

Countering Capitulation: An arts-based, postdisciplinary approach to resolving non-transparency

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Introduction (excerpt)

You know for a fact that there are people out there that know what actually happened but they're not talking. So, in fact, this entire paper could be science fiction, or it could be dead on, we have no idea. —Andrew Lo

Visibility, knowledge and resolution are based on access to information. We usually consider this as either a question of collecting new or examining existing data. However, the term “black box society”¹ points to a situation in which data are deliberately concealed. Manufacturing information asymmetry – imbalances of power due to leverage, misinformation, concealment, collusion or fraud – has become an effective tool for gaining competitive advantage across all levels of life. Noise is the master of information.

Transparency, a paradigm for governing sociality, has come under extreme pressure and the logics of technocapitalism have thus become a threat to the body politic – they not only restrain agency but carve out new forms of exploitation and segregation. As power increasingly shifts from representative to performative speech, it reorganizes the strata of society by creating divisions that affect bodies, minds and affiliations along quite different lines as to how class and consent have been contextualized historically. Hence, we are witnessing a crisis of democratic resolution that far exceeds the epistemic non-transparency criticized by Lo (see motto above²).

Proposals to reconstitute transparency and reengineer data access often resort to legal and operational solutions to govern (big data) algorithms, whether they suggest, amongst others, a new professional class of “algorithmists”,³ algorithmic accountability reporting,⁴ the right to procedural data due process⁵ or, most problematically, corporate digital responsibility as ventilated by Mark Zuckerberg and Silicon Valley venture capitalists. But recommended policies that follow a logic summarized in Linus’ Law: “given enough eyeballs, all bugs are shallow”⁶ are often rather linear. The question remains whether these approaches can disarm proprietary interests that obscure transparency, visibility and information access.

¹ See Pasquale 2015.

² Lo 2011: 13:20–13:55 [...] referring to a study on a financial quant meltdown.

³ Mayer-Schönberger & Cukier 2013.

⁴ See: Diakopoulos (undat.).

⁵ Crawford & Schultz 2014.

⁶ Raymond 1999: 19.

In today's hypercompetitive world, in which margins narrow and monopolization is in the ascendant, non-transparency is tantamount to leveraging against adverse selection.

The pitfalls of a linear conception of transparency fall into two main categories. One is described by Wolfie Christl and Sarah Spiekermann in their study *Networks of Control*: "Transparency is not provided, but avoided. Ambiguous business practices are still the norm and even misleading rhetoric is used to trick people into one-sided and disadvantageous data contracts."⁷ Hacker and Petkova, in a study devoted to the limits of transparency, conclude: "The ways in which data collection and processing are accomplished are opaque and exclusive."⁸ The second issue relates to the depth and scope of algorithmic complexity summarized by the data researcher Freek Bomhof, "[w]hen a system is too complex to understand, transparency will not help us – not even with the most skilled algorithmist to explain what is going on."⁹ This nonlinear "nature of complex systems" is illustrated by the former high frequency trader David Lauer in his account of the financial Flash Crash 2016:

"The markets and the interplay in the industry between all these firms with all these very complicated and complex technology systems and how they interact makes the entire system of exchanges, high-frequency, brokers and the interaction between the technology a complex system. [...] There is no cause and effect that you can point to. What caused the Flash Crash is a nonsense question. [...] if you were to replay the same sequence of events, identically, there's no guarantee that it will cause a Flash Crash again."¹⁰

Transparency is commonly conceived as a prerequisite for resolution. Under black box conditions, however, this relation is ruptured, or in fact "colonized by the logic of secrecy," as Frank Pasquale argues.¹¹ Therefore, this essay proposes a different route to challenge non-transparency. It focuses on an artistic conception that centers on the term *resolution* itself. What I argue is that the term's rich semantic field offers an avenue towards resolving transparency. This postdisciplinary project activates the levels of meaning of the term resolution – from perception, visualization, cognition to knowledge production, decision making and public/regulatory action – for knowledge-making as a collective-activist practice against information and access asymmetries. Here, resolution is leveraged for a multidimensional and non-linear concept of civil agency. But its means and consequences are as radical and ambivalent as the sea change provoked by secretive black box capitalization. Hence, the artistic research on an *aesthetics of resolution* does not content itself with Linus' Law or design for

⁷ Christl and Spiekermann 2016: 119.

⁸ Hacker and Petkova 2017: 22.

⁹ Bomhof 2013.

¹⁰ David Lauer in: Meerman 2013: 46:00–46:48.

¹¹ Pasquale 2015: 2.

accountability. Rather, it proceeds from what it holds as a fact: *resolution as visibility has been severed from resolution as cognition and knowledge*. Instead of merely critiquing this breach, it attempts to access the black box as an entry point for collective activism. Accordingly, the move from an *aesthetics* to a *poietics of resolution* – that is, from *perceiving* to *making* and consequently from *critique* to *insurrection* – requires a corresponding conception of the agent producing and carrying through this escalation against the critical mass of non-disclosure. Given the complexity and secrecy we are exposed to, this agency is inevitably a collective counter-effort, rather than an individual one. I refer to it as the *artist-as-collective* and to its performance as *renegade agency*. But in a blurb for an exhibition in 2018, the artist, writer and curator James Bridle still addresses the individual subject:

“As the scale and complexity of our societies grow ever vaster, individuals feel ever more disempowered and hopeless. Our vision is increasingly universal, but our agency continues to be reduced. We know more and more about the world, while being less and less able to do anything about it. In an age of planetary-scale networks and opaque, remote systems of governance, how do individuals retain the capability for creative thought, meaningful action – and a sense of humor?”¹²

The *artist-as-collective* posits that the “individual” evoked by Bridle is fundamentally one among many. It can only make sense of itself and the volatile world it inhabits in spheres populated by others. Hence, conceiving the individual as singular makes little sense, neither artistically, nor philosophically, nor politically, as it violently abstracts living assemblages and immixtures to capitalist segregation and extraction (including the art market’s individuation and capitalization of the artist brand). In contrast, the figure of the *artist-as-collective* focuses on the multitude of affiliation, alliance, assemblage, material as well as opponency and controversy. It provokes *works of art* which are not objects of beauty for disinterested pleasure or interest-bearing value investments, but “subjects” with their very own, *poietic*, agency in time. ...

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¹² For the exhibition *Agency* Bridle curated at NOME gallery Berlin, see Anonymous (2018).