Call for Papers: The Aesthetics of Bio-Machines and the Question of Life

June 13-14, 2024

Deadline for Abstracts: February 1, 2024

This conference aims to bring together a wide range of scholars, researchers and artists who explore **life-simulating technologies** from an aesthetic perspective. Today we are immersed in life-simulating digital technologies, such as virtual assistants (Siri, Alexa), generative self-learning computer systems (chatbots), and adaptive robots that use artificial intelligence to learn from their surroundings (robot vacuum cleaners). In new and intriguing ways, these digital technologies raise the question of who and what is alive, and how we as humans cohabit with them. Indeed, physicists, engineers, and biologists are currently speaking about a notion of "life 3.0," which affords life status to self-learning artificial intelligence. This **humanities-based** conference will investigate these "life-forms" from an aesthetic perspective by focusing on how we may understand the sensory capabilities of such technologies and the way these are negotiated in literature, art and film.

We propose to conceptualize these diverse life-simulating technologies as sensing bio-machines, since we argue that their life-like qualities should be understood through the ways they perform a techno-mimesis (an imitation) of the sensory capabilities of biological life. Our focus on **aesthetics** allows us to home in on the intersection of humans and machines and to interrogate the dependencies and symbioses we find in the process of sensing, and how these processes negotiate new perspectives on what constitutes life.

It is imperative that these intersections are not solely analyzed by engineers and natural scientists but also by **humanities scholars**, who can place current technological developments in historical trajectories and theoretical debates that highlight the ethical, cultural, and societal implications of such bio-machines for humanity. Given the current planetary crisis (climate change, warfare, inequality), the search for new, integrative, and diverse concepts of life that rethink the status of machines is more than a philosophical task, it is an ethical responsibility. We believe that our focus on aesthetics can provide unique and creative insights to enhance and sustain life in alliance between the human and more-than-human technical entities.

We invite scholars, artists, and practitioners to engage with how aesthetics/artworks/sensoria as imaginaries can reflect the life of bio-machines within the wider contemporary arenas of cultural, ethical, environmental, and socio-political realms.

The keynote speaker will be Joanna Zylinska (Professor of Media Philosophy and Critical Digital Practice at King's College London)

Exploring these cultural-artistic negotiations of bio-machines, we are interested in the following directions:

Cultural Imaginaries and Histories of Bio-machines

This direction invites contributions investigating the cultural imaginaries of bio-machines throughout history. For centuries, humans have created machines that simulate biological life, from eighteenth-century automata (Vaucanson's mechanical digesting duck), wheel-based motion machines (locomotive and automobile), to cinematography (moving images). We are interested tracing back the contemporary correlation between machinic sensing and life back to early analogue concepts of life-simulating machines, as we believe that the historicization of technological innovations provides a necessary perspective for understanding their relevance today.

Domestic Life-Worlds: Bio-Machines and Home Assistance

This direction investigates cultural imaginaries of bio-machines focusing on intimate life-worlds. An emerging genre of fiction and art portrays humanoid robots as friends, partners, and lovers rather than monsters and scary creatures. By means of their advanced technical sensoria, these bio-machinic companions express empathy, compassion, intimacy, and ethical values about human-machine relationships. This direction investigates how artistic works negotiate such new companions and evaluate how technologies claim agency for being seen as alive in cultural imaginaries.

Work Life-Worlds: Bio-Machines and Labor

This direction exploring how bio-machines and their sensoria change the life-worlds of the workplace. Smart technologies include "bossware" (software that tracks productivity), automated warehouse robots used at Amazon, as well as care robots in hospitals. The papers should investigate how these smart technologies become our living and sensing co-workers and employers, as well as how bio-machines change work conditions and power dynamics at the workplace. The main focus is on the artistic interpretations (visual art) of these "working" bio-machines, and how art can critically reflect the use of machinic surveillance at the workplace.

Ecological Life-Worlds: Bio-Machines and Hybrid Eco-Systems

This direction examines ecological life-worlds in conjunction with life-simulating technologies. In a time of ecological decay and climate devastation, engineers and biologists work on the development of "artificial life technology" to stabilize eco-systems. These are bio-machines that could sustain eco-systems, such as artificial honeybees and fish to stabilize biodiversity. Artists have taken up this topic of bioengineering. This WP analyzes bio-machinic art (visual art/literature) and discusses the implications of these eco-hybrid systems in reference to how we understand life, reproduction and evolution.

Venue:

The conference will be held physically from June 13, 2024 (10:00-17:00) and June 14, 2024 (10:00 - 14:00) at the University of Copenhagen. The conference is organized in close collaboration with the University of Southern Denmark and is based on the research cluster "Bio-machines and the Question of Life" supported The Velux Foundations. The cluster is led by Kathrin Maurer (Professor of Humanities and Technology and leader of the Center for Culture and Technology at the University of

Southern Denmark www.sdu.dk/en/cult-tech) and Kristin Veel (Associate Professor at Copenhagen University and leader of the research hub INTERSECT https://intersect.ku.dk).

Please send an abstract of up to 300 words and a short bio to this email address: **kamau@sdu.dk**

Deadline for Abstracts: February 1, 2024

Notification and Invitations: March 15, 2024.