

CURATORIAL TEXT BY CHUS MARTÍNEZ, CURATOR OF *LIQUID INTELLIGENCE*

Liquid Intelligence

The expression “liquid intelligence” implies a change in human mentality. The expression, which a few decades ago would have been understood only as a metaphor or a poetic way of expressing a correspondence between human intelligence (which until recently many people considered the only possible form of intelligence) and the intelligence of water is seen today in a much more literal way. Western culture, perhaps due to monotheism, has a natural inclination for pyramidal structures. Charles Darwin’s theory of evolution reinforces this kind of scheme. The human species is—in the absence of God—the measure of all species and the possessor of all the traits that define what we understand today as intelligence: traits such as language, imaginative capacity, and the ability to project the future, all of which we have carefully cultivated, and all of which we wish to pass on to the artificial inorganic species made up of machines programmed to replicate and surpass our qualities. If all goes according to plan, we will soon cease to subjugate other species and instead be subjugated by that new artificial life form designed to surpass us.

Although this vision of the world is not shared across all cultures, it is difficult to escape from this evolutionary pattern. Partly because colonialism has spread it throughout the world in a categorical way, creating a system capable of effectively silencing any other form of explanation of the relationship between species. We have lost a lot of time and only recently have we opened up to a different and more complex understandings of the ways in which different organisms and life forms interact. These other forms of understanding have made their way from narratives that can initially seem “lateral” or secondary, but that are slowly but surely creating an imaginative and scientific space from which we can affirm that water has intelligence, mushrooms have memory, and the forest an imagination.

A few years ago, on a trip to Japan, a friend took me to visit a great and wonderful exhibition on Buddhist naturalist-polymath author Minakata Kumagusu. Kumagusu left Tokyo University Preparatory School when he was nineteen years old and took off for America. He spent the following fourteen years wandering through South America and Europe until he returned to Japan at the age of thirty-three. Then he disappeared again in the forest close to Tanabe, a city in the

Wakayama Prefecture where he conducted extensive biological research preserved in the form of numerous specimen samples, including slime mold, seaweed, and insects, as well as a collection of 400 mushrooms. His interest in the natural world was parallel to his interest in folk culture. Botany, dreams, the body, taboo theories, and folk phenomena are the main constituents of his incredible thinking. Nature in its invertebrate moment, in the non-divine, in genus and specimen is the origin and engine of the development of life. Kumagusu's work and thought is at the basis of Japanese culture's interest in understanding the real actors in the regeneration of the forest—microbes and subatomic life, which are as or more important than any other species.

Eiko Honda, a thinker who specializes in the intellectual history of modern Japan, conceptualizes this moment as “queer nature.” In her opinion, the microbial paradigm in the work of Kumagusu represents a counterpart to the civilization theory and evolutionism represented by Darwin. If in the West the idea of intelligence beyond or surpassing the human understanding is mostly embodied by a machine, in Japan this image of supreme intelligence would be closer to the sentient ocean in Stanislaw Lem's novel *Solaris*, to the idea that slime mold and fungi can not only remember the forest but are able to work together and make decisions, as stated by Yu Fukasawa, a researcher of forest microbial ecology at Tohoku University in Japan. The notion that mycelia might be intelligent just reached Western culture and science is still trying to process this vision. The complexities of the invisible symbiotic relationships that connect one form of life to another in mycelia worlds is very far from the vision of embodied “actors” possessing a body, a voice, and a say in the historical course of events and the human species controlling all that is important in the life of the planet.

Intelligence of the Biodiversity Network and Storytelling

The introduction of a different, hard to imagine, paradigm has to do with the lack of narrative supports and images that can make these kinds of paradigm shifts transmissible in our context. It is at this point in the history of culture that art, and specifically contemporary art, become really necessary. The relevance of art lies not so much in its capacity to create an experience of what is beyond the surface but in its ability to make us understand even before we have understood the problem. Creating a sense of understanding is as important as understanding each and every element that is part of a complex problem.

In the prevailing model of today's society, the cultural aspect of analysis is particularly prevalent. Technology has made possible not only an enormous accumulation of data, but also an unprecedented reading of this data. Data analysis and statistical interpretation are presented as

the great model for reading the present and as the perfect tool to design our decision making. At the same time, artists and neurolinguists like Mark Turner proclaim that the structure of our brain, language and knowledge, is eminently literary. To understand the processes of life demands to also understand the structures of storytelling and myths. Turner, an expert in cognitive science, goes further and argues that the origin of language is storytelling. In his description of the brain as a literary entity incapable of generating knowledge except through the generation of an infinite interrelation of stories, he states that the origin of language was not due to any genetic mutation but to the very structure of the stories we need to generate in order to carry out the fundamental functions of life, such as eating and drinking. Grammar is born from our capacity to generate stories infinitely intertwined with each other. As we bring our hands to the spout of a fountain, suspend them in the air and bring them to our mouths to sip the water, we can project an action that goes beyond that story and that will start another—walking along a path, admiring the beauty of a tree.

Claiming that there is no knowledge without the continuous creation and projection of stories is very different from claiming that there is thought in data analysis. In other words, data analysis cannot generate knowledge by itself if it is not linked to the creation of a story that articulates it. That is the same as saying that analysis is just another form of storytelling, a form whose main characteristic is the assumption that it can escape the literary form of our brain. It is interesting that at this particular moment in the history of the perception of the damage human actions have caused to nature and the enthusiasm over the quantum leap in the generation of machines capable of autonomous actions and mimicry of human qualities unprecedented so far, artists and scientists are particularly interested in narrative forms and their structure. The situation we lived through during the pandemic only encouraged this interest, perhaps intuitively. The reaction of millions of people to the data and the methods of mitigating the virus was skepticism, even when confronted with evidence. It was the first time that the scientific community was faced with a situation artists and cultural workers know well: disbelief and skepticism. The certainty that historically framed research and data was called into question by narratives with no apparent foundation.

Science, like the history of Western philosophy, has no patience for stories. Data based on the continuous observation and reduced to detailed scientific essays, or, in the case of philosophy, the argumentative form of dialectics are seen the only possible foundations for progress (in the case of science) and for political life (in Western philosophy). In a conversation with the Chilean poet of Indigenous origin Nicanor Parra a decade ago, he told me that in the ancient Greek dialogues that gave rise to the political mythology of the West someone was always right and won the champion's trophy, whereas in the stories of the Aymara, Mapuche, and Diaguita cultures of

Chile there was never a division of power. The goal of each story is the creation of a vision of the world independent of its relation to the truth. It is difficult to postulate the importance of stories without falling into a somewhat nostalgic or romantic rhetoric of their “power.” That is why I believe that contemporary artists—like neurolinguists—can suggest in a visual way the importance of that substance so that we can access very complex forms of understanding, such as the subatomic agency of the natural world.

To speak of water intelligence is to allude to the creation of worlds from agencies that are far beyond what we can imagine. The intelligence of water is the collective intelligence activated by the totality of the beings that form that habitat, that world. A single bird cannot perform the pirouettes that it can perform without hesitation when in a flock of thousands. Science considers this a crucial trait of complex systems. That is, individuals acquire capabilities in a group that they do not possess when they are by themselves. Who introduced this dream of simple things performing incredible effects in our minds? Artists have always done this. Science says complex systems are fundamental to life. Philosopher Paul Cilliers’s definition of complex systems includes the proposal that “[t]he behavior of the system is determined by the nature of the interactions, not by what is contained within the components. Since the interactions are rich, dynamic, fed back, and, above all, nonlinear, the behavior of the system as a whole cannot be predicted from an inspection of its components.” Scientists call this “emergence.”

Cutting down too many trees might decrease a city’s intelligence. I heard this sentence in the context of a conference in Korea on the future of architecture. These words opened my mind and my heart at once. For decades activists, the scientific community, and policymakers have been framing the bad actions of humans as very dangerous to nature. Doing so, they somehow have unconsciously stressed the binary we so badly want to surpass between the human and the nonhuman worlds. At once, this simple statement revealed what was actually happening. Mistreating the ocean and overfishing its species to death decreases the earth’s intelligence.

Emergence

This exhibition can be read as a flock of birds or a large school of fish. Members of the same species—artworks—belonging to very different moments in history and geographies are brought together and set in motion to reflect on a simple notion: that all forms of life are in permanent intercommunication. Because of the limitations of human capacities, we are absolutely incapable of seeing or hearing even a fraction of this language. That is why we have created a substance capable of carrying that message in millions of possible ways. Like a stone falling on the surface

of the water, the circles that speak to us of this event are composed of works from the TBA21 Collection. These works are the direct result of a conversation with the artists about processes that are weakening certain natural habitats: the commissions, research works, and the works that we have decided to join to these two initial groups in order to add a somewhat folkloric component, which is very close to the classical forms of storytelling that I have been talking about.

The reason for this unusual form of intersectionality between works and languages is part of TBA21's aspiration to create a new method, a different form of transmission of the foundation's mission, but also of the general mission of art in the context of a global political reconstitution oriented toward the preservation of interspecies equality and freedom. The interconnection of very different systems that tried to understand the present and future of coexistence implies a diversity in languages and methods that never gives priority to a single discipline, an isolated method, a cultural form, or only one kind of imagination. There is no obvious connection between the work of Ana Mendieta and Jumana Manna, but both are part of TBA21's contemporary collection. Yet, the incredible intuitive act of Mendieta's wanting to become one with trees and the earth is very similar to Manna's interest in the organs we humans have fabricated to create the artificial body of the constructed world. Intestines like tubes are channels for fluids that are supposed to remain invisible but she makes visible. Both artists share an interest in sensing beyond what we are conscious about. Sensing with a forest but also with all the materials we extracted from the earth to produce our cities, to create our buildings, our cars, our trains.... Is it also possible to sense a whole city? And sense the earth while sensing the city? Lucas Arruda embraces similar dreams in his atmospheres of the Amazon. Painting discovered that there were two types of nature: the one inhabited by humans and nature unspoiled, untouched. His series of paintings of the Amazon reflects the fearsome sublime character Romantic painters have given to landscapes and, in doing so, he immediately makes us recall that no such places exist today.

The commissioned research works are represented here with films by Beatriz Santiago Muñoz and Sonia Levy. These two works have somewhat different methodologies. In both, the images are the result of a detailed observation of concrete cases, focusing attention on a specific place and a delimited time in history, which makes it possible to establish the conditions for an analysis of the impact of life and human action on an ecosystem. Artistic research has become a defining way in which artists in the first two decades of the twenty-first century work. Almost like the plein air painters of the nineteenth century, combining observation with documentary reconstruction of facts and events allows artists to compose an image that narrates in a different way the effect of actions prolonged in time. If history painting focused on major events, contemporary artistic research concentrates on the effects of the kind of events we are not used to paying attention to.

Here, the actors are the pollution, the bacterial action that defends itself from the substrates, the winds, the tides—the environmental agents that react to the changes. The images that emerge from these works are an invitation to reflection. A reflection that does not need text or words but is accompanied by the testimonies, the memory, and the feelings of those who are in contact with these situations. In this book, vision, listening, and reflection combine to create a sense of perception that goes beyond aesthetic pleasure and presents sensorial experience as a way to introduce the political dimension of sensing the world.

The third family of works in the exhibition is composed of pieces by Saelia Aparicio, Anne Duk Hee Jordan, and Inês Zehna. These works add a different dimension to the works in the collection and the artistic research projects. All three have in common an interest in aesthetic exuberance and historical moments in which art created a language to speak of crisis. These three artists' works emphasize experiences possessed by imagination and fantasy that are capable of overcoming realism and facts, or the supposed rigor of the facts, to propose way of thinking that could overcome all the obstacles presented by the real situation. Aparicio sees this in the exuberant and gothic fantasy of the Victorian era; in Zenha's work this proposal is evident in the stimulationeity of sensual experience through the fascination with nineteenth-century exoticism; and in Anne Duk Hee Jordan's work this is proposed through ideas of immersion in the present.

As awareness of the situation grows, so does the sense of disaster. The creation of a gigantic, pantagruelic field of perception that could explore all the different ways that the senses open to thought means believing fervently in art as the place from which the invention and production of a new world could be born. This exhibition helps to create a field of connectivity between systems. Imagining intelligence is difficult, but it is a wonderful exercise that invites us to understand a world that wants and wishes to be in permanent contact with itself and of which we are all a part. Liquid intelligence is a pedagogical substance, a network of impulses that keep the world attentive to the dangers that lie in wait, capable of correcting the course of harmful actions, capable of telling stories, capable of allowing itself to be caressed by artists and to show itself in their works again and again to enlarge our understanding of it.

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