

Algorithmic Dispossession

The true effectiveness of power is *all the more savage for its invisibility*.

—Gilles Châtelet¹

Infinitesimal modulations of temperature in, say, a public swimming pool; a white wall's miniscule motorized movements; a blocked museum passageway; the seemingly inexplicable halting of a shopping mall escalator; ordinary new parquet flooring laid atop original ordinary parquet flooring; a shift in lighting; an unannounced one-millimeter reduction of an art magazine's standard size: this is how Tomo Savić-Gecan's projects have palpably manifested over the past decades. No wonder you may not have noticed his art before.

Inconspicuousness has been the Croatian-born conceptual artist's modus operandi since he started making work in the early 1990s. In lieu of crafting portable, marketable objects, Savić-Gecan has elected to instead make art that doggedly sits at the very limit of perception. This has included removing, displacing, replicating, or reconfiguring architectural elements of the institutional contexts into which he was invited, such as *Untitled*, 1994, his plastering over of the three entrances to the exhibition of (and as) his very first solo show in Ljubljana. Or conceiving an artwork that existed quasi-tautologically only as a recorded description, telephonically communicated by the exhibition's curator, in *Untitled*, 2000. *Untitled*, 2007/2017, consisted solely of the declaration of a preset monetary value and that value's incremental diminishment over the course of an exhibition, down to zero. Not only is nothing left of these projects, but there was arguably not much "there" to begin with.

Savić-Gecan has created artworks for which an action somewhere in the world (say, in Amsterdam) begets a real-time effect somewhere else (say, in Tallinn), as it did in *Untitled*, 2005, where the entries of visitors to an exhibition in the Dutch capital caused a modulation of the temperature in a public pool in the capital of Estonia. This interrelation he disclosed in yet another city, Venice, where little was "exhibited" other than a description of the transaction in the form of a wall text. In yet another set of works, visitors would encounter a white cube specially constructed inside the space of the gallery proper at the Jeu de Paume in Paris. Whoever entered this space caused the simultaneous but almost imperceptible closing in of the walls in an identically constructed white cube at Bergen Kunsthall, Norway, and vice versa. More than a thousand kilometers apart, the two constituent parts were branded *Untitled*, 2010.²

1 Gilles Châtelet, *To Live and Think Like Pigs: The Incitement of Envy and Boredom in Market Democracies*, trans. Robin Mackay (New York: Sequence Press; Falmouth, UK: Urbanomic Media, 2014), 107, emphasis in original.

2 It is important to note that the mechanical modulations of heat or humidity or movement that his works enact are absolutely real, even if to perceive them sometimes requires imaginative leaps of faith.

During the 51st Venice Biennale of Art, the entries of visitors to W139 Center for Contemporary Art in Amsterdam, the Netherlands, determine a change in the water temperature in a public swimming pool in Tallinn, Estonia, by 1°C.

Tomo Savić-Gecan

Untitled, 2005

As much as Savić-Gecan's practice deals with the atmospheric—temperature, relative humidity—it equally has long been concerned with the algorithmic. Technological systems have played an important role in many of his projects, although it would be a mistake to think of him as a technology buff or “media” artist. He is emphatically neither. All along, the devices he has specially engineered to facilitate many of his artworks have been either hidden or materially so unobtrusive and banal as to be easily ignored. These are decidedly not fetishized objects to be showcased or contemplated. The impenetrable little boxes, whose increasing sophistication since the 1990s has paralleled advancements in internet, GPS, and other communications technologies, contain within them tracking mechanisms that are set up to regulate other mechanisms—thermostats, humidifiers, escalators—in something akin to interspecies communication across distances, and sometimes also across time.

Time emerges as a recurrent medium in the artist's practice. Consider *Untitled, 2005/2006/2008/2012*, realized for the exhibition *Volume* in Amsterdam, for which the artist precisely predicted three future dates when public solo presentations of his work would take place, then set out to make it come true.³ On another occasion, a machine tracked visitor entries and exits at an exhibition in Brooklyn to constitute *Untitled, 2005* (although not the same as the identically titled work described above, realized between Utrecht, Tallinn, and Venice), and held the data. Its impact was unleashed much later, shifting a New York exhibition's temperature in *Untitled, 2005/2007*, or a Basel exhibition's humidity levels in *Untitled, 2005/2007/2017*.⁴ In a hurry, Savić-Gecan is not.

Nothing accompanying these artworks declares their meaning or sense. The artist himself refuses to give interviews or circulate artist statements, thus dispensing with any privileged or authoritative interpretation of his work. Eschewing images to stand in for his projects, he also rejects any sort of documentation or record once they are made. Because how, after all, could one pictorially represent a temperature change or humidity shift? And given that an artwork might be spread across two places—one where information is harvested and one where that information's consequences come into effect—which of these would be representative anyway? Savić-Gecan offers instead only a single laconic sentence for each project. It is less like a typical museum wall text, where evocative description or analysis might find a place, and more like a dictionary's distillation, providing simple,

3 Treating his career schedule like a weather forecast and proposing this as his contribution to the *Volume* exhibition, the artist predicted that he would have institutional solo presentations during precisely specified periods: October 7–21, 2006; October 15–21, 2008; and October 21–November 11, 2012. He succeeded in having solo shows during the first two date ranges, and in the last case he contributed *Untitled, 2012*, to the 8th Taipei Biennial, whose

dates overlapped with his forecast.

4 A machine recording the entry and exit patterns of visitors was Savić-Gecan's contribution to *The One* at New General Catalogue, Brooklyn (2005), with the patterns used to later direct miniscule heat changes in the group show *Let Everything Be Temporary* at Apex Art, New York (2007), and then humidity changes in *Ungestalt* at Kunsthalle Basel, Switzerland (2017). Together they comprise *Untitled, 2005/2007/2017*.

unadorned *information*. Indiscriminately, his works are called Untitled, followed by the year of their making, no matter that he at times makes more than one work in a year. The artist's decisions about seemingly negligible "management" aspects of the artwork—including its titling and reproduction, but also its commodification and afterlife, which he tightly constrains if not altogether denies—hardly make the critic or historian's task easy.⁵ As intangible as air, heat, or humidity, and just as impermanent, Savić-Gecan's art remains fugitive to an extreme.

One finds in his work echoes of conceptual art practices of the 1960s and 1970s, from a move toward dematerialization to an interrogation of the definition of the artwork and the architectural and institutional apparatuses meant to validate it. Certainly one senses the formative importance of artists belonging to the postwar avant-garde of the former Yugoslavia, from the Gorgona circle to the OHO Group, whose work Savić-Gecan absorbed as a student.⁶ But so, too, does his oeuvre find precedent in the institutional critique of an artist like Michael Asher, even if he only learned about the US conceptualist years after having made works that might appear to have been directly inspired by Asher. Similarly, the Croatian's globe-spanning traversals of distance and his reticence regarding documentation might seem to stand in suggestive relation to longtime fellow Amsterdam resident Stanley Brouwn, however different their output may be. Savić-Gecan deftly expands on these propositions, having articulated a singular oeuvre subtended by an attention to the social, institutional, and technological parameters of its time.

For all of its elusiveness, Savić-Gecan's rigorous practice has been, from the start, a dissection of systems of communication and control that operate invisibly, but with ultimately concrete and grave effects. The assumptions that govern how we perceive art and its institutions are but one, if seemingly benign, facet of the greater whole. As the artist knows well, museums are sites where bodies are disciplined, where behavior is prescribed (don't touch, don't run, don't speak too loudly), where history is codified and its reception is shaped. However, if the artist's gestures appear slight, it is because they reflect the subtlety with which the systems he critiques show themselves. For Franco "Bifo" Berardi, the transformation of our world in the digital era comes down, precisely, to a question of visibility:

The humanistic horizon was related to Protagoras' premise that "man is the measure of all things." In the traditional—

5 Fittingly, when the artist had his first retrospective, *Retrospektiva 2020 / Retrospective 2020*, each space of the exhibition was empty except for a text on the wall bearing the artist's typical sentence to identify each "exhibited" artwork (sometimes "performed" and thus causing lighting or humidity or other changes). This emptiness was mirrored in the

catalogue, which used blank pages and captions for each cited artwork. Radmila Iva Janković, ed., *Retrospektiva 2020 / Retrospective 2020* (Zagreb: MSU Zagreb, 2020).

6 The resonance between Savić-Gecan and the practices of those artists in his more immediate context are laid out in Olga Majcen Linn and Darko Šimičić's contribution to this volume.

even in the industrial—world, man is the measure, and the technological universe is built upon his will and concrete capacities to manipulate. This is no longer true once the technologies of the invisible spread. The important “things” (indeed they are generative algorithms) that count and determine the formation of social phenomena no longer correspond to a human measure: the human eye can no longer perceive them.⁷

A world in which the spectacular and the blingy beguile may act as a foil to Savić-Gecan’s discreet oeuvre. But if we understand the artist as merely contradicting the exuberant excess of mass-media oversharing, we miss the ways in which his projects intuit the workings of our data-driven, turbo-capitalist present. For the effects of technology infiltrate our lives to a far greater extent than it might appear or than we are prepared to admit, since they do so largely imperceptibly. Perhaps none of the artist’s projects to date make this point more emphatically than his newest artwork.

Untitled [Croatian Pavilion], 2022, is a project that, in keeping with the artist’s uncompromising conceptual practice, slyly but acutely reflects what it means to be human at a moment when digital technologies are revolutionizing our lives. The piece triangulates its key tenets—the news, which is to say, its selective, subjective reporting on the events of the world; artificial intelligence, meaning the complex of algorithmic systems that play an invisible yet dominantly insidious role in our present; and the flesh-and-blood bodies of humans, the baseline of human existence and experience.

As scholar Shoshana Zuboff has pointed out, tech giants like Google and Amazon, Apple and YouTube, Microsoft and Meta (owner of Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp), extract our personal data, behavioral information, and emotional profiles, mostly and frighteningly without our even being aware of it.⁸ In our brave new world of human “enhancements” and networked bodies, we want speed and access, personalization and ease. We want our computers and smartphones to synchronize wirelessly in the so-called cloud, we want any product whatsoever to be delivered near-immediately to our doorsteps, we want digital maps to instantaneously show us the way, and we expect our credit cards, each one of them a standard 0.76 mm thick, to slip seamlessly through cash machines anywhere in the world. We want a life organized and made easy, preferably by devices that respond

7 Franco Berardi, *The Soul at Work: From Alienation to Autonomy* (Los Angeles: Semiotext[e], 2009), 200, cited in Anthony Huberman, *Other Mechanisms* (Vienna: Secession; Berlin: Revolver Books, 2018), 104–8.

8 “Thanks to our computers, credit cards, and phones, and the cameras and sensors that proliferate in public and private spaces, just about everything we now do is mediated by computers that record and codify the details of our daily lives

at a scale that would’ve been unimaginable only a few years ago. We have reached the point at which there is little that is omitted from the continuous secretion of this new electronic text dot.

... The result is that both the world and our lives are pervasively rendered as information.” Shoshana Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power* (London: Profile Books, 2019), 181.

to our beck and call when we address them by name, “Hey Siri,” or “Alexa,” even as they hone their “intelligence” on us. We trade our privacy and autonomy for all of these apparent comforts, checking the terms-and-conditions box whose legalese we didn’t read (and probably wouldn’t fully understand if we did) and offer ourselves up to be ubiquitously monitored by computational infrastructures built into every “smart” device we own or use or even just walk by. The result is that every keystroke, like, search, swipe, private email, heart rate dip, emotional fluctuation, and location change is fodder for the machines of the global behemoths that surveil us.

Predictive is what these systems are. AI technologies not only track what we select or what we do; they are programmed to anticipate our future behaviors—what we *will* want, what we *will* believe, what we *will* buy, how we *will* vote—based on unfathomable quantities of data quietly collected.⁹ The danger is not simply that others know things about us that we wouldn’t want known (or, for that matter, shared or sold). The danger is also that this information is deployed to concretely modify what we want, or what we think we want. It is a global human reengineering of sorts, all the better to create ever-greater accumulations of capital for those that have so much already.

The very same algorithmic logics that Google’s “free” search engine, for instance, uses to steer our consumptive behavior are also used to target the poor, the disenfranchised, the minority, and help ensure they continue to have lesser access to educational opportunities, to home loans, to jobs, or are more often negatively profiled and subjected to myriad institutional violences and economic exploitations.¹⁰ Why would these logics diverge from biases resulting in inequalities or oppression, created as they are out of the midst of societies with propensities for structural racism, sexism, and capitalist greed? It would be perilously naive to mistake AI for mere machines disinterestedly processing cold numbers into code. “Algorithms and machines do not compute for themselves,” media theorist Matteo Pasquinelli points out. “They always compute for someone else, for institutions and markets, for industries and armies.”¹¹

Savić-Gecan has no illusions about this state of affairs. Already some years ago, for *Untitled*, 2016, he requested those visiting a display of modern and contemporary art from the collection of the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven, the Netherlands, to wear wireless monitors that tracked emotional responses during their

9 “Predictions about our behavior are Google’s products, and they are sold to its actual customers but not to us. . . . The essence of the exploitation here is the rendering of our lives as behavioral data for the sake of others’ improved control of us.” Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*, 94.

10 For a discussion of the human element behind AI, see Vladan Joler’s essay in this volume. See also Cathy O’Neil, *Weapons of Math Destruction: How Big Data Increases Inequality and Threatens Democracy* (London: Penguin Random House, 2016); Kate Crawford and Trevor Paglen, “Excavating AI: The Politics of Images in

Machine Learning Training Sets,” September 19, 2019, AI Now Institute, NYU, accessible at <https://excavating.ai>.

11 Matteo Pasquinelli, “Three Thousand Years of Algorithmic Rituals: The Emergence of AI from the Computation of Space,” *e-flux Journal*, no. 101 (June 2019): <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/101/273221/three-thousand-years-of-algorithmic-rituals-the-emergence-of-ai-from-the-computation-of-space/>. See also Diane M. Nelson, *Who Counts? The Mathematics of Death and Life after Genocide* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015).

encounter with the artworks, as measured by way of body temperature, breathing, perspiration level, heart rate. The collected data influenced, following a brief delay, the conditions in a freestanding, specially constructed white cube in a public square in Amsterdam. The generic model of that supposedly neutral art space seemed to exhibit nothing, but its motorized walls were made to slowly move and the temperature, humidity, and lighting in the space subtly shifted, each minute modulation governed by the recorded reactions of visitors in Eindhoven. It was an accumulation of anonymized but private information transformed into public, environmental effects that ever so slightly impacted anyone inside the white cube. The project rendered palpable not only how data circulates, but also how it might concretely determine or control experience.

There has always been a circuitous relay between bodies and machines in Savić-Gecan's work: all those humans entering exhibition spaces, for instance, that provided the data that was logged and then transferred by machines, and which eventually was made to affect humans in exhibition spaces or pools or shopping malls far away. Rather than something to be understood, data here thickens to become something felt, something somatically charging bodies across time and space. Essential to Savić-Gecan's projects have been the ways in which technology imperceptibly manipulates and controls—but also how it connects us with each other. We are, however, no mere cogs in a machine, inescapably ruled by it. The artist's various projects have consistently conveyed that humans drive machines, run institutions, and erect architectures in their image, or to serve their ends. If we are controlled, it is not by technology but by the *people* owning, operating, programming, and extracting profit from it. From us.¹² While these concerns have long been cornerstones of the artist's practice, the implications of his abiding explorations into data tracking and human self-determination have taken trenchant, even urgent form in *Untitled* (Croatian Pavilion).

If the piece's circulatory system is AI, its "blood" is the daily news. The practical functioning of the project could be broken down as follows: five performers, from a trained cast of twenty-five, stand by during the seven months of the 59th edition of the Venice Biennale, waiting for their instructions. They receive these at eight o'clock in the morning Central European time each day on their smartphones, wirelessly transmitted from an artificial intelligence that analyzes textual data from that day's lead article from a randomly selected major news source, for

¹² It could be that there is no outside of this system, even for those supposedly *behind* it. They doubtlessly know more about it and can make more informed choices, but even if you are one of the instigators of some form of Big Tech, you probably are also subject to your own inventions, because it's not a question of a single corporate initiative or entity, but a total system.

Visitors to the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven, the Netherlands, wear wireless monitors tracking their heart and breathing rates, temperature, and perspiration while they view art in the museum's collection; the data determines wall movements, temperature, humidity, and lighting in a specially constructed white cube in a public square in Amsterdam.

Tomo Savić-Gecan

Untitled, 2016

instance the *Arab News*, *Corriere della Sera*, *El Tiempo*, *Le Monde*, the *Bangkok Post*, *The Namibian*, or the *New York Times*. This AI has been “trained” using prediction algorithms to recognize and classify a defined set of topics, spanning from climate change to violations of human rights, from developments in technology to military activities. The result produces the performers’ algorithmically derived instructions: which of the various national pavilions inside and outside the Giardini and Arsenale the performers will infiltrate at any time, the parameters of their minimal movements, and even what they should relate to and thus concentrate on (audience or self, floor or wall) while performing. These instructions change, as the news changes, every day for the seven months of the Biennale.

Imagine contemplating an artwork in one of the pavilions when out of the corner of your eye, you become aware of five other people, appearing for all intents and purposes to be visitors just like yourself. Except you notice a certain deliberateness to their gestures, a certain strangeness, as they in unison enact a mundane but precisely synchronized movement before jointly leaving the site. The next day you see them again, this time in another of the national pavilions, enacting a different yet equally minimal and ambiguous scene. Without the delineation of a stage, without a spoken script, without costumes or props, there is little that identifies these performances as such.

Yet regardless of the news acting as fuel and fodder for this piece, the intention is not to render legible momentous world events through a turn of a head or the clasp of hands. The performers’ movements do not *enact* the news or turn it into gestural form. Instead, the main article of a newspaper has been translated into complete abstraction, which in turn becomes a set of rules, a definition of action. The ensuing movements, based on the parameters provided by algorithmic processing and through a collaboration between the artist, the technologist Tomislav Pokrajčić, and the choreographer Irma Omerzo, lack ostentatious flourishes or ornament, disavow any spectacle, and accept that the AI primarily calls the shots. The result might seem at once robotic and sensual, inexplicably uncanny yet absolutely ordinary. Maybe performers following the directives of a machine cannot *but* look like this. To watch them is to intuit evocations of Judson Dance Theater’s dance of the everyday, the restrained grace of hand gestures in Robert Bresson’s films, or the secret language of a sports team’s hand codes. In fact, in order to develop the work’s gestural vocabulary, Omerzo and

the performers studied the typical movements of museum visitors—the quotidian ways a body signals attentive or inattentive visual consumption, engagement, or contemplation. Precisely this will make the performance even harder to detect. And yet, notice how the seeming randomness of the performers' casual movements shifts to something more palpably calculated.¹³ Or how some gestures are held just a little too long to be convincingly accidental. Or how the performers move without apparent purpose and without obvious relationship to the artworks that surround them. Conversely, they may so discreetly insinuate themselves into the audiences and spaces to which they are sent that you might stand before them and not notice them at all.

Having seen them or not, the fact that you know about the piece, as you read this, might prompt you to ask: Who controls whom? Who or what decides? And what does a news item or the technologies that circulate it tell us about perception, power, and the interests of the corporations or nation-states behind them? Whether it is new viral infection rates, a war in Ukraine, supposed election manipulations, a Kardashian divorce, ecological catastrophes, the rise of cryptocurrencies, or one more political corruption scandal, global networked information flows penetrate practically every aspect of our daily lives. And yet, as we know all too well, there is no such thing as neutral news, no such thing as unbiased reporting. Algorithmically driven systems effectively guarantee the burial of objective facts under an avalanche of rumor, emotion, and disinformation, even as our response to these is mined and monetized.¹⁴ In the context of this total condition, *Untitled (Croatian Pavilion)* is an artwork conceived in and for a “post-truth” era.

Here, global events are galvanized to become the very medium of this nomadic Croatian Pavilion. And just as lives are transformed into data in the “real world,” generating new forms of social control and exploitation, so too does this artwork transform the news into directives—a disciplining machine used to determine nearly every aspect governing the piece, which, as a result, remains out of the artist's control and ultimately also nearly out of the control of those performing it . . . nearly, but not completely. It is noteworthy that while the AI directs where and when and for how long the piece is performed, and even selects the specific entry and exit pattern for the performers (randomly, as casual visitors, or as a group), it offers only loose parameters for their gestures and thoughts. What happens within these parameters is not wholly determined, partly as a result of the human factor

¹³ Discreet ear pieces carrying algorithmically driven signals help to orchestrate this.

¹⁴ If, as has long been said, history is written by the victors, in our era of disinformation, the news might arguably be the re-counting of events on their way to becoming history, written by those who claim victory—whether it is actually theirs or not—circulated by those in power who have a vested interest in us believing it. In this day and age, then, that dictum might need to be revised: *history is circulated by the victors.*

(never free of slippages or “mistakes”) and partly by design (built as the program is with a modicum of freedom for the taking). Like life. One might read this as the piece’s insistent hope, which leaves open the door, if only a crack, for some autonomy and even minute acts of sabotage by its human agents. Alternately, it could read as a scathing analysis of our reality, which deludes us into thinking we operate within parameters of our own devising. Either way, the result is devastatingly topical, pointing to our complex relationship with the media, control, technology, and power in what Zuboff has provocatively called “the age of surveillance capitalism.”

The durational operation that is Untitled (Croatian Pavilion) yields neither an object nor a spectacular event. It is not, strictly speaking, a choreography, nor is it wholly technological or immaterial. It is all of these things at once, and in being so, Savić-Gecan’s conceptual-mechanical-performative enactment of our contemporary condition reproduces with eerie clarity and precision our lived experience. And that which is still to come. *If only we could see it.*