

Title of Essay in Plain Type



THIS BOOK begins with an image. We know it is a false image, and that is the problem.

This is not the late nineteenth century. We are past the point of delight and instruction. We are no longer capable of being amazed by the performance of the latest technologies and then elucidated by the description of their operation.

We are also past the point of criticism. In an era of faith-based presidencies and fundamentalist theocracies, reason takes a backseat to religiosity and gut feelings. Simply revealing the point where there were errors in our thinking solves nothing.

We know the fix is in. We know that the explanation we are offered is not the real explanation. And yet we hang around for it.

In this book's opening image, what we see, from behind, are the ostensible inner workings of the Mechanical Turk, an infamous 'automaton' built by Wolfgang von Kempelen in the late eighteenth century. This copper engraving was first published

in 1783 in one of a stream of books, pamphlets and articles that claimed to have figured out how von Kempelen's machine worked.¹ We already know that the revelations this image claims to present are a sham. We already know that what lies behind those doors and compartments are not the various and sundry components of an actual clockwork mechanism capable of playing a match-winning game of chess, but what movie set designers call 'gak' – elaborate mechanical confections attached to the surface of a prop to give us the sense that something marvellous and technical is occurring within it – something, in this case, made more opaque by the puppet dressed like an Eastern mystic who faces the audience. We're entertained by how impressive it all looks, even though we already know that what is really inside the cramped and stuffy confines of the box is at least one small, sweaty, poorly-paid human being.

This worries us, because we also know that Amazon.com's choice to adopt this icon to describe their low-rent Internet-based crowdsourced labour pool, Amazon Mechanical Turk (AMT), is both wholly appropriate and eye-wateringly honest.

Turkey has had a labour migration agreement in place with Germany since 1961. For decades, Turkish families have relocated to do the work that Germans would rather not; a pattern that recurs all over the world, within and without international legislation.

(My brother's first wife was German. Tradition in Germany has it that the night before a wedding, there is a large party. Guests bring old dishes, crockery and anything else that can be broken into pieces by throwing it on the ground. Afterwards the bride and groom clean up the mess together, in order to symbolise their hope that nothing essential to their relationship will be broken in the future, and that they are committed to working together to clean up any messes that might come along. The German sense of humour being what it is, my brother's fiancée's friends showed up with a load of old toilets, bidets and sinks and proceeded to smash them into large, heavy chunks. His

soon-to-be-father-in-law waved his hand dismissively. ‘Never mind’, he said. ‘My Turks will take care of it.’ In retrospect, maybe my brother and his now-ex-wife should have cleaned it up themselves.)

We have a growing suspicion that Amazon’s Turks might not be faring much better. Researchers have conducted some very detailed studies into who, exactly, works for AMT, and we have read them with concern.

From Panos Ipeirotis’ dataset we know that 54% of the people that work for AMT (‘Turkers’) are between 21 and 35 years old. We know that 70% of them are women. We know that 65% of them have a household income of less than \$60,000 per year, and that 55% of them do not have children. We know that 46.80% of them are from the United States, another 34% are from India, and the remaining 19.20% are from everywhere else.²

We have also read essays explaining that the Turk is in fact an elegant metaphor for the precarious condition of the worker in a globalised and networked milieu.³ And we have made a substantial amount of art that actually makes use of Amazon Mechanical Turk as a productive medium to demonstrate the same point, but in a way that is, you know, *artier*.

The point is not that the mechanism is empty, like some kind of neutral reproducer. The point is that it is a mechanism that already includes a spot for *you* – like the Law in Franz Kafka’s novel *The Trial* – whether that spot is in front of it as a player, inside it as the operator, behind it as the spectator being shown its misleading components, from afar as the critic describing and demystifying it by virtue of your criticism or, increasingly, as the artist or writer (mis)using it in your project.⁴ The moment that you engage the setup as a problematic the machine springs into action.

The history of people using AMT to make art is almost as old as the history of the platform.

Gregory Laynor, Stephen McLaughlin, Kaegan Sparks and Vladimir Zykov published a series of AMT pieces in 2008

on their FOR GODOT blog, under the title *I WAS TOLD TO WRITE 50 WORDS*, which was exactly the workshop exercise they had been set by their professor, Kenneth Goldsmith.⁵

The same year, Blogger user Ann conducted an exquisite corpse-style experiment on AMT, choosing a first line, having several AMT workers submit next lines and picking one winner, then resubmitting that line until the poem was completed. One example still appears on the Crowd Poet blog.⁶

In 2010, Markus Strohmaier produced *In the daily life of a Mechanical Turk*, a poem constructed around the acrostic phrase ‘infinite monkey’ and arranged in a series of rhyming couplets. The individual lines that filled this framework were composed by AMT workers.⁷

Also in 2010, the question ‘What are the most creative uses of Amazon’s Mechanical Turk?’ appeared on the user-generated Q&A platform Quora, and answers are still being added. Nat Friedman responded,

I had Turkers email poems to a friend of mine who was faced with a dilemma. For \$0.50 you get a pretty good poem, and for \$1.00 they really put in an effort. Be sure to set the time limit for the HIT high enough so that they have time to compose something good.

Ben Packer contributed this answer to the same question:

I had MTurkers write love letters to my wife.

I gave enough details for them to write something specific and personal (but not enough for them to find and stalk us – hopefully). I paid 25 cents with up to a 50 cent bonus for great ones. When I got them, I copied and pasted them in emails to my wife. She was very confused, particularly by the one that was signed ‘Frank’. I told her it was a typo.⁸

A year later, Suzi Grossman wrote several AMT poems. The first, *Scary Cat*, began with a poem by Alfred Tennyson, which she then excised text from and had workers fill in the blanks ‘madlib style.’ The second, a sound piece, consisted of single lines about ‘late fall’ read by AMT workers, then stitched together.⁹

Aaron Koblin and Daniel Masse’s *Bicycle Built for 2,000* uses AMT on a larger scale. In this project, the workers listened to a short sound clip, then recorded themselves imitating what they heard. 2,088 such recordings were synced together to produce a choral version of ‘Daisy Bell’ (1892), the song used to create the first example of musical speech synthesis.¹⁰

On Strip Generator, a social media comic strip production portal, dogtrax’s *Digital Writing Month* strip describes completing a difficult class assignment to write a digital poem by outsourcing it all to AMT... and then paying for it in Bitcoin.¹¹

Fred Benenson’s Kickstarter-funded *Emoji Dick* submitted each of the 10,000+ sentences in Herman Melville’s *Moby-Dick* to an AMT worker three times for translation into Japanese emoticons (emoji). Another set of workers voted on these results, selecting the most popular sentences for use in the final book. More than 800 people spent about 44 days working on this project, making \$0.05 per translation and \$0.02 per vote per translation.¹²

I am sure I have missed a number of other, similar projects along the way. Whatever. Reception cannot keep pace with this kind of production, and the resulting glut strips away our ability to distinguish. All that remains is the corporate ruthlessness of the search algorithm and its numerically defined sense of what your search should produce, presented to you as though it were perfectly transparent and logical or the poetic voice of some correlative intelligence.

What this history means is that we need to read *Of the Sub-contract* not solely as a critique of poetry (lyrical, conceptual or otherwise). Nor can we read this book solely as a critique of the

economics of the Amazon Mechanical Turk. *Of the Subcontract* needs to be read as a critique of artists and poets who employ networked digital outsourcing as a production method. If this is institutional critique, the point is that art is now quite comfortable inside the institution. There is no neutral place on which to stand.

Paraphrasing the work of Peter Sloterdijk, Slavoj Žižek summarises contemporary ideology with the following aphorism: ‘they know very well what they are doing, but still, they are doing it.’¹³ The artistic gesture of using AMT to write poetry is fully ironised. It wants to assert, at the same time, that the once-lauded cultural value of the work of poets is now so close to nothing as to be indistinguishable from it, and that the work of precarious labourers in a networked digital milieu, which is remunerated far below minimum wage, without benefits or the collective bargaining power of unionisation, is nevertheless dignified. But we cannot even be bothered to agonise about the deadlock any more.

The act of using AMT to make art has already settled in the popular imagination at the level of a composition exercise in the classroom. We try it once, blog about it, perhaps crowdfund the product of our orchestrations in order to package it more elaborately and add another level of iteration to the multiplicity of our production. Then we move on. The traces of our efforts sit on various backwater corners of the web, echoed and re-echoed by their real audience: spiders and robots, who, like us, read without caring.

Although Amazon Mechanical Turk might be a market-leader, it is by no means a unique business. Online portals that connect employers and workers and extract a fee for doing so facilitate a new sort of freelance production that is, in the double sense, data-based. Take, for instance, the foreword ‘by’ McKenzie Wark at the beginning of this book, which was subcontracted to a ghostwriter in Lahore, Pakistan, for \$75 via Freelancer.com.

Of the Subcontract is entirely unconcerned with originality. We might consider it as an attempt to exhaust the gesture of using AMT to write a book of poetry by producing its most complete realisation, in the hope that we might somehow be able to move past the point of deadlock. In that respect, the message of this book would echo the title – and the futility – of derek beaulieu’s recent collection, *Please, No More Poetry* (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2013). Because, of course, even if the message is to stop and do something else, what has been produced is yet another book of poetry to add to the long, long shelf of unread titles.¹⁴ We can be polite about it, but we cannot even dignify our own request by refusing to partake ourselves.

This book is not a solution but a symptom, a litmus test of larger social changes, both basic and corrosive. We use data to represent these changes to ourselves. The meanings that we abstract and extract from that data enforce and accelerate those changes. Data is the great leveller, reconfiguring both the most privileged and the least privileged kinds of writing as Human Intelligence Tasks. Poets and professors can point to this change, but so far, have not been able to move beyond it. As we are beginning to realise, our tasks, too, can be outsourced.

In a myriad of ways, *Of the Subcontract* implicates us. It contains only synthesised voices from an unprecedented future, complicit in their own exploitation, mustering a form of writing that is brutally present.

DARREN WERSHLER → Montreal, 2013

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OF THE SUBCONTRACT

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AFTERWORD

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INFORMATION AS MATERIAL was established in 2002 to publish works by artists who use extant material – selecting it and reframing it – and who, in doing so, disrupt the existing order of things.



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