Counter-N?
A First Conversation

Özgün Eylül İşcen: I guess my initial question would be how you, and then we, have come to this project of Counter-N. What were the initial thoughts that motivated us to work on it? It involves building a platform for reaching out to others who share similar concerns or trajectories regarding the possible futures of computation, which is becoming a totalizing force closely entangled with capitalist operations. It may be fair to direct some questions prepared for the interviewees to ourselves. While mixing a few questions into one, I am curious to hear what theoretical and historical references we start with from fields such as media theory, arts and design, and humanities at large alongside social movements, alternative cultures, and practice-based research. For instance, I see connections between Counter-N and your work on commonist media practices and subcultures. Maybe more on your piece on counter-dancing?[1] In my case, that would be more about my ongoing struggle with navigating through the particulars/ concretes and universals/abstracts of computational capital as well as the theory itself.

For me, as someone more involved in the N-Futuring part, I share the frustration with many other (media) theorists regarding the totalizing impacts of computational capital. Yet, we cannot afford to get stuck in the visions of canceled or dark futures. Therefore, I seek other scholars and practitioners who address this very dialectic of computation, capital, and history to enact and envision alternative possibilities for computational practices and the realm of the future itself. Therefore, I insist on developing theories of computational media that speak to the ongoing struggles in the streets by going back to its material and social conditions. In other words, I am interested in media theory and practice that affirm an aesthetic that is always already in the process of making in the streets. In this sense, I am interested in the additive of "-ing" and a platform or network format that expands as it gathers, where we could share our experiences and strategies of theoretical, practical, and institutional making.

Shintaro Miyazaki: Wonderful! So there are two questions floating around. One on initial thoughts and references, and another on counter-dancing. So let me start with the first, which will lead me to the second. Some roots of counter-N come from the time around 2013/2014. Though Fred Turner's book *From Counterculture to Cyberculture* was actually published already in 2006, it circulated among us in the summer of 2013 when there was a conference on that topic at HkW Berlin.

This was a time when I was very much interested in the 1960s and psychedelics, etc. and the interweaving of art, design, and cybernetics. These ideas slumbered around until late 2019, when I started to think about counter-raving: that is, raving as a practice of resistance and insurgence linked with rhythms, beats, and techno culture. I tried to connect raving with my earlier work on algorhythms... So I talked about counter-raving (which later became counter-dancing) several times... First in Romania, then for CTM in Berlin and then also in Zurich. In early February 2020 in Berlin, our paths crossed again after we had met in Summer 2018, if I remember correctly. During a conversation over coffee, you mentioned the concept of counter-visuality by Nicholas Mirzoeff, which was formative for me for writing an article on critical modeling I was then planning to finish. So here we have the most important references for Counter-N: counter-visuality, which led me to counteralgorhythmicity.

Özgün Eylül İşcen: Can you expand more on your idea of counteralgorhythmicity, especially through its relevance for Counter-N? I think this could offer further context for Counter-N.

Shintaro Miyazaki: So counteralgorhythmicity is an alternate condition or state of algorhythmicity. Algorhythmicity[2] then is the currently most visible state of algorithm-driven technologies, networks, and systems which frame and condition our everyday lives in the age of techno capitalisms or what McKenzie Wark calls "something worse than capitalism." The term is a sort of visualization of the entanglements of technology with capital focusing on its rhythms, timings, and protocols. It is further, as you might have already guessed, a sort of ironic misspelling, a so-called cacography, of 'algorithm' and 'rhythm.' But the point back then when I proposed it was to look and listen more closely to the rhythms of algorithms and their productivity. Counteralgorhythmicity proposes that there must be different, alternative modes of rhythmicity, unfolding, and dancing which operate not within the dictates of capital, the market, competition, and profit-orientation but in a sort of commons-oriented, solidarity-based way. So Counter-N, then, is a project that allows me to explore such alternatives with new and old allies and companion scholars, artists, designers, activists, etc.

Özgün Eylül İşcen: I am also interested in why we have chosen this online format. What are the motivations and implications as such? In short, what are your thoughts on this format and its possible paths?

Shintaro Miyazaki: I have chosen the online format since it allows us to expand almost limitlessly and produce/curate a lot of text, which is also accessible. And since we can archive the materials at the data storage infrastructure of HU Berlin, it is well hosted. The interview format allows us to have more than an ephemeral and spontaneous

conversations via an online video conferencing system. In addition, the barrier to taking part is lower for this than a lengthy text contribution. So, let me ask you a question: You said that you are interested in a theory of computational media that speaks to the struggles of the streets. I think that resonates a lot with my idea of counter-dancing, so what would be the most important parts of such a theory?

Özgün Eylül İşcen: Thank you for asking this question. I see your question as a chance to think about some overlapping gestures or themes in our works, through which we ended up collaborating. First, as you have done, I will start with some specific anecdotes that led me to the question of media theory attending to the streets. Then, I will continue with some theoretical references that helped me navigate this endeavor.

First, I would like to refer to my experience from a few years ago as a PhD student based in the United States, writing a dissertation on media theory and arts in the context of the so-called 'Middle East.' Given the novelty and urgency of the issue, emergent digital publics, such as the Arab uprisings of the 2010s, constituted a popular theme in media studies departments with their emancipatory potentials. At the same time, one of the dominant streams of research was the critique of platform capitalism and its capturing of our cognitive abilities, affects, and futures as new frontiers (which could be related to the following trajectory of such uprisings in the region and beyond, too). I learned a lot from these analyses, which are unexpectedly useful for overcoming the culturalist readings of various themes related to the region. Yet, this gesture also exposed the technodeterministic tone and thus the limits of either interpretation. More importantly, their shortcomings marked the necessity of situating computational media within the geopolitical context and the ongoing violence of colonial powers and oligarchic regimes integral to capitalist operations.[3]

In this regard, the critical work on infrastructure, logistics, and labor (e.g., Laleh Khalili, Orit Halpern, Ned Rossiter, Nick Dyer-Witherford), and "recursive colonialism" (e.g., the Critical Computation Bureau with Luciana Parisi, Ezekiel Dixon-Román, Tiziana Terranova, Oana Pârvan, and Brian D'Aquino) have helped navigate the historical, material, and social conditions of computational media. Our attention to complex histories and contexts complicates the monolithic, deterministic projections of technology that offer a pessimistic image of the future. I think we cannot afford this image, not that it is inaccurate. It is because we need to attune ourselves to the ongoing struggles of communities around the world that still struggle to navigate the existing cultural politics of space, time, technology, and image. In this regard, I am interested in media theory and attending to material, social, and symbolic infrastructures—or the surround beyond

the level of the interface, in Jonathan Beller's terms.[4] Only then we can bring the questions of context and history back into the discussion. For instance, I often refer to Ariella Aïsha Azoulay's idea of a political ontology of a medium (e.g., photography), while she still leaves room for struggle where civil imaginations (could) arise.[5] This way, we can reclaim the radical potential of a given medium despite the fact it is always already an imperial apparatus.

Likewise, as you mentioned, Mirzoeff's conception of counter-visuality[6] has been important for my work, especially regarding my rethinking of Fredric Jameson's geopolitical aesthetic and the accompanying practice of cognitive mapping.[7] For Mirzoeff, counter-visuality is never merely about seeing but claiming a political collectivity that contests the violent transformation of our relationship to history and the current reality.

Furthermore, I draw upon the works of Kodwo Eshun (and the Otolith Group in collaboration with Anjalika Sagar) that think through counter futures within the context of Afrofuturism.[8] They demonstrate how to reclaim the right to the future via the detour of fragmented pasts/archives as a means of bringing the present closer to its desired state that is not there (yet)—which also seems to be in line with Azoulay's recent work on potential history. On the other hand, we have already observed that ethnofuturisms are not necessarily emancipatory, as we see in the examples of Sinofuturism or Gulf Futurism. In that sense, Jussi Parikka's article on "Middle East and Other Futurisms"[9] was encouraging for me as a media theorist drawing upon similar contexts, references, and concerns while writing about artistic practices as a part of theorizing.

Furthermore, Aimee Bahng's idea of migrant futures has been helpful for me in highlighting how dispossessed populations navigate and contest the hegemonic speculations of what we call finance or techno-capitalism at messy sites where it hits the ground. We can build migrant futures only on the axis of organized efforts from the below. For instance, I build upon various scholars working on extractive capitalism (I cannot track how many descriptors I have put in front of capitalism so far) to contextualize the high-tech, profit-driven spectacles of Dubai as manifestations of class hierarchies in the region and beyond. Indeed, Dubai's achievement as a regional power within the global network of logistics has risen with the coupling of automation technology with a repressive labor regime, which relies on the systematic exploitation of non-citizen labor via the Kafala (sponsorship) system.[10] This is a site of struggle for contesting and inverting the very mechanisms underlying platform capitalism today. Indeed, while I am writing these lines, multiple strikes of delivery and warehouse workers are happening in Turkey and are gaining victories with their demands for wage raises.

Given the entanglements of computational capital and the politics of futurity (whether predictive algorithms or apocalyptic futures), even though N-Futuring is a sub-category of Counter-N, I started to feel that there is less distinction than we, or at least me, had thought at the beginning of this project. What do you think?

Shintaro Miyazaki: Sure, not at all. I imagine N-futuring on the same conceptual level as N-computing and both are linked to Counter-N as variants or, to be more specific, as Counter-Futuring and Counter-Computing, right? That is sort of the relational architecture of our little project.

Özgün Eylül İşcen: As we are completing our first few interviews now, how do you see the conversations going? What are the things that seem to work well for you?

Shintaro Miyazaki: The conversations sometimes are really quickly done, sometimes they extend over weeks, so it depends on who we are collaborating with. It requires a bit of patience and emailing, but I am very optimistic and we are just at the beginning. Once we have the first contributions to a term, we should also collect conversations that comment on these first attempts. I think broad ideas such as decolonial computing deserve many iterations and variants. I am dreaming that our tree-like structure will soon become more a sort of rhizome or even a mycelium.

Let me follow up on the references you mentioned, especially Ariella Azoulay and Aimee Bahng. Could you unfold here a bit of what is important for you about their work?

Özgün Eylül İşcen: Even though their research is very different, what fascinates me is their gesture at the possibility of intervention, a site of struggle while navigating through it in very concrete terms. They shift our focus to the fact that capital (or capitalist modernity) as totality never constitutes a full circle and neither does its captures.

Of course, Azoulay's work is more about material and visual cultures, such as photography and the archive. For instance, she argues that the imperial regime of visuality (e.g., the gaze) shaped the development of photography as a medium, which constitutes its political ontology. Similarly, we could locate the logic of computation historically before the invention of computers. Here, the focus is on the earlier history of colonialism and slavery, which renders the historical formation of 'information' as violent and as capital due to their overlapping trajectories. Drawing upon Simone Browne's great book *Dark Matters*, Beller argues that "the technologies of racialization and enslavement were at once horrific technologies of capitalist production, bent as

they were on the violent conversion of people into objectified beings and processes, and also the precursors to current technologies."[11]

Despite its political ontological as such, photography (or the computer) has also engendered a political space for encounter and visibility, as people take, look at, and distribute photographs and reimagine their everyday life through these practices. In that sense, Azoulay offers a theory of apparatus that leaves room for openness that comes from its very sociality despite its programmatic nature (as Vilém Flusser would say). Yet, this openness of the apparatus is not an unbound realm, which even becomes a surface or vehicle to reflect on its very conditions. In this sense, Counter-N also involves unlearning these programmed, repressive mechanisms that are not merely technical but also social, aesthetic, economic, and political. Azoulay ultimately calls it "unlearning imperialism,"[12] which could be relevant to the gesture of countering or commoning. Therefore, Azoulay's emphasis on the historicity of the medium affirms its dialectical nature rather than foreclosing its potentiality for a political will and agenda. In other words, the apparatus cannot be reduced to the logic (whether colonial, national, or commercial) that has dominated its operationalization as such. (This is also how I ended up bringing Jameson and Azoulay into an unexpected dialogue in my work.)

Here, we can return to Bahng's connecting the abstracting processes of financialization and datafication to their material and social conditions (bodies, borders). These are sites where not only imperial, neoliberal violence takes place but also where a resistance to it builds up. In this sense, Bahng highlights that we need to reclaim —which is to say, decolonize—the realm of speculation, too, where world-making becomes future-making and vice versa. This idea of intervening in human labor and sociality speaks to the Marxist and feminist emphasis on social reproduction. Such relationality derives from capital's dependence on its multiple outsides, such as human labor and natural resources. The 'outsides' do not mean the outside but the constitutive part of the (capitalist) system itself that still cannot be reduced to its logic, such as the social hierarchies predicated on the intersecting histories of colonialism, racism, and patriarchy.[13] Yet, as Anna Tsing argues, capital operates through frictions at its frontiers (due to material conditions, cultural encounters) that not only maintain but also have the capacity to disrupt it.[14]

Ultimately, both Azoulay and Bahng offer examples of doing theory while attending to the streets. They invest in praxis that is collective and persistent yet emergent. Azoulay's idea of civil imagination could be relevant to your idea of commoning, too. This gesture overall is apparent in our efforts for Counter-N, as well.

Let me end with how Bahng ends the preface and starts the book, which I think fits the spirit of Counter-N:

"What follows might be considered a 'starter archive' of attempts to imagine if not the end of capitalism, then an alternative to it, by way of those who may find themselves mired in capitalism or displaced by it, but who continue to speculate beyond its logics. What I have assembled here is a promiscuous set of cultural texts, often paired in ways that highlight a tension between fortune-telling in the service of capitalism and migrant futures that dare to imagine a world beyond it."[15]

Any other concluding remarks as we are getting ready to share the first few interviews with the larger audience? I also think that we could reflect from time to time on how things are going as new questions and reflections come up.

Shintaro Miyazaki: No, I think you formulated everything very adequately. I am much looking forward to seeing how this evolves and unfolds.

1   Shintaro Miyazaki, "Counter-Dancing," in Architecture and Naturing Affairs, ed. Mihye An and Ludger Hovestadt (Birkhäuser, 2020), 149–57, https://doi.org/10.1515/9783035622164-023

2   Shintaro Miyazaki, "Algorhythmics: A Diffractive Approach for Understanding Computation," in *The Routledge Companion to Media Studies and Digital Humanities*, 1st ed. (New York; London: Routledge, 2018), 243–49.

3   See also Miriyam Aouragh & Paula Chakravartty. "Infrastructures of Empire: Towards a Critical Geopolitics of Media and Information Studies," *Media, Culture & Society* 38, no. 4, 2016: 559-575.

4   Jonathan Beller, *The Message is Murder: Substrates of Computational Capital* (London: Pluto Press, 2018).

5   Ariella Aisha Azoulay, *The Civil Contract of Photography* (New York: Zone Books, 2008).

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6   Nicholas Mirzoeff, *The Right to Look: A Counterhistory of Visuality* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011).

7   Fredric Jameson, "Cognitive Mapping," in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1988): 347–360. See also Fredric Jameson, *The Geopolitical Aesthetic: Cinema and Space in the World System*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992).

8   Kodwo Eshun, "Further Considerations of Afrofuturism," *CR: The New Centennial Review* 3, no. 2, (Summer 2003): 287–302, https://doi.org/10.1353/ncr.2003.0021

9   Jussi Parikka "Middle East and Other Futurisms: Imaginary Temporalities in Contemporary Art and Visual Culture." *Culture, Theory and Critique* 59, no:1 (2018): 40–58. https://doi.org/10.1080/14735784.2017.1410439

10   Rafeef Ziadah, "Transport Infrastructure & Logistics in the Making of Dubai Inc." *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 42, no.2, 2018: 182–197. https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2427.12570

11   Beller, *The Message is Murder*, 164-165. See also Simone Browne, *Dark Matters: On the Surveillance of Blackness*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015).

12   Ariella Aisha Azoulay, *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism* (London: Verso, 2019).

13   Sandro Mezzadra, and Brett Neilson, *The Politics of Operations: Excavating Contemporary Capitalism*, (Durham, Duke University Press, 2019).

14   Anna Tsing, "Supply Chains and the Human Condition." Rethinking Marxism 21, no. 2, 2008: 148–176. See also Anna Tsing, *Friction: An Ethnography of Global Connection* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004).

15   Bahng, *Migrant Futures*, xi.