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A network of unintended connections ¹

Once a month I download the images from my phone to a hard drive. I obsessively capture bits of life to shortly afterwards put them to sleep. The camera's eye improves on mine: it zooms in without having to get close and records what I will soon forget. While I am disengaged, the growing archives live on, waiting for some extraordinary event to awaken them again: a random connection from the analogue world. Memory is not something we have, it is something that happens: a network of unintended connections. While remembering is a form of caring, storing is a way of safely forgetting. Our devices know us better than we know them. The algorithm is an oracle that tracks our secrets and predicts both questions and answers. The promises of technology are many. Among them, that all information will be always available. But the internet, like the past, is also made of broken links and errors. No cloud lasts forever, not even those born in a silicon valley. How many times have we felt the vertigo of the no longer accessible data? When machines fail, we stop taking them for granted. Glitches are part of their agency. When they work again, they regain their deceptive immateriality.

We live in anxious times where obsessive recording is part of a collective amnesia. Remembering forward conceals the unfulfilled promises of technological tales. What was supposed to free us ended up making us dependent on a light screen. At the same time, the apocalyptic rhetoric of a future that has already happened does not match the simplicity of our daily gestures. How much harm can there be in simply pressing keys and touching screens? Sharing information - what's wrong with that? How can the small movements of our hands be involved in an event of planetary proportions? How can a loving message dig into the extractive wound of colonial history? While transferring files from one device to another, I am also part of another story: that of the invisible work that brings women and machines together. The assembly line has long since left the factory to enter our intimacy. But the factory did not disappear, it got bigger and bigger. Being part of the same story does not make us equal within it. While some of us benefit from the hyperconnectivity of things, others suffer from it. And yet, it is increasingly difficult to know whether it is machines that are at our service or whether it is we who are at theirs. Flesh-and-blood replicants, we also rely on external digital memories that disengage from the past with every update. But there is still one thing that intelligent machines cannot do: thinking. Because in order to think, it is necessary to forget. Although they are frequently conflated, remembering is not the same as storing data.

Before the internet, there was a different primordial planetary archive. Like so many other elements of Earth, water is a matter that recalls worlds long before this one. Satellite images of the oceans capture the liquid state of planet Earth from the thermosphere. Our source of life is external, the consequence of a cosmic journey across the universe. Thanks to satellites, water waves can travel in radio waves around the planet in a round trip. Like - but never in the same way as - today's technologies, water is an archive of both memory and forgetting. What falls into its depths, stays within it. Everything water dissolves, becomes part of its deep time. Water flows through many bodies, even in those that seem dry. Like memory, it needs them to take on a concrete shape. Our mineral electronic devices mimic the flows that produce them. Information never stops, powered by particles of artificial light.

Technology is a thirsty being afraid of water. The disembodied data spring dries the earth where the minerals in our devices come from. They return years later, creating a wasteland where the hardware never quite disappears. The newest machines don't move and we can't see them, but they are everywhere. Hidden in personal devices, they follow us around. The smallest thing, a microchip, has become the most powerful element. The miniature maximises our experience and moves large amounts of money and water. The human body is now inorganic, connected to a wireless network that hides its massive infrastructure across the planet. Switching any device off and on sets in motion a global economy driven by the production of integrated circuits and semiconductors. We need them for almost everything. The most

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¹ This text relates to Su Yu Hsin's work from abstract connections to the pieces in her exhibition and to conversations together over the years. They are conversations that have a watery quality in how ideas come and go, taking different shapes and voices over time. Finding her practice amidst the abstraction of these words has something of a search for the materiality lost in disembodied data.

extraordinary technology is now a tiny part, essential for the functioning of the most ordinary things. What goes unnoticed holds much power.

When I was a child many things were made in Taiwan. It was the tangible beginning of a globalization of which I was unaware back then. Many years later I would come to realize that things are not just made in one place, but are part of a strategically concealed production line spread across the planet. In the information era we never have all the information. Opacity is part of the infrastructure. The software outshines the hardware. The less we know, the fewer questions we ask. My phone and computer barely hint at the global journey of technology: designed in California, assembled in China. Nothing is said about Taiwan, where most of the semiconductors they need to function are produced and exported. Nor do they mention the extractive violence in Congo that also makes it possible for me to write this text. I only relatively recently realised that writing is a geological event, becoming more aware also of how the earth is part of its origins. History as we know it began in cuneiform clay tablets, stones with hieroglyphics, followed by different writing minerals until incorporating intricate water processes with the development of our current memory technologies. Yet the water that semiconductor silicon wafers need so much to be produced can also damage them during the process. It has to be ultrapure water, capable of meeting the hygienic requirements of an industry that, in turn, pollutes the planet. Raw water has too much life within. The organic poses a threat by acting on its own. The more semiconductors evolve, the more water they need. The smaller they are, the more resources they consume. But the problem is not just the exhaustion of resources, but treating life as a resource at the disposal of technology. The quest for an ultimate memory overlooks the deep memory this planet has held for millennia. The fact that language, our most ancient technology, still has no synonyms for the word resource is very telling of how we understand living environments: as something always available for external needs.

Like so many stories, the mainstream ones of technology and science follow an evolutionary script that aims at a final destination. Singularity is one of its most popular tales: one day machines will surpass humans, being smarter than us. The way in which it takes one machine to make another backs up this human prophecy. There is something uncannily human about this codependency. But for machines to think, it takes much more than data. At the moment, artificial intelligence can only think what humans already think. As advanced as it may seem, it is not as imaginative as we are told. It mirrors us, yet looking human is not enough to be human. AI lacks cultural memory and can't feel empathy. Beyond our borrowed fantasies, technology is a mundane being. For our microchips to be produced, water truck drivers have to go back and forth from the factory to the river every day. This journey lacks the futuristic aesthetic that surrounds technological achievements. And perhaps that is why it is possible to make gestures of quiet resistance, such as returning the water to the river instead of taking it to the factory. After all, resistances are also made of small, enmeshed waves. Understanding to whom things belong begins to dissolve many given narratives. Water belongs to waters and ethics do not belong to humans alone. To undo these narratives is not so much to substitute one future prediction for another as to remember the earthly qualities of everything. However complex it can be, technology is one of nature's many assemblages. Our most sophisticated, silicon-hungry devices come from sand. Moving the future backwards is also about remembering how things are done. If it is true that technology may eventually rebel against us, it should also rebel against our predictions about it. It could even prefer to return to its original environment. When interrupted, the circuit opens to the unknown. For a moment I imagine a singularity otherwise. For a moment I imagine a singularity of a different kind, one in which disembodied data miss the raw materials from which they come, no longer participating in our unfinished human condition. Like water returning to water, they go back to the unresolved question of origins: another departure point for what neither begins nor ends.

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