

# Conversations with an Oracle Towards a New Theory of Creativity

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‘Welcome, you are about to participate in an experiment’. A nice lady dressed in black with a professional smile welcomes me. We are standing in front of a big blue container that has been installed in the forest. I only know a few things about this project by Floris Schönfeld. It is about mental conditions like schizophrenia and how they relate to creativity. And, it has something to do with an artificial intelligence called PUK\*. The combination of these elements prepares me for any type of mind twist.



image by Vika Ushkanova

‘Please follow me’ the lady tells me. We go into the container where I receive further instructions. ‘In the first section, you will meet PUK\* but you will only observe her. In five minutes, I will come back and we will move to the second phase of the experiment’. She guides me to a darkened room and disappears. PUK\* appears on a screen where images of little ceramic owls are rapidly alternating. Happy owls, charming owls, scary owls, angry owls, hundreds of restless little owls in bright colors are looking at me. And there is the sound of a little baby gurgling and crying. It sounds sweet, although in this weird context also a bit uncanny. While staring at PUK\*, I try to make sense of it all. Is there a relation between the noises produced by the baby and the hypnotizing owls? Why use the sound of helpless little babies? Why owls? Is this a joke? I am so caught up in trying to figure out the rationale behind the system that I am startled when, out of nowhere, the

lady in black shows up. ‘Now I will take you to the next room where you are going to communicate with PUK\*. The more you communicate with her, the more she will learn’. When I enter the room, first, I see a big light box in the shape of a circle. In the back there is a kind of bench. On top of it someone has installed hundreds of little ceramic owls. Some owls I recognize from the screen. The diagnosis ‘obsessive-compulsive disorder’ pops in my mind when I look at this huge collection.

On the big light box, someone has been playing with the owls and arranged them in a certain order. Aha, I should probably start to make a composition myself. I start to remove all the big, angry looking owls. Maybe it’s because I sympathize with the marginalized, or maybe it’s because I am short myself, but either way I start to decolonize the little owls. They don’t need to be protected by the bigger owls. I organize them in democratic little communities in which they can have a nice conversation. Then the time is up and the lady in black guides me into the daylight where Floris Schönfeld is waiting for me with his camera crew. We sit down on tree trunks and he starts to ask me about my feelings during the experiment and the strategies I used to communicate with PUK\*.

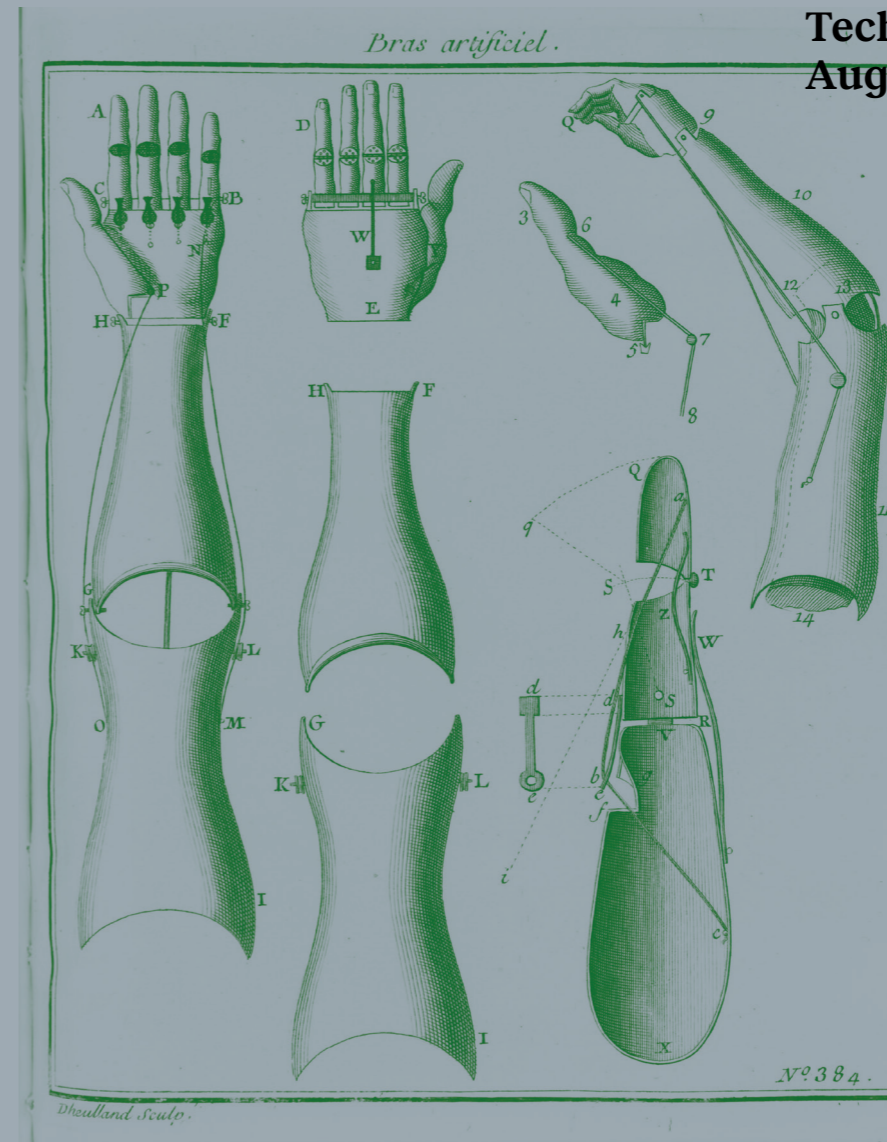
‘A lot of people feel the need to protect PUK\*’, Floris explains. The compositions they make with the owls is documented, mapped. This data is input for an algorithm that programs the baby sounds and images in the first room. This slightly changes

and influences the state of mind of the next person stepping in the room. But, usually when you program a system, you know how it works, this algorithm we don’t understand, Floris explains. That is what makes the system intelligent. It’s unpredictable and irrational and it keeps on learning. To accept a different kind of intelligence that is not rational, you have to accept different mental states. You have to step out of your normative vision and let go of your assumptions. I realize that PUK\* is learning from me and that I am learning about myself through PUK\*. In that sense, PUK\* is a bit like an oracle, you have to try hard to understand her. PUK\* is opening a new layer of understanding of how we might be work with artificial intelligence in the future. Like emotional, irrational, learning systems, like...me. I hope that one day I will meet PUK\* again to find out what has become of her.

meestal weet je hoe een systeem werkt als je het programmeert, maar dit algoritme begrijpen wij niet.

Het is onvoorspelbaar, irrationeel en het blijft doorleren.

nieuw inzicht over hoe we in de toekomst met kunstmatige intelligentie om kunnen gaan.



Illus. in: *Machines et inventions approuvées par l'Académie royale des sciences, depuis son établissement jusqu'à présent; avec leur description.* Paris : G. Martin [etc.] 1735-77, no. 384.

Where does this bring us? Let us reverse the normative relation between technology and prosthetic (from prosthetic as technology, to technology as prosthetic) and apply it to our modern conceptions of health, wellness and being.

Maybe we do need to have a new language, that is not stuck in our normative structures (an extension of the Athenian Empire of Concept Thought). Perhaps there is something to learn from being critical about our relation to technology, by being a bit more aware in what ways our world is augmented by the various Tekne (not only what we commonly call technology).

wellicht hebben we een nieuwe taal nodig, die niet vast zit in onze normatieve structuren  
wellicht valt er iets te leren van een kritische houding ten opzichte van onze relatie tot technologie

## Technology Augmentation → Prosthetic

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Technology - word-forming element meaning “art, craft, skill,” later “technical, technology,” from Latinized form of Greek tekhnō-, combining form of tekhnē “art, skill, craft in work; method, system, an art, a system or method of making or doing,”

The word “technology” is not the right word. On the one hand it is too general, and on the other hand it has a too specified significance on our everyday. It is not the right word to express this cloudy, fog-like conception that hangs in the air. It is something more than the individual – what we are on a most basic level. It needs to encapsulate more than the tekne of the human – the physical body. Language, theoretical formulations, our ability to connect... perhaps it is augmentation.

Augmentation - late 14c., “become more severe;” c. 1400, “to make larger; become larger,” from Old French augmenter “increase, enhance” (14c.), from Late Latin augmentare “to increase,” from Latin augmentum “an increase, growth,” from

augere “to increase, make big, enlarge, enrich,” from PIE root \*aug- (1) “to increase.”

But doesn’t this imply some sort of “more and more” dynamic? More often than not there is a sense that something is lost, and needs to be “put back in”. This is not “to increase”, but to make whole again.

Prosthetic - 1550s, “addition of a letter or syllable to a word,” from Late Latin, from Greek prosthesis “addition,” from prosthenai “add to,” from pros “to” (from PIE root \*per- (1) “forward,” hence “in front of, toward, near”) + tithenai “to put, to place,” from reduplicated form of PIE root \*dhe- “to set, put.” Meaning “artificial body part” is first recorded c. 1900, from earlier use to describe the medical art of making artificial limbs (1706), on notion of “that which is added to” the injured body.

Here the conditions of “additional” is removed – moving from increase / enhance to add or to put / place. This may seem non-consequential, but it proposes an important idea that is neither sublimity or uncanny – between heaven and earth.

