A closed circuit is a circuit without interruption, a continuous path through which current can flow. A short circuit, on the other hand, occurs when current travels along an unintended path in a circuit. When there are insufficient resistive elements within the unintended path, it results in an excess of current and the circuit either fails or overheats. Most short circuits are accidental, but some are intentional. Intentional short circuits are generally designed to protect the rest of the circuit from damage—as a kind of fail-safe.

While surveillance is more typically associated with closed circuits (CCTV), artworks that utilize surveillance systems can short-circuit conventional observational flow, generate abnormalities and malfunctions, and disrupt the way that closed surveillance circuits are designed to work. Bypassing the resistive elements within these systems, surveillance art overheats the status quo through an approach that is directly interventionist, ethically ambiguous, and methodologically distinctive.

Short circuits can manifest themselves in a variety of ways. When artists pursue a system-based, rather than object-based, practice they understand art institutions, writers, collectors, historians, and archives as part of the work that they make. The conventional, framed, representational art object itself can then be easily removed from the equation and replaced with real-world systems that are recontextualized as art, thus short-circuiting established modes of distribution, exhibition, and interpretation. Rather than representing or holding up a mirror to the world around them, artists can work directly with real surveillance systems, thereby authoring their work though materials and forms that are not exclusive to art and not separated from the world via frames, plinths, and spotlights. When it comes to surveillance systems, this involves appropriating, hacking, and reconfiguring closed circuits, some of which remain camera-based, that are increasingly algorithmic and data-driven.

Over the past few years, I have made a number of works that involve Amazon Mechanical Turk (mTurk) crowdworkers. Borrowing the name of an eighteenth-century sham chess-playing robot, which actually contained a small human player inside, mTurk is a service that allows people (“requesters”) to hire workers to complete “human intelligence tasks,” or HITs: surveys, transcription, image recognition, and so forth. Thus far, humans can complete such HITs more efficiently and accurately than machines. Most tasks pay only a few cents, and Amazon encourages a highly compliant workforce by allowing requesters to withhold payments unless they are happy with the workers’ performances. As a microlabor platform, mTurk provides a closed-circuit observational system between corporation, requester, and worker characterized by a highly efficient and controlled loop between request, response, and payment to the extent that Amazon describes its invisible workforce as “Artificial Artificial Intelligence.” MTurk workers are humans pretending to be machines.
The tasks I have created on mTurk focus on routine and repetition and, in some cases, introduce behavioral patterns: for instance, workers are hired to make videos of themselves eating three times a day, exercising three times a day, praying three times a day, or showing the camera a clock and reporting what they’re doing during a specific minute interval in the day. Short circuits inevitably arise, namely workers tend towards a highly performative, oversharing, confessional, and diaristic tone; they are intensely human, not robots. Many appeal to an imaginary audience, “Hello everyone,” and remark on how nice it is to have someone to talk to.

My first work involving mTurk was *General Intellect* (2015) (Figure 1), which was installed in a condemned school building near Amazon’s headquarters in the South Lake Union neighborhood in Seattle, a place where, as gleaming office blocks replace independent art centers, bars, and stores, Amazon’s white-collar employees are increasingly visible. Monitors installed throughout the abandoned classrooms played one-minute videos uploaded by mTurk workers in response to a HIT asking them to record what they were doing each hour of a nine-to-five workday along with a caption and demographic information about themselves. The HIT resulted in approximately three thousand videos, individual portraits of an extraordinarily diverse range of people, living conditions, and daily routines. There were stay-at-home mothers, retirees, disabled and reclusive people, and under- and self-employed people, as well as those who performed HITs during their regular day jobs.

*Figure 1:* General Intellect (2015).

The term “General Intellect” comes from Marx’s *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy* and is variously understood as a kind of general, social knowledge that Marx speculated would in
itself become a form of capital. For theorists such as Christian Fuchs, Andrea Fumagalli, and Paolo Virno, Marx has proved correct as we perform unpaid labor through social media and other online platforms and create capital for corporations such as Facebook, Amazon, and Google. So while most mTurk tasks are simply placeholders until a machine can read images and handwriting better, my goal in using mTurk has been to create tasks that can bring the human out of the machine, to make them visible, to find those moments of improvisation that can short-circuit the loop of highly routinized tasks being performed by humans pretending to be machines.

_Time-Clock_ (2019) (Figure 2) converts a generic factory punch-clock into a video monitor that displays one-minute videos of mTurk workers filming a clock and describing what they are doing. The work is synchronized to the current time of day and runs twenty-four seven. _Time-Clock_ instrumentalizes workers as timekeepers and reveals the often oppressive routines of a diverse group of workers whose affect, empathy, and pathos short-circuit their routinized, round-the-clock surveillance.

*Figure 2: Time-Clock (2019).*

In _Let Us Pray_ (2019) (Figure 3), a coin-operated collection box plays a three-channel video of mTurk workers filming themselves engaging in spiritual practice. Splitting the difference between work and

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1 “it is neither the direct human labour [a worker] himself performs, nor the time during which he works, but rather, the appropriation of his own general productive power, his understanding of nature and his mastery over it by virtue of his presence as a social body – it is, in a word, the development of the social individual which appears as the great foundation-stone of production and of wealth” (Marx 1973: 705).
worship, *Let Us Pray* orchestrates a factory of prayer where the labor theory of value is translated to spiritual practice and enchantment is just another name for surplus. To quote Max Weber, “Labor is not merely an economic means; it is a spiritual end” (Weber 1930: 4).

*Watchtower* (2017) (Figure 4), a forty-foot-high wooden surveillance tower installed in the atrium of FACT, Liverpool, was flanked by sixteen monitors that showed mTurk workers exercising, eating, praying, dreaming, and performing various other distinctly human observational tasks. The videos are organized by time, converting the tower into a large clock that organizes the workday according to a ritualized set of mundane activities. Following Edward Snowden’s revelations that Verizon had been required to hand over the telephone records of its customers to the National Security Agency, United States Senator Dianne Feinstein (2013) wrote: “The calls record program is not surveillance. It does not collect the content of any communication, not do the records include names or locations. The NSA only collects the type of information found on a telephone bill.” In the laborious construction of an anachronistic, incongruous, and impotent surveillance structure, *Watchtower* tracks a shift in the technological apparatus of observation from the architectural to the algorithmic, from content to metadata, from visible to invisible; today, a network of domestic webcams and mobile devices, databases and code, have replaced physical watchtowers and their human overseers. Surveillance is no longer an external eye of power but a domesticated one seamlessly integrated into the rituals and environments of home, work, and leisure.
Where is the boundary between short-circuiting a system and simply reproducing it in the name of art? In this context, to reproduce simply means replicating the same closed circuit that exists in real life, participating in the same power dynamics, and reinforcing the scenarios that the works claim to resist or critique. To short-circuit, on the other hand, means to renegotiate such systems, to rebuild them in such a way as to introduce possibilities for critical resistance, alternative ways of being, and new forms of agency. Often this forces viewers to feel discomforted and implicated. New connections emerge from the original closed circuit, a re-wiring that, as in the case of an actual short-circuit, generates an overheating as the usual components in the circuit are bypassed and compromised.

Working with these kinds of materials can put the artist in an ethically ambiguous position: Are we exposing the problem, or contributing to it? Are we asking critical questions or aestheticizing exploitation? It is difficult, if not impossible, to maintain the position of impartial observer, or disinterested academic, when you are actively building systems rather than merely depicting or describing them.

The short circuit shows us how artistic research is a distinct form of knowledge with methodologies, goals, and ethical standards that are distinct from other fields. Art plays a vital, necessary, and, above all, generative role in conversations and collaborations around subjects such as surveillance. Art is not merely illustrative, intuitive, or reflective; it is strategic, conceptually-driven, and an agent for change. Whereas the Hippocratic oath and the IRB instruct researchers to “do no harm,” the artist’s ethical imperative is more akin to the journalist’s: to take things apart in pursuit of new ways of seeing. Unlike the social scientist, artists seek to intervene, disrupt, and become compromised in turn. Representation is not enough: when an artist reproduces a system’s logic rather than effectively short-circuiting it, they are no different than the institutions that they critique. Exhibition and distribution are key factors and never neutral choices. It is one thing to observe the observers; it is another to transform these observations into luxury goods that only the
wealthy can access or afford. It is one thing to create a work using crowdworking platforms such as mTurk but another to simply reproduce the same processes of alienation, exploitation, and invisibility that such workers routinely undergo.

My mTurk projects are deliberately, strategically unnerving. They solicit a voyeuristic gaze that enlists the viewer in exploitation. All mTurk participants consented to have their videos publicly displayed, and many expressed excitement that a large audience would see their videos. Whereas mTurk workers are normally rendered invisible by a platform deliberately designed to treat them as anonymous machines, my work short-circuits this anonymity, deploying visibility to upset hierarchies of power and control. My projects ask how an automated, content-rich, yet attention-scarce, economy impacts the ways we live, work, and communicate through digital platforms. By illuminating the hidden mechanics and human costs of twenty-first century capitalism, they pose difficult questions about the exponential capacity for exploitation embedded within data-driven systems. At once compromised and compromising, they ask what remains “human” in our hyper-automated control society.

References

