Bailey, Faith. "Addie Wagenknecht: Coding Is Art," *Prishtina Insight,* August 7, 2016.

ADDIE WAGENKNECHT: CODING IS ART

by
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07/08/2016 - 10:16 AM

Dokutech is an annual component of Dokufest bringing together techies that also wear the hats of social activists and justice advocates. The Dokutech 2016 panel sessions kicked off on Saturday night with a discussion between tech talents who use their expertise to address issues related to migration and displacement, inequality, and surveillance.

This year, Dokutech first-timer Addie Wagenknecht discusses her work as an "anti-disciplinary, experimental artist" in the technology field, specifically regarding open source software and hardware. Her panel discussion focused on her work with the collective Deep Lab, an international, all-female group that engages in issues related to privacy, security, and large-scale data aggregation.

Wagenknecht was born in Portland, Oregon, considers New York City her true American home, and has been living in Europe for the past decade. She traveled to Prizren on Friday from her home in Austria. She's seen some familiar faces around—this field, she says, is pretty intimate.

Faith Bailey: Although I am constantly engaged in the technologies that impact my everyday life, I don't consider myself particularly tech savvy. How would you describe your current work to someone like me?

Addie Wagenknecht: In general, my work deals with the infrastructure of the internet and networks, and the manifestation of the unseen as seen—how do you show the unseen as an artifact? In addition to that, I'm involved in work that deals with surveillance and the culture of social networks, data aggregation, and privacy matters.


Asymmetric Love, 2013. Photo: Wagenknecht

I also do work with remote controlled drones in my paintings to apply pigments to canvas. It's a traditional practice using a non-traditional object.

FB: I'm thinking about Hito Steyerl's protest work against surveillance drones called "How Not to be Seen: A Fucking Didactic Educational .MOV." What about art as protest? Is your art also political work?

AW: I think almost art is political, even if it's a painting of a flower. There's always a political tone to it. It's about who produces it, because all of your biases and experiences are inflicted upon it. That's why I really view coding as a form of art. All of the information and experience one brings to coding is ultimately reflected in the end piece product.
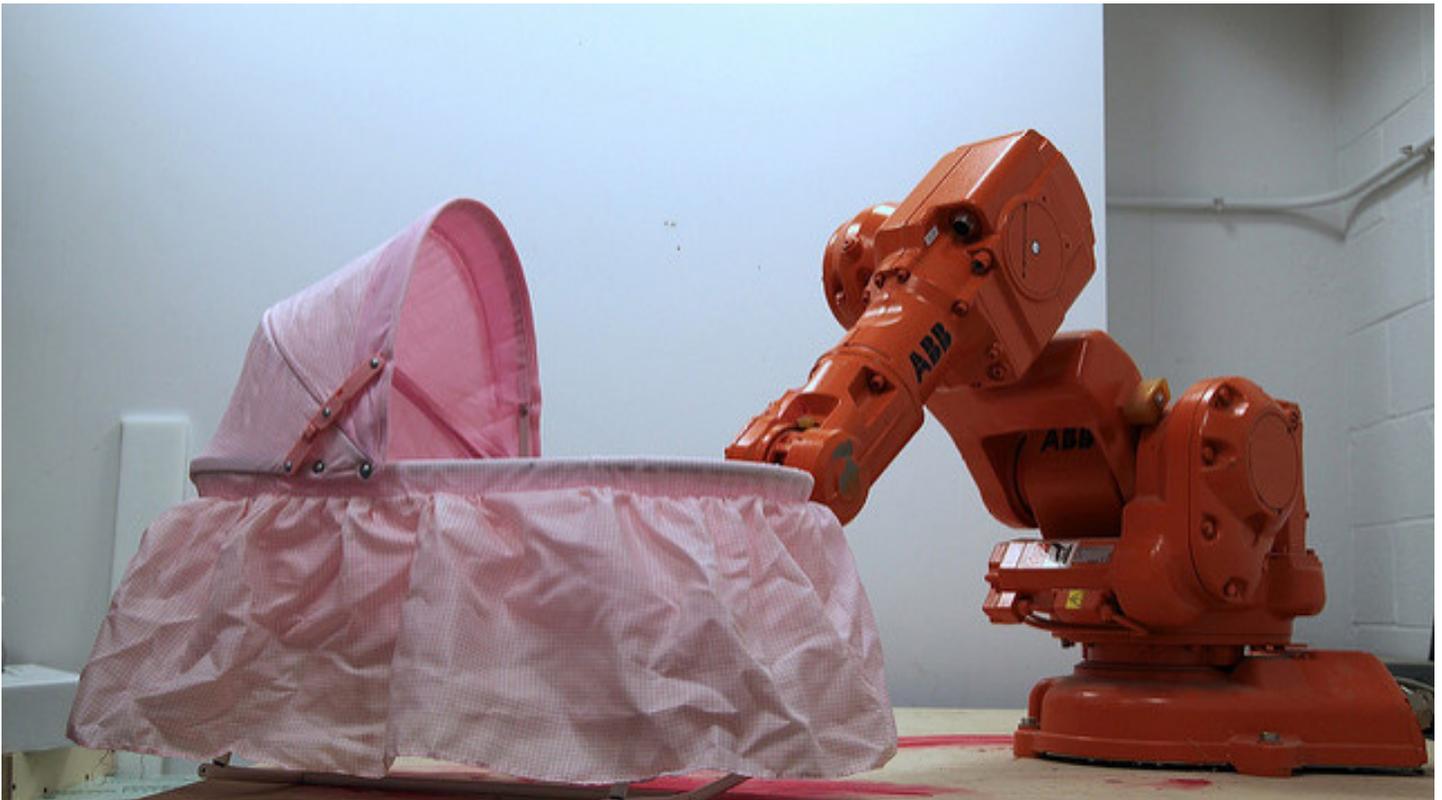
Optimization of *Parenting, Part 2* is a robot arm that reacts whenever a baby in the bassinet cries or awakes from sleep. Photo: Wagenknecht.

A lot of what I do has to deal with feminism because I'm a woman and motherhood because it deals with having a child. Whatever I experience in my life, I very much use art to encapsulate that in a way that allows for a deeper understanding that someone may not get from non-visual mediums.

FB: Could you talk more about how feminist theory impacts your work? We know that representation is a huge problem with women in tech. How else does gender impact the field?

AW: What's so frustrating as a woman in tech or art is that you don't have a reference point when people ask "What's it like being a female artist?" I don't know what it's like to be a male artist. I can speculate, but I have no personal experience. When I read about other women's work or talk to other female artists, it reaffirms my own experiences.

I started looking at a form of artificial intelligence that looks at how machines learn. I started looking at whether machines can recognize a female or a male artist based off of the artist's work. Now I'm looking at databases of large sets of art to see if the machines can actually learn what it a female work versus male work. Because women's work tends to sell for 30 to 60 per cent less than men's. Even if it's identical.

Glass Ceiling: *The Kiss,* 2015. Photo: Wagenknecht.

How do you determine value, and is there a way you can teach machines to actually output more male work for me, even though I'm female? That's something I've been thinking about lately for a new project.

FB: Have you been imagining how to visualize that?

AW: I'm thinking about taking really large data sets from different websites that show contemporary art, and then I'll somehow try to decipher between male and female artists. I haven't figured out how to do that yet, but I'll have the machine learn these two sets of information and then actually output paintings based off of those biases that are basically pre-determined within contemporary art.

In all fields, including technology, women are earning less than men. Is there a way to actually quantify that as a women, and ultimately, to hack that? To become the male artist?

For an upcoming show in New York next year, I want to make 'female' and 'male' paintings, and see if it's true that men's sell more than women's. I wouldn't tell people until the show is over. I want to see if I can reaffirm these things that have been proven.

FB: The first time I noticed tech and art specifically put together was seeing binary code appearing throughout poet Dawn Lundy Partin's collection Discipline. Are a lot of people blending the two fields?

AW: I think using technology as the medium is becoming more and more common. Artists have kind of always used what's ubiquitous around us, what's cheap or free. In Venice, they painted on wood planks. And then the canvases started being imported, and they switched because wood planks were expensive. I think it's the same with art. We're going from materiality and using more traditional mediums to using the internet, because the internet is an all-encompassing experience. There's so much information and beauty there. It's becoming less common to not rely on it somehow.

This has been a really interesting shift in the last four or five years in contemporary art. People are just naturally going to the net as a source of something, whether its images or inspiration.

http://prishtinainsight.com/addie-wagenknecht-coding-is-art-mag/