OVERGADEN.

Linda Hilfling Ritasdatter, *Bugs in the War Room*, 2016. Installation view

The Code of a Silent Power

By Matthias Hvass Borello

Right now I'm sitting in front of the computer screen trying to gather my thoughts. I'm in another time zone than you. I'm 6 hours behind. Right now you are my future, my insurance that everything will run smoothly tomorrow. I'll probably be sleeping soundly while the wheels keep turning on your side of the world. When I wake up, everything will be fine and dandy.

The machine, or computer terminal as it would probably have been called 70 years ago, is a MacBook Pro. Back then it would have filled a whole room with heavy hardware, massive cooling units, and staff to run it. Now it lies humming quietly in my lap filled with electronic parts and materials that are presumably a mix of raw materials from the Congo, codes from Bangalore, and design from Silicon Valley. I wouldn't usually think about what's happening under my fingers, but right now it

hits me right in the cerebral cortex that I don't have a clue what's going on in there.

My job over the next couple of days is to try to express in words what the current exhibition at Overgaden – *Bugs in the War Room* by the Danish artist Linda Hilfling Ritasdatter – is about, which makes this situation even more profound and complex. Because *Bugs in the War Room* opens an abyss of new apprehensions, where data and information technology, the hidden codes and 'bugs' of computer history, capitalist superpowers, the production conditions of the East, and human paranoia are linked to very basic issues of language, time, place, belief and hope. These are the links that mix everything up in the accelerating information flow between my ears.

The Danish artist Kaspar Bonnén has described art as a 'drag anchor'. Not as a tool for innova-

tion or growth to lead us on new business adventures, but as a form of critical reflection that mixes up what we thought we knew and rips open a wound we thought had healed.[1] It can make us reflect on the past, on what we experience as reality, on official versions of history, and on our habitual thoughts and actions. In 2004 the American art historian Hal Foster wrote a text in the art journal *October* with the title 'The Archival Impulse', which describes this need to disturb the dusty files of memory – an apposite description in this context:

"In the first instance archival artists seek to make historical information, often lost or displaced, physically present. To this end they elaborate on the found image, object, and text, and favor the installation format as they do so. (Frequently they use its nonhierarchical [sic] spatiality to advantage – which is rather rare in contemporary art.) [...] These sources are familiar, drawn from the archives of mass culture, to ensure a legibility that can then be disturbed or detourné; but they can also be obscure, retrieved in a gesture of alternative knowledge or counter-memory."[2]

The persistent return of art to archives, the writing of history, and diverse collections has intensified since the start of the 2000s, underlining the need for this form of critical recollection, which in the final analysis situates materials, thoughts and actions in constant relationship to time and place. This relationship has only been reconfirmed in the present, as the collation, handling and surveillance of data have become political and global issues where the boundaries between the private and the public and freedom and terror are subject to constant negotiation. The fabricated and superimposed logic and order of the archive are, in other words, constructs that constantly change in meaning and power over time. Especially here in 2016, when we all 'archive' in a relentless information flow of photographing, writing, filming, uploading, streaming, checking in, liking, sharing, commenting and publishing.

If the material of the archive is disturbed, this challenges the pre-established order to reorder it in another time and context, which then displaces meaning. This is also the ambition

here. In the heart of the exhibition, with senses and thoughts weaving around each other, the viewer is invited to re-archive. Linda Hilfling Ritasdatter's works in *Bugs in the War Room* appear as diverse collections of materials – texts, images, textiles and letters – in an almost absurd order and spatial constellation that defies any obvious logic, yet is packed with information that demands active interconnection and interpretation. In dialogue with the material and the works, we become the generators of new meaning – part of the point with such artistic strategies. It is the process rather than any distilled narrative that is in focus. Like me, sitting here now pressing the keys in an attempt to create order. I can't explain yet where we're heading – merely suggest a possible, and for me meaningful, path. In archival practises it is the very act of archiving – the ordering and investigation of the material – that constitutes the art experience. Yet the moment the viewer stands in the midst of the material with the freedom to choose, conflict rather than harmony prevails. The realisation we reach is often that the truth is far more conflicted than we – or our systems – are able to handle.

In Linda Hilfling Ritasdatter's art, that conflict is linked to the relationship between technology and reality – a coded reality we are in contact with everyday when we surf the net, withdraw money from a cashpoint, enter an open network, search on Google, etc. What interests Ritasdatter are hidden mechanisms and systems, not least the agencies and systems that control our presence in this parallel and constantly expanding universe. Via her works, she places the viewer in the middle of this digital reality. Drawing on her analytical and technical expertise, she has manipulated elements to expose a logic and strategic power that places us as users – and not least as consumers – in a highly compromised position. Think about issues like the sharing, security, ownership and management of data. Do we really have any idea about what's going on and what kind of power and capital is at play when? And if we did know, would that change how we act and think? The obliviousness and uncertainty that lie behind these questions, coupled with the hidden power and agenda of technology, can easily induce paranoia, especially when large parts of our

life and identity today are based on data handling. Data paranoia is in many ways the phenomenon that connects the materials and individual works in the exhibition – both to each other and to the present. At an existential level, *Bugs in the War Room* is an investigation of the reality and human condition of data paranoia.

Which is why it is fitting that Ritasdatter takes us back to the most extreme moment of data paranoia – the moment when the entire world's computer systems, networks, databases and underlying codes were to enter the new millennium, confronting us with the 'Y2K bug', which according to even the most advanced computer experts could virtually stop the earth in its tracks. Armageddon was upon us. In a globalised world, this was the moment that revealed how merged our existence had become with the construction and language of code. Via the computer we are at the mercy of an unknown power. This is directly addressed in the exhibition, for example in the work *666 letters to the editor*, where data paranoia turns into a desperate hunt for some kind of logic. That the word 'computer' – decoded using numerology – should be linked to the devil himself via the digits 666 is a theory that might make us shrug at its absurdity. Nonetheless, it represents an – albeit extreme – expression of the fear and insecurity generated by the coded reality hidden inside the computer. In this inner landscape of codes, the world is indexed, encoded and controlled anew. Simple commands were all that was once required to dispatch information effectively, efficiently and safely. 'Sub-routines', as the American mathematician 'Amazing' Grace Murray Hopper called these command structures, formed the basis of the world's first computer code. In the 1950s, Hopper was the primary architect behind first FLOW-MATIC then COBOL (COmmon Business Oriented Language). Despite its complex and in many ways inelegant structure, COBOL has been behind standardised military commands, bank transactions and procedures in business, insurance and security sectors worldwide ever since. For better or worse, it is a language we share, yet it is a language most of us have no idea we even share.

Despite being classified as extinct in the West

in the 1990s, COBOL is everywhere. According to the Dutch physicist and computer theorist Edsger Dijekstra – writing as early as 1975 – "COBOL criples the mind; it's teaching should, therefore, be regarded as criminal offense."[3] Although it was unpopular as a code, COBOL was to meet an entirely different fate. Its management – and thereby the problem – was simply moved to another continent, out of the control room of the West and into the hands of nations like India, where programmers are still trained to manage our dirty programming work, because none of us have the resources or competence to work with COBOL today. Like so much other heavy production by the West, Cobol has been outsourced as part of a recolonisation we've probably only seen the beginnings of (as more Baltic, Russian and Asian companies and programmers are subject to similar working conditions). Except, that is, for the minor detail that the West's core communication, security and financial systems are all still locked into these obsolete codes. As they were in 1999. With the approach of the new millennium, COBOL programmers had been working around the clock to fix the fatal codes based on the two-digit configuration of the year that would stop in the new year zero – thereby obliterating the progressive chronology the system was built on.

The exhibition *Bugs in the War Room* does not confront us with computers, screens or live data streams. Instead, we're invited inside the 'war room' where the fate of the entire world – and pending end of 'civilisation' as we know it in the eyes of many – was under surveillance at the turn of the millennium. We are witness to the accounts of the around 50 Indian COBOL programmers who were on duty and themselves witness to that moment. Ritasdatter takes us inside the minds, physical space and thinking behind this 'control room of the world'. She even lets us control the passage of the sun across the sky. But remember, as you put one apparently innocent slide after another on the overhead projector of the sunset on December 31st 1999 and the sunrise on January 1st 2000, that the reality we think we control, have found the perfect solution to, and believe to be safe and mutually beneficial, contains a bug. Not because the code is defective, but because we are incapable of

acknowledging our own defectiveness, arrogance and lack of ability to think beyond ourselves and our own needs.

Debug that programmer, and we might just stand a chance of being saved!

Matthias Hvass Borello is a curator, writer and editor at kunsten.nu.

Translation: Jane Rowley

1. Published in *Overskud*, Statens Værksteder for Kunst, Copenhagen, 2011.
2. Hal Foster: "The Archival Impulse", in: *October 110*, Fall 2004, p. 4.
3. Edsger Dijekstra: *Selected Writings on Computing: A Personal Perspective*, 1982. Springer Verlag, p. 130.

CV

Linda Hilfling Ritasdatter (b. 1976) lives and works in Berlin. She is a graduate of the Piet Zwart Institute of the Willem de Kooning Academy in Rotterdam, and is a researcher at K3 – School of Arts and Communication, Malmö University. Ritasdatter has exhibited widely internationally, including shows in Germany, the Netherlands, Canada and France.

EVENTS

Sunday 22 May 3-5pm
Seminar // *CRISIS COMPUTING*
This seminar will cross-cut past and present artistic research into the intersection of crises, computation, network architectures and global power structures. Florian Cramer will look into our current over-belief in the objectivity and neutrality of algorithms and discuss how artists infuse technology with a poetic sensibility. Linda Hilfling Ritasdatter will present a performance lecture that draws out connections between the cybernetics of the 1960s, the millennium bug paranoia and India's outsourcing boom. On the day, a publication that is a never-ending encyclopedia of the end of the world published by the Swedish micro-publishing house Rojal Forlag will be released.
Participants: Florian Cramer (NL/DE), Linda Hilfling Ritasdatter (DK), Rojal Förlag (SE)

THANK YOU

Linda Hilfling Ritasdatter would like to thank the Indian engineers who shared their experiences and knowledge and who wish to remain anonymous, Padmini H, Susan Kozel, Maria Hellström Reimer, K3 – School of Arts and Communication at Malmö University, Critical Software Thing, Nina Gribat, Rita Brogaard Nielsen, Preben Hilfling, Kristoffer Gansing, Wilbur and Overgaden.

UPCOMING EXHIBITIONS

Friday 17 June 2016 Overgaden presents the solo exhibition *Milk & Honey* by Deniz Eroglu and *SummerSounds*, consisting of three shorter exhibitions dedicated to the intersection of music, sound and visual art. Both run through 14 August 2016.

This exhibition folder can be downloaded from: www.overgaden.org

The exhibition is supported by:
THE DANISH ARTS FOUNDATION

Overgaden.
Institute of Contemporary Art
Overgaden neden Vandet 17
DK-1414 Copenhagen K

www.overgaden.org
+45 32 57 72 73