LACMA Art + Tech LAB Conversations

Art Work and the Gig Economy

Michael Mandiberg and Lior Zalmanson

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Mechanical Tramp, 2016-2017 Michael Mandiberg image courtesy of the artist

Artist Michael Mandiberg and artist/researcher Lior Zalmanson will discuss the connection between digital arts and online labor including its recent manifestations: crowdsourcing and the gig economy. The conversation will explore how these contemporary phenomena inform artistic practices and create creative possibilities that challenge traditional concepts of authorship, ownership, collaboration as well as the ethics of artist-participant relationships.

Mandiberg is a recipient of a LACMA Art + Technology Lab grant; "Michael Mandiberg: Workflow" is currently on view at LACMA. Zalmanson is the founder of Print Screen Festival, Israel's digital culture festival, and a Fulbright Post-doctoral Researcher at New York University.

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How I can put some kind of content into this system that isn't what is expected that somehow changes both that idea content as well as our understanding of the system?

- Michael Mandiberg

When you lose the physical proximity, when you lose the intimacy, when you lose some sort of communication or, at least, communication richness, it's really easy to dehumanize this assistant character or this participant.

- Lior Zalmanson

Joel Ferree: Hello. Welcome to the Art + Technology Lab. I'm Joel Ferree, the Program Director, and we're thrilled to have Lior Zalmanson and Michael Mandiberg here tonight. I'm going to let our advisor, Peggy Weil, do their introductions and make a quick plug for the lab. We just announced our 2017 grant recipients. You can learn all about it at lacma.org and visit our webpage, lacma.org/lab. I think we're running a bit behind, so I'm going to go ahead and jump in and introduce our advisor, Peggy Weil.

Peggy Weil: Hi. We're really happy to see all of you here and we're especially happy to have a 2016 grantee, Michael Mandiberg and, from New York and Tel Aviv, Lior Zalmanson, to talk about art*work,* specifically the *work* part of artwork. Both Michael and Lior will be talking about labor; the uses of labor and the integration of artists using the gig economy, and online, digital labor in their artworks. We're not going to moderate this. The first time they met, Michael, you said that you spoke for—?

Michael Mandiberg: Three hours.

Peggy Weil: Three hours?

Michael Mandiberg: We've only met once before.

Peggy Weil: We'll talk about the repercussions of this relatively new advance of using digital labor and the accompanying issues of control, ethics, and participation. I think you were going to start with, "Why even do this at all?"

Michael and Lior will talk for about 40 - 50 minutes, and then we'll open it up for questions. When we have questions, we prefer that you come and use the mic because we are recording it. We will post the transcriptions sometime in the future. Thank you.

Michael Mandiberg: Hi, everyone. Thank you for coming. Thank you, Peggy. I'm Michael. I am fortunate enough to have been the recipient of a 2016 LACMA Art + Technology grant. I also live in New York and I'm going to show you a little bit about one of the projects that I'm working on. I'm hoping that you saw some of you saw some of the other works installed in the elevators coming up from the parking garage and in the Stark bar.

Lior Zalmanson: I'm Lior. Fortunate enough to have met Michael through Peggy this year and I'm, as Peggy said, originally from Tel Aviv, where I direct the Print-Screen Festival, which is Israel's art festival. It's the biggest; it's also the only one. I'm here on a Fulbright for the last year, teaching at NYU Technology and Society. I also do some of my own art, which I'll showcase right after Michael.

Michael Mandiberg: I want to thank the Art + Technology lab. I've been here a week. I've come several times. I keep getting asked, "How's it been to work with them?"

and I want to very publicly state it's been amazing and transformative. It's a really, really amazing program. Some of the advisors are also here. Brian and Nicole and Stephanie. It's been really amazing to have that support as well as the support of the institution, at large. If you saw the installation, can you imagine how crazy it is trying to put an installation in an elevator that also happens to have been designed by a starchitect?

So, all kinds of craziness has happened and Joel really pulled that off in making everything happen and figuring out where it all had to happen. I just want to publicly thank LACMA and the lab and for making this happen. It was Peggy that introduced me to Lior when I was having difficulty with some of the work that I'm showing you and we started this conversation and it's been really great. We're going to show work very briefly and then we're just going to have a free-form conversation. If you really want to jump in with a question, please do. Just come up to the microphone.

I'm not going to show the work that's up. I'm just going to say it's part of a durational performance that's a year long where I tracked all of my quantified self-labor. What's up in the elevator is my heartbeat for a whole year paired with the sound of my email alerts for a whole year and then the three-channel video is of screenshots and photographs every 15 minutes for a whole year. It's about a seven-minute-long video with daily reflection texts. That's a tool that's used to monitor freelance labor. On the one hand, I was looking at myself. At the same time there was a separate project, which was actually the project I applied for the Art + Technology grant with, but then things got into a different order, and I'm going to show you some snippets.

I will show it to you and narrate pieces of it while we go and then I'm going to show you, as a third component…that was one larger section. Here are two other, smaller sections. Procedurally, I'm posting: I cut the film up into clips. I'm posting it onto, in this case, Fiverr.com, with short descriptions of what's actually happening in that little clip. In fact, I'm actually producing a procedural script for the film. There's actually no script that

exists, so that'll actually probably be an artist's book in the end. I found a lot of difficulty, which is actually where our conversation originated. I was having a lot of trouble because Fiverr was actually rejecting all of my jobs I was posting because it just looks like nonsense and it doesn't fit into any of the industrial pipelines that they have set up there.

One of the ways I've actually gotten around that is when I do have somebody that I've worked with once, I've batched up sets of 10 to 15 clips to send to them to make, based off of their infrastructural and human resources, shall we say. Some people can do two people; some people can do three people. Some people can only do one people. I'm going to just show you one set that one of the producers who worked under the username Moseschika made. These clips are a little out of context, so they probably don't make a lot of sense, narratively. That was the clip that we saw, earlier. One of the reasons why I'm actually working this way is because it actually takes an enormous amount of work to make this work happen. Actually negotiating—going through the negotiation— let me come at it a different way.

It's not different from, say, going back a couple of micro generations, buying something on eBay takes so much research. Then, you got to do the one auction and you don't get the one auction. You finally get it, and then it's like, "Okay." Then, you got to arrange shipment. There's so much labor required to get that or Craigslist, right? You look at something like Airbnb. Similar. It's like you have to go through this whole research process. Even with these, when I'm doing these three-second clips, there's an hour of work on my part as well as probably an hour of work on their part to go through that process. That's like Coase's *Theory of the Firm*, right? This is going out on the market and there's a whole lot of labor required to get the thing done on the market. In this case, I'm actually bunching them for that reason, to a certain degree.

I'm going to show you one other and then I'm going to pass the mic. This is an installation. It's called *View from the Window at Work.* This is the piece and it's about 200 photographs taken the posts on Mechanical Turk, Amazon's Mechanical Turk, and the prompt was to take a photograph out the window that you work at. Again, these are all around the world. One of the things I want to talk about, which is one of the things I raised, are the aesthetic qualities of this work and where it is actually high quality and where it is low quality and where low quality actually becomes sublime and poetic. The recurrence of bars, as I think this is really beautiful, and formal elements, as well as very symbolic meanings to it. I'm going to leave it at that.

Lior Zalmanson: I have my own (computer). Thank you so much. I have a fear of MacBooks. Israel is very much a PC country. Not in the sense of politically correct, of course, but Keynote is very new to me. So, it's interesting, as you mentioned aesthetics and visuals. Most of the works I'm going to focus on are actually only audio. This is the first piece I would like—well, maybe I'll say a sentence before. As a researcher, I'm a social scientist. I would say most of the hours of the day. As a researcher, I've been using Mechanical Turk and other gig economy or crowd-sourcing platforms, basically to get participants to my experiments.

When the Israel Museum approached me and Eran Hadas, who is sitting here, (he is a professor of computational poetry at Caltech this semester), they talked about doing something different for one night with the audio guides. The idea was, how about we crowdsource the audio from the art historians, the professionals, the archeologists, to just the internet crowds? The twist was that it's not just anyone in the crowd; it's only people from countries who are not legally allowed to visit Israel and specifically the Israel Museum in Jerusalem. The museum department we chose was the archeology department, which is, of course, very socially, historically, tense.

We choose a route that goes from the dawn to humanity to the dawn of Islam and we chose significant works and we uploaded them to microworkers.com and we asked people to tell them what—tell us what do they think about the artifact? They weren't told it was Israel; they weren't told it was Israel museum. They weren't told its archeology. The remarks, the comments we got from them were really, really interesting. We asked them to record their own voice, which of course, we don't speak their languages. It was Urdu and of course Arabic and Malay and all these languages. I'll tell you in a second what we did but let's first listen to one example. This is an example from a work of art—I think it's from Neolithic times?

Female Voice 1: Username identifies as a citizen of Morocco.

Male Voice 1: [foreign language]

Female Voice 1: "We see in the image a human with only a head and two toes or legs. They might want it to say the human is a head, meaning thinking and the toes point at science. Without thinking or science, there is no human. I'll explain the toes' part, now. Humans always follow their thinking by the head and as the toes write down the thoughts, they express it. We are moved by our heads, not by our legs, and I think it also shows a sort of an ability."

Lior Zalmanson: The work is called *Listening to the Enemy* and it allows for one night in the museum listening to voices that otherwise could not be heard. The fact that we did this while being very aware of the choice of not telling them the context was important (and we can discuss this and how much we reveal to our participants) actually made them come up with these really naïve sorts of descriptions. Thinking about their childhood; thinking about what art means to them. A moment where they were excited about something. This was just one very touching example of that, exactly. What I forgot

to say is that the translations that you hear were also from Fiverr, so basically there were two processes here of crowdsourcing. One of gig economy and crowdsourcing.

One was the Mechanical Turk, for getting people to discuss basically comment on the piece. Then, there was the translation process. A lot of things got lost in translation, of course, because, and we were not able to make sure for some of this that we knew, for sure, what the original person had been discussing. This is one example.

A second example, you will see the common trend is audio. This is called accessibility. This is a Google conference. It took place in 2009 in which the Google team announced their ability to do automatic captions on YouTube. What I did in 2014 was just to place their automatic captions in 2014 onto their press conference. Why is it interesting?

> Male Voice 2: I don't have much more to say in closing except I do want to acknowledge some people who've made this happen. To do that, if you'll hold onto the microphone for a minute.

Lior Zalmanson: Sometimes, it works well and sometimes it goes way, way off.

> Male Voice 2: Okay, so not everyone is here but a lot of people are here. I'm going to name the folks who are here and plus a few that aren't. I want them to please stand up and accept our recognition of the wonderful work that's been done. Ken Harinstein, will you stand up for a moment? Naomi and Toliver Where's Toliver? Okay, there. Greg Milam? Is Greg here? Okay. Chris Alberti? Mikhail?
>
> You saw Hiroto Tokusei but he isn't here; he's off in Japan but we thank him for his work, too Jonas Clink, finally. You see these t-shirts? They are indicative of Google's determination to make accessibility a part—a real part—of its model

and its objectives in the world. I hope that we're going to see lots of other t-shirts with lots of other indications of accessibility progress that we make at Google.

Lior Zalmanson: It's a seven-minute piece from that press conference. It made me think about automatic captions and, of course, let's say the gap between what we think technology is capable of and the reality, and the reality of chatbots and communication. How will communication in the future will be limited, basically, by what algorithms can understand by voice recognition. This leads me to my new work, a work in progress, and it's much more related to the gig economy. That's work called, *Simpler, simpler English*. I hope some of you, at least, are aware of *Ogden's Basic English*. Linguistics from the 1930s. He basically summed up the English language, or minimized it, to 850 words that he believed make up 90 percent of the meaningful information in the English language. It's a very effective, efficient sub-language. He used it in order to teach English. It was still colonialist times; the end of colonialism. I think it's still being used heavily in China and Asia. What I'm exploring, now, is the notion I call *Simpler, Simpler English,* and that is the English, or a subdivision of Ogden's basic dictionary that is recognized by most chatbots. The idea is, what will be the dictionary that you would need to teach humans in order to speak correctly and be understood by all bots? What I'm doing now, at the moment, is asking a lot of people on Fiverr to just read the dictionary for me.

Male Voice 3: In this order. Come.

Female Voice 2: Come

Male Voice 4: Come.

Male Voice 3: Get.

Male Voice 4: Get.

Male Voice 3: Give.

Female Voice 2: Get.

Male Voice 3: Go.

Male Voice 4: Go.

Male Voice 3: Keep.

Female Voice 2: Give.

Male Voice 4: Let.

Male Voice 3: Let.

Female Voice 2: Go.

Male Voice 4: Make.

Male Voice 3: Make.

Female Voice 2: Keep.

Male Voice 3: Put.

Male Voice 4: Take

Female Voice 2: Let.

Male Voice 3: Take.

Male Voice 3: Seem.

Male Voice 4: Be.

Male Voice 3: Take.

Female Voice 2: Let.

Lior Zalmanson: These are just three people but I'm collecting much, much more. Also, nonhuman voices, different accents. Different accents and I'm trying to find out statistically what do bots get mostly right; what do they get wrong? Then, just cross out words that are confusing to bots from the dictionary. For instance, in this example, we can see that "take" becomes "cake" in many cases and the word—the verb "to be" just becomes sometimes recognized as the letter B. So, there are words that will be crossed out in *the Simpler, Simpler English.* "By" —which is B-Y—is sometimes confused with "bye" which is bye, B-Y-E, and so on and so forth.

I'm trying to see, What do we end up when we have this minimal, *Simpler, Simpler English,* which is very good for technical purposes, but ask, what can it really convey?

I'll start with the first discussion topic. What I found fascinating, we discussed it before, is the notion of how much do we share with our participants? What do we actually tell them and maybe how guilty do we feel when we're not giving them the full picture?

Michael Mandiberg: When I was doing this work and posting on Fiverr, I had 250 characters. I had to become as efficient as possible in the way that I was describing things. The question of whether or not I was giving the whole story and what, exactly, counts as the whole story wasn't even an option. So much of this work is working inside of the constraints of tools. Mechanical Turk's a little bit different and, often, there's a back and forth. On Fiverr, there's still back and forth. It happens. On Mechanical Turk, it's much more structured. I don't see it as much as keeping them in the dark, so much as trying to keep things focused because getting something back that is usable is, I think, a challenge.

Lior Zalmanson: You made a very aware choice to not tell them, "Well, this is Modern times. This is Charlie Chaplin. This is this in this scene and you should act it up. Watch the movie and then act it up."

Michael Mandiberg: Right. I gave them a clip and part of it is I wanted it to be itemizing. That's very important, right? Because it's about reenacting the kind of conveyor belt, assembly line mechanism, but in a digital context. Because that's what so much of the work on these platforms is, is abstracting things. We all work on these platforms, too. We don't necessarily know it. Every time you're solving a re-captcha, you're doing this work, right? You're— at this point, mostly, we're identifying cars and street signs when you're proving you're human.

Lior Zalmanson: Yeah. We used to scan books.

Michael Mandiberg: We used to scan books. We used to figure out things with books and then we figured out things with the weird angles that street signs and street addresses photographed on buildings. It moved on to books. Now, it's moved on to cars. I recently had to tell the AI what shrimp was and what wasn't shrimp. I was

thinking, “AI, are you hungry?” I was very curious but we all do this work and if we were given too many options—

Lior Zalmanson: You know what’s the slogan of Mechanical Turk? The original one.

Michael Mandiberg: “Is artificial intelligence?”

Lior Zalmanson: Exactly.

Michael Mandiberg: Yes. So, I think, for me, it ends up being conceptually driven. I think it’s important for that project that it be the kind of context in which Chaplin’s character, The Tramp, would’ve encountered his labor. Then, it’s like you’re doing one widget and that’s what you’re doing. You don’t understand the way it all fits to the whole thing. You understand the way it works and the mechanics.

Lior Zalmanson: I teach crowdsourcing to business school students and I find myself using this differentiation between microtasks and macrotasks. The idea is that in a microtask you’re basically a small part of the system and it’s like the assembly line that you mentioned. You don’t know what’s coming before you; or what’s going to be happen after you with this information and materials. You also don’t have a choice about how much to be involved. You basically—you do your thing. You’re getting paid. You don’t think too much. You don’t exercise a lot of—it doesn’t require a lot of cognitive efforts.

Macrotasks—for instance, Wikipedia, which is also participatory is also crowdsourced. Wisdom of the crowds. I think what differentiates between those two is that in Wikipedia you get to choose. You understand the world, even though this world can have mechanisms, could have politics of its own, it could be hard to be involved in. You still

can choose how much and which—what way are you—what kind of rules you take in this.

Michael Mandiberg: Yeah. That's interesting, this idea of choice. I edit Wikipedia and I choose to edit Wikipedia and I choose to edit Wikipedia in a very intentional way. I made a choice in my ten days here. I decided not to rent a car and I've been taking the bus as much as I can but I've also been taking Lyft. It was an experiment. I was having a conversation with one of the drivers, the driver that drove me to the beach. No. No, it was the driver that drove me on the way back from the beach from the bus stop because I saw the bus drive away as I was coming up. The next bus was 30 minutes and it was like, "Okay." He was talking about how he had driven to the beach that day and he really wanted to just get out but he already had a new ride. He'd dropped someone off at the beach and wanted to stop the car for 15 minutes.

Lior Zalmanson: You can't, now because—

Michael Mandiberg: You can't because you just—

Lior Zalmanson: - they do this automatic thing.

Michael Mandiberg: -- put it into his—

Lior Zalmanson: Queue.

Michael Mandiberg: - queue. So, that difference in choice, is, I think, very important.

Lior Zalmanson: I've been talking a lot to Lyft and Uber drivers in the last year and the thing that bugs them the most, it's actually going to be in academic research,

now, but it's not surveillance. It's not the fact that they are being watched. It's even not the fact that they are being evaluated. It's really the fact that they don't understand sometimes what's going on. The fact that there's a lack of transparency. That something happens. I think they get like, I don't know, $8.00 less than what they thought. They just don't understand. They just don't understand who did this – the calculation. How come this was done? They feel they are not treated fairly and the second thing that annoys them is that there's nobody to talk with. Nobody to talk to.

The idea is that in Uber there is no driver support. There is an email and in very rare cases you really get to interact with and talk to a human. That's why coming back to the gig economy, what's weird for me, as an artist or even as a researcher scientist that uses the gig economy is the idea that I'm now an employer. I never wanted to be an employer. I was never a boss; I was never wanted to manage anyone in terms of telling them exactly what to do. Now, suddenly, I'm sort of in this place. I have to make all these choices like what is fair and what is not? Should I tell them if they did something bad or if the work is not satisfying? I find myself feeling like—I'll give you an example. I worked in Fiverr and I noticed there's a lot of ways people game the system on Fiverr. In Fiverr, you need to report back with your work after some time, so you say, "I will give you this transcription or this analysis in 24 hours."

Sometimes, those people on Fiver say, "Yes, I did it," but then they write you a personal message saying, "Listen. I haven't done it, yet. This was a blank file but I needed to report it because of my statistics because I'm being evaluated. Please, give me one more day." I did, in this case, but after five days, I didn't hear back from this woman. Then, I complained. I one-starred her and I felt super guilty about one-starring somebody but I felt like, "Okay, I was mistreated." I never heard back. She disappeared from the face of the earth. Then, in the end, she one-starred me. That was her reply saying I wasn't okay. I felt like this Cold-War Russian/U.S. balance of terror sort of thing where we one-starred each other and now we have nothing to do.

We wrote to Fiverr, actually, Mike and I met and I offered them my help with Fiverr. I know the people on Fiverr, some of them. They erased both of the scores; I was lucky, in that sense. She ruined my reputation for ruining her reputation. I thought how much of this new gig economy is based on this feeling of uncomfortableness and feelings that ends up in plain lies. I have enough research, there's a guy here at USC I just met two days ago and his research on Airbnb shows that people on Airbnb give way higher ratings for the same establishments as the ratings they get on TripAdvisor. That's because in the years that he checked, there was the same balance of terror. People did not give less than five or four stars because they were afraid to get a bad review from the owner of the house, in this case.

Michael Mandiberg: Yeah. That's a funny answer to the question. We bounced some questions back and forth over the last few days to talk about it and one of the questions was what kind of relationships are formed between, in this case, we're thinking about the artist and the crowd but that's a funny kind of relationship or rather, lack of relationship. I think that one of the interesting things that I'm seeing working with some of these folks on Fiverr is actually engaging with them and finding what they understand about what's going on. They're really enjoying it. It's like so much of the work they're being offered is actually—I mean, I'm hiring in the section of people who are there to do promotional videos. Testimonials, video testimonials for a product. So, this is this really strange and playful thing, at the same time and—

Lior Zalmanson: Can I ask how much do you give them?

Michael Mandiberg: I give them whatever they ask, which has exceptions like typically there will be one person who'll want $200 to do a three-second clip. LACMA was very generous. Very, but I can't—I won't be able to finish it in the budget. It ends up

being about $5 - $10 for one person, $10 - $15 for two people and $15 - $20 for more than that, per three-second clip. That's what it ends up working out to be.

Lior Zalmanson: So, in my works, I think at least in *Listening to the Enemy*, some of it is about use and abuse. I think we paid them—if I remember correctly, was a dollar?

Eran Hadas: A dollar and a half.

Lior Zalmanson: A dollar and a half?

Eran Hadas: Five for their translations.

Lior Zalmanson: Five for the translations, yes. So, five because Fiverr. A dollar and a half for the recordings and—but I always ask myself, is this right? Is this fair? I don't know. My Fiverr experience has since—if you use Fiverr, now, nothing costs $5.00, anymore. For $5.00, you get basically nothing. This free version of a premium thing and then you need to always add more money, which is fair. Which makes sense. After a while, again, using this website, you feel like you're being scammed by these people who are actually—most of them are decent people trying to make a buck but you're trying—but you find yourself—I don't know. Maybe I'm speaking for myself and just putting myself in the bad position but I find myself as a cheap bastard, basically.

Michael Mandiberg: To flip it a little bit, you saw the videos. They ranged wildly in quality, which, for me, I think, is compelling and part of the formal and conceptual aspects of the work. No one is ever going to—for five or 10 or $15 or $20—match the virtuosity of Charlie Chaplin, right? We have this idea it's kind of, in a way, a critique or making a literal critique of this semi-professional production. It's like manifesting, in a way, the limits of it. The possibilities, but also the limits.

Lior Zalmanson: Do you find yourself thinking like the global conglomerate? Because you showed us, basically, clips from Africa, where I guess the money you give them makes much more. You get more production value, there, if you out/offshore your work?

Michael Mandiberg: You could think of it that way. I'm more interested in representing the way in which this digital factory has become global. The ways in which that place is legible. You called out one that was—you were like, "That's Eastern Europe, isn't it?" I said, "Yeah." So, you see place; you see difference. It's not homogenous but yet it's this interface that goes everywhere.

Lior Zalmanson: Do you have any correspondence with them, other than—? Do they usually ask subsequent, follow-up questions?

Michael Mandiberg: It's mostly procedural. It's like, "How do you want me to do this?" "I want you to do what you think is the right thing. I want you to do what is reasonable. I want you to…" I think a lot of it is letting it play out how it plays out. No matter how bad the clip is or how good the clip is, it's part of the way in which it looks and the way in which it makes the story. There's one clip in there that's really—there's a couple of them that are really bad but that's part of it.

Lior Zalmanson: In the end, that's a question. One of the topics we've written in this event description is the question of authorship and ownership over the piece. In the end, do you see it as this collaborative piece or do you see it as Michael Mandiberg's?

Michael Mandiberg: I think of myself in the sense as the director and I'm going to be listing all of their names in the credits. I'm thinking, that's too technical, but do I remake the credits in the same kind of font and whatever or not? They're performers.

Lior Zalmanson: Do you know their real names?

Michael Mandiberg: I know their usernames and I want to credit them as their usernames.

Lior Zalmanson: In this case, for instance, in listening to them, maybe we wanted to know as little about them as possible and we didn't want to put them in risk, which was really a work about anonymity even though you listen and you hear the voices and we did say their first names. Because if they give their real first name—or if otherwise, we give them a number and they say, "Number 1234 from identified as coming from Morocco," they could be at risk because we also weren't sure if maybe there was a VPN or some other thing. We left it as unidentified.

Michael Mandiberg: I want to go back to one of the questions. How much do you think this is similar to or different from past practices of crowdsourcing collaboration or concurrently, the other question is how is this different from an artist having an assistant?

Lior Zalmanson: For me, it's more about mediation. Once the assistant, so to speak, or the participant is remote and the communication is occurring via a computer, via technology, that creates a lot of situations. Again, it could lead to anonymity and maybe extra freedom but it could also lead to dehumanizing the person and treating him, as you said, as an assembly line. As a prop. As an extra. I've looked at works like Santiago Sierra's for example, where he used—took all these people—I think it was in

Mexico—and had them stand in a line and then he drew the line or tattooed, if I remember correctly, the line on their back.

At least it was—even if this work talks about use and abuse, it's still about interaction and intimacy and touch, in a way. Physical proximity, at least. When you lose the physical proximity, when you lose the intimacy, when you lose some sort of communication or, at least, communication richness, it's really easy to dehumanize this assistant character or this participant. One of the famous gig economy pieces by Aaron Koblin, *The Sheep Market,* demonstrates this really well. Treating them, again, as sheep maybe to the slaughter or very innocent sheep. So what about yourself? What is the difference?

Michael Mandiberg: For me, I think it manifests the difference between utopian visions of technology and dystopian visions of technology. There's an obvious parallel that people talk about with this film. There's a film by Perry Bard where Perry Bard remade Dziga Vertov's *Man with a Movie Camera*. Broke it up shot by shot, send it out to the crowd, crowdsourced it, and many, many, many people made individual shots and then the film actually plays back algorithmically. It's different every time. That comparison is made frequently but I think the difference is that, in a way, like the era for the film that it was referencing, it was hopeful and I think that a utopia, in some way—I think it's really important that I am paying for this because that's manifesting the way in which this labor and even these utopian forms of labor have become commodified.

Lior Zalmanson: Are you also saying that in the art world, where work is most times unpaid, those gig economy people, is that they get more than most artists, in some cases?

Michael Mandiberg: That's a whole, other thing. I think that transaction is actually, often very important. I don't have a visual for this, but a project I completed in

the fall is called *FDIC Insured.* I collected all the logos of all the failed banks in the United States and then I burned them onto castoff guidebooks, investment guidebooks; 527 of them. I bought them all from the dollar rack at the Strand or from an online bookseller where there were 99-cent booksellers. It was really important to me in that case that I wasn't given these. That this was actually, in this case, the least valuable book that you could possibly buy. That it still is about, in that case, it was still about market-based transaction. I think sometimes it's actually conceptually meaningful and resonant that it's part of an exchange.

Lior Zalmanson: Yeah, and what I like about—well, the optimist thing about gig economy is that, at least sometimes, the rules of transactions are relatively clear. I found myself thinking and doing some initial work on crowdfunding, which I feel plays and subverts this transactional and friendly relationships and connections and builds. You are transforming your friends as basically your new sponsors. I find it much more problematic, in a way, than at least the agreed system of the gig economy. I think, going back to your point about utopia/dystopia, what I love about your work and what I think is also present in *Listening to the Enemy*, is that those are really positive, moving artworks. When you experience them, you're not thinking about, "Oh, they are getting abused. This is such an assembly line." No. It's charming. This is, in a sense, globalism or global culture in the most beautiful sense. Because it almost unifies, maybe unifies under a U.S. sort of film and culture, but still shows what makes us similar.

Michael Mandiberg: I feel like it does and it doesn't and it sits it there in that space in between and it leaves it in a state of tension. Definitely with *Listening to the Enemy*, right? It was like—

Lior Zalmanson: Yeah. That was our purpose, but what we felt is the most audience took the pretty aspects out of it. They were like, "Ah, this is such a nice text

that they said," and totally overlooked the essence of abuse or the essence of borders that we wanted to discuss in this piece.

Michael Mandiberg: Yeah. That's probably culturally—that's part of the cultural context in which it was presented.

Lior Zalmanson: Yeah. We want to, maybe, open to questions—

Michael Mandiberg: Do you want to open to questions or do you want us to keep going?

Peggy Weil: I want to ask you one more question about control; how you determine control as the author and as the artist? Both aesthetically and politically, how do you deal with the role of the control, or the loss of control, in the content of these works or the result? How does that question work in the editing and how that might relate to other work in interactive or crowdsourced work?

Michael Mandiberg: I think I've dealt with it by building the inability to control into the work itself. As I was talking about a little bit earlier about the varying qualities and that's one of the ways I've dealt with it. To frame it a different way, I'm not trying to get high-quality, precise work product. It's all in air quotes.

Peggy Weil: Right, but do you ever find yourself looking at that? The clip that you showed us which, by the way, the loaf of bread was stacks of sliced bread, right? Which was wonderful. Do you ever find yourself saying, "Sit down, sit down. Run"? Do you ever find yourself wishing you could direct them?

Michael Mandiberg: I find myself thrilled by the improvisation because—so, the way I look at these situations is I say, "What are the affordances?" I've been making

work for almost 20 years, looking at systems, online systems, and what can be. How I can put some kind of content into this system that isn't what is expected that somehow changes both that idea content as well as our understanding of the system? Going back to putting all my possessions onto an e-commerce site that I built in 2000 and forward. I came to it first from the standpoint of looking at the system. One of my collaborators in 2009 -2010, xtine burrough, was doing work on Mechanical Turk. It must have been 2008 because it was called the Mechanical Turk Olympics; the Mechanical Olympics.

She had people enact specific events from the Olympics. The 10-meter dive or something like that. There were these creative and totally whimsical ways in which people were reenacting these and that really inspired me. I was thinking, okay, that's the way xtine did it. This is a very interesting site, it took me quite a while to figure out what it is that I wanted to do with that and I was thinking and that's often the way I work. I think and I think. There are many other people that have worked with the platforms. The way I was trying to think about it was, what works into this platform that tells the story that I want to do? Because it's clearly all about, in a way, loss of control.

Lior Zalmanson: If you fully embrace the loss of control, is there something you're going to leave out in the editing process or are you going to showcase all of the entries?

Michael Mandiberg: Sometimes, people give me two clips. One person gave me 13 takes, maybe there's a piece there, just the 13 takes. I don't know. Mostly, I'm choosing the one that conforms the most to the timing and blocking and I am flipping things when they've done it left to right and backwards. It's ultimately about—if the thing is—it's narratively convulsive. Sometimes, it looks like it and other times it's like, "Where are we?" I'm intentionally leaving in chunks of the original. There will probably be one every five to seven as well as the intertitles. What you saw was very much in progress

and that gives it some grounding to convulse upon but I'm trying to choose the ones that are maybe—I'm trying to keep it flowing to some degree.

Lior Zalmanson: I know storytelling is maybe a foreign word, sometimes, to fine arts but it is about storytelling, here. *Listening to the Enemy*, for example, some of it just didn't make sense after translating it and it would've been cool to hear gibberish for 30 seconds or words that do not connect into a sentence but we were thinking, Eran and I, that the audience also has limited attention span. If they hear gibberish, they might say, "Okay. Had enough. Let's move on." So, we did curate the best remarks that we got. I think a lot of these works, xtine, for example, as well, are a lot about the process and embracing the diversity, of course, that comes to mind. Though it was different crowdsourcing, Miranda July; the work that was sold to SF MOMA.

Michael Mandiberg: That's very different.

Lior Zalmanson: Okay, we talked about this; very different.

Michael Mandiberg: There, it was super different.

Lior Zalmanson: I know. I remember we talked about this in our last time, why is it very different? You want to maybe say a sentence about this work? Just because it's—?

Michael Mandiberg: Does everyone know (Miranda July's*) "Learning to Love You More"?* It was a series of assignments that were given, prompted to a community. There was a community that built up around it. People made things and then posted them. Maybe some of you remember some of the exact prompts, but—

Lior Zalmanson: I think one of them was something similar to your work. Looking outside of the window. Maybe it was under a bed, but it was like—

Michael Mandiberg: Yeah. I think the difference is that the people who were in part of that project thought that they were making their own work and Miranda July and Harrell Fletcher, I think, "I statements"—Miranda and Harold, if you hear me, I'm sorry if I'm saying this and this isn't true—I think that from the outside, it looks like they thought they were making their own work. I think there's a difference between what the participants thought and what the audience—the authors—thought.

Lior Zalmanson: I'm trying to decipher. The idea behind *"Learning to Love You More,"* again, just purely as an example, there was no money; there was no transaction. It was all about community building and sharing, so it's a different sort of values but then it's being sold to a museum.

Michael Mandiberg: Well, it's being sold but also— So, it was sold to the museum and it was—was it in the Biennial or was it in a different piece of Harold's? I've seen it on people's CVs.

Lior Zalmanson: Ah, so the participants put it on their CVs. Did they—?

Michael Mandiberg: So, there's this—but as far as the institutions considered it, they're not the artists, so I think that's a—it's tricky, making work with the community. It's very complicated, I think.

Lior Zalmanson: So, again, it's the question of authorship. The ownership and who is really part of this work. Again, I think gig economy, despite a lot of issues that arises, it's still very transactional so it's very clearly—it's almost a legally detailed transaction. Not "almost," I guess. It definitely is. Maybe the problem with participation

with artwork—so, mediated participation—is exactly the artworks that have no transactions in them—that the boundaries are not so clear. That it's all about community values; all about sharing. You give an example, how we are all participating, well, like an untold, unaware gig economy work by just complying to this test that we are not even aware that they are tasks. So, yes?

Peggy Weil: So, with that, I think it'd be a good time to open up for questions.

Lior Zalmanson: Sure.

Audience Member: Maybe just to follow-up on the conversation about content, you had mentioned talking about quality control with the images out the window and I wondered if you could say a little bit more about that, as what choices do you make and what issues come up for you and what role does that play?

Michael Mandiberg: Some people want to try to put stock images in. Just download an image and put a stock image in. You can tell, like when you look at a stock, you know what a stock image looks like. So, those ones I would not include. Also, even though I asked repeatedly to take them horizontally, there were people who would submit vertical images. Just for structural reasons, because of the reason it was going to be laid out, I would discard those. Everything else went in. Even the lowest-resolution was still fine. Is that the question you were asking?

Audience Member: Yeah. I mean, I guess, do questions—do you modify your ask when you begin to see what people are submitting to maybe—

Michael Mandiberg: I mean, part of it is about clarity. I'm sorry if I'm answering these questions way too literally, but yeah, I had to really emphasize they have to be

horizontal and please do not submit a stock photograph. Take a photograph out your window, not of your window. Some people actually took photos, there were a couple who took photographs of their house from the outside of the window, which I think is great. I think it's one of those—

Lior Zalmanson: It's creative.

Michael Mandiberg: I actually included.

Audience Member: Can I ask a totally different question but one about privilege? Because I think when you're talking about labor and economics, there is, of course, an inherent conversation about privilege. As you were discussing ideas of the utopic and dystopic and qualities of these projects, I'm wondering—I'm thinking about how many people who responded to your call or calls maybe don't even have the privilege or luxury of contemplating the theoretical context of this work. At the same time, there's also something really amazing and beautiful about ideas of anonymity and places and authorship because, in seeing these clips, what struck me was how not anonymous these people were.

Seeing them in their context in their homes, and I'm like, "Wow. This is this incredible tour around the whole world and what we get to see," but even taking pleasure in that is a position of privilege where I get to be this digital, global tourist through your piece. Can you—I don't know if that brings up—it's not a specific question, per se, but maybe just talk about that for a moment?

Michael Mandiberg: I think that position, or the questions of privilege and positions of privilege are inherent to all art production. As an artist, to a certain degree, I'm making something that has no use value. I mean, obviously, you could argue that it does have a use value and a certain kind of luxury economy, but ultimately, I'm

making—by virtue of making things that are sites of commentary or contemplation or whatever, there's no way that it can't be a point of privilege. To complicate it a little bit is to say, "Is this more or less of a position of privilege than, say, making a painting?"

Audience Member: Well, I think it does differ when it's crowdsourced, right? When you don't necessarily have control over who is participating. I think that some people, as you mentioned—the $5.00 in certain parts of Africa will go much further and you're talking about including their usernames. I'm thinking, "Wow. Maybe we need worker names and not usernames." You know? That there's really interesting language—

Lior Zalmanson: In Mechanical Turk, it's Worker IDs. It's not really Usernames, there, so…

Michael Mandiberg: With Mechanical Turk, it's User IDs. On Fiverr, it's Usernames.

Lior Zalmanson: Yeah, because that's more personal and you actually are expected to talk to them and see their picture. Mechanical Turk is all about anonymity. I feel very uncomfortable mostly in a researcher position. A lot of social science, now, is based on Mechanical Turk and a lot of the experiments have moved from students to those Turkers and, again, the question of privilege is huge, there. That's why it's not an easy question. I agree with everything that Michael said, but I think, in some ways, it's also not different than traditional factory work of an artist.

At least, in Michael's piece and I think in and mine is that you see them; that you hear them. They are really central, in a sense, to the piece. It's true, what you said about globalism and so on. I'm much more worried about when I see a work of art here or

abroad—a contemporary art piece—I think, “Who’s behind the name of the artist? Who are all the people who actually worked on the piece?” I have no idea about them.

Audience Member: Thank you.

Eran Hadas: First, I’d like to comment regarding what I call abuse, or treating people as resources. There is a great work by Greek artist Ilan Manouach. He did something similar to work you mentioned. He took porn films and divided them into single frames. Then, he paid for people to watch the porn frames and to tell him whether there’s an artwork in the background—a contemporary artwork in the background. This is sort of a crowdsourced definition of what art is by forcing people to watch porn. A second thing that came to mind was when we did *Listen to the Enemy* was that currency is different between different countries.

In Bangladesh, because we worked with micro workers that can work according to the different countries, we gave a certain budget to each country and you could see that in Bangladesh a dollar and a half got 100 people within five minutes; whereas, in Egypt or Morocco, it would not happen. We got only 20 or 30 answers the entire time. These were statements but my question is what responsibility do we have as artists and how does it differ when regarding different countries? Another question for you is what I really liked about your work is that you’re trying to build a linear story but this process is not working linearly. So, it’s beautiful but why did you make this decision or what is behind this?

Michael Mandiberg: A linear story and it’s not working linearly? What do you mean? What is not working linearly?

Eran Hadas: When you address different people and different styles. It won’t—

Michael Mandiberg: It's not going to flow.

Eran Hadas: Right.

Michael Mandiberg: There's not going to be continuity.

Eran Hadas:: Yes. That's what I like about it.

Michael Mandiberg: I wasn't sure if you were talking about the continuity in the film or the continuity in the production of the film.

Eran Hadas: No. In the film, itself.

Michael Mandiberg: Like I said, I'm actually interested in the discontinuity and the manifestation of the breakdown and the impossibility of producing the kind of virtuosity of the original film through this process. In a way, as some of you, as some words have come up, like the pleasure of watching the failure or the pleasure of watching the amateur and its discrepancy to the original and the pleasure that it gives you from seeing both, right? Maybe part of that is actually about an identification. Yeah. I guess part baked in there is why I chose this film, because I think that's a part of why—I mean, it would be very different if I chose a different film. I was thinking, "Okay, so it's going to be made across all these different—I was like, "I want to do a film. I want to use this tool to make a film. I don't know what it is."

I was thinking it through, "Okay, what are the material constraints of this? Do I want to have to deal with dialogue? Do I want to have to deal with sound recording A/B language? How am I going to deal with that? Okay, so let's think about silent films." Then, I asked "What is the—?" Because it's also about archetypes, right? This is a kind

of archetypical film and it's also the film about the factory. The film about—you could maybe look at *Metropolis* being similar but these aren't—the scene isn't in here but the iconic scenes of him on the assembly line and dealing with the dials that are spinning and everything. So, I think that that's how I got there, which is ultimately about thinking about narrative.

Eran Hadas: Thanks.

Audience Member: Thank you for all of this, so far. My question is, as a conceptual artist, I could see this piece walking in a gallery and look at it and it resembles a crowdsourced movie you would find online. How do you think about—do you think about clueing in your audience in the work itself or do you think about the title card next to it? We're obviously privileged that we've heard you speak about it, so we're in on it, but how you do think about it with this type of piece?

Michael Mandiberg: I'll speak more generally, first, which is that I strongly believe that you shouldn't have to read an essay to understand the work. Obviously, sometimes that's not going to be true but I think it's very important to do as much of an effort to try to encode that information into the work, itself. I feel like…

Audience Member: The other one you described with the investment guides and the burning of the logos registers right away, if you look at it. I would think of this in the gallery being harder to piece together in my mind.

Michael Mandiberg: Yeah, and I think that, in a way, you're right. It's not something I had thought of, explicitly, that way. I'd like to think that the wild discrepancy between the quality of work might clue you in to that. I think also one of the things that is maybe there is that there's almost an aesthetic of—for better or for worse—because I am, by no means, the only artist that has been doing this kind of, in particular, video-

production work. There's a little bit of an establishment of an aesthetic that is clear that there—that it is being made on a cellphone. There's something like that. That, again, doesn't really talk to whether it's crowdsourced or whether it's paid for.

I think part of it is that the varied production—I'd be curious. Obviously, I've already told you but I'd be curious to know whether how many people would've thought that they might have been able to know that this was produced through this marketplace versus maybe that I had crowdsourced it. Actually, how many people think that they would've known that it was through a marketplace? Show of hands. How many people would've thought that it was crowdsourced? A few. About the same. How many people would not have known or wouldn't have even—just wouldn't have known? Okay. It's like one-third, one-third, one-third.

Audience Member: How's it going? Emmitt Ferguson is my name and this question is for you. You sounded like you had an interest in communication and language and all that, so what do you think about the possibility of language barriers closing through the use of emojis? Like in a hieroglyphic style? Egyptian, ancient-type thing, except more modern with emojis.

Peggy Weil: *Simpler, Simpler English,* too.

Lior Zalmanson: Yeah, it is a simpler, simpler language, in a way. It's amazing. What I love about emojis is how people assign different meanings to them, right? So, my mother would not get a lot of the meanings that the younger generation assigns, possibly the sexual ones, to emojis. So, I like how this language is created, what is lost in translations, so fast and so interestingly. Because it's using an image but I agree with you. It's a fascinating attempt on closing the language gap while developing a global, like a new, visual Esperanto language. I was wondering—I haven't researched

emoji language, so I'm not sure if there's huge cultural differences between, again, the meaning or how people assign emojis in the U.S. versus China or versus India.

That answer might tell us about closing any language gaps but what I'm interested in, mostly, is the age of the Internet of Things, where we still need to use voice. I don't think we will communicate or it will be an interesting future where we'll communicate via image, emojis, but I think most of the industry goes to a much more vocal solution. I'm much more interested in not just closing the barrier between different world cultures but closing the barrier between humans and machines. What is the human price? What is the price on communications that the humans will have to pay? Because it's clear, if you ever—maybe you've attempted talking to Alexa or to Siri, you're not talking to them in the same way you'll talk to your friends.

There are a lot of engineers working on improving that, of course, but I found—there's another piece I haven't shown you, but the other thing that I'm curious is not just how word gets; like our language gets limited or minimized or more fit or more efficient but it's also about how language becomes more authoritative and when you speak to those assistants. There are videos of kids talking to Alexa. Videos of kids talking to Siri on YouTube. They all boss "her" (and it's not surprisingly her) around, which I find fascinating. That is also a notion that I'm interested in. I'll tell you just one thing. This might be just an anecdote but I think it's fascinating. Where I come from, the Hebrew language or the modern Hebrew language is a very authoritative and very efficient language. A lot of people who come to visit Tel Aviv just think Israelis are rude.

I don't know how many of you have been in Israel but it's like that's the essence; that they're rude or too direct. The reason for that, the cultural reason for that, is because when it was founded in 1948, there was a lot of immigration really fast from different countries with different languages. In order to just communicate fast and build a country, they had to just eliminate a lot of words. They had to just talk very directly; not to say

“Sir,” not to say, “Sorry.” Not to say all this meaningless—supposedly—less efficient, less effective words and just say directly what you mean. Also, in a very authoritative tone so they know you mean business. In a way, I think it’s the same with computers and machines.

I think what happened specifically in Israel is going to continue with most of humans in the future because machines conversations will start earlier; a lot of babies will talk to machines, much more in their early years than talking to real humans. I think that will create a new sort of language and a new expression.

Audience Member: So, would you say that their expression—and right now, what’s on my mind from what you’re saying is the book, 1984—I don’t know if you ever read—

Lior Zalmanson: Uh huh. Yeah. They also have exactly a sublanguage, there, but continue on. Sorry.

Audience Member: Are you saying that language would be more simplified, in that sense?

Lior Zalmanson: Yeah. I think simplified, authoritative, efficient. Well, efficiency, in a way. Again, it’s about words that are very clear that have no two meanings; less nuances to them because it’s really hard for computers to try to understand irony. Try to understand nuances. When you want a job done or you want something from your personal robotic assistant, you will need to be very, very direct. I think that will probably have some carryover effect to the communication with other humans, as well.

Audience Member: Thanks.

Lior Zalmanson: Thank you.

Peggy Weil: Thank you all for being here.

End of recording.