

# Mapping Opaque Mechanisms

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In an era in which information can be generated, copied, duplicated, fabricated, multiplied, and disseminated with few restraints, and in which the human agents behind its circulation become increasingly faceless, blurred by the imperatives of capital, how does the invisible hand operate? How does collective fear accelerate circulation, only to be converted into yet more fear as a routine, and as a capitalizable asset? And when we turn to language models to “detect” machine-generated texts, what limitations, biases, and interpretative ambiguities are already inscribed in that very act of detection? Working in a speculative cinematic mode, Veneta Androva brings both the behind-the-scenes and the beyond-the-scene into view. In *Spray and Pray*, she composes a distinctive weave of documentary pulse, constructed testimonies, CGI animation, human-machine voices, and machine-learning experiments – unsettling the boundary between the real and the fabricated, and pushing beyond the original research data and its algorithmic readings.

Long engaged with questions at the intersection of machines and humanity, Androva pairs hands-on investigation with sustained theoretical inquiry. She monitors and studies mushroom websites: automatically generated news portals that impersonate legitimate media, recycle clickbait, and circulate identity-based disinformation across social networks, often amplified by clickworkers paid small amounts to share links. This close probing draws her into Bulgaria’s disinformation climate – the fungal undergrowth of these sites – while machine-learning-assisted analysis functions simultaneously as method and material.

Over the course of a two-year research process, Androva worked with computational linguist Tsvetomila Mihaylova in applying language models developed by the Big Data for Smart Society Institute (GATE) in Sofia: rare tools trained on Bulgarian, a language markedly underrepresented in mainstream AI ecosystems. Headlines harvested from mushroom websites were processed through LLM-based classifiers to trace origins, measure emotional charge (fear, anxiety, excitement), and estimate disinformation potential. These tests are folded into the film’s surface as subtitles: the Bulgarian headline spoken by the mushroom character, an English translation beneath, and the model’s outputs hovering like a forensic note. Yet nothing is fully accurate, and that uncertainty becomes an additional register of meaning – truth claims revealed as unstable, analysis and speculation held side by side along a razor-thin line.

What emerges is a mycelial universe: a visualization of how information spreads and transmits. Mushroom websites, along with the mushroom-character, become both metaphor and device: an AI-made ecology of seemingly human-authored content that is, in fact, not human at all. The film extends a body of work in which Androva employs speculative documentary to approach mediated realities and the political and technological systems that shape them. Resisting straightforward exposition, she cinematically and conceptually maps the opaque infrastructures of value, attention, and control that shape lived reality but largely remain unseen. Across earlier projects, she

has drawn on research-based construction, staged narration, and synthetic image-worlds not to “illustrate” facts, but to probe how such systems perform themselves, and how they mobilize desire, compliance, and fear.

Evolving from earlier installation formats within an exhibition context, *Spray and Pray* has grown through a series of fragments and forms: in its earliest iteration, a talking mushroom recited headlines while a single protagonist’s interview text appeared on the wall; later versions expanded into pre-film installations. In the Venice Pavilion, the project reaches a new intensity. Constructed characters, with pixelated faces and synthesized voices, stage a documentary tension in which real research is spoken through CGI-animated visages, while the disturbing headlines themselves are delivered by a figure that feels stranger than fiction.

All characters are constructed from open-source narratives and field research, while human-machine hybrid voices blend the artist’s own voice with voice cloning, each calibrated with its own pace and timbre. *Spray and Pray* hence begins in individual experience and accrues force through its precise mapping of patterns, opaque economies, circulation mechanisms, and infrastructural systems.

Across Androva’s wider practice, systems that claim neutrality – platforms, templates, algorithms – are treated as meaning-manufacturing apparatuses that need to be challenged, contextualized, and placed under scrutiny. *Spray and Pray* extends this approach into a Deleuzian sense of the virtual: a rhizome of online activity and monetized attention in which virtual connection becomes reality, and reality becomes the by-product of that connection. Within the Pavilion, *Spray and Pray* opens up less a passive viewing experience than an immersive habitat – a space in which to feel how the internet’s “public sphere” is increasingly produced by automated ecologies, and to ask what kinds of humane space – time to think, room to doubt, permission to refuse and reject, the freedom of the pause – might still be reclaimed in spore-filled air.