

## Counting peas for human flourishing? The need for collaboration to change society

### The Pea Counter

How do humans and machines collaborate? What kind of frictions emerge when we classify and standardize unruly humans? How do previous classification models influence future decisions? These questions are addressed in Pea Counter by German visual artist Verena Friedrich, exhibited at Södertörn University for five weeks during Autumn 2024. The installation invites visitors to classify peas under a microscope, choosing between good or bad peas by the press of a button. Based on their decision, the pea is either violently thrown into a black bucket or gently dropped into a white one. Meanwhile, an AI is trained on images of the peas taken at the moment of human classification. Once enough data has been collected, the system runs autonomously, making decisions about pea quality based on earlier human judgments.

### The Existential Need to Categorize

The installation illustrates much of the academic discussions we had in our AUTO-WELF project, focusing on the automating welfare provision with the help of algorithms and artificial intelligence. We explored, for example, the human labour that is involved in automation, the arbitrariness of cer-

tain decision-making with important impact and the value-based judgements that are part of the process of automation. More closely related to the exhibition, we arranged a public panel including Liv Fries (Inera – Digitalisation company supporting municipalities and regions in digitalisation for welfare), Maja Fjaestad (European Commission AI Office in Brussels), Martin Snygg-Söder (analyst at the Swedish Agency for Public Management) and Petter Danielsson (digital developer at Södertälje municipality).



Photo by: Ricard Estay

After seeing the Pea counter installation and trying it themselves, the panel reflected on the role of language, images and metaphors but also stereotypes and clichés to discuss technological change that is induced, for example by artificial intelligence in welfare provision. The Pea counter illustrates for them how our AI solutions are extending the dichotomies that we are thinking with – the good versus the bad – and the almost existential need for us to categorize humans and objects, but also the vulnerabilities that emerge from this cultural practice of sorting.



Photo by: Ricard Estay

However, the most important takeaway for the panel from the installation was the collaboration between humans and machines that can take unexpected turns and that cannot always be explained rationally.

### **New Ways of Thinking for Societal Change**

The installation and the panel discussion, which was turned into a live podcast, not only show how humans and machines collaborate and what kind of emotions, insecurities and frictions are involved in the process. They also point to the fact that collaboration is essential for developing technologies for social change. Collaboration between researchers of different generations, disciplines and cultural contexts, but also collaboration between domains crossing academic and non-academic boundaries. The AUTO-WELF consortium is an example of this diversity including researchers from eight different countries, from different research generations and disciplines. This diversity has led to intense discussions, discussions characterized by productive frictions powering new ways of thinking for societal change through collaboration and capacity building, and through creating space and time for new formats to think in, including the counting of peas.