

## KEYNOTE TENSIONS OF EUROPE 2026

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### **The Broken Machine: Other Histories of Technology**

For more than a century, our most powerful theories of technology have been built around working machines. More recently, a burgeoning scholarship has taught us how moments of breakage, malfunction, and failure are also central to our technological worlds—molding the material form of artifacts, structuring late-modern networks of disposal, repair, and discard, and underpinning the risk society and its cultures of disaster. Despite those rich insights, though, we still have a poor understanding of breakdowns themselves as historical objects — their changing nature over time, their evolving meanings and roles, and the crucial work that broken machines have performed in their own times and in ours.

This talk explores the rich history and complex technopolitics of breaking machines. It argues that, against our first intuitions, breakdowns do not interrupt the role of machines in shaping our natural and social worlds: they extend it. The first half of the talk focuses on the kinds of historical objects that breakdowns represent and how they might figure in our histories of technology. It presents breakdowns as moments that have historically been mobilized to define difference, including long-standing ideas about the distinctiveness of Europe in relation to the rest of the world. The second half of the talk turns to how these moments of breakage and their meanings can shed new light on two central questions of our field: the relationship between technology and nature; and the relationship between technology and social order. The talk ends with some observations about how broken machines continue to shape our contemporary world, and how our future might depend not so much on new technologies, but on new relationships to our existing machines and their unexpected behaviors.