

# Designing AI for Autonomy as a Political Project

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[contestable.ai](https://contestable.ai)

# Who I Am

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# Human Autonomy in the Age of AI

Autonomy means having the effective capacity to govern your own life.

It rests on two conditions: authenticity and agency.<sup>1</sup>

1. Prunkl, C. (2022). Human autonomy in the age of artificial intelligence. *Nature Machine Intelligence*, 4(2), 99–101. <https://doi.org/10/gsd2rt> ↩

# Common Approaches Fall Short

Ethical and rights-based approaches to AI are necessary but structurally limited.<sup>1</sup>

They protect individual autonomy from above.

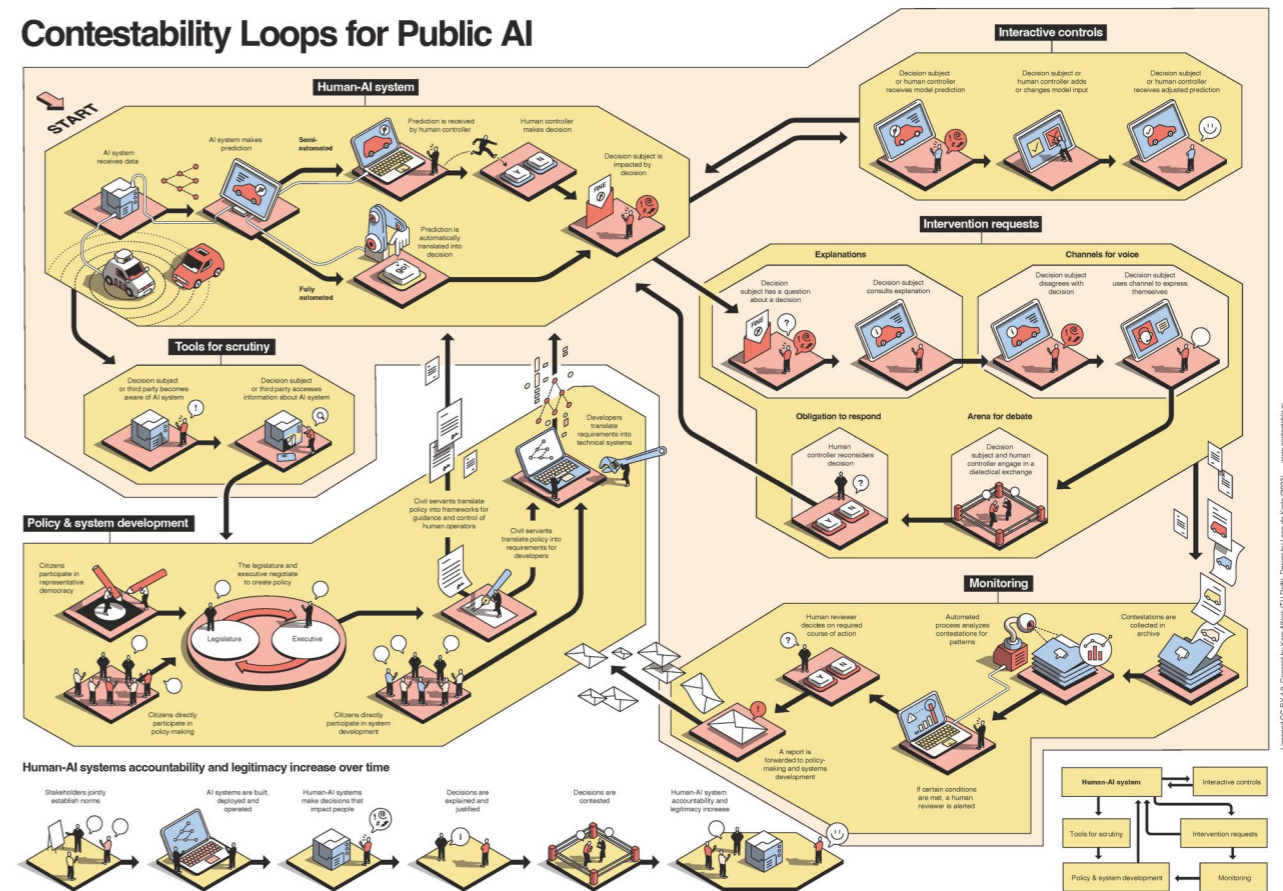
They do not create the conditions for collective autonomy from below.

1. Alfrink, K. (2025a). Designing Artificial Intelligence for Autonomy. In U. Pesch (Ed.), Design for Human Autonomy (pp. 18–19). Delft Design for Values Institute. ↩

# Arenas, Not Guardrails

We need agonistic arenas for public AI.<sup>1</sup>

## Contestability Loops for Public AI



Contestability Loops for Public AI infographic

1. Alfrink, K., Keller, I., Yurrita Semperena, M., Bulygin, D., Kortuem, G., & Doorn, N. (2024). Envisioning Contestability Loops: Evaluating the Agonistic Arena as a Generative Metaphor for Public AI. *She Ji: The Journal of Design, Economics, and Innovation*, 10(1), 53–93. <https://doi.org/10/gtzwft> ↩

# Vision Model Macroscope

Making Machine Learning Engineering Public<sup>1</sup>

1. This work is part of the Human Values for Smarter Cities project. [humanvaluesforsmartercities.nl](https://humanvaluesforsmartercities.nl) ↩

## The Setting

Cities are experimenting with camera vehicles to detect objects in public space.

But how the detection system is tuned involves hidden trade-offs.



Scan vehicle (Photo: Robin Utrecht)

## What We Built

A “macroscope”: an instrument that helps people see what many small actions look like added together, while staying connected to the details.<sup>1</sup>



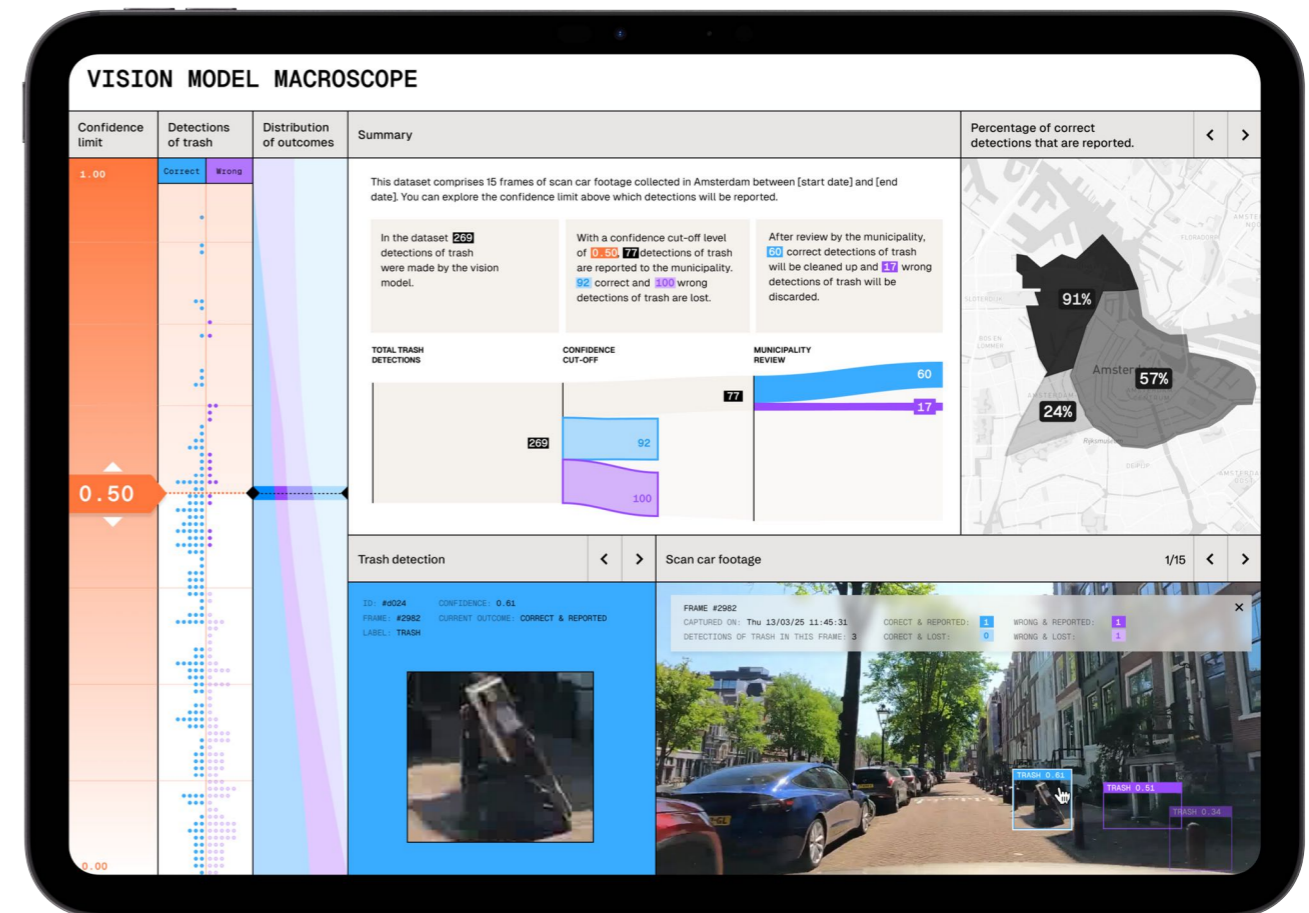
1. Thackara, J. (2005). In *The Bubble: Designing In A Complex World* (p. 6). MIT Press. ↩

# How It Works

One slider.

Multiple perspectives.

From individual detections to city-wide patterns.



Vision Model Macroscope interface. Design by CLEVER°FRANKE.

## What We Found

Rich, multi-perspective deliberation that went well beyond what we expected.

Diverse perspectives. Contradictory arguments. Questioning beyond the given trade-off.



# What This Example Reveals

A politics-first, not ethics-first, approach to design.<sup>1</sup>

1. van Maanen, G. (2022). AI Ethics, Ethics Washing, and the Need to Politicize Data Ethics. *Digital Society*, 1(2), 9. <https://doi.org/10/g833qb> ↩

# Designing AI for Autonomy

Three moves for taking autonomy seriously:

1. from individuals to collectives
2. from applications to infrastructure
3. from abstract principles to actual power relations<sup>1</sup>

1. Alfrink, K. (2025b). People's Compute: Design and the Politics of AI Infrastructures [Position paper]. OSF Preprints. [https://doi.org/10.31219/osf.io/uaewn\\_v2](https://doi.org/10.31219/osf.io/uaewn_v2) ↩

# Takeaway

Designing AI for autonomy means treating it as a political project, not just a technical one.

# Thank You

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## References

- Alfrink, K., Keller, I., Yurrita Semperena, M., Bulygin, D., Kortuem, G., & Doorn, N. (2024). Envisioning Contestability Loops: Evaluating the Agonistic Arena as a Generative Metaphor for Public AI. *She Ji: The Journal of Design, Economics, and Innovation*, 10(1), 53–93. <https://doi.org/10/gtzwft>
- Alfrink, K. (2025a). Designing Artificial Intelligence for Autonomy. In U. Pesch (Ed.), *Design for Human Autonomy* (pp. 18–19). Delft Design for Values Institute.
- Alfrink, K. (2025b). People's Compute: Design and the Politics of AI Infrastructures [Position paper]. OSF Preprints. [https://doi.org/10.31219/osf.io/uaewn\\_v2](https://doi.org/10.31219/osf.io/uaewn_v2)
- Prunkl, C. (2022). Human autonomy in the age of artificial intelligence. *Nature Machine Intelligence*, 4(2), 99–101. <https://doi.org/10/gsd2rt>
- Thackara, J. (2005). *In The Bubble: Designing In A Complex World*. MIT Press.
- van Maanen, G. (2022). AI Ethics, Ethics Washing, and the Need to Politicize Data Ethics. *Digital Society*, 1(2), 9. <https://doi.org/10/g833qb>