Contemporary Art: 1989 to the Present.

Eds. Alexander Dumbadze and Suzanne Hudson.

Ina Blom:

Inhabiting the technosphere. Art and technology beyond technical invention

Prepublication Manuscript

"Media convergence under digitality actually increases the centrality of the body as a framer of information: as media lose their material specificity, the body takes on a more prominent function as selective processor in the creation of images." [1]

The body as a framer of information: This notion, presented in the introduction to Mark Hansen's 2004 *New Philosophy of New Media,* could also stand as an introduction to the general condition under which art after 1989 thinks, produces and engages with technology. It marks not just a shift in thinking that concerns our general understanding of media technologies and practices - but an equally significant shift taking place within the type of artistic practice where new media and information technologies are not just deployed but are themselves also objects of thinking, investigation and imagination. The

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[1] Timothy Lenoir, Foreword, in Mark Hansen, *New Philosophy for New Media,* MIT Press, 2004, xxii

task for art history is then to try to understand the newly prominent mediatic body that emerges with this shift – to discover its various manifestations in artistic practice, as well as its implications for aesthetic theory. In particular, we need to conceptualize its double relation to, on the one hand, technological media and the realm of media production and, on the other hand the notion of the artistic medium.

With this shift, several influential conceptions of the relation between art, technology and media may be questioned. Firstly, the notion of the body as a framer of information challenges some of the most influential theorizations of the cultural shift that took place in the 1990's, as the Internet became a global phenomenon and digital processing emerged as a communal platform for all previously separate media and technologies of expression. One was the marginalization of art in the realm of new media. Digital media leave aesthetics behind, Friedrich Kittler claimed, with all the apocalyptic gusto of the early computer age: In distinction to the consciousness-flow of film or audio tape, the algorithmic operations that underpin information processing happen at a level that has no immediate correlate to the human perceptual system. Humans had created a non-human realm that made obsolete any idea of art based on the sense apparatus. And this turn of events was related to the way in which technologies of the information age severed any tangible connection with human existence beyond what pertains to the control practices of capitalist superpowers, notably warfare, surveillance and superficial entertainment or visual "eyewash".[2] Yet, against Kittler's bleak description of post-human technologies it could be argued that information will still necessarily have to be processed by human bodies—even if the interaction between the human perceptual

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[2] Friedrich Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter,* (Trans. Geoffrey Winthrop-Young and Michael Wutz), Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999, 1-19

system and the finely grained temporalities of digital processing open new ways of understanding the qualities and capacities of such bodies and their environments. Aesthetics is not dead or irrelevant, but in need of a new set of descriptions that will also aid our understanding of artistic practice in the age of new media

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Secondly, the notion of the body as the framer of information challenges an influential assumption concerning the formal characteristics of Contemporary artworks. In the 1999 essay *A Voyage on the North Sea. Art in the Age of the Post-Medium Condition,* Rosalind Krauss outlines a situation in which a majority of artworks and art practices have lost their critical connection to specific media. In her reading, contemporary art is not simply multi- or intermedial but, more acutely, post-medial. Post-mediality in art is the effect of an uncritical aesthetic adaptation to a media industry in which the facilitation of economic exchange is the order of the day – in sharp contrast to the critical and properly materialist struggle with the frameworks of a particular artistic medium that characterized the Modernist engagement with painting, sculpture, photography, or film. However, in Krauss's text such engagement with medium specificity is no longer described in the more traditional, formalist terms of self-reference but through the concept of recursion: a principle according to which an infinite number of computations can be described by a finite program such that a crucial moment of invention or difference is produced from within the limits of the same. Where the concept of self-reference is easily misread as solipsism, the concept of recursion places emphasis on the fact that reflexive attention to the properties of an artistic medium does not reproduce this medium as self-identical, but as a different instantiation in each specific case. Resistance to the erasure of critical

differences in the new information economies is in other words achieved through a conceptual framework that provides a sort of quasi-computational updating of the modernist preoccupation with medium specificity.[3]

Against the description of a post-medium condition, one could argue that recent art has *not* lost its connection to a critical and materialist notion of "medium." It is just that the properties of this medium cannot be easily elucidated with reference to a specific apparatus or support in the way one could speak of Modern artist's engagement with distinct technologies such as photography or film. Instead, a medium today must be sought out in the more elusive interaction between bodies (or various types of existential situations) and the informational realm. It is a type of interaction that is explored in a number of recent artworks that tend to *foreground* a distinctly aesthetic realm of perceptual and sensorial data, while placing it within larger technological frameworks that seem to encompass the idea of an information-based mode of life.

From such a point of view, the problem with the notion of the post-medium condition is that it deals with the relation between art, technologies, and media from the point of view of old media, both in aesthetic and technological terms. The intensive 20th century debates about the aesthetic properties of specific media should no doubt be seen as a corollary to an industrial development of new and distinct media technologies — film, photography, gramophone, audiotape, radio, television, x-ray, radar and digital sound and image, among others— that each have their own specific formats, uses, programs, and modes of spectatorship. To a great extent, modern art production could be seen as a deep engagement with this series of technical inventions. It is an engagement

[3] Rosalind Krauss, *A Voyage on The North Sea. Art in the Age of the Post-Medium Condition.* London: Thames & Hudson, 1999

that turns around the radical newness of each technology and its stakes in a yet-to-be determined future, based on its distinct medial features and the ability to generate certain (hypothetical) audiovisual, temporal and social or political effects. As Dieter Daniels has pointed out, 20th century media technologies tended to develop distinct artistic practices alongside their industrial or commercial uses. Television stands as the exception to this rule in the sense that an artistic use of video was developed relatively late after the establishment of TV as a state-owned or corporate mass medium. As a result, video artists not only engaged with the properties of television signals: they immediately addressed the specificity of TV in terms of its function as an already existing and increasingly all-enveloping social and political institution.[4] One effect of this development was that television was explored from a larger media-ecological and existential perspective that very often took the productive interface between human bodies and televisual real-time technologies as a point of departure. The television environments of Nam June Paik or the complex feedback mechanisms set up in Frank Gillette and Ira Schneider's video installations combined macro-political critique with a techno-utopian imagination set on reconfiguring the potential of human perception and sensation. In this opening towards wider media-ecological perspectives, certain aspects of 1970s video art may be interpreted as early signs of the transformation of the critical concept of medium that emerged more fully after 1990. In many ways, it is the consequences of this transformation that is mourned in the notion of a post-medium condition. But the emphasis on loss implicit in this notion is also what blinds one to the

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[4] Dieter Daniels, Dieter Daniels, *Kunst als Sendung, Von der Telegraphie zum Internet,* München: Verlag C.H. Beck, 2002, 241-249

specific features of the relationship between art and technology that emerges in the current realm of information.

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In broad terms, this transformation can be traced in an artistic approach to technology that is no longer aligned with the invention of specific apparatuses, programs, or media formats. This is not to say that technical invention plays a limited role in art after 1989. On the contrary, a rich subfield of recent artistic practices is devoted to intensive research and development in the realm of digital technology, spurring collaborative networks between artists, scientists, engineers and theorists.[5] However, what is of late most compelling is the often overlooked generative framework under which a number of recent artworks are produced, works that do not even necessarily come across as "technologically oriented" in any very emphatic or explicit sense. Instead they express a sensitivity to what we might call "general mediality," a type of focus that ultimately draws attention to the human as a biotechnical form of life.

If this framework should be foregrounded it is not just because it constitutes a historically new addition to the realm of artistic expression and production. It also adds to our understanding of what the philosopher Gilbert Simondon might have called the *technicity* of a great number of recent artworks; that is, an understanding of how they *come into being as new technical events*. [6] The "technicity" of a work of art is in other words not a given derived from a determinate set of features associated with an already

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[5] A growing number of festivals and conferences (Ars Electronica, Transmediale, the annual ISEA and SIGGRAPH conferences) testify to the urgency and significance of this activity.
[6] Gilbert Simondon, *Du mode d'existence des objets techniques.* Paris: Éditions Aubier, 1989. The question of technicity has been discussed in some detail in de Boever, Murray and Roffe, "Technical Mentality Revisited: Brian Massumi on Gilbert Simondon", *Parrhesia* no. 7, 2009, 36-45

existing apparatus or technology. It indicates, rather, a set of complex feedback relations between a range of elements—technical, environmental, intellectual, sensorial —that account for the emergence of a new techno-existential situation.

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Consider, then, a different type of aesthetic scenario. Consider, for instance, the brilliant multicolored light emanating from the grand windows of a Parisian apartment at nightfall: this is what is offered to the city public that happens to pass by Philippe Parreno's *Mount Analogue* (2001). Invisible to these outside spectators, the colored light is generated from a TV screen connected to a digital video system that produces a series of colors whose hue and duration are determined by a Morse code translation of a text - a narrative about the cinematic production of the mystical/spiritual novel *Le Mont Analogue,* left unfinished by René Daumal in 1944 and posthumously published in 1952. Assembled here are almost every single transcription system and media platform known to modern humans: writing, publication, Morse code, cinema, television, electric light, and binary code. What is more, digital or discrete sign systems fuse seamlessly with analogue or continuous modes of imagination and projection (as in the narrated description of a cinematic production). Uniting them, however, is the fact that these familiar media forms are now all made to operate at a submerged or imperceptible level in relation to human consciousness, a level whose temporal complexities and phenomenological inaccessibility are normally associated with the mathematics of binary code only.

Writing, cinematic images, television signals, and mental imaging are here united and pushed into the background as the interconnected elements of a complex and

invisible procedure of processing. Spectators only engage with the intensive dimensions of a luminosity whose precise "technical" sources can at best be guessed at but never known within the limits of the viewing situation. In a sense, they are as inaccessible to us as the neuronal wiring and firing that underpins our own thinking as it unfolds. As a consequence, what takes place in the interplay between the sensations and perception of the spectator's body and the flow of colored light cannot be directly elucidated with reference to the mediatic apparatuses subtending the production. In relation to the bodies engaging with the raw sensory data of the work, the role of apparatuses and technologies is mainly that of an open question or a gap in our knowledge—a point of real indeterminacy as to the function and meaning of technology itself.

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Parreno's *Mount Analogue* is a paradigm of the new techno-existential scenario explored in recent art. Generally speaking, works of this kind approach sophisticated media technologies as a new vernacular, since the interfaces and modes of operation of such technologies come across as integrated in the fabric of everyday life. They are at one with the lamps, screens, and light constructions that illuminate buildings and streets, with architectural constructions, with trendy interior design as well as that of more ordinary modes of dwelling. They are at one with the way in which people interact, think, dream, and experience, as well as with the way in which connections are created between humans and other agents and entities in the world. This is, at least, how the presence of media technologies have been staged in numerous artworks: works attuned to the electronic networks that keep entire environments alive with the pulsations of real time processing.

As if in response to this integration of information technology in the deeper fabric of everyday life, many of these works lack any kind of distinct formal or object-oriented unity and instead create associations between a number of seemingly disparate elements, often separate in time and space. A work by Liam Gillick may, for instance, take place in the interstice between the translation, publication and distribution of a 19th century utopian novel by the Italian sociologist Gabriel Tarde. The ideas and metaphors subtending Tarde's vision of a new collectivity of sensations and perceptions are updated for the new media age through a newly written philosophical introduction, innovative translation details, a promotional video for the book, and finally an architectural arrangement (or presentational "setting") that includes specially designed furniture and carpeting.[7] Other works seem to evoke a new type of media atmospherics, as if to explore more elusive dimensions of today's shared spaces than those foregrounded through the more traditional parameters of media critique. Take, for instance, Angela Bulloch's practice of expanding single pixels to screen-size square boxes. Even when she constructs entire walls of such pixel boxes (as in *Macro World: One Hour3 and Canned*), we still do not get a screen image in the traditional sense of the term, only a very tiny fragment of what might have been a rapidly passing TV-screen "output." Connected to real-time signal transmission systems that respond to the movements of the people in the room, her enormous pixels walls and their constantly changing colors above all envelop us in a new type of atmospheric architectural surround – one which alerts us to the degree to which today's shared spaces operate alongside the flows and temporalities of signal-based technologies.

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[7] Liam Gillick, *Underground. Fragments of Future Histories,* at Galerie Micheline Szwajcer, 2004.

Or take the works of Sean Snyder, which explore the relation between the technologies of information processing subtending our everyday environment and the question of "information access" in the public sphere. This relation is fraught with paradoxes. For if digital technologies facilitate the need for visual documentation, such documents are also open to manipulation in ways that constantly undermine their validity. In addition, the enormous flow of visual data from mobile cameras, surveillance systems, satellite systems, and television stations decrease the informational value of each image-document, influencing our ability to identify, differentiate, and account for relevance based on visual evidence. In Snyder's work the tremendous flow of visual information then essentially comes across as a form of signaletic presence or atmosphere, which engages the viewer through a predominantly tactile form of appeal. For what the signaletic environment produces is above all a powerful sense of being "with it", "in touch", perpetually in the middle of action.[8]

In contrast to much of the media-oriented art of the 20th century, Bullock and Snyder both explore a form of collective media existence that is no longer primarily based on a viewing and digestion of spectacular images or other types of media content. Instead, their works expose and explore the intimate connections that are continually being forged between today's sophisticated time processing technologies and the complex temporalities of a human memory that moves at several speeds at once, combining preconscious action-oriented neuronal responses with a conscious processing of the past and future within a dynamic now-time. If today's information technologies

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[8] Sean Snyder's exhibition *Optics. Compression. Propaganda* at the Lisson Gallery, London, 2007, is an example of this approach, as is the project *Bucharest / Pyonyang 2000-2004.* Both works use a number of different visual technologies, including photographs, satelite images, video images, digital images and LightJet prints.

come across as attractive, intimate, user-friendly and "human" (in contrast to "alienating"

industrial technologies such as the conveyor belt), it is because they appear to be an

extension of our neural systems and in fact include our sensorial and perceptual apparatus

as part of their working components. The almost visceral sense of "connectedness" or

"presence" that is brought forward in so many works, relate to the fact that shared space

itself is increasingly understood as intercerebral space or a collectivity of brains, a sphere

of interconnected thoughts, sensations and affects whose political and economic

dimensions we have only just begun to explore.[9]

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In general, the situationist notions of the media spectacle and of spectacular society—

central for much of the recent critique of the modern media and entertainment industries

and their artificial version of reality - have relatively little to contribute to this new

technicity in art.[10] For these works often seem to move away from habitual

preoccupations with the ideological and institutional shaping of media content and its

construction of more or less passive spectatorship. Once attention is directed to the

impact of those aspects of media technologies that function as corollaries to our own

sensorial and perceptual apparatuses, we are no longer primarily seen as "users" of

distinct media. Instead we are approached as human elements in a larger techno-

biological process of becoming that may produce new forms of subjectivity and social

identity but that also passes beyond traditional conceptions of the human self. The Manga

character *Annlee* – the point of departure for a wide-ranging collective art project- could

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[9] The political and economic aspects of intercerebral collaboration is discussed in Maurizio
Lazzarato, *Puissances de l'invention. La psychologie économique de Gabriel Tarde.* Paris: Les
Empêcheurs de penser en rond / Le Seuil: 2002.
[10] The key text here is Guy Debord, *La Société du Spectacle,* Editions Gallimard, Paris:
1992

be seen as an allegory of such processes. In 1999 Philippe Parreno and Pierre Huyghe bought the rights to a Manga drawing from the Japanese company Kworks, and invited fifteen artists – Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster, Liam Gillick, Philippe Joseph, Rirkrit Tiravanija, Francois Curlet among them - to produce works with or around this generic yet "open" cartoon figure, who was named Annlee. Annlee is then essentially a legal-informational entity, a purchased set of rights that takes on fleeting aspects of personhood as it becomes the interface of the various desires, perceptions, sensations and fantasies that are activated in the project.

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Once the body emerges as the critical medium of such works, it becomes easier to pay attention to the specific ways in which a number of artworks explore the alignment of real-time technologies and human memory. Such alignment takes place at two levels. On the one hand, real-time technologies seem to replicate the conscious processes of recalling the contents of the past or imagining future scenarios within the parameters of a constantly unfolding "now-time." In fact, a range of work by artists like Pierre Huyghe, Douglas Gordon, and Jeremy Deller recall collective media memories or future-oriented media fantasies through techniques of "presencing" that place emphasis on the event-like, refractive and uncontrollable now-time of both signaletic and human recollection and projection. Cinema and television classics, historical news events and the scenario-like presentations of real estate agents and tourist operators are given a new form of social existence by playing off the complex techniques of memory itself. Deller's work with the folk practice of historical reenactment is a case in point: In *The Battle of Orgreave* he restages the famous 1984 battle between British police and 5000 picketing miners at a

British Steel coking plant in a way that interlaces the "real" reenactment of the battle with the past and present mediatization of the event through television and film. The effect is not just a refraction of the political meanings traditionally ascribed to this key event in Thatcherite politics. Even more pertinently, Deller enlarges and plays off the affects involved in the production of a so-called "media event" whose force and impact depends on its ability to enroll not just history but entire collectivities in a mode of perpetual presence.[11]

On the other hand, the inaccessible algorithmic operations that underpin real time information processing might be compared with the subconscious memory techniques of a nervous system that guides our bodies through complex and action-filled contexts, so to speak, in advance of our conscious processing of what is going on around us. The quasi-natural and quasi-technological spaces created by Olafur Eliasson seem in particular to emphasize how an intimate interaction between neurological and informational processes are constitutive elements in the creation of whatever it is that we see as our immediate bodily environments today. Through relatively simple and always technically transparent procedures that typically involve manipulations of color and light, temporal and spatial experience, Eliasson creates situations where our perceptions and sensations are at once intensified and externalized -- to the extent that we get a fleeting sense of experiencing our own nervous system at work in action – like getting a sudden flash of insight into the

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[11] Daniel Dayan and Elihu Katz have analyzed the specific way in which the live media event constructs sociality through a type of journalistic procedure where the reporter is no longer an "outside" commentator cynically open to any meanings. In contrast, the media event reporter tends to be actively involved in the official meaning of the event as if unfolds. Operating in terms of televisual presence, he or she *enacts* this meaning. Daniel Dayan and Elihu Katz, *Media Events. The Live Broadcasting of History.* Harvard University Press, 1992, p. 89-92

generative work of a computer code.[12] A nodal point in a web of technologies and constructions that operate at a number of different levels, the body is here clearly a self-reflexive or recursive medium – one that experiences its own continual production of an environment as an integral part of the discovery of its own means and capacities, forces and limitations. This is, in short, the properly aesthetic approach to a new media reality developed in contemporary art after 1989.

Ina Blom is a Professor at the Department of Philosophy, Classics, History of Art and Ideas at the University of Oslo

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[12] Titles like *Your Negotiable Panorama* (2006), *Your space embracer* (2004) or *Your mobile expectations* (2007) clearly emphasize the way in which the work open onto a reflexive mode of perception based on the situational experience of the individual spectator-body.