

Towards an Aesthetics of Connective Processes

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1. Preface

A recent video work by Oliver Whitehead, *mind's eye* (Finland, 1999), shows the fleeting impressions of graffiti, antennae and pedestrians, caught while riding on a suburban train. The tape exemplifies a way of looking at and understanding the visual culture of the age of post-media in which the black hole of television has been replaced by an almost continuous surface of images, sounds, texts, movements; the tape only lacks a layer of sounds from a translocal, networked world with its extension and transgression of local subjectivities. *mind's eye*, the internal gaze blending with a continuously drifting and unfocused glance, points beyond attempts at saving *the image* from its presumed digital crisis, towards a non-reductivist aesthetics of connective image sampling.

2. *Bilder ohne Blick* - Images without Gaze

The development of technical media has, since the invention of cinematography at the end of the 19th century and its emergence as one of the prototypical mass media of the 20th century, been accompanied by claims that images would come to replace text as the dominant mode of symbolic exchange. Such claims have been further on the increase throughout the 1990s, given the rapid expansion of digital imaging technologies - from editing software and processor performance to design interfaces and network bandwidth. The suggestion is that digital culture will no longer be based on text, but on images.

This image culture has become the object of research efforts that attempt to reassess the structural and operative role of images in modern societies. In the Netherlands these discussions have been sparked by plans for establishing a national Centre for Image Culture (*Beeldcultuur*), so that the cultural debate was immediately shot through by political and budgetary interests, as well as by considerations of institutionalisation. In Germany, recent debates about images have developed in academic circles where the boundaries between art history, media theory, philosophy and sociology have been blurred and where *disciplinary* attempts are made at defining a new research field of *image studies* (*Bildwissenschaft*). Similar approaches have been taken since the 1980s in Art History, inspired by the Anglo-American Cultural Studies, and in Social Anthropology under the header Visual Anthropology.

What is particular in the debates that directly refer to media theory is that they engage more radically the question whether the notion of the 'image' still holds as a central operative category. Discounting some pre-cursors, we can say that the media technologies of the 20th century, from film and radio via telephone and television to computers and electronic networks, have turned static texts and static images into time-based, non-local and open-ended processes whose materiality is mediated by discrete units and, eventually, by digital code.

The discussion frequently hinges on the evaluation of this movement from image object to image process. A dominant definition takes the 'image' as an object of

perception that offers itself to the human gaze and that constructs meaning beyond its pure material existence. Gottfried Boehm talks about the interplay of the work of the artist who fixes the materiality of the image and defines its boundaries, and the work of the gaze, which together bring forth the image. Attempts at understanding the image as an immaterial 'imagination' are more often rejected than accepted. Instead, Boehm speaks of the image as a perceivable object, "whose basic definition is the simultaneous perceivability of the means of representation and what is represented, i.e. of the medial premise and iconic form". (Boehm 1999, p.173) The gaze is not only the form of appropriation, but it is a central condition of the image. As Hans Belting writes: "Without our gaze (without our consciousness), images would be something completely different, or altogether nothing. Although we receive images of the world, or in the social sphere, from the outside, we make them our own images, in a collective as well as personal sense." (Belting 2000, p.7)

The problem of saving this notion of the image in the face of ubiquitous digitisation was pinpointed by an academic conference held in Berlin in February 2001, under the title "Suchbilder" (*Search Images*), which dealt with the cultural consequences of ordering and archiving images in a digital form. In the programmes of the conference, German film maker Harun Farocki's intuitive editing method was juxtaposed by recent research for automated image recognition and retrieval from digital databases. In this latter approach, images are seen less as catalysts of cultural meaning and productivity but as containers of machine-comparable digitised content.

This method of ordering the archive of images refers not so much to the historical and hermeneutic traditions of art history, but to the mechanised forms of reading images, like Alphonse Bertillon's *identification signalétique*, which are today epitomised by the automated facial and retinal recognition systems. These are surveillance systems which hinge not on what Michel Foucault and others have analysed as the disciplining gaze of authority, but on a machine-induced identification and the acceptance or denial of access. By cutting out the gaze that constructs a meaningful image (Belting), *Suchbilder* are constructed as purely relational, comparative objects whose sole function is to be similar to or different from another machine construction, e.g. the digital video portrait of a suspicious bank customer.

3. Machinic Images

You don't have to be a Luddite to understand that delegating the visual memory to an automated archivist may lead to a more efficient treatment of visual contents, but not to a richer visual culture. Instead, several artists have made use of machine-generated, subjectless images and turned them into expressive material. For his video installation 'I thought I was Seeing Convicts' (2000), Harun Farocki took the recordings from surveillance cameras in a Californian prison as found footage and constructed an intensive narrative about prison life and its medial refractions. The observation that the range of sight of the camera is identical with the firing angle of the prison guards harks back to Foucault's analysis of the panoptic gaze, and to Paul Virilio's parallel descriptions of military and media technologies. Farocki's installation tells a story of this mechanised gaze, its critical approach subjectifies the political system that employs such 'gazing machines'.

A more recent phenomenon that follows a similar logic is the web-camera that sends images of a specific object or location to a WWW server at regular intervals (or

streams them constantly), turning those images into a global media spectacle. The general and permanent availability of these images and the co-presence of viewers with the most banal and the most intimate events - a structure that is currently taken to new extremes in TV shows like Big Brother - radically transforms the topology of a media culture in which reality and fiction, life and performance, inside and outside finally become indistinguishable.

The American researcher Steve Mann developed a head-set device which carries a video camera and which can continuously upload whatever the wearer of the device sees onto a website. "Wearable Wireless Webcam challenges the 'editing' tradition of cinematography by transmitting, in real time, life as it happens, from the perspective of the surveilled." (Mann 1998, p.62) The camera can be operated remotely, allowing web users to take photographs of what the wearer is seeing. The deliberate confusion of subjectivities and the gaze is also explored in a project by Nobuhira Narumi, 'Dog-Cam' (1996-99), who attached a video and a digital stills camera to the head of a dog. The result are images who can only be seen through a transgressive identification with the dog, through "becoming-dog-becoming-human-becoming ..." (Paul Sakoilsky)

The critical analysis of representation and image content that was the hallmark of semiotics-inspired Cultural Studies since the 1970s falls as short of grasping the significance of this image process, as would the kind of critique of digital realism that tried to sort out the symbolic and ontological differences between virtual and physical spaces. The image process includes a technical, engineering and creative process as well as the production of an image or event stream and the conditions of its reception. Think of the dissection of the act of seeing in Seiko Mikami's interactive installation 'Molecular Informatics' (1996), where the movement of the gaze is represented as an evolving line of molecules which the viewer sees and understands as a trace of his or her own act of seeing, and that is interlaced with the trace of a second viewer's gaze. In Mikami's work, there is no image, but a continuous visual process - similar to the ongoing construction and dissolution of spatial and textual objects in Ulrike Gabriel's 'Memory' (1999), where the viewer's attention 'energises' the evolutionary process of virtual text and visual constructs. The theme of such works is not a particular image and not even the principle of visibility, but the treatment of processuality of perception, of attention, and the oscillation between unintentionality and intentionality.

4. Post-Media Operations

Neither the notion of the visual nor that of the virtual are appropriate to describe much of the current cultural practice. The relevant distinction is not to be made between virtuality and physicality, but between object and process. In so far as an image acquires its meaning as a fixed object, it belongs to a different aesthetics from the image which is a passing state in a process, or an image process itself.

Take Herwig Weiser's installation 'zgodlocator' (1998-2000) in which granulated metallic materials taken from computer hardware recycling processes are spread out as strange technoid landscapes in a glass-covered basin and animated by strong magnets which are placed under the landscape. These magnets can be activated individually and in concert through an interactive computer program, which is further influenced by small interfaces with knobs and buttons that can be 'played' by the visitors. Sound sensors are placed in the metallic landscapes and feed back the

material activity as rumbling and rhythmical noise. The whole installation is built into an extensive carpeted 50 cm platform, with the loudspeakers and the top of the round basin at a level with the raised floor. Visitors can sit and lie on the floor, gaze into the depth of what appears to be a post-technoid creation scene, manipulate this abstract god-game and thus surround themselves by industrial techno sounds.

This type of multi-medial assemblages are not entirely new, yet, they have become a standard form of artistic expression at a time when digitisation implies a constant shifting, blurring and transformation between the media. Furthermore, the transformation of digital code into material processes, their instantiation as sound and the interactive, collective and transient perception of the image reality behind the glass - these transformations make a distinction between virtual and physical meaningless.

This - by no means dominant - type of media-based cultural practice belongs to what Félix Guattari has called the age of post-media, an age when the mass media lose their universal symbolic grip on the collective imaginary and when individuals and groups begin to re-appropriate the media and their idioms. The affordability and availability of media tools and infrastructures - PCs, Free Software, electronic networks, printing on demand, etc. - have created a widely dispersed rhizome of practices in which texts, images, video, and sounds are crossed with parties, street actions, internet campaigns, web, record and paper publications, graffiti, live-performances and lectures. A disparate world of signals, gestures and expressions in which tribes and individuals explore shifting (group) subjectivities.

Post-media operations intertwine the productivity of sampling different media, with the productivity of cooperation. Heterogeneous groups and practices mingle, counter, complement each other, guided not by the will to collective self-expression but by the autopoietic movement of the *connective*. Unlike the collective, which aspires to a unified ideological principle for defining its actions, the connective is a machinic assemblage that dynamically and openly connects a network of operators. The notion of a connective agency has been explored by projects of the artist group Knowbotic Research, like in the *IO_dencies* series (1997-99) or in 'Connective Force Attack' (2000), where a password-protected Internet server was installed which gave access to several public displays in the city of Hamburg. The server had to be attacked by several users at the same time who would share the work of cracking the password by attacking different security domains. When successful, the group was able to put their own, uncensored text onto public display in the form of text message, permeating from the digital domain into the urban space. The participants would connect temporarily and tactically, balanced at the border between play, hacker passion and political engagement.

The projects of Knowbotic Research condense, articulate and aestheticise a common set of post-media practices and thus exemplify elements of an aesthetics of connective processes in which mediated human and machine agency are interlaced. A machine agency, however, that does not technocratically order and structure these processes, but that opens them up - much in the sense of how Félix Guattari has described the machine, i.e. as an assemblage of heterogeneous parts which transforms forces, articulates and propels their elements, and forces them into a continuous state of transformation and becoming. Machines are multiplicities without unity, they are

criss-crossed by multiple lines of forces. A machine connects and disconnects, articulates and disarticulates, frames and releases. The machine is always productive, as against the 'anti-production' of a fixed structure. Its productivity lies in the creation of discontinuities and disruptions, it dislodges a given order and runs against routines and expectations.

The technological environment of networked media and global communication are, without doubt, no prototypes of such heterogenic machines. They molarise and territorialise in an expansive and authoritarian way, which is why post-media operations cannot be plain counter-cultural activities. There are no minor media without major media. Post-media operations as Howard Slater describes them, always place themselves in the filiations of the media, negotiating media power: "post-media operators are, in a sense, manipulating their own manipulation. Not only does this reveal the power of the media it, also brings into focus the power of the post-media operators themselves, a power that, because it has diversified the levels at which it can place itself, achieves an imperviousness to power: by means of the 'exteriority of its vicinity' it is empowered enough to be overpowered and, as a result, is sensitized to the dispersion of power which is not solely conducted through the channels of the media." (Slater 1998)

The post-media aesthetics of connective processes is ethics as well as politics. It engages with power and seeks tactics and strategies of mediated actions that evade capitalist modes of valorisation, but seek forms of 'self-valorisation', 'auto-temporalisation' and 'auto-institutionalisation' (Slater). We can see the work of Marko Peljhan as exemplary in this field, because Peljhan deals with military technologies and global telecommunications infrastructures in a direct and fearless way, working not against but through the technocratic power structures and aestheticising them in the sense of an 'aesthetics of existence' (Foucault), in the sense of 'being media'.

5. Image? What Image?

The filiations of connective agencies are singular and networked acts combining into heterogeneous processes. Their aesthetics is to be found in the inert flows and sudden eruptions of events and situations. They articulate the media and individuals into cyborgian human-machine concoctions. They trigger, disperse, break, flood streams of desire into the anodyne techno-social environments where ants, slugs, viruses and slackers thrive. Against the myth of convergence post-media are set to push the dirty unpredictability of the machine.

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JODI

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Knowbotic Research + cF

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Mailingliste "bilder"

<http://www.hgb-leipzig.de/ARTNINE/bildwissenschaft/index.html>

MetaMute

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