

Art of Our Times: A Temporal Position to Art and Change

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Abstract

How we understand and approach art from certain epistemological grounds has implications for how we trace its genealogies, formulate its trajectories, understand its contextual and discursive departures and impacts, and develop our expectations to what the art might pursue – and *do*. This paper advocates for a holistic, non-linear perspective on contemporary (media) art as interfering with our world through time, rather than matter. It anchors ‘art machines’ in their temporal, operational core as *art of our times*, as implicated with and acting through temporal experience and ecologies.

Boris Groys has suggested that contemporary art can be distinguished from that which prevailed during the modern era significantly by its core commitment to a notion of *radical temporality*, as it engages with a contemporary situation in which every element may be considered ‘temporary’. [1] In this *contemporary* perspective, art has emerged conceptually and materially from questions that pertain to perceptual-ontological conditions with contemporary technological realities. Art has reflected and challenged the communicative conditions *of their times* – oftentimes critical of the given dominant conditions of mediated experience. Besides being radically enabled by the evolution and mobility of the perceptual lens of, for example, the video camera and the mobile phone, art has evolved from concerns with expanding perception and with liberating the subject from fixed viewing structures. For example, through efforts to destabilize fixity of meaning and remediate power structures of physical places and their dynamics of social

encounters, and through initiatives of expanding and reconfiguring perception with media aesthetic ambiance and augmentation of real-world environments. Art both exists and expresses in *contingency* with technological culture and our contemporary communicative existence.

Here I refer to *art of our times* not only in terms of art that engages time-based technologies that are implicated with perceptual experience, or which addresses issues of time and perception – across behavioral modes of e.g. temporal overlay, disruption, interactivity, forms of networkedness and telepresence, among many others. Art of our times denotes how the art operates by way of interfering with temporalities of various ecologies of our communicative existence, as art machines that enact a sense of ‘radical temporality’ – acting as *present* rather than represented ‘images,’ in direct, operational engagement with temporal, perceptual experience. [2]

I exemplify the operation of art of our times in a current condition in which processes of change accelerate through machinic language and temporal effect, speeding up how we shape the world through language – from speech and writing to communication and algorithmic and machine learning processes. Machinic language accelerates the infrastructures and interfaces of how we see, do and make; how we distribute our subjectivity and sensibilities across multiple temporalities. [3] Machinic language affects our behaviors, routines and paths of understanding, and machinic and scientific processes rooted in ideas of linearity and relativity extend into innovation, design, social phenomena and human relations. Eventually, the human-

machine symbiosis evolves fast and at temporal frequencies that bypass human consciousness and awareness. [4] In this context, the deeper questions with which art is implicated concern how our lived experience shapes our human, cultural and societal evolution. Our experienced, temporally conditioned sense of presence shapes our behaviors and our acting out of politics, economic systems, and cultural norms.

At this point in time, when multiple and increasingly machinic temporalities structure and disperse our present being and experience, and in which hybrid environments of expanded reality increasingly become our experienced reality, I propose *art of our times* as a both epistemological, time-based contextualization of media art and an actual mode by which the art *does*. I argue that rather than existing as an object in space, art machines – as art of our times – act while embedded in our temporal experience. [5] With this I suggest a conception of art's roles – and rules – of existence in the urban context as deeply implicated with dynamics of change.

I exemplify how, with art, we can ask: What ritualistic behaviors are facilitated and encouraged through our designed, coded and instructed temporal experiences? Which cultural, social, political and economic ideas inform the modalities of our temporal experiences and immersion, and are these for example grounded in liberalization, separation and distance – or in association, interconnection and co-existence? Do they evoke sameness, or difference?

I challenge a currently dominant and much celebrated discourse in the cross-field between the technical arts, architecture, innovation design, and urban development that anticipates art's direct effect on matter and environment as an inevitable good, as an effective way of changing and optimizing our environments. This is a discourse that nonetheless does not account for how the 'art machine' complies with dominant narratives of politics, economy, or culture, affects ecologies of evolution, and results in intuitive-behavioral modes of indifference and production of more of the same. Instead of reproducing a Western-anchored, anthropocentric discourse obsessed with

controlling and changing matter, with the concept of *art of our times* I examine a temporal perspective on art machines and advocate for a holistic perspective on how art affects ecologies of material, memory, and behavior, by affecting our relation to time and temporal experience.

References

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3. Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, ed. and trans. Gabriel Rockhill (London and New York: Bloomsbury Academic), 2015.
4. N. Katherine Hayles, *How We Think: Digital Media and Contemporary Technogenesis* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press), 2012.
5. Richard Grusin, "Radical Mediation", *Critical Inquiry* 42, no. 1 (2015).

Biography

Dr. Tanya Toft Ag is a curator, researcher, writer and lecturer on urban media aesthetic phenomena and media art's engagement with societal and urban change. She gained her doctoral degree from Copenhagen University with visiting scholarships at Columbia University and Konstfack (CuratorLab), and MA degrees from The New School and Copenhagen University. Her curatorial practice evolves with media art and media architecture in urban environments, and she has held keynotes and presented her critical perspectives on art and urban media worldwide. She is editor of *Digital Dynamics in Nordic Contemporary Art* (Intellect, 2019) and co-editor of *What Urban Media Art Can Do – Why, When, Where, and How?* (av edition, 2016). In 2017 she co-founded the globally networked Urban Media Art Academy. Her current research is situated at School of Creative Media, City University of Hong Kong.

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