

Descending Parnassus: The State of Material is in Play

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1. The Crisis

To paraphrase the Buddha, the nature of suffering is media.

Crises arise when the materials we believed to be concrete, extant, or otherwise situated within reality begin to exhibit flux: when what we take as given wavers in and out of focus, exhibiting exquisite impermanence. For the Buddha, suffering is a direct consequence of clinging to impermanent materials and events, objects which once instantiated exist for a finite time and then simply cease. In contrast, the primary function of media has been to attempt a stabilization of this natural cycle, to manage impermanence by distilling a continuity from disparate chunks of time and space, resulting in rarified constructions which formalize our expectations and identities. Certainly, such stability can be a boon for civilization, which relies upon standards and systems such as mathematics, language, and law to modulate and reproduce society. But media systems are not inherently concrete; rather they are flexible, ad hoc techniques and procedures for navigating reality, or as Kittler suggests, determining the situation.

When media are in alignment with lived experience, there can be benefit. However, when these abstract sense-making systems are mismatched with the situation, we are presented

with a choice: either cling to known methods of material production, which grow increasingly ineffective at discerning the current state, or seek open processes which can offer alternatives and, perhaps, a way forward. The dilemma we face at beginning of the 21st century is whether to remain beholden to established systems of reproducibility, linearity, and predictability which are currently failing us, or seek more complementary solutions in the arbitrary, unpredictable, and somewhat playful behaviors of experimentation. If we are to counter the myriad social, political, economic, and ecological issues before us, we must be willing to engage unconventional ways of mediating reality, otherwise we may remain powerless to change our current trajectory.

2. The Cognitive and the Exemplative

Fluxus co-founder Dick Higgins offers two models for material production, two ways of envisioning reality, the *cognitive* and the *exemplative*. Cognitive materials arise out of a need to create fixities, a desire for permanence and security. Pre-authorized and pre-ossified, cognitive media may only quote other cognitive media, effectively entering a self-referential dialectic which, though mimetic of forward motion, may actually impede development. These materials, ends in and of themselves, seem to spring forth from the cleaved heads of geniuses like Athena, fully formed and fully armored.

A recollection from my early musical studies was the presentation of the artifacts: a set of Norton study scores, 16 phonographic recordings, and a copy of Johann Fux's *Gradus ad Parnassum*, which roughly translates to *The Steps to Parnassus*. Handed down from the master himself, this seminal text of Palestrinian counterpoint set the rules for the game, which when questioned always elucidates assurances that one must 'learn' the rules in order 'to know' how to break them. Cognitive praxis places a premium upon the material, the end product. All

knowledge (the rules) emanates from examination of the object (the score, recording, or text). Hermetically sealed, the cognitive media system is opaque, offering only a finite set of alternatives which must be reverse engineered from the artifact. To elucidate knowledge from outside of such a system requires another approach.

The exemplative effort focuses entirely upon process, from which any material derived is not a foreseen conclusion but rather one of many possible future alternatives. To turn *Parnassus* on its head, one must create the rules (the learning) in order to materialize the knowing (an object). Ambiguous and somewhat alchemical, exemplative works are in transition, a state of continually becoming. As indeterminate materials emanate from the implementation of exemplative procedures, any residual object is both ephemeral and unique, an embodiment of the originating actions from which it was conceived. Successive iterations of the process establish a dialectic between any one instantiation and all others. The exemplative work is not merely an end in itself, but a means for exploring multiple possibilities generated from a single set of instantiative procedures. The *Twittage Project* (2016 to present) is representative of this type of practice.

3. Twittage

Twittage is an automatic technique for generating images from visual assets encountered in the open Twitter stream. A portmanteau of Twitter (the target) and frottage (the technique), Twittage culls images from Twitter in real time, layering them one upon the other, effectively creating a digital rubbing of the ephemeral social event. The process is executed by a Java program which searches the text of individual tweets (known as statuses) for key words as they arise in real time. These key words, the sole deterministic aspect of the process, have varied over time, though the majority of the work prior to March 2020 resulted from statuses

containing *fake* and/or *news*, after which statuses including *lonely* and/or *isolated* were flagged.

If a key word is encountered, the status is additionally queried to determine if there are any media entities associated with the tweet, specifically those of type *photo*. If true, the URL pointing to the image is retrieved and the asset loaded into the Java canvas. Further successful queries layer images upon one another, blended using a difference algorithm which subtracts values from the underlying image on a pixel by pixel basis. The program exits after a random number of iterations have been completed, a value chosen at run time. This technique has generated a variety of materials from digital images, to large-scale gallery prints, video artifacts, and high-resolution gifs (see fig. 1-6). Titles are indicative of the date and time the objects were generated.



Fig. 1. twittage-2018-6-18-17-44.png

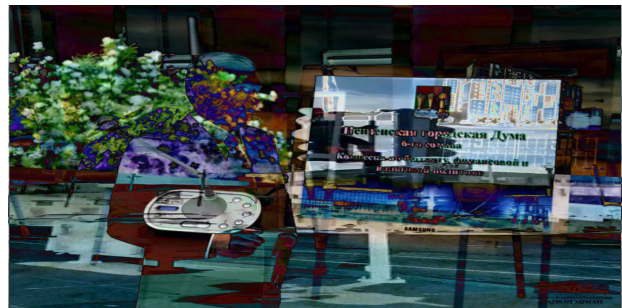


Fig. 2. twittage-2019-8-22-6-56.png

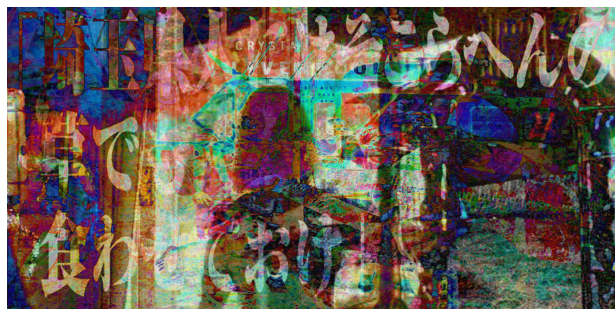


Fig. 3. twittage-2018-8-17-11-8.png

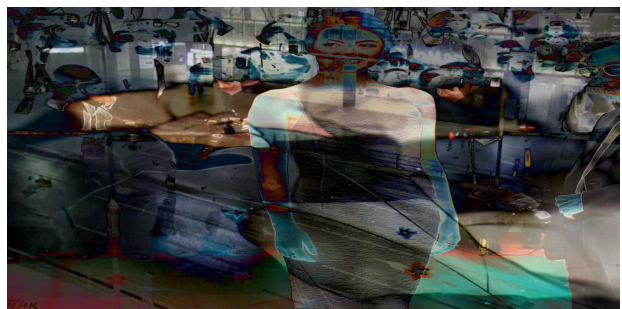


Fig. 4. twittage-2019-9-8-18-56.png



Fig. 5. Still from twitterVideo-2018-8-14-15-55.mp4.

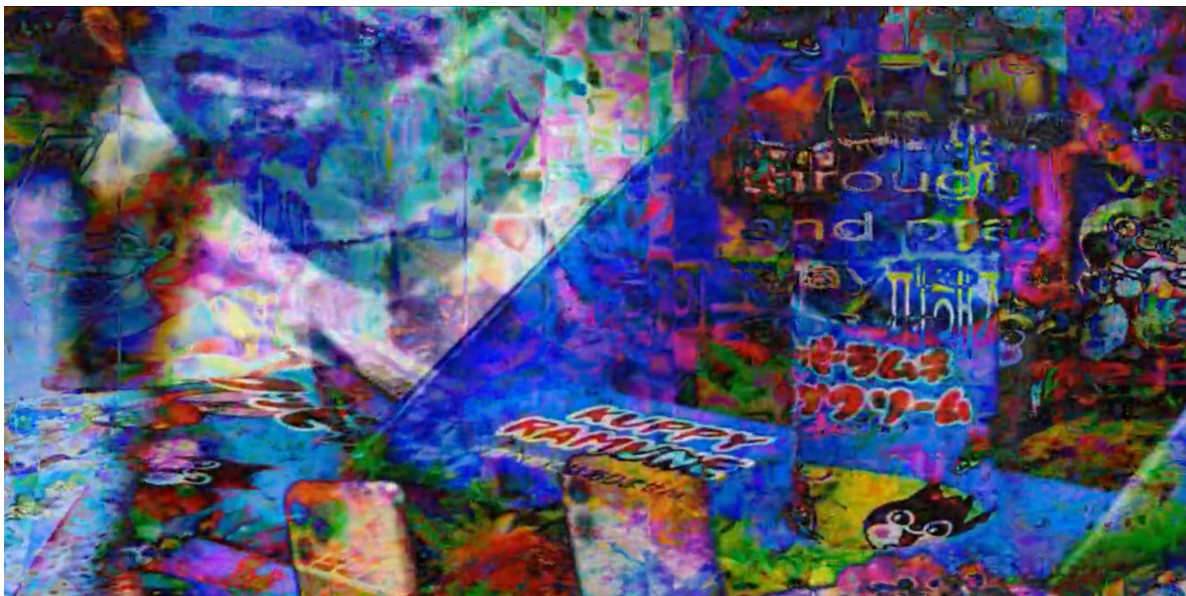


Fig. 6. twittageLoop-2020-4-24-20-28.mp4.

In 2017, the process was extended to post generated images back to Twitter via the @guydebordbot account (see fig. 7), accompanied by a quote derived from the corpus of Guy Debord's *Society of Spectacle* using Markov procedures. Now fully automated, the process emits a stream of daily content without the intervention of the artist.



Fig. 7. @guydebordbot, Twitter.

As an exemplative work, the Twittage process can be revelatory, presenting the viewer with a singular object comprised of materials randomly chosen from unknown sources at irregular intervals. As this hot process, ripe with possibility, begins to cool, exemplative

procedures give way to concrete material in the form of a snapshot: a media object determined by its distinctive situation in space and time. For the viewer, stumbling upon this new found artifact, the amalgamation may present as illogical or haphazard, challenging one's expectations and understanding. Here, as George Brecht suggests, the unconscious mind takes over, attempting to reconcile a media object which, by design, does not arise out of any preconceived, cognitive notion.

Twittage, as with other exemplative works, effectively triggers our sense-making behaviors, which are perhaps the basis of our evolutionary advantage. Further, sense-making is key to knowledge creation, a process not merely the assembly of static truths (artifacts), but an ongoing act of remediating a world which is continually in a state of becoming. I opened this discussion by suggesting that human suffering was based in our desire to cling to media systems and ways of knowing—*fixities*, to borrow Higgins' term—that are no longer germane to the situation undergoing rapid, systemic change.

Managing the social, political, economic, and ecological issues before us by doubling down on outmoded ways of knowing have not been effective at mitigating the crisis. If ways of sense-making are to realign with a world in flux, those methods must be equally flexible. Artist and theorist Roy Ascott suggests art objects (and by extension media) should be considered as dynamic systems and not as static entities impervious to change. As he explains, such objects should be historically *behaviorable*, structurally *futurible*, and capable of triggering an effective response.

4. Toward a Behaviorable Media

Behaviorable media embrace change by designing rituals and performances which provide spectators the opportunity to engage physically, emotionally, and conceptually in the process

of knowledge creation. The process is entirely collaborative and individuals are invited to engage in open-ended activities encouraging a diversity of responses. Participants are not set up to win or lose, as in the cognitive model; there are no rewards or punishments, as the situation and the materials are in a state of play. The process is entirely experimental, creating a diversity of practice around which a community may coalesce: a unity of diversity.

Behavior-based practices manifest as *futurible*, alternative renderings which are perhaps the closest analog the *exemplative* has to a materiality. Neither absolute nor uncertain, the *futurible* is in transition and ephemeral, exhibiting continuous change. *Futuribles* are certainly useful and enter into the dialectic, but they don't hang around for long. Once a *futurible* has served its structural purpose, it is happily released back into the wild, at which point one may return to the well of behaviorable practice and fetch another alternative.

The role of the *futurible* is to activate the observer, triggering a behavioral response in which the spectator is once again invited to engage in the physical, emotional, and conceptual work of knowledge creation. The trigger heals the process/material gap and establishes a dualism in which media exist as both object and behavior. Consequently, we need no longer cling to the sanctity of materials or the objects which they comprise. To do so risks building structures which over time calcify and lose their ability to adapt to changes in the environment.

In presenting my experimental work within the context of Higgins and Ascott, I am attempting to breach the topic of materiality, endeavoring to expand my understanding of media and personalize its position and import within my own creative practice. The crisis emerging (the emergency) we face as a species is, to my mind, the product of our inability to engage in open-ended processes of knowledge creation. We seem to be stuck in the apocryphal insanity of doing the same thing over and over again and expecting the same result. What

exemplative processes such as Twittage demonstrate is that in a complex system such as the Twitter platform, we can do the same thing over and over again and *not* arrive at the same result.

As we extricate ourselves from the current crisis we occupy here at the beginning of the 21st century, we might consider a new agility in our mediation and understanding of the situation. It is not that the universe is growing increasingly complex—it always has been—rather, what is changing is our understanding of that complexity and the precariousness of existence. Behaviorable practices, exemplative in nature, allow for flexible approaches to knowing, methods which can adjust to the ever-shifting topography of a complex dilemma. The results of such a practice, futuribles, are not sacrosanct materials to cling to, but merely intermediate elements which can be modified when need be or entirely abandoned when their use is no longer deemed necessary. If we accept that the universe is in transition, then our materials, media, and artifacts are equally insecure. Consequently, we may come to realize that true security is not to be found in avoiding change, but in embracing behaviors and processes that promote it.

Works Cited

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Jason E. Geistweidt is a trans-disciplinary artist working at the nexus of music technology, physical computing, creative coding, networked systems, digital fabrication, interactive installation, and performance. Grounding his research is the use of purpose-built computational tools and systems for generating media via procedural, yet aleatoric or otherwise chance methodologies (www.geistweidt.com). Conceptually his work is playing with ideas of control, intention, and expectation within the creative process. His approach is experimental and works to interconnect disparate systems in a desire to make the intangible—data, networks, computation, and the like—tangible through their transduction into objects, events, and experiences. Geistweidt holds a PhD in Music Composition from the Sonic Arts Research Center (SARC), Queen's University Belfast, as well as a Master of Arts in Music Technology from the University of Limerick. He is an assistant professor in the Department of Media Study at SUNY Buffalo, coordinating the activities of the Extensible Media Lab. Email: jasongei@buffalo.edu.