

# MAST

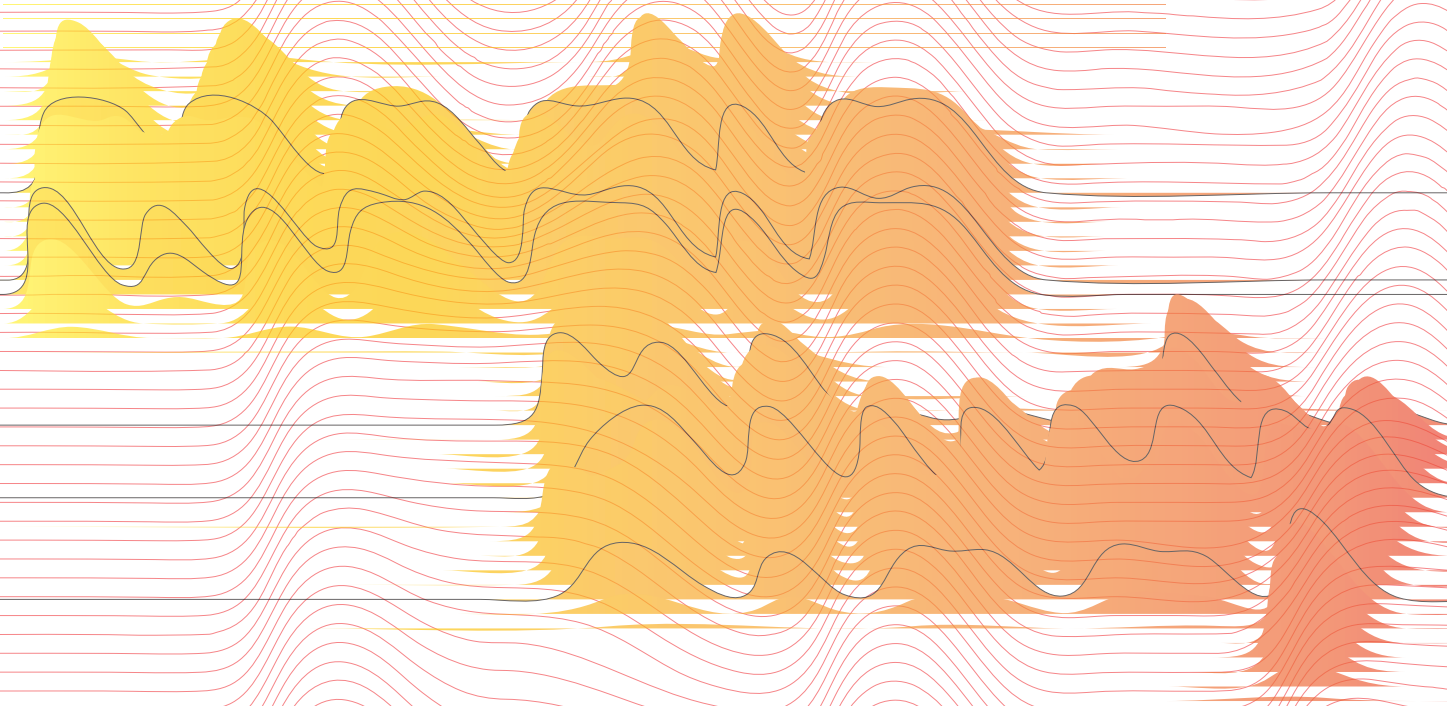
## The Journal of Media Art Study and Theory

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Inaugural issue:

### Mapping Media Studies

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# MAST

## The Journal of Media Art Study and Theory

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Mani Mehrvarz (University at Buffalo)

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## **Aims and Scope**

*MAST* is an online, open-access, and double-blind peer-reviewed journal featuring interdisciplinary scholarship in the domain of media studies. *MAST* stands for “Media Art, Study and Theory” and aims to publish and promote innovative research, writings, and works by artists and scholars who present new methods, approaches, questions, and researches in the field of media studies in theory and practice. The journal is relevant to academics, artists, researchers, theorists, and art curators with an interest in artistic research, theory, and praxis of media, introducing works that demonstrate creative engagements with current debates in media studies. *MAST* is housed in and sponsored by NeMLA (The Northeast Modern Language Association) at the University at Buffalo, State University of New York. *MAST* issues are published digitally twice a year (Spring and Fall).

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# Editorial Introduction

**Maryam Muliaee and Mani Mehrvarz**

University at Buffalo

As we write this introduction for the inaugural issue of *MAST*, the world is facing a critical situation with the spread of a novel coronavirus and a pandemic, like fiction that has suddenly become too real. Various computer-generated colorful representations of the virus are available everywhere, circulating quickly on all social media platforms, gaining control of the media, and inventing new discourses through the vast and diverse psycho-socio-political responses provoked all over the world. One could argue that this situation is distinct from past cases because no historical pandemic has ever been experienced alongside the kind of hegemony today's social media commands. Nevertheless, now is the moment, we feel, when rethinking and re-defining the field of media studies seems to make the most sense, because everything appears to be so much more tangibly connected to and dictated by the bodies of media today.

The idea of founding *MAST: A Journal of Media Art, Study and Theory* dedicated to interdisciplinary work, was initially fueled by the following motivation: we knew that if media studies in all its forms of hybrid, creative, and queer research models is going to be recognized as contributing to knowledge and humanity, it must be given more platforms and diverse hubs in order to reach beyond its specific contexts and extend to a wider audience. Indeed, despite

the proliferation of interdisciplinary media studies on the one hand, and of PhD programs focused on practice-based research models on the other, there have been relatively few platforms for exhibiting, publishing, and promoting new forms of work and research.

More specifically, we realized the critical need for such a journal over the last five years, while we were conducting research in the Department of Media Study at the University at Buffalo—one of the unique, pioneering, practice-based PhD programs in the country. We were working on a project focused on the history of avant-garde media art and study in Buffalo, the work, pedagogy, and research methods of artists such as Steina and Woody Vasulka, Hollis Frampton, Tony Conrad, Paul Sharits, among others. These were the innovators who helped develop “Media Study” for the next hybrid generation of artist-scholars working in an academic context and who built methodologies for how both media practice and research could come into balance. During that time, we realized that when we wanted to present our work or publish our research projects, there was a scarcity of journals on interdisciplinary media scholarship, including practice-based studies. The need to expand new spaces for dialogue and intellectual exchange was pressing, especially for media studies which was so heavily determined by experimentation and individual practice. We knew then and there that there was a gap in the field and that a journal was needed. Hence, here we are.

The texts in this collection have been written in response to a few questions, which we asked and to which the invited authors responded. What does media studies mean or do, today? What kind of paradigms, discourses, and knowledges can a potential and porous field like media studies offer? The questions invoked a multiplicity of rich and inspiring responses. Media are complex systems that can be studied from various perspectives and that are approached with a variety of methods and techniques; this multiplicity is important for the

meanings, impacts, and results that media studies can engender in communities, whether academic, public, or private. In this sense, the authors in this issue have addressed the above questions from their own personal experiences, methods, and methodologies, based on their past or current research or art projects. The responses are hybrid, ranging from various accounts on mediation, artistic uses of technology, and the discussions of the key concepts and mixed methods in media studies. With this series, we intend to highlight some of the possible directions and likely orientations that this journal will take in the future.

In particular, the field of media studies is expanding beyond its former bounds, to now include not just content but the complex networks, mechanisms, and processes within which messages are transmitted. Media studies is now a “transversal” or “transdisciplinary” field, as Jussi Parikka has argued: “The best way for media studies to really make sense is to think outside of media—of where it expands, takes us, if we persistently follow its lead” (Parikka). To follow this framing, we consider the performative, transformative, and empirical aspects of the field as fundamental because media studies goes beyond limited borders determined only by analytical, theoretical, or research-oriented scholarship. If media studies is defined as a diverse range of practices within media, then it becomes what Kirsten Ostherr calls “applied media study,” a dynamic field that can creatively “intervene in production and consumption that characterize our always-on, always-connected, screen-oriented lives,” bringing in “new strategies” for future research, practice, and teaching (Ostherr 3). This way, media studies is becoming truly multi-disciplinary and international.

“After all, there is nothing real outside our perception of reality, is there? You can see that, can't you?” The question Prof. Brian O'Blivion once asked in the 1983 science fiction film *Videodrome* is a fundamental question that splits off into multiple other speculations regarding



our current realities on- and off-screen. What is real? This question once seemed to be a perpetual major concern of philosophy, but now, the field of media studies has ventured to deal with it as well. From the experience of the illusion of motion in phenakistoscope to the representation of the black hole with the Event Horizon Telescope (EHT), from sense-making machines to non-sensed materialities, media transformed from image to illusion, from texts to numbers in infinite circulations where fact and fiction have the same origins over and over again. Simultaneously, media are transforming our perception of reality as well.

We hope that by launching a media studies journal dedicated to hybrid models and nontraditional approaches to media—with a focus on both art practice and theory, we will be able to make a true contribution to the field. When we began inviting colleagues from across the world to join the *MAST* advisory board—a list of distinguished academics, authors, scholars and practitioners whose works have been inspirational to so many in the field—we received nothing but delighted and encouraging responses that made us ever more determined, enthusiastic, and hopeful. We are deeply grateful and indebted to every single one of our contributors. This acknowledgment would not be complete, however, without recognizing that this journal would not have happened without the invaluable help, encouragement, and enthusiastic support of our mentor, Carine Mardorossian, a former chair of the University of Buffalo's Department of Media Study and the executive director of NeMLA, whose experience, insight, and co-operation—and, most importantly, trust—helped us from the beginning until this moment in the actualization of this journal.

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# Media Philosophy

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At the start of 2012, I moved to Glasgow. I had been working as a post-doc at the University of New South Wales in the iCinema Research Centre, writing *Time and the Digital* and helping out on various research projects that the Centre was working on. Like most research positions, this one was extraordinarily enriching, challenging and ultimately, time-limited. In 2012, as my contract was coming to an end, I moved from Sydney to Glasgow to take up a permanent lecturing post at the University of Glasgow. Now, I'm not delusional enough to think that readers of this short essay, looking to get an idea of my own framing of media studies, are completely interested in the biographical details of these early stages in my career. But I mention my relocation because it had a significant impact on my intellectual work. I had always been interested in the philosophy of Gilles Deleuze (a product of an Australian tertiary education in the Arts), particularly in the opportunities that he offered to think about process philosophy and the way that he could be used to re-vitalise the work of A.N. Whitehead. This was my first book, a synthesis of Whitehead and Deleuze that offered me new ways to talk about interactive media and digital aesthetics. To my mind, two particular contributions came from the book. One was the concept of *multi-temporality* and one was the concept of *the condition of userness*. The process that I was most interested in describing in the

book was the process of interaction between a user and an image-making machine. This book was still very much focussed on aesthetics and experiences of interaction.

After moving to Glasgow and taking up a post in the Film and Television Studies department, something changed. I was still interested in process philosophy but I became much more interested in the actual workings of the technical apparatus than Deleuze's transcendental empiricism (one might say this was natural, with Glasgow being the home of the *Screen* journal, which has of course made massive contributions to apparatus theory).

This began to signal a shift in my work towards media archaeology, whilst still retaining the style of thought needed to do process philosophy. Of course, I was unusual in the department, a type of 'joker in the pack'. After all, I was hired for a new post as a lecturer in digital media, not in film and television studies, and I was repeatedly told that my role was to 'shake things up'. While my colleagues at Glasgow remained interested in close textual analysis and to some degree hermeneutics, producing what in my eyes were brilliant readings of films and television programmes that were nonetheless beyond me, I was given free reign to try and look at different ways to study technical images, focusing on the actual workings of media and, in full accord with my background in Whitehead, Deleuze and process philosophy, trying to explore the way that technical processes might be seen to provide the *conditions for the possibility of experience*. This trajectory found its resolution in my second book *Against Transmission*.

The concept of the condition of userness is one that underpins most of the work that I have done in media studies. It represents a way of thinking about the 'user' or the subject in a way that focuses on the condition for their emergence, rather than the figure of 'the user' or 'the subject' as an already constituted thing. The formulation of this concept largely comes

from my explorations of Deleuze's work, which gave me a way of talking about process and experience without recourse to a subject or a consciousness that is at the centre of experience. Instead, the condition of userness is a way to talk about the conditions for possibility that are set up in the interactive encounter for the *expression* of a user, as an identity that is produced by the encounter, rather than a figure whose identity is exterior or prior to a process of mediation. This follows fairly closely Deleuze's ideas of actualization, where 'bodies' (in this case the 'user') are like the solution to a problem: they emerge from the plane of the virtual, which could be thought of as ideal events embedded in the conditions for the problem (Deleuze 237). This idea also took form because of my interpretation of Whitehead's (1985) thoughts on prehension, his arguments about the subject-superject and the becoming of actual entities, which again offers a way, like Deleuze, to avoid the phenomenological recourse to an experiencing subject at the centre of the world of process. Instead, in this model, it is the conditions for interaction that are at the center. This then offers a new way to think about media studies and indeed the philosophy of technology by focusing on the conditions of possibility, without reifying technology itself.

Likewise the concept of multi-temporality has framed my approach to media studies. We have known at least since Harold A. Innis and then Marshall McLuhan and Friedrich Kittler that media are designed not only to overcome time, but also to produce temporalities. Print, as McLuhan (1962) argued, structured a particular linear version of time, as events appeared as though words on a page, read from start to end. Television and what McLuhan called the new electronic environments produced a different type of time, expressed as aural rather than visual information, coming from different locations all at once. This was a space thick with information, rather than that expressed by a line. Kittler then extends McLuhan,

opening up new avenues for media philosophy with his work in *Discourse Networks* and *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter* where the conditions for the possibility of discourse were linked to technical realities. And of course since then, with the emergence of faster and faster computing power, networked international markets and the everydayness of computing, many people have argued that the time of the contemporary moment is accelerating, as though we are all locked in one type of computationally effected temporality. One of the drivers behind my research has been an unease that I have felt with this description of a mono-temporality that is meant to pervade global society. The concept of multi-temporalities was my attempt at providing a way to get around this. Mostly adapted from Michel Serres's philosophy, this concept allowed me to look at the multiple times produced by media as a type of scalar version of the present moment (Serres 1995; 1983/2015), rather than one focused on one, homogenous time that is thought to define 'digital culture'. In short, the concept of multi-temporalities allows me to explore the way that people might live in multiple types of time simultaneously, to explore how the contemporary moment is made up of multiple, often conflicting histories, and to examine the way media produces the multiple through their technical operation of transmission and storage routines.

What then is media philosophy (the title of this essay but something that I have yet to mention). Rather than delivering a theory of the media, media philosophy establishes the conditions for reflection on the technology of media. Media philosophy finds its place beyond media theory by conducting an exploration of media that asks: what are the fundamental concepts and experiences produced by the technical infrastructure of the media apparatus? What are the epistemological effects of transduction, transmission and storage? What are the conditions in-between human subjects and technical media that give form to both objects and

experiences? Just as philosophers of language argue for a rigorous investigation into the conditions for meaning and the relationship between language and reality, a philosophy of media, looks to the medial conditions for life in describing experience in this in-between constantly mediated and technical universe. Instead of language and semiotics, which proved so valuable both to structuralist visions of the world and its reformulation in post-structuralism, media philosophy looks to technical codes, operability and data processing and storage routines. Media philosophy thus makes the transition from semiotics to the ‘media-technical time event’ (Ernst 173).

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# Three Moments on Mediation

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2007: Lexus airs a series of ads featuring famous musicians as figureheads for the digital sound imaging feature of their Mark Levinson sound system. In [one of these ads](#), jazz musician Diana Krall sits in the driver's seat of a Lexus, discussing the transformative experience of hearing pianist Oscar Peterson perform when she was a teenager in Vancouver.

As Peterson's version of the classic blues "Night Train" plays, somewhere between diegetic and nondiegetic sound, the ad's onscreen text describes the Levinson system as "music you can see," and Krall recalls how she was "completely blown away," moved by the song to this day "to the point where [she] can't express it, except on the piano."

There's a great deal to be said about this ad as an object of media study, about how it interweaves questions of art, technology, gender, and capitalism. Yet, since I first saw it air, I have been drawn to it more for the theory of media study it advances in both its onscreen text and Krall's reflections, a theory based on uneven mediations and productive incompatibilities. At stake in such an approach is not just the question of remediation as theorized by Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, foundational as that theory may be, but rather a question of what happens to remediation when it becomes marked by excess. What does it mean to *see* music,

especially music produced through a high-end digital sound system? What might we glean from the incompatibility of such an interpretive approach? What does it mean to be so overloaded—by emotion, by music, by information—that one can only express oneself nonverbally? And what possibilities—if any—are there for expressing such an overload through the verbal and the textual registers of scholarly media study?

2003: In *Dark Fiber*, Geert Lovink writes, “‘Media’ still refers to information, communication, and black boxes, not to pure mediation straight into the body. Media, almost by definition, are about filters, switches, technical limitations, silly simulations, and heartless representations” (23). Lovink’s conception of media raises another series of generative questions for media study: how might scholars represent media’s “heartless representations?” What are the moments where our critical ability to discuss media technologies bends and breaks, and what productive moments and modes of critical engagement might we find in those bendings and breakings? Where might we see common ground between the interpretive practices of media poetics and the anti-hermeneutics of media archaeology, between human and posthuman materialities? Lovink asks us to reach into the black box of mediation, to attempt an interpretive reckoning with archives, artifacts, and processes that we already know we cannot fathom.

Jorge Luis Borges stands as a productive avatar for this theoretical work. But not the Borges of “The Garden of Forking Paths,” so often cited as a forerunner of hypertextuality and nonlinear digital narrative—rather, the Borges of “The Library of Babel” and “Funes the Memorious,” wrestling with archival excess and the complex ways in which information and inscription have always already had posthuman dimensions. These dimensions are increasingly urgent in our current moment of global mediation and information overload: where does our

media—posts, streams, vibrations, devices, metals—come from, and where does it go? At one level, this is a question of discursive and material sourcing, of network circulation and supply chain analysis, of geopolitical and ecological ethics. But when we approach those questions at scale, they also become ontological and existential: how do we open up the black box once we realize we are inside of it, when the map has become the territory?

1998: The electronic music group Boards of Canada releases their first full-length album, *Music Has the Right to Children*. A foundational work in the genre, *Music* is deeply concerned with media history and analog technology in both its modes of production and its thematic content. Track four, “[Telephasic Workshop](#),” is for me what Peterson’s “Night Train” is for Krall.

With almost no actual words, “Telephasic Workshop” says almost everything about media and media study that I work to say in my research, asking questions that I can only answer at a slant, by taking up other texts, technologies, artifacts. If you listen closely, you can hear the lost histories of media threaded through the track—not just the analog sound production and the 1970s filmstrip aesthetic often cited as touchpoints for group’s work, but also the record-scratching, proto-hip-hop robotics of Herbie Hancock’s “Rockit,” the out-of-time body segmentation of early breakdancing, the cyberpunk elegy of Ridley Scott’s *Blade Runner*. Its voices—chopped, manipulated, and looped in and out of phase—are somehow nonvocal, indexical, geometric, interlocking with one another and with the song’s synthesized rhythm and melody. It frames sonic poetics as media archaeology, the sound of what happens when machines and bodies talk to one another in a kind of shared, kludged language, intermingling and taking each other’s places in space and time.

I approach media study not as an attempt to describe indescribable media, but rather as an attempt to describe the indescribability of media: to articulate texts, operations, and archives that are (or at least seem) outside of the human, but that nonetheless bear deeply upon the shape of the human in the early twenty-first century. Media study maps the blank space of the black box we find ourselves in.

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# Machines/Environments

Ina Blom

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To outline the significance and potential of media studies today is, in many ways, to address an endless field. It is hard to think of areas within the humanities that would not, in one way or other, be touched by perspectives on media, mediation, technologies, formats and infrastructures. And with increasing attention to the fact that *a medium must mean but be*—as outlined in John Durham Peter’s work on the elemental or existential of water, clouds, fire and stars—media studies could be seen as a lens to study the modes and materialities of connection at stake in all possible forms of relation, across all forms of being.

My own approach seems to waver between approaches that explicitly draw on such wider, environmental or existential takes on media—as seen in a number of artistic practices that address situations of mediation in more indirect, hidden or abstract ways—and a more focused preoccupation with the ingression of specific machines and technologies in the sphere of 20th- and 21st-century art and their ramification for aesthetic-political practice and thinking (Blom 2016, 2017). In the latter case, I am particularly interested in the way in which technologies of memory often tend to produce alternative social ontologies within the expanded field of art practice—a technologically informed take on the forms of social reflexivity that play such an important role in modern and contemporary art. If we agree with

Émile Durkheim that society *is* memory, significant changes in the available technologies of memory must necessarily also affect the definition of the social itself, including the sociality explored in a number of art practices. As the effects of the dynamic, “living” memory of analog video expanded across art practices in the 1960s and 1970s, it became possible to trace the way in which a concept of social memory based on a conflation of memory with storage (or forms of inscription that remain relatively stable over time) was replaced by an understanding of memory as temporal events geared towards the future and defined by difference and repetition.<sup>1</sup> Yet, paying attention to the genuinely time-producing forces of a memory technology such as analog video also meant that video could no longer be approached, wholesale, as “a” medium. It was, more precisely, a rapidly evolving set of machines, components and affordances that produced a number of different instances of sociality or collectivity in or through the work of different artists and activists—forms that could not be subsumed under any one master theory. These are, to follow Gilbert Simondon’s philosophy of technical objects, the concretizations or individuations of a memory technology “using” the contexts of art as an associated milieu in which its own capacities—and particularly those kept in check by the strictures of the broadcasting institutions—can unfold. For this type of research perspective, the type of operative and diagrammatically-oriented media archaeography outlined in the work of Wolfgang Ernst becomes useful, focusing as it does on the active inscriptions of machine realities that cannot simply be reduced to the standardized operating

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<sup>1</sup> See Durkheim’s discussion of the way in which shared memory of the past confers collective identity in *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, as well as Maurice Halbwachs’s description of the relative stability of the material frameworks of collective memory in *On Collective Memory*. A very different account of the temporalities of collective memory appear in Maurizio Lazzarato’s discussion of Gabriel Tarde’s monadological approach to sociology: this again provides the basis for tracing the new forms of social reflexivity that unfolds alongside of new and dynamic technologies of memory (Blom, “Introduction” in *Memory in Motion*)

systems supporting familiar cultural interfaces based on iconographic, theatrical, literary or journalistic modes of presentation and interaction. Yet, versus the tendency of this approach to eschew all references to sociality so as to focus on the features of machine hardware operating at speeds incompatible with human perception must also be countered: what counts is the wider relational matrices instigated by such microtemporal and time-producing forms of agency.

There is, of course, no clear-cut distinction between this machine-oriented approach in the more limited sense of the term and the wider environmental perspectives outlined initially: The connection between memory technologies and social ontologies obviously alert us to the existential vectors of media, rather than their communications and significations. Yet, from an art historical perspective, I am specifically interested in the more vague or indirect approaches to modern media technologies that can found throughout 20th- and 21st-century art, practices that “think” and enact technologically inflected scenarios without necessarily using the technologies in question in the works themselves. Freed from the overarching focus on the typical productions or communications of a given medium or format, the circuitous strategies of such works often tend to draw attention to unthought ramifications of specific media and their less-evident social, political and aesthetic powers. To give a brief example, I am currently interested in the ways in which certain recurrent figures in 20th- and 21st-century art seem to work around a distinct infrastructural sensibility, more specifically, a sensibility oriented toward the new infrastructures of sensing that emerged in embryonic form in the technomathematical approaches to human perception and sensation that first appeared in late 19th-century psychophysics and that was developed into a more full scale project with the emergence of cognitive and affective computing in the late 1950s (Blom, 2019). Revolving

around the recurring artistic phenomenon of straight lines geared towards topological continuities rather than formalist construction, this scenario seems, among other things, to be closely associated with the type of withdrawing or disappearing works produced in and around the international Fluxus network in the early 1960s, works that seem to exist in a realm *beyond* emphatic media and their various ways of drawing attention. Existing, like much infrastructure, at the level of the rarely seen and barely perceived, the works in question signal their complicity with the new technologies of late capitalism – the electronic networks whose radical extension of mathematical rationality into sensorial realms might generate not just limit modes of bodily existence, but also an attunement to the many different ways in which infrastructures, as Lauren Berlant (394) points out, bind us to the world in movement and keeps the world practically bound to itself.

Working along the fault line between new modes of artistic abstraction and the realm of technopolitical development, it could be a way of addressing aspects of the *practical* abstraction that Alberto Toscano sees as the key mark of social life under capitalism.

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# Building a more Infrastructural Media Studies

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This inaugural issue of *MAST* provides new opportunities to shape what media studies does and what it includes. The editorial board consists of an amazing group of artists and academics who work on everything from urban media to haptic media. What I will be arguing here is that we should not forget the infrastructures. As Susan Leigh Star pointed out more than two decades ago, infrastructures are often the boring things of everyday life (Star). They are the cables, the electricity, the policy documents, and so on that hold everything together. Media technologies are not impactful without that glue, and I hope future research in this journal can examine and theorize how our infrastructures of communication play a major role in everything from artistic practice to social justice to relationship maintenance.

My own approach to media studies has shifted over the years to reflect this new consideration. Back in the early 2010s, when I was finishing my dissertation about the mobile application *Foursquare*, I focused on what was clearly a form of media: a mobile social media application. I looked at media as artifacts that people use to build ties in relationships, and social media were particularly interesting because they broke down the mass media/personal media dichotomy that had been so influential in media studies (Baym). Traditionally, media

studies often separated media into one-to-many forms (i.e. mass media like newspaper) or one-to-one forms (i.e. personal media like letter writing or face-to-face communication). Social media did not fit that model. Social media like *Facebook*, *Foursquare*, *Twitter* and so forth were not mass in the traditional sense, but neither were they one-to-one because they let people share with much larger networks.

My more recent work in media studies, however, has departed significantly from the traditional focus of media studies. I still study mobile media in a sense, but I often do so by focusing on the infrastructures that enable mediated experiences rather than the media themselves. My second book combined the two approaches by looking at traditional media (e.g. mobile apps) but also the infrastructures (e.g. cellular networks, Wifi, and GPS) that enabled those media forms to work as they did (Frith, *Smartphone as Locative Media*). My third book was even more of a departure and examined Radio Frequency Identification (RFID) technologies as what I argued was a core infrastructure of identification for the Internet of Things (Frith, *A Billion Little Pieces: RFID and Infrastructures of Identification*). That book examined what I called object communication, but it did so by specifically analyzing infrastructures. And here is where I want to make my contribution to this important first issue of *MAST*: I want to argue that the study of infrastructure should be a key part of media art and theory going forward.

Media studies has fairly recently begun to look more and more at the technical infrastructures that make media possible (Starosielski; Parks and Starosielski). Possibly the leader in pushing in that direction has been Lisa Parks, whose populist approach to infrastructure “emphasizes how people come to access, imagine, and understand infrastructures, not only by demystifying their seamless operation in everyday life, but also by

understanding them as material forms—sites, nodes, parts, pieces, objects to be seen, engaged with, handled, felt, and investigated” (Parks 64). In other words, an infrastructural approach to media involves researching the hardware and software that make media possible. Drawing from the transdisciplinary field of infrastructure studies, it involves studying the mundane and making the invisible visible. Doing that work can push us outside our comfort zones as humanists and social scientists, but I argue it is necessary work for media studies going forward.

An infrastructural approach to media involves looking beneath the interfaces that are the more typical focus in the humanities and social sciences. It involves asking how things work and what types of communication or artworks are enabled or constrained by everything from hardware to software to cultural economics. Additionally, an infrastructural approach complicates what we even mean by media. It requires looking at larger networks and viewing the interfaces and information we interact with as the tip of a very large iceberg that involves everything from software to internet cables all the way down to electricity and radio waves. And beyond the “hard” infrastructures of materiality, an infrastructural approach to media can also involve diving into how companies license APIs to grant access to data, how startups are purchased to strengthen data infrastructures, and so forth (Wilken).

Infrastructures are built not to be noticed, to fade into the background of our everyday life, but they constrain and enable in consequential ways; they contain biases that influence who can communicate and move freely and who cannot (Graham and Marvin). As John Durham Peters said, “Whatever else modernity is, it is a proliferation of infrastructures” (Peters 31). This new journal has an opportunity to both theorize and expose through practice

the importance of uncovering how those infrastructures shape the media that are so essential to how people live their lives.

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# Practicing Theory

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*I've been through the desert on a horse with no name*

*It felt good to be out of the rain*

*In the desert you can't remember your name*

*'Cause there ain't no one for to give you no pain*

—America

As a practitioner, I have always framed Media Study as an *everything space*, an oasis of possibility where the exploration of new ways for seeing and making our world—new connections, filters, and perspectives—are prototyped, tested, cultivated, and perhaps most importantly, *encouraged*. As media makers, we find ourselves engaged in a discipline of manifesting space and time, a practice firmly grounded in the Humanities—the investigation and consideration of our collective experience. Though *media* once implicated the specific material being utilized, in the ever-expanding field of *cultural production*, we find this material could be just about anything, with the discipline providing no preference or prescription.

In contrast to platforms such as Film, Dance, Music, English, and the like—Media Study remains delightfully agnostic, failing to lay claim to any one practice or genre, such that free-ranging representatives from across the Humanities and Sciences find solace within its *communitas*. Simply put, it is the *discipline of interdisciplinarity*, truly the purview of the generalist, the one who is open to tinkering across a wide spectrum of traditions and technologies, willing to look beyond the *known knowns*—to glance obliquely at *known unknowns*—in the hope of catching sight of the exquisite *unknown unknowns*. Poised at the precipice—staring into the abyss—the practitioners of Media Study look back only to confirm they are moving forward. Blatantly ignoring the admonishment of putting old wine into new wineskins, *we come to renew culture itself*.

Dick Higgins acknowledged as much in 1965 when he coined *intermedia* to describe those innovative practices that fell in between traditional genres or disciplines, works which manifest when two or more genres were “fused conceptually.” Higgins, awash in the unrest of the 60s, was looking to break with “venerable” terms such as *mixed-media*, which merely described works executed in more than one material. Further, he wished to democratize the “specialist” language being raised around the works of the *avant-garde*, believing “one wanted to know well the art of one's time . . . without the interventions of history and historical judgments.” To my mind, Higgins’ *intermedia* is *the business of Media Study*, that is the tearing down of the manufactured walls between academic disciplines, exploring the in-between spaces through purposeful play. In our practice-based research, we do not seek practical answers—we are not doing sums here—or even desire to formalize arguments—it is much too early for that. Rather, we are working to position ourselves to discover a more personal knowledge—a *way of knowing*—that is encountered *in the moment itself*.

In my play, this manifests as a process-driven practice that is open and indeterminate, an approach which aims to mediate between systems of *intention* and *intuition*. The majority of my tools are computational in nature, and it is through code that my students and I manifest reality. From a state of *tabula rasa*—the empty text editor, null areas of memory, or the open switch—we start to rough out an *intentional space*: first a few variables, feeding minor calculations, evolving into major functions—instantiating an environment of procedures and interconnections. This is our opening salvo into conceiving a world. Logical, structured, and left-brained, we deliberately place objects in opposition to one another—constructing hierarchies, pathways, and architectures which will give way to structures, procedures, and forms. We compile and run, transitioning into *intuitive space*, calling upon our capacities to evaluate *what is happening*—encountering the actualized, unintended, and unforeseen—followed by the *oh-that’s-cool-let’s-do-more-of-that* stage of the process and the *what-if* and *let’s-try-this* moments. Haphazard, instinctive, and incredibly right-brained, we are throwing things up to see what sticks—and when they do, we return to intentionally fix the intuitive through purposeful code. And so it goes, this modulation between *intention* and *intuition*—the back and forth between the practical and the instinctual, forming a liminal space where cultural innovation and transformation may emerge from the crucible that is the practice of Media Study.

But *how did we get here*, and perhaps more importantly, once we leave, *how do we get back*?

I often tell my students that there is no greater strength in the world than realizing you have no earthly idea what you are doing, reminding them that *what* they are doing is far less important than the fact that they are *doing* it. Which is to say that *process* and the *pursuit of*



*daily practice* will inevitably lead to *something*—an object, event, or idea—one just needs to keep hacking away at it. As I remind them, as well as myself, *the more you do it, the better it gets*. Such an approach requires an act of faith, a trust in one's own intuition and experience—and for the practitioner, a willingness to approach every project as an experiment, an expedition into unexplored territory. As we traverse the landscape, we begin to map our practice, defining patterns and procedures, noting the topography of what works for us and what does not. As preferences develop, *theories of practice* begin to emerge—principles which help us along the way as we continue moving forward—though we may not know, as of yet, where we are going. Though these findings may be universal, in their initial state they are realized as singular personal revelations, a way of knowing the world, a *practicing theory*.

Have we been here before?

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# Pas de chemin, pas de ligne

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The question of what it means to study media—what this undisciplined field can do—is, for me, bound up with questions of history, including my *own* history. I did not begin as a student of media, and I did not receive a degree in it. (There were not many places to get a degree in it.) As an undergraduate, I studied comparative literature in a department profoundly influenced by debates in post-structuralism, psychoanalysis, and trauma studies. Of course, I did not know *all that* then, could not name the frameworks that worked upon me and shaped the syllabi I studied, and did not quite grasp how my training was embedded—and would embed me—in certain histories of thought that continue to inform how I encounter and interpret texts and images.

Back then, I remember reading Marguerite Duras's *L'Amant* (*The Lover*), a story about a life that “does not exist,” in part, because a photograph was never taken. The image is missing and yet it persists. Duras writes: “So, I’m fifteen and a half. It’s on a ferry crossing the Mekong River. The image lasts all the way across” (5). The crossing is experienced as a photograph and yet no evidence of the experience remains. It is a traumatic structure and a photographic one: a missed encounter, a moment that irreparably splits in two (what was and

what could have been). Duras pursues the absence, fills it in with language. She writes the photograph that was never taken, remembers it as best she can in words. But the untaken photograph she remembers—the image that she writes—is really a *film*. After all, if the image had been taken, it would have lasted “all the way across” the river.

In this way, as a student of literature many years ago, the boundaries of writing immediately gave way to other modes of representation (photography, cinema) and to a comparative thinking about media as much as about languages. I followed Duras from *L'Amant* to her other novels, her works of theater, her enigmatic short essays and photographic albums, and her expansive, durational cinema. The compulsive effort to re-present—to recall a childhood and mark the phenomenon of forgetting it—extends across her entire body of work. Images appear and re-appear, over and again, in different textual and visual formations. I came to understand photomechanical technology not only as a part of how time and memory are structured in her works but also as foundational to her own iterative process of rewritings, adaptations, and resuscitations. Each medium seemed to preserve and annihilate in its own distinct way. Looking back, Duras was the first media theorist I ever read.

Like any origin story, this one likely cannot be trusted. From time to time, I remember passages from Duras's books, and scenes from her films. I am sure that I misremember them too, and what they really meant for me at the moment of our first encounter.

But the question of what media communicates to us about history—how it structures our relationship to history, both what we remember and what we necessarily forget—continues to underpin my research and my relationship to the field. In my own work, media studies is the interstitial space for thinking comparatively about the historicity of representational technologies, their particular indexical and deictic structures, the archives that they make

possible, and the historical methodologies that they constitute and destabilize. In keeping with certain of my post-structural inheritances, I am interested in how technology always exceeds the secondary or seemingly passive processes of preservation and storage; I am concerned with how particular media formations *act* upon history, determine our experiences of it in the first instance. Each technology has its own historical epistemology.

I used to think that Derrida's insistence that "portable tape recorders, computers, printers, faxes, televisions, teleconferences, and above all E-mail" would have radically transformed psychoanalysis had the technology been around for Freud was a wonderfully unintentional accounting of media obsolescence and a wild misreading of the powers of email. And then, a few weeks ago, I was searching for an innocuous word among my thousands of emails and twelve forgotten messages from my dead father returned to me. Technology forgets and remembers, archives and acts and makes you grieve. In any case, I wrote him back.

I am at the beginning of a new project now, less film-centric than the last. I am thinking about the ways that contemporary visual media, from drone images of climate change to the reanimating visions of artificial neural networks, function as historical artifacts despite their seeming lack of artifactual authority. Arguments about what the digital is and how it means have long emphasized its separation from the historical privileges, physical "thereness," and evidentiary seriousness of the analog image. This distinction no longer seems to hold. What is perhaps most puzzling about these images is that they mimic the *affective structures* (e.g., melancholy, mourning, spectrality, loss) that we have tended to associate with the analog index. In turn, I wonder how these digital images might compel us to imagine histories and catastrophes to come, how they might engage us in a work of mourning for a species or a planet (rather than, say, a family member), and, most importantly, how these images might

reshape the definitions that define twentieth-century visuality. What, in the end, separates analog and digital images if they generate the same phenomenal experience of history?

That academic research is always personal is something of a psychoanalytic cliché. The cliché holds for me if we accept that personal histories are always contingent, like a book assigned in a class you were never meant to take, and a death that arrived without warning at the end of a wondrous summer. For me, Media Studies is the field that helps make sense of the ways that we experience those contingencies, how we are forced to remember, and forget them.

*For SBG*

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# An Alternative to Facts

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In a January 22, 2017 interview on NBC's *Meet the Press*, Kellyanne Conway, senior advisor to President Donald Trump, introduced a phrase that would gain almost instant notoriety. Conway was responding to the heavy criticisms of White House Press Secretary Sean Spicer's claims that the crowd in attendance for the 2017 presidential inauguration "was the largest audience to ever witness an inauguration—period" (Hunt). When Chuck Todd, the moderator of the program, accused the day-old administration of putting out a "provable falsehood," Conway's parry and riposte was that what had been offered were not untruths, but "alternative facts" (*Meet the Press*, NBC News). The alternate rhetorical universe of skepticism about the media (and mediation) that this coinage inaugurated has had an implausibly long after-life with even more implausible consequences. Popular language about visual media in particular has become possessed by suspicions about boutique facts and deep (and cheap) fakes. What was once self-evident has been consigned to a conspiracy of realism.

Transparency, objectivity, evidence, and fact, all terms that served as clay pigeons for critical theoretical target shooting, are now under fire from a position of power rather than critique. Images have been largely liberated from their referents and the "dream of

verisimilitude,” once the prompt for more sensitive genealogies of media that debunked the supposed convergence of the real and representation, appears like a virtuous fantasy from a simpler time to which we would happily return (Sterne 4).<sup>1</sup> In his post-mortem of the 1968 protests and in response to Hans Magnus Enzensberger’s optimism about the native radicality of electronic media, Jean Baudrillard inveighed against a mass media that had turned “the political” into a “category of *fait divers*” precisely for the sake of depoliticizing politics (283). Through centralized, “vectorized” broadcasts of people marching in the streets, “riots,” and unrest, mass media falsified the clamorous heterogeneity of politics by making it news. The news is now denounced as fake. The question is why this is—rather obviously—not a good thing.

Nostalgia for a reliably untrustworthy mass media signals a crisis in the optimism of negativity. What are artists and theorists of media to do when the mistrust in a belief in unmediated facts that was the trademark of a critical project is now the playbook for state-issued mis-misinformation? Even Theodor Adorno, the brand manager of negativity, knew that “without hope there is no good” (276). Many, however, shared Chuck Todd’s exasperation, believing that the aerial photographs of the inauguration did indeed “tell a very different story,” implying that they documented a reality that was self-evident (Meet the Press 1/22/17). Spicer and Conway, on the other hand, both contended that satellite and overhead images, as well as public transit data from the Washington D.C. WMATA, were rigged by mass media outlets to indicate a lackluster turnout when compared to previous inaugurations.<sup>2</sup> When it

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<sup>1</sup> Sterne’s book is specifically about audio compression, but its insights about dominant techno-progressive beliefs is applicable to all new media.

<sup>2</sup> In the case of transit ridership numbers on the day of the inauguration, there were fewer opportunities for “alternatives” (although attempts at creative counting were certainly made).

came to the images evaluated by crowd scientists that became the conversational flashpoint, their power to define the fact of the event was both certain and up for interpretation. What emerged as a result were two competing, internally discordant beliefs about what images and media more generally do.

The images were seen simultaneously as proof per se of what they depicted. At the same time they were treated as highly manipulable instruments of deception whose truth was tied to protocols of fact production. Of course, in order to believe in the latter, one would also have to believe in the former, as images need to be accorded a special relationship to *the real* in order to worry about their ability to mislead. Conway's "alternative facts," if they can be taken as more than an absurdism, rely on the belief in the unique evidentiary status of "photographic" images and a faith in mass media to capture an external real, while also suggesting that not only could there be multiple, potentially legitimate protocols for creating and reading images, but that those protocols could yield multiple, irreconcilable facts.

Of course, the real problem was that the facts had been chosen in advance of their evidence. Initially, the claim that it was the largest inaugural crowd in history was floated with the proviso that "no one had numbers," only later turning to the images in an attempt to shore up earlier assertions. That the "alternative facts" were not actually constructed from the photographs themselves is perhaps best indicated by the administration's decision to shut down the National Park Service's Twitter account after it retweeted side-by-side images of the 2009 and 2017 crowds, seeking to suppress the very evidence that would become the crux of the eventual argument. Nevertheless, there is a feeling that we want to believe in images and the outlets that disseminate them, if only to have a stable object to critique.



Beyond this bungling sideshow of political legerdemain a new indeterminacy in the status of mediated facts (that is to say, all facts) lurks beneath our desire for faith in them. In October 2019, California passed AB 730, anti-deepfake legislation that bans the distribution of manipulated “image or audio or video recording” of political candidates that “would falsely appear to a reasonable person to be authentic” (California Legislative Information). If such a thing as a “reasonable person” exists, it appears that what it designates is someone with a healthy commitment to the stability of the signifier and signified, image and referent. The bill’s author, Assemblyman Marc Berman, commented that the danger of deepfakes is that they “distort the truth, making it extremely challenging to distinguish real events and actions from fiction and fantasy” (Berman). As we know from *The X-Files*, “the truth is out there,” and images should be legally bound to verifying it without the interference from pesky artificial neural networks. But the real fantasy of such legislation is in its yearning for a long-evaporated ontology of images that trusts pictures to capture rather than produce their truths.

In 1935 Ludwik Fleck, the microbiologist and historian of science credited as the forerunner to Thomas Kuhn, already noted that “both thinking and facts are changeable, if only because changes in thinking manifest themselves in changed facts” (Fleck 50). The forms of mediation from which facts are built have always been procedural in nature. They require a host of changing protocols for producing something like an image, recording, or video, including selections of framing, duration, depth of field, dodging and burning, envelopes, compression, and an infinite array of other technical steps. Deepfakes and alternative facts have simply made the operational nature of the media on which truths rely impossible to ignore. And yet our ontological default setting remains.

This was perhaps best captured in April 2019 when a supernova of stories about the “first image of a blackhole” spread across news outlets. The fuzzy orange donut that supposedly depicts the super massive black hole at the center of the Messier Galaxy 87 is certainly beautiful to look at. But what does it mean to create a picture *of* a black hole? The image was the result of coordinated observations from a global network of telescopes collectively called the Event Horizon Telescope using Very Long Baseline Interferometry (Lutz). Data collected from these many telescopes were then algorithmically sorted and synchronized, after which a visual representation that could be called a “picture” was ultimately assembled. This is an image of a vast series of protocols, not an object. And appropriately, as if a brilliant bit of NASA-funded metacritical media theory, the celestial object to which the image corresponds is definitionally impossible to depict.

In case it requires clarification, I am not creating any kind of equivalence between NASA images and Trump administration press conferences. What I am suggesting is that the politics of media, in practice and theory, is a question of protocols. Our most pressing social, political, and environmental (if these things can truly be separated) exigencies are now defined by representational practices that attempt to capture vast networks of processes through media technical processes that are themselves vast networks. The fakes may have gotten deeper, but the operations from which they arise remain real.

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# Toward a Goal of Inclusive Academic Publishing

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Thinking about the concept of what media studies can do, and how that is manifested through my own research and pedagogy, I am reminded that the more inclusive we can make this field of study (in its many manifestations, subfields, and modes of inquiry), the better we may be able to do the most good within an increasingly media-saturated world, inclusive both in terms of access for scholars at all levels of their career, as well as for students and others who may read our works.

I will share an anecdote from my dissertation defense that I think gets to the heart of this media studies philosophy as it pertains to the inclusiveness (or potential lack thereof) that might sometimes exist within scholarly endeavors. As my defense wrapped up, and just as the euphoria I felt from its being a success was setting in, my dissertation advisor, Dr. Matthew Jordan, said he had one more question (paraphrased here). He asked how I would present these materials to students, or more pointedly to anyone, keeping in mind the goal of increasing their media literacy. I stumbled through an answer that I do not recall, but I never forgot the question because it speaks to the opacity of scholarly works, not just for students but for fellow scholars.

We as media studies scholars, or any scholar for that matter, are rightly told to stand on the shoulders of giants to advance our respective fields. This tenet is reinforced and reified at countless junctures of our academic careers, from graduate studies events like defenses to journal reviews that ensure scholarly continuity and depth. Where this important element of scholarly work can become daunting, and media studies is no exception, is in the cumulative influence over a hundred years of scholarship can have on a beginning researcher, especially when coupled with unequal institution resources and information access.

Some fields and subfields have such a rich history that the list of “must cites” outpaces the ability for the work itself to stand on its own. This ever growing list becomes a veritable minefield for burgeoning scholars as they begin submitting their work to conferences and journals. One never quite knows if the scholar on the other end of a review agrees with your particular constellation of inclusions and exclusions. This concept has been popularized by the “Reviewer #2” Internet meme in which the titular critic inevitably wishes the submitting writer would have written something more closely to what they value in scholarship, regardless of the intent of the actual research. Not only do I think this has the potential to be a moment of exclusion, but it also has the potential to water down the actual research being produced (which is the opposite of the intent to enrich the work through rigorous historical scholarly engagement). There is absolutely no doubt that new research must engage deeply with important connected works that came before it, especially as it pertains to building a stronger foundation to advance a given field, but too often a given citation or line of thought within an article seems placed to serve a specific scholar and not a whole field.

A reciprocal, and equally problematic, dynamic occurs when a scholarly work engages sufficiently with historically important research as a foundation, but lacks in the citation of the

newest works in a given field or subfield. There are many innocent factors that can contribute to this lack of recent scholarly engagement, most notably the sometimes extended publishing timeline that leads to omissions of work released contemporaneously, as well as unequal resource access at various institutions which leads to the omission of newer articles and books that have not yet passed their paywall timetables. In either case, the issue may not lie with the scholarly work itself as much as with structural concerns in academic publishing.

Perhaps, much of this line of thought has to do with my specific chronological positioning within the academic field of media studies, where the predominant feeling at various stages of an article or chapter or even a full manuscript is one of inevitably falling short of capturing the entirety (or even the most relevant) historical research on a given topic. This feeling especially grows when attempting to engage with a topic from interdisciplinary perspectives that compound the concern.

None of this is to say that we should be ahistorical scholars, or that we should be forgiving of works that either refuse to engage with important precursors that directly connect to the topic at hand or that do a poor job of due scholarly diligence. Instead, I think a concerted effort should be made on the part of senior scholars and gatekeepers to recognize the difference between a lack of citations and scholarly engagement that is actually detrimental to the argument being made by the submitting author(s), and a perceived lack of perfunctory citations that do not significantly advance the argument and topic at hand. Many journals (and their constellation of editors and reviewers) do a fantastic job at making this distinction, and I have no doubt that *MAST* will be among those that will do just that. I look forward to helping in my capacity as an advisory board member, and I am excited to see the fascinating issues that will follow.

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# From Media Literacy to Media Archaeology

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I had the honor of serving as chair of the legendary Department of Media Study at the University at Buffalo for a semester. I remember the thrill of knowing that I was treading in the footsteps of colleagues I had admired, who were, like me, English professors. I remember the excitement of finding a home among artists and media scholars for whom practice and theory were both inseparable and fluid. This was the context in which I came to make even more sense of the urgency of moving from media literacy to media archaeology, i.e. from the in-depth analysis of individual media texts to a technological- and material-based perspective in studying media practices and artifacts, past or present.

In light of my training in English studies, it was not surprising that I arrived at the University at Buffalo with a predilection for media literacy or the practice of reading and evaluating “texts” (including film and media) *critically*. In English studies, critical distance and insight go hand in hand, and often take the shape of critical analyses that are informed by a school of thought or theoretical approach. So I approached media in very much the same way I was tackling cultural and literary documents in my own discipline, by not just reading the text or media object but also by ... close reading it. In other words, my initial reading strategies

constituted my first encounter with perspective distortion: after all, close reading implies examining the text up close, which inevitably leads to transformation and warping due to the relative scale of nearby and distant features. It was not long before I became aware of my own disciplinary framing and limitations and benefited from the alternative approaches that had long been the purview of the work done by UB Media Study scholars and artists.

The first teacher to initiate me in an alternative approach to cultural artifacts was no other than Gerald O'Grady, a man I never got to meet but whose intellectual legacy transcended both his field (Medieval Literature) and his time. I knew of O'Grady as the McLuhanist media scholar who had founded the cutting-edge department that turned arcane art forms like video installation and media art into legitimate disciplines and art practices. I remember how struck I was not just by this pioneer's McLuhanist emphasis on the impact of technology on education, but by how his interest in literacy, the deep understanding of text, which naturally derived from his training in English studies had been transformed by his encounter with media forms and artists.

"Literacy," O'Grady was quoted as saying, "has been with us now since the nineteenth century and is pretty much accepted to be a universal thrust. My own theory is that we should move towards what I call 'mediacy.' It's a political issue: one cannot participate in society unless one can use the channels or codes of communication that are current in the time that one lives" (15). The verb O'Grady deployed fairly early on to define his new theory was *not* "understand" the "channels or codes of communication that are current in the time that one lives" but "use". His focus was already on a hybrid form of practice and scholarly activity that his term *mediacy* would increasingly encompass, an approach that would resonate with the similar work surrounding the medium of language that was happening in the Poetics program



of the English Department at the University at Buffalo, as well as in the experimental practices of the Music Department. These three departments constituted the convergence of like-minded, participatory, revolutionary art and scholarly practices that put the University at Buffalo on the map.

That was then; this is now. The institutional imagination that permitted those departments to flourish is gone. We live in a day and age when institutional memories are either too short or under too much stress to remember the importance of their own innovative traditions. I was amazed, for instance, to discover that international students from the Middle East seemed to know more about the legendary history of Buffalo than local artists or administrators who were operating in its shadow.

At a time when universities strive to justify the reason for their existence by trying to emulate professional schools and their experiential approach, it was deeply ironic to learn that the practice-based contributions of an influential generation of experimental media makers were not regarded highly. Their hands-on practice was apparently not the hands-on practice on demand, never mind that they were first to introduce the concept in relation to literacy and media theory and practice in the first place. In the context of the university's new commitment to vocational training and standardized assessments, the values and esoteric methods of a Tony Conrad, Paul Sharits, Hollis Frampton, Steina and Woody Vasulka seemed out of place. James Blue, the extraordinary documentary filmmaker who was doing street work in Huston with kids using Super-8 before he arrived at Buffalo, was relegated to the oubliettes by administrators who promoted the exact same kind of learning his work embodied. Many of Tony Conrad's documentary videos had socio-political contents even though they adopted experimental methods to critique the authority relationships. Last but not least, Steina and

Woody Vasulka were interested in manipulating media to create an image. Their art practice was truly media archaeological: they were interested not in content-making but in exploring the material aspect of media.

I remember taking note of these developments, with all their attendant ironies, and wondering why the university was not capitalizing on the uniqueness of legacies that had brought practice and the experiential back in full force at our institution. I just didn't get it. Why were these not evoked and celebrated? Was this yet another form of taking credit for (re)inventing the wheel? Or just a lack of historicized hindsight? For me, the antidote to this atavism had to be in a media archaeology that could educate and enlighten. A new approach would reveal how the very words through which I and others had experienced the world but that we thought of as separate from media were no less saturated and determined by its operations and mechanisms than what we have defined as media historically.

From its onset, O'Grady's department was about bridging the gulf that separated literature and media, high from low culture: he acquired and lent media equipment to novice and accomplished artists alike. Maybe, just maybe, then, we should be able to conceive of the avant-garde and experimental nature of his department's media-making practices as an extension of that democratizing impulse rather than as its opposite? Too many of us today, including in universities, seem to have fallen for the fallacious assumptions of a mainstream and ahistorical discourse that associates all avant-garde practices with an ivory-tower and out-of-touch elite. Nothing could be further from the truth, and that is why we have launched this journal.

We need to understand emerging media technologies through a critical scrutiny of the existing narratives about what constitutes popular, commercial, and avant-garde media. The

focus in higher education may be on hands-on skills, but that no longer seems to include the kind of experimental approaches to media (or language) that necessarily characterized a practice-informed theory, and theory in turn informed by practice. Why was there a necessary imbrication of practice-based, hands-on media making with experimental practices in a department whose founder had made vocational training and instrumental knowledge his mission? Why am I claiming that there is continuity where others see a gulf, troublingly distancing themselves from an institution's most important legacies? Simply because to know how a medium works and gets normalized in a particular social context, taken for granted, used and abused, it takes experimenting with it. It takes the kind of speculative and eye-opening interventions experimental practices have provided and continue to provide. Only then, when we have reshuffled practices and certainties whose obscured workings turn us into passive consumers of ideas and images, can we use the medium in the kind of productive and inspiring ways that move us forward as a society and as a species. The goal isn't going back; that is nostalgia. It is using something lost to move forward. In the philosopher Soren Kierkegaard's words, "life can only be understood backwards, but it must be lived forward" (306).

The students who come out of a department whose reason for being is precisely *not* to churn out commercially-minded, assembly-line automatons intent on producing just any film on demand go on, in fact, to create video and clips institutions and corporations would fight to have represent them. New media aesthetics are not at odds with commercial, professional, and bureaucratic discourse. It is the latter whose ethos is often at odds with the democratizing impulses that motivate media artists. It is not that media artists leave the university unable to contribute to commercially-minded media, agendas and positions. It is that media artists

require a commitment to a broader, more humane, and hopeful dynamics before they join particular remunerative agendas.

At the very least, at a time when the legacies, values and methods of pioneers in the field of Media Study seem under duress, we owe it to our students to recognize the very public role these practiced-based approaches played, each in their own way. It may very well be that few will recall the emancipatory, democratic, accessible because practice-based potential of a generation that was once the necessary avant-garde, but it is also true that legacies need not be recognized to persist, and literally matter.

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# When Art History Meets Information Theory, or on Media Theory outside Media Theory

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Reading Ernst H. Gombrich's *Art and Illusion*, a classic in art history, I was captivated by the following lines:

Styles, like language, differ in the sequence of articulation and in the number of questions they allow the artist to ask; and so complex is the information that reaches us from the visible world that no picture will ever embody it all. This is not due to the subjectivity of vision but to its richness. Where the artist has to copy a human product he can, of course, produce a facsimile which is indistinguishable from the original. The forger of banknotes succeeds only too well in effacing its personality and the limitations of a period style. (Gombrich 90)

I wondered if Gombrich was applying Claude Shannon's information theory to the visual arts. For Shannon, the amount of information in a message depends on how much uncertainty it involves: the result of a fair die, for instance, entails more uncertainty, and therefore more information, than a loaded one. This has important consequences for mediated communication: in a telegraphic message that starts with the letter "Y," the uncertainty (and thus, the amount of

information) of the second and third letter is lower because of the probability that they will be an “E” and an “S.” Transposed to the world of figurative arts, Gombrich appears to suggest in the quote above, style could also be seen as the reduction of uncertainty: limiting the amounts of choices that the artist has to do to produce their work, it also limits the amount of information provided by an image. On one extreme, therefore, is the complexity of the information that reaches us from the visible world, while on the other extreme Gombrich placed highly formalized images such as a banknote—a form or representation that minimizes the amount of uncertainty and thus of information.

That this was precisely what Gombrich had in mind became evident pages later, when the great art historian explicitly mentioned information theory and its general conclusion “that the greater the probability of a symbol’s occurrence in any given situation, the smaller will be its information content” (Gombrich 205). This hint from Shannon’s mathematical approach to communication helped Gombrich develop his theory of illusion, according to which a viewer projects a range of expectations on an image. In Gombrich’s views, the illusion is not just a product of the characteristics instilled in the viewer’s perception and psychology, but also emerges from the visual conventions that stimulates viewers to project meaning onto an image. The capacity to recognize this moon, for instance, has little to do with how the moon appears. It has much more to do with the fact that the viewer knows what the drawing of a moon looks like, and thus makes the right guess—instead of thinking, for instance, that the drawing portrays a cheese or a piece of fruit. Thus, visual habits and the implicit knowledge of style orient recognition much more than any correspondence between the drawing and the “natural” appearance of the moon.

The little discovery not only confirmed my belief that *Art and Illusion* is, though unbeknownst to most media theorists, a masterpiece of media theory. It reminded me that studying media requires to open the perspective to the widest possible spectrum: from art history all the way to information theory. Nobody more than Gombrich helped me envision the deep implications of information theory for what concerns our relationship with media. It made me aware that information theory also works as an incitation to consider the active role of audiences and users in projecting meaning, and that such acts of projection are always embedded in historically-situated conventions and expectations. I had learned about information theory by reading works in human-machine communication and computer science, yet I needed a book on art history to realize the full extent to which Shannon's theory applies to life in the highly mediated world in which we live.

In an academic globe where the number of publications and journals grows every year, one might wonder if a new journal can provide a true contribution to the debate. I believe that the power of *MAST*'s proposal and its promise reside in the eclectic exploration that the journal programmatically situates at the intersection of theory and practice, creation and research, humanities and social sciences—and also, I take license to add, art history and information theory, as suggested by the inclusion of the “aesthetics of glitch, error, and noise in media art” among the journal's themes of interest (*MAST* 2020). The interdisciplinary endeavor in which this new project emerges is the only possible framework for media studies: a discipline that is constitutionally at the crossroads between approaches and perspectives that at first glance appear different and even antithetic from each other.

As Marshall McLuhan (1964) pointed out, for the scholar of media every little aspect in the mosaic of contemporary life is charged with meaning and life. What I find most exciting in

this new project is how it promises to advance this same spirit by studying media without setting rigid boundaries to what “media” means. As not only Gombrich, but many contemporary media scholars and artists (some of which also contributed to this opening issue) continue to teach me, remaining alert to the media theories that come from “outside” media theory is not just a possibility but a need for anyone who aspires to better understand media, communication and ultimately, the world.

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# The Undisciplined “Discipline” of the In-between

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Writing a short essay for the *MAST* journal was a pleasure and an honor, especially the editors’ wish that we impart a personal touch to our contributions. I tried to identify when exactly I began to be interested in media, art and communication. As a child, I was already fascinated by photography, learning in school about how to develop pictures or how to access alternative perspectives of reality through media. For one exercise, we were instructed to take the camera and try to give visibility to things that most people do not pay attention to—which is still my favorite school experience. Before starting university, we were also assigned an essay written by Paul Watzlawick in a literature course and I believed that this could help me have a better understanding of myself and of the people communicating around me—which, of course, did not work as I expected. Still, Watzlawick’s essay provided me with a language to describe what had intrigued me in childhood: Why do people not talk the same way when they use a phone? Why do we keep photographs in albums? After having received my high-school diploma, I decided to apply for the Master of Arts program in “European Media Culture” at the Bauhaus University in Weimar (Germany). A few months later, in 1999, I attended my first seminars and lectures on

media philosophy, media theory, media archaeology (it did not have this name twenty years ago), film theory and semiotics, as well as media art. We were invited to read texts from different scholarly or philosophical backgrounds (Jean Baudrillard, Vilém Flusser, Michel Foucault, Donna Haraway, Harold Innis, Friedrich Kittler, Niklas Luhmann, Susan Sontag) but at that time I was very intrigued by a text written in 1921: Fritz Heider's "Ding und Medium" (*Thing and Medium*). This work has influenced many German media philosophers such as Sybille Krämer, for example. Considering waves, sounds, matter and the four elements within their media theory, the question of materiality and the relation to 'natural' elements is one of the essential nodes in "German" media philosophy (Pias; Roesler and Sandbothe), but also in French *mediology* (Merzeau). Media historian John Durham Peters takes similar directions by considering media as environments and environments as media.

To sum it up here, the most important preoccupation during these "Weimar years" was to defend the idea that media cannot be reduced to television or the printed press (as devices or institutions). Also, media theory is not at all uninterested in communication studies (I do not have enough space to develop on the distinctions and important relations between both that are of historical, epistemological and cultural order), but enlarging the definition what media are or could (not) be can foster alternative and forgotten (historical) perspectives on how we are interwoven with the material world, which power relations are taking shape and how we can critically break hegemonic patterns or communicative habits, schemes or interpretation (Wentz). I am not sure that I want to call what we do a "discipline" (some of us defend the idea; others do not). I think that we are an "undisciplined discipline"—and if that makes it a discipline, then why not...

What I am sure of, however, is that the study of media (and media and art, and media-art)—in the form of “classical” research or research-creation (Paquin and Noury) as we say at the *University of Quebec in Montreal, Canada* (École des médias)—is a way to engage with the critical analysis of and views on how media are interwoven with our senses, bodies and social realities—how they shape us, and how we shape them. Political dimensions are particularly important here as technological inventions (which, as we know, are never really “new”), as well as their production and use, are our objects of analysis, our sources and our tools of creation. Teaching media theory and engaging students who work on their creations and research in this field is not only a pleasure, it is also, and maybe more importantly, a way of approaching and examining our current society, with all the difficulties that arise from adopting different perspectives. Indeed, perpetually interwoven within specific power relations, media cannot be understood without a rigorous critical reflection on the economic, political, technical and historical dimensions—including, of course, gender, race, culture and materiality on a broad level. This is, at least, how I approach the pedagogy of media theory and media studies: the students’ contributions, theses or artworks are not merely concerned with producing results or triggering effects, but rather they have a point to make about how and why we think as we do - *with* media. Beyond the epistemological level, I invite them to follow their intuitions and passions and to share their views and their voices on argumentative and creative bases. What makes our undisciplined “discipline” so complex, fascinating and sometimes difficult to deal with is the variety of approaches, topics and interests that can be developed. Leona Nikolić (experimental media program, UQAM), for example, is currently working on an interactive installation about the commodification of digital beliefs, rituals and spirituality in order to question our relationship with our smartphones from a media-archeological perspective.

As a media theorist with background in media philosophy and semiotics, it is precisely this “in-between more than two” that makes me passionate about what we do. Similar to research in particle physics, we observe it, we get closer to it and sometimes create it—but luckily, we can never completely grasp it.

For the future of media theory and (media) art, we have to continue to be undisciplined and we need to keep on decolonizing our perspectives, cultural bias, minds and research, we need to keep on translating (Steinberg and Zahlten), rebelling against uniformization of research and thinking and we need to keep on exploring alternative ways of approaching and doing (media-)-theory.

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# To Media Study: Media Studies and Beyond

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To study media is to study more than what we already recognize as media. The beauty of media study should involve the possibility of methodological and theoretical labor that investigates what even constitutes its object of knowledge and the process through which such objects of knowledge are stabilised as the thing that circulates as “media” in academia. It even includes the possibility of considering academia as an institution and its practices as “media,” a proposition made by Friedrich Kittler (2004). Indeed, universities consist of a changing set of practices and techniques programmed into students and future staff, hardware from libraries to mail systems and objects of knowledge that provide one operating system for a range of contemporary operations—mathematics to philosophy as well as computing. Not that we need to accept all the details and specifics of the story (and its European bias, as Kittler also stated) but the methodology of realising that media relates not to “communication,” but to material architectures, cultural techniques, and infrastructures from hardware to standards is the key takeaway. In short, even the academic study itself is, well, media.

To study media is to study what then even becomes media in the first place, and how mediation is much more than what counts as media as such. Hence, media study and its stabilized version in academia, Media Studies, can be in a privileged position to understand how the question of media shifts from the human scale of interface to large-scale networks, infrastructure, and logistics. Some of the greyest things are the most exciting when it comes to understanding the powers of media: administration, logistics, infrastructural arrangement and territorial governance. Media is placed in actual spatial, material, and institutional realities.

Not that the academia is the sole place of media study – media study also happens outside Media Studies. Indeed, to radicalize Kittler’s point about media at the university, we need to recognise the subtle – and sometimes not so subtle – mechanisms of economic power that enable and disable the possibilities of study. To study media is also to recognise, as Stefano Harney and Fred Moten (2013) importantly argue, that it happens in contemporary contexts of debt and governance that are, one might add, part of the “media” and cultural techniques of the university and of how it produces experience and habit. To study should not be about the reproduction of misery as part of the policy of the current academic institutional landscapes, or as Moten puts it: “I think that a huge part of it has to do simply with, let’s call it, a certain reduction of intellectual life – to reduce study into critique, and then at the same time, a really, really horrific, brutal reduction of critique to debunking, which operates under the general assumption that naturalised academic misery loves company in its isolation, like some kind of warped communal alienation in which people are tied together not by blood or a common language but by the bad feeling they compete over.” (Harney and Moten 120).

For many reasons we also need to focus on what is understood as “study” that is irreducible to the institution. To study is to connect and to work collectively, across and

beyond academia as well. In Harney's words: "That opened up another question for me, which was when you leave the university to study, in what way do you have to continue to recognize that you're not leaving the place of study and making a new place, but entering a whole other world where study is already going on beyond the university? I felt I ought to have some way to be able to see that world, to feel that world, to sense it, and to enter into it, to join the study already going on in different informal ways, unforming, informing ways." (Harney and Moten 118). This is also true of media study that de facto has happened across different sites and practices, from critical hacker labs to art studios, reading groups to zine archives and more.

Both media study and the field of Media Studies can be said to be part of the same waves of radical rethinking that has characterized the Humanities since 1980, and which Rosi Braidotti identified as interdisciplinary practices: "Women's, Gay and Lesbian, Gender, Feminist and Queer Studies; Race, Postcolonial and Subaltern Studies, alongside Cultural Studies, Film, Television and Media Studies" (Braidotti 105). Braidotti later added Posthuman studies, or the Critical Posthumanities to her genealogy, as the contemporary practice that emerged from it. To paraphrase Braidotti, these studies should work against structural anthropocentrism and methodological nationalism while being grounded in "real-life present world" (106-108). As part of the Critical Posthumanities, we also need to consider that it is media (machines and systems) which do the study: in other words, it is media that study, organize, analyze, "see", and process data whether in the administrative or logistical sense. They are part of the large-scale reorganization of agential forces and algorithmic power, and to be able to understand them properly, to be able to exploit them properly, we would do well to follow the Critical Engineering manifesto's lead (Oliver et al).



By now it should be amply clear that media study arrives as many—it arrives not just as a discipline but as an already buzzing link between multidisciplinary investigations. Besides the connections to science and engineering as technical cousins of the practice of media, two exciting directions that can be named are architecture and (critical) legal studies. Why these two? Both architecture and law are examples of disciplines which are able to articulate their effects and impacts across spatial transformations in ways that are at times effectively geared toward an activism of sorts. Indeed, even they have the power to speak in context to the spatial set of governance and transformation, which media study can learn from and interact with in relation to questions of spatial justice for example (see e.g. Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos 2014). It is here also that critique is not merely about debunking but remains committed to the transformation of the existing conditions of practice – and this practice, as Braidotti argues, is one that is already embedded in “real-life present worlds”.

Hence, we also need to ensure that the (at least partly) radical legacy of media studies—and its constitutive energy as media study—is sustained in contemporary academia despite the pressure of austerity economics and neoliberal policies, climate change denialism, and disciplinary cynicism. Media study is not reducible to the academic standardisation of media studies, and we should remain invested in also keeping the academic part of the spectrum as radical and inspiring as it can be.

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# Making Media (Study) Haptic

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Taking media to be extensions and amplifications of the human senses, Media Study identifies the senses as vital sites for the formation and circulation of culture. In this conceptualization, media technologies are not simply passive conduits for the senses, but instead actively reshape and transform both the individual senses and the sensorium more generally, prioritizing certain perceptual modalities over and above others. Media simultaneously provide the epistemological framework for making claims about reality *and* the ground for sharing aesthetic experiences, participating in the construction of a hegemonic cultural sensorium. To contextualize and historicize the emergence of the contemporary mediated sensorium, scholars have focused on the interplay among the embodied senses, media technology, culture, and power. The body's expression through media—how media are adapted to the perceptual capacities of human subjects—has been a paramount concern in this tradition. Jonathan Sterne, for example, situates “the sounding or listening body” as “an object of cultural struggle and historical transformation” (346) in the development of sound reproduction technologies. Particularly with the rise of technical media from the nineteenth century on, the iterative design and engineering of media systems depended on the abstraction

and quantification of the senses, with machines of image and sound reproduction calibrated to the parameters of vision and hearing as revealed through dedicated programs of scientific investigation, executed with a variety of electrical and mechanical apparatuses. Identifying this mutual reciprocity between the physiology of the senses—with its focus on uncovering the just-noticeable difference between applied stimuli—and the genesis of media technologies—which operate by calibrating stimuli to the psychophysical parameters of perception—troubles conventional media historiography, by linking the origins of contemporary media technologies to broader histories of medicine, psychology, and scientific empiricism. The political significance of this project lies in the way it defines media as expressions of normative models of the senses, rather than extensions of some natural and transhistorical body.

While this investigative program may be motivated by a radical and disruptive impulse aimed at upending and undoing linear histories of media<sup>4</sup>, it has proceeded from a rather limited conceptualization of media as primarily acting on and extending the senses of seeing and hearing. Consequently, we are left with a narrative that reifies and replicates—rather than challenges—the audiovisuality of media. The other senses are left behind and marginalized both by contemporary media and by contemporary media historiography. Where touch is concerned, this focus on seeing and hearing perpetuates what Jacques Derrida calls a “haptocentric intuitionism” (300) that takes as its core assumption touch’s resistance to

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<sup>4</sup> This approach is typified by Siegfried Zielinski’s sprawling excavation of hidden histories of image and sound media in *Deep Time of the Media*. The critique of linear histories can be found throughout the media archaeological tradition. Friedrich Kittler, for example, argues that “in spite of all beliefs in progress, there is no linear or continuous development in the history of media” (119). Similarly, Timothy Druckrey asserts in his foreword to Zielinski’s *Deep Time* that media archaeology provides a means of countering the “anemic and evolutionary model” that has come “to dominate many studies in so-called media” (vii).

virtualization and extension via electronic networks.<sup>5</sup> In my work, I have explicitly pushed back on the assumed audiovisuality of media by identifying a research tradition that seeks to give touch its own set of dedicated technical media. While some narratives—such as Derrida’s—portray media that extend and digitalize touch as part of a promised future, I look at a series of efforts pursued throughout the twentieth century to transform touch into what Carl Sherrick called a “communicative sense” (218)—a sense that could have its own set of affiliated technologies for sending and receiving coded messages. In pursuing this attempted technological transformation of tactility, Sherrick and his mentor Frank Geldard developed a wide range of experimental mechanisms and languages for transmitting messages through the skin, establishing the Cutaneous Communication Lab (active from 1962-2004) to house this ongoing project. Just as designing technical media for the eyes and ears required a detailed knowledge of those senses’ psychophysiological parameters, designing media for touch entailed calibrating machinic tactile stimuli to the sensing properties of the skin. And just as nineteenth-century psychophysiology had quantified the processes of seeing and hearing, it had similarly quantified the process of touching, with psychophysicists developing scores of dedicated apparatuses and batteries of tests to uncover the microphysics of tactile perception. By the 1890s, this new accrued knowledge about touch had grown so complex that it was given the formal name “haptics,” defined as “the doctrine of touch,” (Titchener 441) and positioned explicitly in relationship to the scientific study of seeing (optics) and hearing (acoustics). Nineteenth-century psychophysiology, then, attempted to make touch like seeing

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<sup>5</sup> Echoing Marshall McLuhan’s claim that future systems of mediated tactility may upend the audiovisuality of media, Derrida looks to the nascent haptic human-computer interfaces of the late 1990s—the PHANToM and the CyberGrasp in particular—as evidence of touch’s impending virtualization.

and hearing by giving it its own dedicated field of research; twentieth-century tactile communication researchers attempted to make touch like seeing and hearing by giving it its own dedicated set of transmission apparatuses and languages.

By situating technologized touching at the center of a sustained media historical research program, I have sought to counter the longstanding assumption, operating in a range of fields including psychology, communication, and aesthetics, that touch, through some inherent set of intractable properties, resists mediation. My aim is not to suggest that those who have sought to perfectly replicate the sense of touch in virtual worlds have succeeded in doing so, but rather to situate *the efforts at* transforming touch through media technology as a coherent and stable formation, articulated discursively by scientists and engineers in a host of disciplines and materially in the form of both experimental and commercial touch technologies (ranging from haptic bodysuits to vibration alert systems found in smartphones). The prompt to treat media technologies as technologies of sensory extension allows us to expand the field of Media Study outward, so that it encompasses a sense previously thought hostile to mediation. Media Study provides a model for approaching the archive of haptic media, allowing us to understand, for example, how normative models of the body and perception become embedded in the design of media for touch. Beyond this historical orientation, attending to efforts at mediating touch also prompts us to examine the social construction of touch technology, as media and communication researchers have shown recently in edited volumes, special issues, and related projects focused on tactility and mediation (Cranny-Francis; Elo and Luoto; Jewitt et al.; Parisi, Paterson, and Archer; Pozo; Richardson and Hjorth). Media, as Lisa Gitelman describes, are social as much as they are technological, involving negotiated protocols of use that take shape through their adoption, habituation, and incorporation into everyday life.

Moreover, touch's social life and cultural history are inseparable from issues such as gender, sexuality, power, race, class, ableism, and labor, as scholars in the field of Sensory Studies have detailed.<sup>6</sup> Finally, with the wave of new digital touch technologies—cybersex devices, exoskeleton gloves, and haptic bodysuits—accompanying the recent re-emergence of virtual reality, it is worth considering the possibility that we may be on the cusp of a long-promised shift in the mediated sensorium, away from the visual and toward the haptic. Proponents of haptics technologies—especially the marketers and engineers of haptics devices—have assured us that this shift will undo the negative and distancing effects of visual media, countering a hegemonic visuality with a counterhegemonic tactility. However, an understanding of touch as a media-historical object pushes back on this technoutopian narrative by showing the touch expressed through media technologies to be thoroughly transformed by its encounters with capitalist technoscience.

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# Investigating the Digital Nonhumanities

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One of the unique challenges, and I would say great fascinations, with the study of media, particularly for a scholar such as myself who investigates the cultural and rhetorical effects of contemporary media, is the effort of keeping up with rapid technological development. In the last 10-15 years the expansion of social media, mobile technologies, and IoT devices, the increasing speed and availability of networks, the arrival of AR and VR, and the increasing influence of data science, algorithms, machine learning, and AI, to name a few of the most obvious examples, have transformed cultures and our lived experience not only in the industrialized world, where access to such things is easiest, but on a global scale. The geopolitical ramifications of using social media to subvert democratic elections and create ubiquitous surveillance states with social credit scores, the cognitive and psychological effects of our incessant dependence upon smartphones, and the ecological impacts and ignored externalities of technological “progress” have exploded the scope and intensified the exigency of media study. And that is to name only a handful of areas in which study is possible.

In this broad range of possibilities, my work has emerged at the intersection of digital rhetoric (my home field), media study, posthumanism, and new materialism. I explore

questions such as how deliberation occurs in the distributed cognition of digital media ecologies or how attention is managed at the intersection of a smartphone and its human user. Deliberation and attention are classical concerns of rhetoric. To put it in familiar Aristotelian terms, the available means of persuasion rely upon holding an audience's attention and guiding their deliberations to suit the rhetor's purpose. However, deliberation and attention also echo familiar mainstream concerns with critical thinking, fake news, distraction, internet addiction and so on. My interest, thus, is in the shifting rhetorical capacities within digital media. In posthuman and new materialist rhetoric, rhetorical agency emerges in the ecological and ambient relations among humans and nonhumans. In the digital context, it is self-evident that we could not make effective deliberations about the media available to us without the assistance of search engines and related algorithms. Similarly, we could not access or regulate the flow of information coming to us without the operations of our smartphones. At the same time, it is equally obvious that our relationships with these devices are not simple; they are not the mute and obedient servants of our independent will. In fact, we cannot fully know what is happening when we interact with these technologies as many of their operations are hidden and proprietary. As Latour would say, we are "made to act" by these relationships, not compelled to act (or at least not usually so) but rather constructed with certain capacities for action through our encounters with digital media (46). With this in mind, my research seeks to describe those relations and the capacities that emerge with the intention of creating new rhetorical capacities. In my most ambitious and optimistic moment, I hope that discovering such capacities might lead to better rhetorical means for addressing the many challenges digital media present to us.

That said, there are so many other questions to pursue.

There are also many other practices to pursue than the writing of academic articles or monographs that have largely characterized my research practice. I have published several born-digital articles that combine image, audio, and/or video with text, but disciplinary expectations have always grounded such work in writing, at least for me. The rise of the digital humanities, critical making, videographic criticism and other forms of digital scholarship suggests a different future. As I see it, the challenge has never been to figure out how to make these emergent genres replicate the work of print scholarship but rather to discover what new rhetorical practices they can develop. The academic essay, the monograph, and the conference presentation participated in the development of specializations, fields, disciplines, and departments across the arts and humanities in the twentieth century. Through our relations with those rhetorical ecologies we became populations of scholars. From there we built expectations of literacy for our students: how they should read and write. Each of us has been trained by those expectations.

With this in mind, as I see it, in addition to the broader rhetorical challenges we all face in digital media ecologies, as scholars we must encounter our own. Will the quiet discourse communities of journals, bookshelves, and concurrent panel sessions provide the means we require to meet these challenges? I doubt it, but what new communities, audiences, participants, and populations of scholars will arise in the context of emerging media? What will our students require from us as professionals, intellectuals, artists, and citizens? As humans? And perhaps most poignantly, how will we best serve those students? As a rhetorician (though I do not doubt other academics feel similarly), the centuries-long tradition of my work is intimately tied to the development of students as democratic citizens. So, I find myself ending much where I began. The task before us is tremendous and made no less so by

the ground shifting beneath our feet. In all that though, the expansive and varied investigation of media is needed more than ever.

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# Media Study Futures

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The future of Media Study will be what it has always been: *made in the present*. When Gerry O’Grady founded the Center for Media Study at the State University of New York at Buffalo in 1973, he specifically chose the singular form “study” over the plural “studies” to emphasize the notion of “a careful and extended consideration” of media and the sense of “zeal, or focus” that it conveyed (O’Grady 1-3). He also noted its relation to the derivate “studio,” understood originally as “the working place of a painter or sculptor and a place for the study of art,” and subsequently “a place where motion pictures were made” and later “a place maintained and equipped for the production and transmission of radio and television programs” (O’Grady) The implications of defining the field this way are worth noting.

First, Media Study was intended to refer to an intense and focused study of *media art* through a process that brought together practice and theory, making and interpretation. The State University of New York at Buffalo was among the first institutions to hire practicing artists as faculty members, and the faculty O’Grady brought together included some of the most experimental and innovative practitioners of the time, including Hollis Frampton, Paul Sharits, Steina, Woody Vasulka and Tony Conrad. “There were no trained scholars in these fields,” O’Grady remarked, “and the only persons I could find to explain these new media were

the practitioners” (Sei 137). Experimental practice in making media was thus understood as the basis for its interpretation and theorization.

Second, citing the evolution of the studio—from a place for making painting and sculpture to one for making motion pictures, to the production and transmission of radio and television—acknowledges that the notion of media itself was in a state of constant evolution. O’Grady would refer to this quality as that of “the metamorphic image,” organizing an initial curriculum around three image-making technologies—film, video and the computer—and their changing materials, processes, and systems (Sei 137). These metamorphic images themselves were understood as constantly mutating into each other through experimental practices of the time. This instability of the image form and its contingency on methods of making position Media Study from the outset as a perpetually emerging field. To study media is to study emerging media.

Today, emerging media incorporates a wide range of materials, processes and systems. From bio-media made from living tissue to hyper-realistic media objects synthesized by generative adversarial networks (GANs) to media infrastructures enabled by embedded low-power wireless sensor networks, contemporary media art practice extends beyond the image-making codes and linguistic referents of its early practitioners. Computing itself has become a medium that touches all aspects of cultural production, distribution and consumption in one way or another. Media artists working critically and creatively with algorithms to process environmental data acquired through networked information systems, for example, simultaneously unpack and engender our present cultural moment through their interventions within it. In place of image-codes we find the encoded image, utterance, gesture, body, artifact, network, and so forth.

Within this context, the study of emerging media extends beyond the boundaries of the studio. Contemporary media art practices are distributed across networks, embedded within landscapes and proliferate throughout both urban and rural, natural and artificial environments. They are interdisciplinary not by choice but by necessity, and are often collaboratively produced. Some privilege active social and political engagement, others favor more remote representational techniques. Many seek out and define alternatives to dominant modes of production, distribution and consumption. To the extent that these practices tie themselves to their enabling technologies, they evolve rapidly, can quickly mutate, and may suddenly disappear without warning.

Some have suggested that this poses a crisis for traditional media theory and scholarship. “Because of the speed of events,” writes Geert Lovink, “there is a real danger that an online phenomenon will already have disappeared before a critical discourse reflecting on it has had the time to mature and establish itself as institutionally recognized knowledge” (12). Lovink goes on to suggest that theory needs to align itself with the temporality of events and practices it seeks to engage. We might go further and question in the first place the traditional separation between artist and theorist, maker and scholar.

Combining theory and practice has very little to do with “practicing theory” or “theorizing practice.” Making processes often involve tacit knowledge, coming to know something through practice, something that often eludes being stated in propositional or formal terms. This is not to say that it is not transferrable, but simply that it resists certain forms of codification. Gilbert Ryle has described this as “know-how” as opposed “know-that” (or “know-why”, “know-who”) (1945-46). Critical reflection and interpretation of this process and its products involves the aggregation of tacit knowledge and its articulation as explicit



knowledge, often performed collectively within communities of practice. Like two sides of a coin, these processes are inseparable and individually partial in nature. Through their mutual and reciprocal exchanges, new knowledge is created. It is in this sense that we can say that Media Study futures are presently shaped.

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# Unphotographable

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When I was fourteen I fell in love with photography. When I was eighteen I fell out of love with photography. I found that when my father died, photography could not capture and preserve all of my experiences—it could not show me the loss I felt. In my work I move between my original reverence and my later disillusionment as a way to study and map our relationship to this medium. My work does not take a side or make value judgments about photography—each photographic series is as conflicted as I am about the role photography plays in our lives. I have developed three processes that have become part of my practice studying and creating photographs: I collect, question, and reimagine photography.

## **Collect**

I study a specific subset of photography, often denoted by categories like amateur, vernacular, or snapshot photography. These terms try to categorize these images in dialectics organized around implicit judgments: high/low, expert/amateur, ordinary/extraordinary. I do not believe that these dialectics are helpful—instead I prefer methods of identification based on two qualities: 1) the relationships of the subject and photographer and 2) the motivation for creating the photograph. In the photographs I work with, the relationship of the photographer

and subject is one of self. The photographer is photographing their own world, through their own camera. Even when the subject is not themselves they can be described as part of the photographer's universe: my mother, my sister, my vacation, my walk, my waiter. In the photographs I work with, there are two primary reasons for their creation: preservation or circulation. These photographs are taken to preserve moments from the photographer's lives in a form that is more stable and enduring than biological memories. These photographs are also taken to share with the photographer's community through photo albums, slide shows, camera rolls, or Instagram. Instead of using the common terms for this group of photographs, I think of them as auto-memorial-social photographs. Redefining photographs this way allows me to approach photography more broadly as a social, cultural, and psychological medium, interrogating how it functions in our lives outside of questions of expertise and artistry.

I chose to study auto-memorial-social photographs because of how central these images are to our lives. When I was young, I remember seeing a news story about a family who had to leave their house because of a fire and the mother talked about how the only thing she took with her was her box of photographs. In my collecting and studying of these photographs, it has become clear how deeply we invest them with meaning as memory objects, as sites where the ritual processes of preservation and circulation take place.

I started to study and collect photography using my own boxes of photographs. Then as a way to broaden my archive, I began buying boxes of Kodachrome slides on ebay. Recently I have been downloading Creative Commons licensed photographs from flickr photostreams. In all of these collections I find the same types of images: photographs of babies, holidays, birthdays and vacations, each photograph simultaneously an archetype and a unique record.

**Question**

My work is shaped by the questions I have found in this archive. In each question there is a curiosity about something that I have seen—an overlapping hand on a shoulder, a frozen leg—or something that I can't see—my father's absence, an imagined cloud. Each question I pose to this archive is part critique and part challenge. Why is photography like this? What would happen if it were different?

This is a partial list of the questions I have asked:

Can you see loss?

What do vulnerability, anxiety and desire look like?

Can I see myself as a mother before I become one in real life?

How do we use photographs to remember, and what happens if we choose to forget?

How does our imagination shape our memories?

Can we see stillness?

When we pose with our friends and family in photographs what parts of ourselves are erased?

What does a canceled person look like?

Is there a way to make a portrait of someone who is missing?

Can we see what could have been?

What would an overgrown photograph look like?

**Reimagine**

I respond to these questions by creating photographic series. In each series I begin with photographs I have collected that I import into the digital space where I can alter them. In the computer, I build new backgrounds, extend limbs, create masks, and produce new photodigital hybrids. Each response is a genuine attempt to see something new that I can study and learn

from. For example, in my series *Reimagining Erica*, I deleted, or digitally covered, the bodies of one woman's friends and family to see if you could see the parts of her body that they erased. In the resulting photodigital series, you can study the size and shape of the holes in Erica's body over eight years as she changes from single woman to wife to mother. While this series gives us a new way to see a woman's body, it also makes us uncomfortable. It calls into question the practice of collaboration codified by Creative Commons and our complicit presence and active participation in the public spaces of the internet. It creates as many questions about auto-memorial-social photography as it answers.



Fig. 1. Reimagining 025 (March 14, 2011) - by Michael Bentley / CC BY 2.0

I show these photodigital series in galleries and museums as well as auto-memorial-social photographic spaces. I circulated the series *my father died four years ago* as a photo album, *The Forgetting Machine* as an iPhone app, and the series *Reimagining Erica* as a year-long Instagram feed. I have always felt it was important for these images to return to the spaces

that they came from. In these spaces, they are reminders of both the possibilities and the limitations of photography.



Fig. 3. Reimaging 003 (March 14, 2011) - by Michael Bentley / CC BY 2.0



Fig. 2. Andrew and Erica on the Dance Floor (February 3, 2013).

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# Media in the Age of Apophenia: Why the Study of Media Art and Theory is more Important Today than Ever

**Bernadette Wegenstein**

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If there is something we cannot and shouldn't escape, it's our relationship to our own bodies, for it is more real than any other relationship we might come across in our lives, simply because anything we experience will always come back as as sign, code, stimulus, or feeling to our *own bodies*. Throughout our lives, our bodies adopt a myriad of instantiations of in-betweenness to express our shifting identities, from young to old, from man to woman, from invisible to visible, and so on. While this might sound like an advertisement for a new hair-coloring shampoo for one's greying hair, it really isn't just a celebration of the transformability of our shape-shifting-bodies, although it is also that. More importantly, I celebrate it as a signpost for the body as the first "other" we as humans have had to come to terms with—or to say it in German, to "aus-einander-setzen," which means to "cope with" while also to "place outside of ourselves."

And for most of us who aren't "normalized" and whose bodies will therefore remain "marked" as "outsiders," this is a life-long learning experience.

Ours is an age of “apophenia,” where identity is visible, accessible, quantified, and datafied (Steyerl in Apprich, et al. 13). It is an age when living the *self on the internet* has become an increasingly dysphoric era of bodily self-expression—from Jennicam making us a take part in deadly long hours in her bathroom routine, to being frantically deluded into a “trick mirror” (Tolentino 7)—from which bodily action is no longer required from us other than as consumption, active or passive, by pressing a few buttons or engaging with a cyber-avatar who listens to us on our own in-built jennicams. In this day and age, media are no longer the ominous and celebrated “extensions” of our bodies, but are rather an extension for those who want to track us down, and turn our data-flesh into ruthless information for selling a form of “automated aesthetics” (Manovich 1) that benefits in some shape or form someone’s capital gain—mostly if not exclusively Jeff Bezos’s.

But where is the “advantage” in all this in an age of cyber-capitalism? And what does media art and theory bring to the table now that is worth pursuing?

Being embodied and “other” to ourselves can be an advantage when it comes to turning this experience into media language, or any form of mediatization, because as human beings we share the above-described experience of having been “other” and put “outside” of “ourselves” (aus-einander-gesetzt). Hence, the more we intensify our engagement, from 117.2/96.5 inch screens to the latest Quibi content made for portable devices, what comes back on all these devices is a reflection of us and our *othered selves*. This is the nature of the gaze. It is circular (Silverman).

Take the female body: since long before the modern age female subjectivity has been conceptualized as *difference*, then *othering*, then *resistance* to “all adequate definition” (Irigaray). If there is something positive about this or any other struggle of a body that is up



against the cruelty of the conflict between brown vs. white, female vs. male, gay vs. straight etc. bodies, with #metoo we have now entered an age of *outing*, *making visible*, and no longer camouflaging that very *difference* and that power struggle entirely. Rather, we have entered into an era where “difference” is a hot topic and a highly sellable commodity. This is not yet the age of healing the scars of rape, enslavement, or any other form of even more benign subjugation, to be sure, and it could be said that there is more harm done than not by exposing the trauma of people’s vulnerabilities; this is an age, however, that puts the “exploding kitten” card openly on the table with no “diffuse card” to defend it.<sup>7</sup> To move one metaphor further from a popular card game to a popular body game: we have adopted a beautifully advanced “mental yoga pose,” if not one of the final poses before nirvana, to wrap our heads around the meaning and the place of difference in feminist philosophy and more recently in trans, queer, and queer of color studies, where for instance the wonderful work of José Muñoz has identified “queer hybridity” or “terrorist drag” as a political form of *disidentification* and hence a practice of *freedom*.

This freedom does not come for free though, as no freedom ever has. It is said that there are three ways to react to terror: fight, flight, and freeze. In this age of digital persecution and cyber-terrorism, the body is undergoing all of these reactions, and the media culture is bringing it all home to us. The “other body” is on the run yet again, evading a “pattern,” creating a new kind of freedom by resisting a form of clear identification, as Irigaray or Muñoz have suggested.

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<sup>7</sup> According to the rules of the *Exploding Kitten* card game, once the exploding kitten card is on the table the player loses unless they have a “defuse” card.

There are many examples from current media art work produced in the U.S. and beyond to bring to the table to show some of this new work of pattern-evasive media art work. The artist Kandis Williams, for instance, grounds her artistic practice by troubling the identity slots into which the broader culture tries to fit her. Williams evades a clear interpretation of shapes, forms, or racial identifications in her composite-paintings. Nothing is clearly in the foreground or background but every shape is a reflection in the reflection. By taking out the color, nothing is a oneness or one place, one identity, one color.

The circular nature of the gaze has not changed for any media age, whether it be the invention of the Gutenberg press, the world wide web, or the age of e-trolls and memes. Today's media culture, precisely because it is a capitalist battlefield, requires us artists, intellectuals, and media producers to reconnect with the screen by way of *feeling-seeing*, *participation*, *empathy*, and *point of view*. I have written elsewhere that a "feminist filmmaking" practice is one that takes the circularity of the gaze fully into account. We don't only see from one point, but from all around us, we can see through our bodies, and reveal what's behind them, just as in Kandis Williams's *Shallow pool of Bacchanal Freedom*. The upside to this age of "apophenia," is hopefully not its "cruel optimism" (Berlant), but to find othered ourselves and our altered identities in the alternate media we create.



Fig. 1. Kandis Williams, *Shallow pool of Bacchanal Freedom* (2018).

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# Art vs. Tech: Subversive Relations

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Should both art and technology always be progressive and contribute to mainstream technoculture? How about a subversive and tactical usage of technology that art makes possible? These are the key questions of this essay, but first, let me begin with a disclaimer. Using “versus” in the title is not about creating a binary opposition, but rather an excuse to think about common fields and the creative potential that results from the relation between art and technology. It is so because of a paradox: the more we try to convince ourselves about the unity of art and technology, the more we enhance the dualism and keep the “versus” aspect alive. Even if technology is becoming second nature, there are so many notions regarding similar issues in art that rely on it: post-media art, post-Internet art, speculative design, *sousveillance* art, generative art, glitch art, or critical engineering. It is not possible to discuss all of these here, but what they do have in common is the relation between art and various technologies. Art & Tech then? But there is a catch there too.

As Olia Lialina recently noticed, the figure of speech “Art & Tech” is becoming obsolete, because the “[...] constant repetition of the world ‘technology’ instead of ‘computers’ sedates us and makes us forget that the system we hold in our hands is a

programmable one” (137). By becoming actively involved in re-programming and tinkering, artists are able to avoid being just consumers and also go beyond being prosumers.

Polish researcher Marcin Składanek, writing on generative art, claims that the most interesting contemporary projects take place in a so-called “grey zone” between art and design (232). The value of art and design in relation to technology is not about inventing new gadgets that maintain consumption. According to many artists, tech-related art is not about supporting technology in a straightforward way, but about subverting it in order to provoke critical questions or even hacking.

A series of questions might help in identifying the problem and finding a solution, maybe by using the “wisdom of crowds” (Surowiecki). Sometimes the belief that such a wisdom is genuine may be slightly subverted, like in the project *The Ethical Things* by Simone Rebaudengo, who comments on the Internet of Things and collective human intelligence. The project is described as: “an exploration of the implications of the huge amount of data available and mundane objects that might become ‘smarter’. It's a system that uses collaboration between a fan and crowdsourced ethical reasoning to help the object overcome complex daily dilemmas” (Rebaudengo).

The first sentence sounds serious, but the second one is rather ironic, as is much of the project. This is the idea of speculative design, a genre that dares to ask critical questions by producing seemingly useless objects. One of the leading collectives within this field, that deals with this notion of speculative design, is London-based Superflux. As Anab Jain, one of its members, explains, they are “bringing aspects of the imagined future to life” (Jain) just to test them and generate questions, for example about the aspect of surveillance in our daily life. So

this future may be utopian as well as dystopic. That is why we are talking about *sousveillance* art here, as it stands against surveillance by revealing the way it is conducted.

Speculative designers think of technology in a subversive and often witty way. But they are often concerned with serious issues about privacy, data security, and even human rights. An example is the Berlin-based Critical Engineering Working Group. As they explain in their manifesto, “The Critical Engineer observes the space between the production and consumption of technology” (Oliver et al.). I suppose this space is a gap that an artist should always mind. A good example is the project *Harvest* (2017) by one of the collective’s members, Julian Oliver. The short description of the project is as follows: “Wind energy used to mine cryptocurrency to fund climate research” (Oliver et al.).

However, the artistic usage of technology does not always have to be that advanced. Sometimes asking relatively simple questions may lead to unexpected but important results or even increased awareness of some important matters, as in the case of The Tactical Tech collective. According to their name, in which “tactical” (Michel de Certeau’s term) means being actively but elastically involved in operations against dominating systems, they make difficult issues easier just by explaining their mechanisms or providing know-how to those in need through workshops and tutorials.

Another thing is not only bringing technology to the people, but also bringing together people from the fields of art and technology. A positive example is a project *Seven on Seven* by Rhizome, affiliated with New York’s New Museum. For more than ten years they have organized a series of collaborative events which bring together seven media artists and seven people from business, IT, or science fields. As a result, they are supposed to develop and present a project together, contributing to the field of “artistic research”.

Why should an artist actually collaborate with a web developer, an engineer, or an IT start-up entrepreneur? Isn't this the "Art & Tech" cliché all over again? Well, as Marcin Składanek reminds us, "art helps us to adapt to upcoming transformations that might arrive unexpectedly" (17), because it enables to reveal the hidden curriculum of technoculture and allows us recognize critically the things that we might otherwise blindly accept.

Just to summarize, is this short essay supposed to argue that art – understood as creating useless objects, or creating for the purpose of aesthetic values only – should act against technology (understood, on the other hand, as creating useful objects that have a purpose)? Not at all. Art often happens to be against tech but only when tech is understood as gadgets. But technology is more than that. Interesting things start to happen when art relies on technology, and this may help provoke critical questions and raise awareness about serious contemporary issues. Art speaks the language of paradoxes much better because it is art's native language.

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**Paul Benzon** is an Assistant Professor in the Department of English at Skidmore College, where he also teaches courses in the Media and Film Studies Program. His research explores the intersections of contemporary literary experimentation, technological and textual materiality, and media history. His work has appeared in *PMLA* (where it received the William Riley Parker Prize), *Narrative*, *electronic book review*, *Media-N*, and *College Literature* (where it received the Schachterle Prize). His book *Archival Fictions: Materiality, Form, and Media History in Contemporary Literature* is forthcoming from University of Massachusetts Press as part of their series "Page and Screen: New Perspectives in Book Studies."

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**Jordan Frith** is the Pearce Professor of Professional Communication at Clemson University. He is the author of 3 books and more than 25 peer-reviewed journal articles published in a variety of disciplinary journals. His work has focused on a variety of issues related to emerging media, and he has written books about mobile media, locative media, and communication infrastructures. His second book—*Smartphones as Locative Media*—analyzed how smartphones have become a core technology of location, and that phenomenon can impact how we understand digital data more broadly. His third book—*A Billion Little Pieces: RFID and Infrastructures of Identification*—was published by MIT Press in Spring 2019. That book examines how RFID infrastructures have reshaped everything from identification practices to nonhuman communication built into physical spaces. Dr. Frith has also produced public scholarship, and his work can be found in a variety of podcast and more popular venues.

**Jason 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. Conceptually the 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. Dr. Geistweidt holds a PhD in Music Composition from the Sonic Arts Research Center (SARC), Queen's University Belfast, as well as Master of Arts in Music Technology from the University of Limerick. He currently

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**Carine Mardorossian** is professor of English at the University at Buffalo, SUNY and the executive director of the Northeast Modern Language Association, the lucky organization that is sponsoring *Mast*. Professor Mardorossian chaired the legendary UB Media Study in 2019, an experience which reminded her of the centrality of media to her own fields, Caribbean and feminist studies. Her latest manuscript is a crossover, co-written book entitled *Death is but a Dream: Hope and Meaning at Life's End* (with Christopher Kerr, MD, Penguin, 2020) and reveals the centrality of the humanities to

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**Mani Mehrvarz** is a filmmaker, media artist, and one of the co-founding editor of *MAST*. He has been teaching courses in documentary, video art, and media theory at the University at Buffalo since 2015, while pursuing his PhD in the practice-based program in Media Study. Currently, he is the founding director of the Buffalo Documentary Project, the design strategist of the UB Arts Collaboratory, and the curator of Media-as-things Collective. Mehrvarz's current research explores technologies of magnetic memory in the contexts of both media archaeology and object philosophy. Since 2013, Mehrvarz has worked on several media art projects with a focus on the unstable processes of analog and digital media informed by post-Kittlerian media theories. His art practice with the moving-image goes beyond the conventional linear storytelling and explores various forms of databased cinema, interactive documentary, and video mapping. His media installations and documentary films have been exhibited or screened worldwide since 2006.

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