

Aesthetic Seminar

Autumn 2018

*All talks held 14.15 at Kasernen, Aarhus University,
Langelandsgade 139, Aarhus C, Building 1584, Room 124,
unless otherwise stated*

*Seminars are organized by Karen-Margrethe Simonsen og Søren Pold
on behalf of the School of Communication and Culture, Aarhus University*

13.09.2018 (NB: Kunsthallen) Rebecca Schneider: *Gesture and the Antiphonal Aesthetics of Possibility*

This talk will be about the aesthetics of possibility contained in thinking with and about gesture. If we think of humans, nonhumans, media objects and atmospheres as intra-active (Karen Barad) how can thinking about gesture help us think about our engagement with media objects in hand and the environment at hand? For the purposes of this gathering, I will think about gesture in terms of algorithm and algorithm in terms of gesture.

27.09.2018 Andreas Broeckmann: *Seven Aspects of Machine Aesthetics*

The relationship of humans to technology is fraught with tension. What is often referred to as the "human-machine relation" is characterized by conflicting sentiments of repulsion, by instances of imitation, and even intimacy. "Machine art" is a term that has been used since the early 20th century to describe forms of art that address this complicated relationship. The "machine art of the twentieth century" – which is also the title of Andreas Broeckmann's 2016 monograph – is characterised by a number of aesthetic aspects which the author will elaborate during his lecture. These aspects articulate the human-machine relationship as one of co-operation, rivalry, or even as an existential threat. The *associative* aspect of machine aesthetics refers to the social meanings of technology, often to make a provocative claim against the assumptions of artistic ingenuity; the *symbolic* aspect refers to mechanics as a metaphor for elements of human culture and psychology; furthermore: the *formalist* appraisal of the beauty of functional forms; the play with *kinetic* functions as a way to broaden the expressive potentials of sculpture; and the *automatic* operation of machines that underpins their functional independence and their existential strangeness. While these aspects evolved in the first half of the twentieth century, two further aspects of the aesthetics of machines were added in the second half: one is the aspect of *interactivity*, which adds the dimension of a charged, at times tense, at other times playful dialogue and exchange to the human-machine relationship; and the other is the aspect of *autonomy*, which becomes a determining factor in the human experience of increasingly independent and self-referential technical systems. These aspects of machine aesthetics form, at the same time, an analytical tool-set, and a program in which different forms of the human-machine relation are – critically or affirmatively – spelled out.

11.10.2018 John Cayley: *Reading with Aesthetics: before and after transactive synthetic language*

The culture of reading has changed and continues to change. Those of us who make a profession of reading are quick to agree, but are hesitant to specify the when or the how, and to what extent. When it comes to why? it seems obvious that the conception and practice of reading has been reconfigured by digital mediation and, more generally, by the digitalization of culture practices as a whole. Regardless of these circumstances, in the developed world, human aesthetic experience that is associated with the art of language continues to derive its authority from print culture, from published books, from the instantiation of linguistic artifacts as typography impressed on the leaves of printed volumes. It is reading, conventional reading, that brings this work into existence as lived aesthetic experience.

Reading, however, may also be understood as more than reading print. It is fundamental to linguistic ontology. In my thinking, reading is reconfigured and taken to apply to practices

of language in any perceptible medium, and especially to linguistic practices in aurality, with respect to which the human genetic predisposition to language evolved. This is what I call *grammaleptic reading* or *grammalepsy*. Grammalepsis, the sudden grasp of grammé is what is required for language to exist.

Bots have begun, since the mid 2010s, to grasp correspondent grammé in a quasi-socialized manner. We can acknowledge this behavior as humanoid because it shares the same embodiment in aurality that made us language animals in the "first place." The networked systems that underlie these bots provide us, simultaneously, with the same affordances – of archive, indexed access to this archive, and thus hypomnesic memory – that writing granted civilization. This is a remarkable convergence. We can make aesthetic language and instantiate it in a system of inscription where, as aurature, it will share and compete with all the civilized affordances of literature. At the same time, our aurature will share the network and compete with an overwhelming volume of humanoid "language" that threatens to foreclose the very possibility of aesthetic linguistic difference.

01.11.2018: Kristin Veel: *Social Media Small Forms*

The discourse of the digital seems inclined towards a vocabulary of the gigantic – from big data analytics to the encyclopaedic and global ambitions of online archival projects. Yet, this monumentality seems to rely on the minute interest in the opposite end of the scale: i.e. the miniscule details of the fragmentary and mundane. In this lecture I will discuss the aesthetic forms found on social media which are often addressed as “netdramas” or “webseries”. Despite playing with the short form encouraged by the attention economy of these platforms and often engaged with “small” issues of the everyday, these forms display a gigantism characterised by a serialisation that can go on seemingly ad infinitum and which relies precisely on the monumental weight they put on the everyday and the uneventful. I will argue that this fosters a flirtatious temporality and storytelling practice connected to a sense of provisional engagement in the now, which designates that the narratives are easily distributed and consumed, demanding no long-term attention span commitment, yet may linger latently and re-appear as subsequent instalment in a serial structure or as re-posts or fan interaction, thus creating a slow-burning narrative drive for human and algorithmic readers alike.

08.11.2018 Anna Nacher: *Between the “gray media” of camera trapping and the technological art practice: towards non-only-human aesthetics of post-digital imaging*

It is no doubt that the production of digital imagery invites the major update of theoretical apparatus: what up until now was perceived solely or primarily as the stable representation of the world, gives way to the image understood in terms of “the continuous actualization of networked data” [Marie & Hoelzl 2015, loc. 146] or “networked terminal” [Marie & Hoelzl 2015, loc. 146]. However, I would like to argue that the analysis of this new visual environment should not be limited to the procedures of data processing, especially considering the condition of post-digitality, where the digital technologies – stripped of the allure of "new" and "exciting" - constitute the common background for everyday activities. [Berry & Dieter 2015]. Such a change in paradigm calls for "an atmospheric, collective and microtemporal model of media", to follow the phrase coined by Mark B.N. Hansen (Hansen, 2013: 72).

I'm going to trace the multifarious distributed agencies involved in the production of post-digital imagery occurring across different ontological realms: physical space, electromagnetic field, animal and plant bodies and the institutional practices of forest management embodied in the specific media infrastructure. One of the examples in this field can be the sensor-based visual monitoring systems (camera trapping), placed out of the urban context and often constituting the basic infrastructure of contemporary forest management (for instance, in the Polish State Forests). Such “gray media” [Goffey & Fuller 2012] uses are often overlooked and omitted from the cultural theory, as exemplified in the otherwise insightful and inspiring recent analysis of “nonhuman vision” by Joanna Zylińska [Zylińska 2017]. On the other side of the spectrum we have the art practice described as techno-ecological practice (Kluitenberg, 2013), of which Ralf Baecker's *Mirage* is one of the best incarnations. Therefore I propose the analysis of such media environment fully acknowledges the complex processuality of the visual objects' production and circulation, including hybrid and distributed agencies situated in the ontologically different realms of materiality and discursivity.

15.11.2018 Rasmus Fleischer: *Spotify and the management of abundance*

Digital culture entails a general tendency towards superabundance. Blame cultural overproduction or the robotic logic of spam; anyway, we are always confronted with too much information, always looking for methods of reducing the range of possible choice, so that it can meet the cognitive limits of the individual human. While the problem of abundance is certainly not new thing in media history, it becomes a defining issue for what digitization means in art and entertainment, for news reporting and academic communication. This becomes evident in the development of streaming media services like Spotify, if one looks beyond the usual success story. Spotify is widely credited for making people pay for music again and saving the music industry from piracy. But what started out as an offering of access to a database of songs, has now transformed to a service centered on the idea of "the right music for every moment" based on combined human/machine curation. Rather than selling music, Spotify now sells the personalized solution to the problem of too much music.

At the same time, the digital media industry is shaped by another kind of abundance – the abundance of venture capital, resulting from the monetary policies implemented ten years ago, in response to the global financial crisis. One result of such financial stimuli have been the booming valuation of technology startups. Spotify, for example, is now valued at 30 billion dollars, yet it has never been close to make a profit. Call it a bubble or not; such valuations anyway set the direction of media history. How then to understand the interplay between financial speculation and cultural abundance? This presentation will approach that question with Spotify as one main example, based on experiences from a transdisciplinary research project centered on this company. It will also discuss alternative practices of curation, aiming to develop what Fleischer has called a "postdigital sensibility" that might resist commodification – or at least let music be something that cannot be subsumed under the pre-defined "moods" of a corporate streaming service. However, the issues raised are in no way limited to the field of music, but rather concern the very status of the individualized consumer of digital commodities.

22.11.2018 Søren Pold og Christian Ulrik Andersen: *The Metainterface – Critical Realism and Design*

The computer interface is both omnipresent and invisible, at once integrated into everyday objects and characterized by hidden exchanges of information between objects. With the current spread of mobile devices, embedded sensors, cloud services, and data capture, a new interface paradigm, the metainterface, arises where data and software disappear from our devices and into the global cloud. The metainterface indicates, that the interface has become more abstract, generalized, but also spatialized in the sense of being ubiquitous, mobile, urban and related to the things of our environment. The metainterface is a paradigm, an industry (e.g. Amazon, Google, Apple, Spotify, Netflix, Facebook, etc.) and an art/design practice, which calls for new understandings of art, culture and IT. In our book *The Metainterface* (MIT-Press, 2018), we have developed such understandings in relation to art, literature and culture, and we will present some of this in this talk with a focus on realism and design. We will argue, that a realism of the metainterface is needed to understand what we see (e.g. the data, tools, operations, transactions) combined with how we see it (the metainterface and its software, networks and executions), including how it sees us (how the user/users are captured, datafied, profiled, computed or ‘executed’). In other ways we need a ‘way of seeing’ that goes beyond the visual and integrates the metainterface and its effects. This realism will be discussed with examples from software art and critical interface design.

29.11.2018 Jørn Erslev Andersen: *Aktuelle perspektiver på Asger Jorns kunstteori, sitologi og triolektik*

I 1961 meldte Jørn sig ud af Situationistisk Internationale, som han sammen med Guy Debord var medstifter af i 1957. Han fortsatte derefter i artikler, aktioner og bøger med at udvikle den sitologiske kunstteori, som han påbegyndte i 1960 i en artikel i situationisternes tidsskrift *internationale situationniste* nr. 5. Sitologien, som er en situationslære, udgør sammen med hans triolektik en af de mest egensindige, perspektivrige og stadigvæk aktuelle kunst- og aktionsteorier i nyere dansk og international kunsthistorie, som ikke tidligere har været behandlet i Jørnreceptionen. Han arbejdede intenst med den frem til ca. 1965 i regi af Institut for Sammenlignende Vandalisme. I 1968 blev projektet endegyldigt afsluttet med det patafysiske hovedværk *La langue verte et la cuite*, som han sammen med Noël Arnaud udgav i Paris umiddelbart efter studenteroprøret.

Foredraget vil introducere til dette og give bud på aktualiserende perspektiver heraf, samt foreslå nye forståelser af hans kunst fra perioden med fokus på portrættet fra 1960 af filosofen og videnskabsmanden Gaston Bachelard. Maleriet er på Museum Jorn.

13.12.2018 Alexandra Walsham: *Converting the Cross: Monuments, Memory and Time in Post-Reformation England*

This lecture will examine the afterlives of churchyard, wayside and market crosses in post-Reformation England. It will explore how they were implicated in successive phases of the Protestant war against idols, alongside the manner in which many were recycled for a range of alternative purposes. Approaching these objects as palimpsests, it probes the new layers of meaning they acquired as they were modified and the contested legacies they left to the generations that inherited them. Particular attention is paid to the phenomenon of transforming decapitated crosses into sundials, and to the relationship between this and the reconfiguration of traditional regimes of liturgical and spiritual time. It will be suggested that converted crosses not merely illuminate the interconnections between memory and materiality, space and temporality, in post-Reformation culture. They also offer insight into the evolving concept of the 'monument' itself. They afford a glimpse of the process by which things designed to provoke remembrance became things worthy of preservation as historic artefacts themselves. They became signposts to a disappearing past.

- Rebecca Schneider** Professor in the Department of Theatre Arts and Performance Studies, Browns University. She teaches performance studies, theater history, and theories of intermedia. She is the author of *Theatre and History* (Palgrave 2014), *Performing Remains: Art and War in Times of Theatrical Reenactment* (Routledge 2011) and *The Explicit Body in Performance* (Routledge, 1997). With Jussi Parikka she is the author of *Remain(s)*, forthcoming with MIT Press.
- Andreas Broeckmann** Art historian and curator, Berlin. Currently Visiting Professor for Art History and Media Theory at the Academy of Fine Arts, Leipzig (HGB - Hochschule für Grafik und Buchkunst, 2017-2019). From 2011-2016 he directed the *Leuphana Arts Program* of Leuphana University Lüneburg. He was the Founding Director of the *Dortmunder U - Centre for Art and Creativity* (2009-2011) and has curated exhibitions and festivals in major European venues, incl. *transmediale* and *ISEA2010 RUHR*. He holds a PhD in Art History from the University of East Anglia, Norwich/UK, and lectures internationally about the history of modern art, media theory, machine aesthetics, and digital culture. He is the author of *Machine Art in the Twentieth Century* (MIT-Press, 2016).
- John Cayley** Writer, theorist, and pioneering maker of language art in programmable media. Professor of Literary Arts, Brown University. Apart from more or less conventional poetry and translation, he has explored dynamic and ambient poetics, text generation, transliteral morphing, aestheticized vectors of reading, and transactive synthetic language. Today, he composes as much for reading in aurality as in visuality. As Professor of Literary Arts at Brown University, Cayley directs a graduate program in Digital Language Arts. A book of his selected essays on digital language art, *Grammalepsy*, is published by Bloomsbury, September, 2018.
- Kristin Veel** Associate Professor at the Department of Arts and Cultural Studies, University of Copenhagen. Her research focuses on the impact of digital technology on the contemporary cultural imagination. She is PI of the research project *Uncertain Archives: Adapting Cultural Theories of the Archive to Understand the Risks and Potentials of Big Data* (www.uncertainarchives.dk). She has published the monograph *Narrative Negotiations: Information Structures in Literary Fiction* (Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2009) and is co-editor of several collected volumes and journal issues, most recently the special issue of *Digital Creativity* 'The Uncertain Image' (2017).
- Anna Nacher** Associate professor at the Institute of Audiovisual Arts, Jagiellonian University, Kraków, Poland. She is currently pursuing a 3-year long research project on the post-digital imagery ("The aesthetics of post-digital imagery: between new materialism and object-oriented philosophy", grant from Polish National Science Centre). The author of three books in Polish, the newest one published in 2016 focuses on the locative media imagery. A reworked version of one chapter has been published as "Internet of things and automation of imaging: beyond representationalism" in "communication+1", vol. 5 (2016). Other publications include chapters in edited volumes: *The creative process as a „dance of agency” – Shelley Jackson’s „Snow”: performing literary text with elements* [in:] *Digital Media and Textuality. From Creation to Archiving*, ed. Daniela Cortes-Maduro, Transcript Verlag, Bielefeld 2017; *Mashup as paratextual practice: beyond digital objects (in the age of networked media)*, [in:] N. Desrochers, D. Apollon (eds.), *Examining Paratextual Theory and its Application in Digital Culture*, Information Science Reference, IGI Global 2014; *Stelarc and His Experiential Machinarium* [in:] R. W. Kluszczyński (ed.), *STELARC: Meat, Metal & Code / Contestable Chimeras*, Gdańsk 2014.

- Rasmus Fleischer** Postdoctoral researcher, Department of Economic History, Stockholm University, essayist. His research interests include media history, cultural economy and the interplay between digitization, financialization and surveillance. He was involved in the anti-copyright group Piratbyrå (2003–2009) and has been a frequent speaker at conferences like Transmediale. He has written *The Political Economy of Music: Sound Media, Legislation and the Defense of Live Music, 1925-2000*, 2012 and is the co-author of two new books on Spotify.
- Christian Ulrik Andersen** Associate Professor at Aarhus University, Department of Digital Design and Information Studies. Inspired by network and software culture his research addresses the intersection between software and cultural performativity. In particular, he addresses the notion of »interface criticism« as performed in a variety of design and arts practices. The outcome is found in various articles and books, including »The Metainteface – The Art of Platforms, Cities and Clouds«, MIT Press 2018 (co-authored with Søren Pold) as well as a number of projects that address issues of tactical and free research; including the online journal APRJA, together with Geoff Cox, and a Peer-Reviewed Newspaper in collaboration with transmediale festival for art and digital culture, Berlin.
- Søren Bro Pold** Associate Professor, Information Science, Aarhus University. He has published on digital and media aesthetics – from the 19th century panorama to the interface in its different forms, e.g. on electronic literature, net art, software art, creative software, urban, mobile and cloud interfaces, activism, surveillance culture and digital culture. His main research field is interface criticism which discusses the role and the development of the interface for art, literature, aesthetics, culture and IT. Together with Christian Ulrik Andersen he edited the anthology "Interface Criticism" (2011) and published "The Metainteface – The Art of Platforms, Cities and Clouds" (MIT-Press, 2018). In relation to electronic literature, he has collaborated with libraries in several projects, e.g. on developing the installation *The Poetry Machine*, which has been showed at many libraries across Denmark and internationally.
- Jørn Erslev Andersen** Lektor lic.phil. i Æstetik og Kultur ved Aarhus Universitet. Han har skrevet om Jorns kunstteori 1960-68 i monografien *At sætte i situation. Asger Jorns triolektik & sitologi* (Antipyrene 2017) og i artikler i *Standart* (2017), *Slagmark* (2018) og *Passepartout* (2018), samt i et bogprojekt om eksperimenterende kunst 1968-2018 planlagt til udg. 2018/19 på Antipyrene.
- Alexandra Walsham** Professor of Modern History at the University of Cambridge and a Fellow of Trinity College and the British Academy. She has published extensively on the early modern religious and cultural history of Britain and her books include *Providence in Early Modern England* (1999), *Charitable Hatred: Tolerance and Intolerance in England 1500-1700* (Manchester, 2006), and *The Reformation of the Landscape: Religion, Identity and Memory in Early Modern Britain and Ireland* (2011), which won the Wolfson Prize for History. Her current research, supported by a Leverhulme Trust Major Research Fellowship for 2015-2018, is on 'The Reformation of the Generations: Age, Ancestry and Memory in England, c. 1500-1700' and was the subject of the Ford Lectures in British History delivered at the University of Oxford earlier this year. She is the Principal Investigator of the ARHC funded project, 'Remembering the Reformation', based jointly at the Universities of Cambridge and York. She also serves as co-editor of the journal *Past and Present*.