

Book Series Proposal

TECHNOLOGIES OF LIVED ABSTRACTION

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THE CONTEXT

Art/Science and philosophy

Cross-fertilization among art, philosophy and science has been a constant throughout Western cultural history. Older strata of this mutual influence are still visible today, for example in the familiar gesture of a physicist professing skepticism toward a new theoretical synthesis on the aesthetic grounds that it lacks “beauty” or “elegance.” The arts, of course, long ago moved beyond the notion implied in this comment that “good” form is harmonious form – or for that matter the idea that what is at stake in art is the production of good formal criteria for judging it. But they have done so in no small part under return influence from the sciences themselves. Twentieth-century scientific paradigms from relativity to complexity and chaos theory have significantly shaped the contemporary cultural landscape. In particular, the emergence model used in complexity theory’s order-out-of-chaos approach has reinforced a long-term realignment of artistic theory and practice away from questions of aesthetic judgment and toward the question of the production of the new – from good form to *new forms* (at the limit, in bio-art, of life itself).

This realigning of the creative question on the production of the new has reenergized the relevance of art for innovative political practice, and implicated it in general in issues surrounding the ethics of invention. Among the repercussions has been an intense debate in certain quarters around the newly compelling idea of an “ethico-aesthetic paradigm” for the political (a term coined by Félix Guattari). The reference to invention immediately invokes the question of technology. It is perhaps in the area of technology and culture, focusing on the new digital media, that the cross-fertilization between creative activity and (in this case applied) science has seen its most concerted development. An entire interdisciplinary domain has grown up around this juncture, comprising not only single-author books but book series, journals, conferences, art festivals, academic and community associations, and in some cases frameworks for private-public partnerships aimed at fostering linkages into the “culture industries” (the models for this being the MIT Media Lab in the US and Hexagram in Canada). These initiatives are all responding to what seems today to be self-evident: that the global economy itself is realigning on what has been called “immaterial” goods and labor. The idea is that the process of innovative production is becoming its own product, as consumers increasingly consume not simple objects but active platforms for creative productivity (software being the simplest example). These platforms often expand into matrices for affinity-based community formation (virtual communities, peer-to-peer networks, distance collaboration through telepresence, etc.). Within these groupings new practices of expression grow which rework individuals’ sense of themselves ... From good form to new form to new forms of self-defining *expression*. A common framework for understanding this epochal cultural drift or shift has been in terms of “autopoiesis,” meaning self-production (again a borrowing from science, in this case biology). This yolking of technologically bootstrapped expression to a general economy of self-production makes a case for an ethico-aesthetic paradigm for the political in the most expanded sense, on a level with globalization.

All signs point to art and science having lived to see the day when C.P. Snow's dire mid-twentieth century diagnosis of a "two cultures" split between hard science and the humanities is beginning, at least, to be overcome. But what of philosophy? Initiatives situated at the intersection of art and technoscience often give it short shrift. The scientist's proverbial disdain for the "merely" philosophical is echoed by received artistic wisdom valuing the concrete over the "merely" abstract, assumed to be the sole province of philosophy. Yet the meaning of the "concrete" may well have changed as what seems most compellingly close to hand shifts from the objective to the interactive. Interactivity may be intangible as such. But it is still manipulable. It *is* manipulability. If it qualifies as an "immaterial" good, it does so "concretely," by offering itself as the infinitely manipulable (in principle). The priority placed on interactivity tends to solder the connection between art and technoscience at philosophy's expense, by making the principle of interlinkage cleave to the instrumental. The mother of all disciplines, from which both aesthetics and the sciences individuated, is left in its speculative rocking chair to miss all the excitement.

The relative sidelining of philosophy from the creative process is, culturally and historically, an anomaly. From the early modern period, when philosophy first started to separate as an independent domain, it has been a thoroughly symbiotic companion of aesthetic theory and creative practice. This was the situation at least through the color field painters of the 1950s and the non-objective art movement of the 1960s, when it still seemed natural for an experimental artist like Robert Irwin to frame an exhibit with a quote from A.N. Whitehead.

THE PROJECT Back into the Mix

The premise of this book series is that time is right for a reconvergence. Our sense is that this reconvergence is already happening, in many cases taking back up where the connection left off, with thinkers like Whitehead, Bergson, James, Merleau-Ponty and other phenomenologists making a dramatic return, by way of the Continental thought of the intervening period (most influentially Deleuze/Guattari and Derrida).

It is important not to overstate the falling out between creative practice and philosophy. It was less a clean break that occurred than a change in emphasis. In the English speaking world particularly, the center of gravity shifted for a period toward what came to be known generically as Theory, an umbrella term used to denote a wide range of critical theoretical practices whose most salient shared characteristic is their thoroughly interdisciplinary cast. Behind many of these currents lies a shared assumption that to theorize is to make explicit the social and historical *determinants* of cultural production. These determinants were most commonly construed as linguistic or semiotic. In contrast, both empirical and rationalist philosophy from Hume and Kant had taken as its sphere the *perceptual* and experiential. In Theory, when the experiential was invoked, it was generally in consonance with the contemporaneous anti-abstract turn in art (notable exceptions include the *October* group publishing at MIT Press). Abstract came to be seen as the opposite of the intensely experienced. It became synonymous with socially restrictive representation and ideologically imposing social encoding – or the breakdown of these in the paralysis of the simulation of order. In any case, it was the enemy of life and lived experience. These could only be regained by *performing* one's pre-determined positioning in a such a way as to subvert it and open new possibilities. The theoretical privileging of performativity dovetailed with the growing importance of interactivity in creative production.

In spite of sharing a friend in performativity, Theory's relation to creative practice was fraught. It was widely perceived as *applying* itself to art practice and cultural production from the outside in a way that it became itself a restrictive representation or ideologically imposing social encoding of its object of analysis. In many academic and art institutions this tension ossified into a strict compartmentalization between creative practice and theoretical analysis. This division has recently come to be challenged by the convergence between creative practice and technoscience described in the last section, which is giving rise to a fast-developing domain of hybrid theory-practice to which the name "research-creation" is sometimes given.

The book series we are proposing situates itself in this double context : on the one hand research-creation at the intersection of art and science, and on the other the rich interdisciplinary domain of inquiry opened by Theory as it has moved toward notions of performativity resonant with the research-creation's emphasis on interactivity. The project is to add philosophy back into the mix in a new and sustained way. The goal is to foster new avenues for thought and experimentation that are already present as compelling tendencies, but in our opinion can only reach full expression if boosted by an active philosophical reengagement. The kind of philosophical participation necessary will itself be a theme of the series, and will define an organizing thread running through its publications. The publications, however, will *not* be limited to works explicitly defining themselves as primarily philosophical in orientation. This is because philosophy will be approached neither as a judge of good form as in traditional aesthetic theory, nor a guarantor of instrumental use-value as in the currently dominant research-creation paradigm, nor as in Theory as a critical unveiler of hidden social power determinants, but rather as a creative endeavor in its own right. Philosophy will be approached as the practice of creating concepts, on the theory that it can connect with other practices on a shared ground of creativity in a way that allows them to mutually reinforce and prolong each other. In other words, philosophy will be performed as a *creative factor* that is implicitly or potentially already at work in other domains of practice. The corollary to the idea that philosophy is potentially productive creatively is the notion that creative production is proto-philosophical. Any practice of producing the new is a *thinking in action* of what cannot yet be fully expressed conceptually, for the simple reason that it has not yet fully emerged. In other words, philosophy holds pragmatic potential because its abstract creation of concepts can foreshadow new practices, and pragmatic experimentation and invention embryonically practice philosophy because they concretize thoughts yet to come.

It is in this *complementarity* between abstraction (as jump-starting the production of new possibilities for action) and concretization (as enacting future possibilities of abstract thought) that the series locate itself. The ways in which the works included in the series produce or perform this complementarity will vary, as will the discipline or sphere of practice they may identify themselves as most closely allied with. The books chosen or developed for the series will have a necessarily interdisciplinary profile, even when they take a given domain as their main base of operations.

The series will seek and develop interdisciplinary works which address one, or ideally more than one, of the following interwoven issues :

- 1) *Rethinking the relation between the concrete and the abstract.* Works will be sought which do this from the particular angle of a specific practice or tendency actively involved in the contexts described above. This rethinking entails a reassessment of

what is meant by “the new.” The most fertile ground for this reassessment is in relation to the concept of the virtual and its conceptual cognates, the possible and the potential. The strategic value of the concept of the virtual lies in the fact that it has been a key term in both new media and philosophy. Given the centrality of performativity and interactivity, works which approach these questions through a focus on movement and gesture will be especially sought after. New forms of empiricism and pragmatism suggested by placing the concrete and the abstract back into active continuity with each other will be of special interest (for example, those going by the names of “radical” or “superior” empiricism and “speculative pragmatism,” both of which are undergoing a renaissance). Approaches to these problems naturally lend themselves to a reconsideration of what is “new” in “new media” or “emergent” in “emergent technologies.” Work bringing earlier periods of art theory and older forms of art practice back into productive contact with contemporary creative activity will be a strong priority, with a view to overcoming the sometimes apocalyptic language – such as announcements of the “death” of painting or dance or photography – encouraged by the too-eager assumption of a total break between the “old” and the “new.”

- 2) *Moving beyond the duality between lived intensity and abstraction, or between perception and conception.* Central to this is an engagement with perceptual and cognitive studies together with the philosophy of experience. The currents in cognitive studies most fertile for this are the ecological school of perception studies (Gibson), embodied cognition (Varela), and the enactive theory of perception (Noë), all of which renounce representative or pictorial models in favor of “direct perception.” By these accounts, the directness of perception extends to what is not objectively present (time, causality, relation, becoming). From this angle, they rejoin the analytic of the abstract or virtual, placing it at the very heart of lived experience. The series will seek works which carry some of the insights of these schools, as well as of present-day neuroscience, into a dialogue with creative practice and issues in research-creation. The interrelations between the senses, the nature of lesser known modalities of experience such as proprioception, the nature of amodal or nonsensuous perception, the role of movement in perception, and the workings of affect will be key areas to look at. The lines of philosophical thought that might contribute to this strand in their contemporary incarnations are phenomenology (as centering on Merleau-Ponty), philosophies of expression (as flowing from Spinoza and Leibniz), and the philosophy of nature as experience (as culminating in Whitehead).
- 3) *Thinking the relation between the body and technology as intrinsic rather than external.* During the rise of the new media in the 1990s and early 2000s the model of prosthesis was widely used as a framework for understanding the relation between the body and technology. The strength of the prosthesis model is to take seriously the fact that the life of the body changes qualitatively through its technical enhancements. In other words, new perceptual worlds are opened. Its weakness is to conceive of this becoming of embodied experience in terms of “extension,” in other words as operating through a process of external add-on. An exciting new body of work is rethinking this question in ways which posit an intrinsic relation between the body and technology. In this view, it is part of the definition of the body to be open to extensions which qualitatively alter the form of its life and experience – beginning with the senses themselves (or in the case of Bergsonism, even beginning with matter). These currents of thought and experimentation which make becoming the essence of the body and

place the senses and technology in fundamental continuity with one another are most often inspired by the Derridean keyword of “originary technicity” and/or Gilbert Simondon’s model of “individuation.” Contemporary names include Bernard Steigler and Peter Sloterdijk, among others. This line of inquiry has direct consequences for new media art theory and practice and research-creation (including in areas such as robotics). The series will seek new work further developing these currents in original ways.

- 4) *Inventing ethico-aesthetic paradigms for creative practice and politics.* Broadly, this includes all approaches beginning from the presupposition of a primacy of relation. In art practice, Rafael Lozano-Hemmer’s “relational architecture” provides a useful example. Many political practices and conceptions allied with the rethinking and updating of Spinoza’s “multitude” fall into this category. This line of thought has generated intense activity in a number of domains following upon the success of Negri/Hardt’s *Empire*, vying and hybridizing with approaches working with notions of “collective individuation” (Simondon), micropolitics (Gabriel Tarde, Deleuze/Guattari), and cosmopolitics (Isabelle Stengers). The series will seek original contributions in this and related areas. The emphasis will be works growing out of particular creative practices, or those operating in overview toward a reconceptualization of the nature of research-creation and its place in the global political economy.

THE PLAN

1. Editor generated content

The series editors will generate a certain number of volumes to build a core around which other contributions will constellate. The idea behind this editor-generated core is to suggest orientations and tendencies -- clearly enough to define a series brand identity and attract work by outside contributors, but open-ended enough that the brand identity is not bought at the expense of diversity and the unexpected. Toward this end, the two series editors will propose their next monographs for inclusion in the series. Brian Massumi’s contribution, entitled *Architectures of the Unforeseen*, develops the connection between perception and conception, approaching emergent forms of experience associated with the new media from a “radical empirical” perspective. Erin Manning’s *Moving the Relation: Between Painting, Dance and the Cinematic* explores the relational nexus between movement and sense-perception through a creative engagement with a series of artistic practices. It foregrounds the way in which art practice can generate new space-times of experience that respond to Spinoza’s open question of “what a body can do” performatively, by moving the body toward qualitatively new figures of embodiment. (Specific proposals for these books are appended to this series application).

The editors will in addition generate tightly conceived collective volumes growing out of a series of experimental research-creation encounters that we are hosting at the Society for Arts and Technology in Montreal. For each of these we will invite two special guest participants whose work provides a common reference to help catalyze the interactions during the event. The remaining participants, numbering between 30 and 40, are chosen from among responses to an open call for participation. The first of these events, “Dancing the Virtual,” was held in May 2006. Participants included choreographers, dancers, sound artists, philosophers, interactive installation artists, and cultural theorists from four continents. The invited

participants were preeminent Portuguese philosopher Jose Gil (New University of Lisbon), Australian new media theorist and practitioner Andrew Murphie (University of New South Wales), and emergent movement theorist Stamatia Portanova (University of East London). Growing out of the intense interaction of the event we have pursued an continuing dialogue with Jose Gil, the author of many volumes of philosophy, political theory and aesthetic theory which collectively earned him a place on the French weekly magazine *Le nouvel observateur*'s list of the 100 most influential cultural figures of our time. The first collective volume we will propose for the series will present an original essay by Jose Gil inspired by the event and its follow-up, accompanied by a written piece that Gil and the two series editors will develop from extensive exploratory discussions. These live discussions will be transcribed and then collaboratively reworked into an essay that combines the accessibility of in-person conversation with the conceptual precision of the written text. These two essays may be supplemented by a third essay from one of the other two invited participants to the event, or another participant from among the group. The goal is to provide cutting-edge thought growing out of genuine conceptual collaboration in an inviting, small-format product that strives for accessibility without sacrificing quality and complexity of conceptual content. The volume pivoting on the work of Gil will be entitled *The Paradoxical Body*. It will explore Gil's innovative theories of the connection between movement and virtuality as understood through dance, most extensively developed thus far in a book forthcoming in French entitled *Le mouvement total*. Our book will take off from this work, extending toward movement practices Gil does not deal with in his solo work, and toward the new media (in dance practice and beyond).

A small-format book of hybrid or conceptually experimental nature will be generated from each of the two similarly conceived sequels we are planning to "Dancing the Virtual." The next event will be entitled "Housing the Body/Dressing the Environment" (June 2007). This event focus on responsive environments, soft architecture, and architecture proper, with a special emphasis on fabric and textile and the conceptual models of weaving and topological folding they suggest. Invited participants will be Greg Lynn of UCLA Architecture, Eyal Weizman of the Goldsmiths University School of Architecture, and interactive cinema artist Toni Dove. The third event, scheduled for June 2008, is on renewing the concepts and practices of micropolitics. Entitled "The Society of Molecules," it will feature Michael Hardt and Isabelle Stengers and one other invited participant yet to be chosen.

A fourth event to be held in June 2009 will be a research-creation festival capping the series of event. All of the theorists and creative practitioners who attended the first three events will be invited back to present research-creation work, with a priority given to collaborations growing out of the events. New media developer and theorist Sher Doruff (Waag Society, Holland) will conceive and edit a volume that will present work from the festival and related writing. She will collaborate on this project with Stamatia Portanova (New Media, University of East London) and Nadine Asswad (Fine Arts, Concordia University, Montreal).

French translations of the four volumes generated from the research-creation events will be prepared and simultaneously published by the Society for Arts and Technology in Montreal as part of the launch of a French-language publishing endeavor.

2. Content from Outside Contributors

The editors will also accept outside contributions of original monographs. These will form the bulk of volumes published in the series. Some of the manuscripts will be solicited, others

received in response to an open call for manuscripts that will be disseminated by word of mouth, through the Montreal research-creation events, selectively on the internet, and through MIT Press channels. The first invited manuscript we will propose is from prominent philosopher and cultural theorist Steven Shaviro, whose previous titles include *The Cinematic Body*, *Doom Patrols* and *Connected, or What it Means to Live in the Network Society*. The book we would like to solicit for this series is entitled *Beauty Lies in the Eye: Kant, Whitehead, Deleuze and Aesthetics Today*. It undertakes a radical reconsideration of the concept of the beautiful from a postmodern perspective inspired by innovative readings of three of the thinkers around whose work many of the philosophical issues addressed in the series will doubtless pivot. Its reconceptualization of the aesthetic will contribute to defining the new potentials in this area that the series is intended to explore, and because of this it will be a key text for us. (An abstract for this title is appended to this series proposal)

3. Timing and Quantity

We envision 2-4 titles a year. The target for the submission of the first completed manuscripts will be September 2007.

THE AUDIENCE

The series addresses itself to an interdisciplinary audience stretching across such fields as: art and architectural theory, new media studies, dance and performance studies, contemporary philosophy, perception and cognitive studies, science studies, and political philosophy in the context of globalization. Although the range of fields from which we would like to draw is broad, the appeal is in fact carefully focused. The intent is to address certain rising tendencies in each field and to place them into communication with each other in a way that brings to fuller expression affinities among them that are already stirring. It is hoped that this new convergence will contribute to renewing an interdisciplinary arena that is already long established in academic practice and publishing. MIT Press is without question the right venue for this project. It is the recognized leader in a number of the key fields on which the series will draw. Through the series we would like to consolidate a new grouping of existing MIT Press readers around emerging issues of relevance to a number of disciplines, as well as to attract new readers to the fold.

EDITOR BIOS

Brian Massumi (www.brianmassumi.com) is the founding editor of an interdisciplinary book series active at the University of Minnesota Press from 1992-2004. The Theory Out of Bounds Series was co-edited by Michael Hardt and Sandra Buckley. It published 28 volumes, mixing original monographs, edited volumes, and translations (www.upress.umn.edu/byseries/toob.html). Among its contributors are authors who were at the time relatively little known to the English speaking world but are now central figures, such as Giorgio Agamben, Alain Badiou, Toni Negri, Paolo Virno, and Isabelle Stengers. Its project was to create a presence for work developing promising theoretical currents which at the time had yet to make their mark (in particular those flowing from Spinozist philosophy, Simondon's philosophy of science, Deleuze/Guattari, and recent Italian political philosophy). These currents now form an established part of the common academic ground from which many contemporary writers and analysts operate, and from which the present series will take lauch. Massumi first book, *User's Guide to Capitalism and Schizophrenia: Deviations from*

Deleuze and Guattari, is an MIT Press title now in its fifth printing. He is also the author of *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* (Duke University) and editor of *The Politics of Everyday Fear* (Minnesota) and *A Shock to Thought: Expression After Deleuze and Guattari* (Routledge). He teaches in the Université de Montréal Communications Department, where he directs a research group entitled the Workshop in Radical Empiricism.

Erin Manning (www.erinmanning.lunarpages.net, www.senselab.co) is a philosopher, visual artist and dancer. She is assistant professor in Studio Art and Film Studies, Concordia University. She directs The Sense Lab, an interdisciplinary research-creation laboratory that promotes the theoretical and artistic exploration of the sensing body in movement. The sensing body in movement is understood as a relational body. The senses are not seen as pre-given biological apparatuses, but as veritable technologies of life that continuously reinvent what the body is and can do, through its interactions with its designed environment and the technical objects populating it. Her research is intimately connected to her work at The Sense Lab. Her first book, *Ephemeral Territories: Representing Nation, Home and Identity in Canada* (Minnesota UP, 2003), explored how artists who are second-generation immigrants to Canada challenge the concept of home through their work. In *Politics of Touch: Sense, Movement, Sovereignty* (Minnesota UP, 2006), Manning extends this problematic to explore the ways in which the sensing body in movement inventively extricates itself from political philosophies that rely on concepts such as state sovereignty. Research-creation is at the heart of both of these inquiries: the question posed is how art practice provokes new ways of thinking, and ultimately, of living in the world. Her current work takes this problematic one step further by engaging specifically with the movement of the body, asking how new technologies reconfigure the sensing body in movement. In her artwork, Manning explores the potential of the body, asking the Spinozan question: “what can a body *do*?” She is interested in the ways in which bodies creatively and self-creatively express themselves, qualitatively changing the space-times they inhabit. Her preoccupations as a dancer are along similar lines. Currently she is exploring the concept of the movement-interval, an insubstantial “third” that holds the bodies of two dancers together in shared momentum, joining them dynamically across their separation. This enveloping interval composes what she is calling a virtual body (or a movement of thought). The virtual body is best conceived in terms of a directly relational movement of which the individual movements of the separate bodies involved are synchronous expressions.