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## **New Philosophy For New Media**

by Mark B.N. Hansen  
The MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 2004  
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While reading Mark B.N. Hansen's "*New Philosophy For New Media*", I more and more realized the strangeness of a situation in which an author who publishes a book under this title, with the agenda of reinstating Bergsonian bodily affection and who does that, not in the last place thanks to digital media, despite his insisting on the digital being something inhuman, alien, not accessible. From a media art point of view, it is quite a peculiar book and being an artist, I can't ignore that—so this response in the end defined my point-of-view for the purpose of this review.

*New Philosophy For New Media* builds on previous publications by the same author, extending and deepening much of what he has published there. In this review, however, I have deliberately chosen not to go into his theoretical exploration but to look at the book from a point of view of (new) media art. The reason for this approach is that I believe Hansen has a fundamental problem accepting anything that is digital, as I will show below, and this stance is reflected in his fairly typical choice of art works featured in the book. This, too, I will attempt to explain below. It goes without saying that my criticism does not concern the quality of the artworks presented but rather their representational nature and, specifically, the role this choice has in the narrative.

Hansen's qualifications of the digital, combined with the type of artworks included in the book and those specifically rejected, leads to an interpretation of the book as an attempt to surface or sur-face the digital with—literally—a human face.

In the somewhat unfortunately titled *New Philosophy For New Media*, Mark Hansen sets out to 're-inject' Bergsonian bodily affection into Deleuze's reworking of Bergson's understanding of the image. To achieve this re-injection of Bergsonian affective embodiment, in Hansen's own words, he interweaves three narratives:

"First: how the image comes to encompass the entire process of its own embodied formation or creation, what I shall call the digital image. Second: how the body acquires a newly specified function within the regime of the digital image, namely, the function of filtering information in order to create images. And third: how this function of the body gives rise to an affective "supplement" to the act of perceiving the image, that is, a properly haptic domain of sensation and, specifically, the sensory experience of the "warped space" of the body itself." (p.12)

Hansen develops his argument, as Mark Poster describes it on the back cover of the book "in a rigorous, systematic manner". The argument is sufficiently systematic to be put in a table at the end of the introduction, listing separate columns for "Theoretical aim",

"Body", "Image" and "Artwork" on a chapter by chapter basis. The relevant sections of this table are throughout the rest of the book repeated at the start of each chapter as if to function as road-signs, guiding the reader in the right direction and reminding us of the task at hand.

In his introduction, Hansen starts by declaring the digital image as free of material dependency; it is a set of information that can be rendered perceptible through various technologies and ultimately through human embodiment. He defines the digital image as an image that "finds no instantiation in a privileged technical form" but rather "demarcates the very process through which the body, in conjunction with various apparatuses for rendering information perceptible, gives form to or in-forms information" (p. 10).

Once the image is freed of its materiality, the bodily perception, and more specifically, affective bodily perception finds itself at the centre of the digital image. Perhaps realizing that with this definition, every collection of random (digital) numerics becomes a 'digital image', Hansen then confronts this "problematic of framing once the (technical) image has been exploded into a limitless flux of information" (p. 84) by bringing in British cyberneticist Donald MacKay and French bio-philosopher Raymond Ruyer to insist, through a looped reasoning that information can only be information (by receiving meaning) through bodily framing, on what is nothing less than the equation of information with meaning and, as is exemplified by almost every artwork discussed in the rest of the book, with a representation of the human body.

From there on all new media artwork Hansen refers to either involves physical, bodily, haptic contact between the artwork and the visitor (Jeffrey Shaw's interactive installations in several chapters in the book, the various VR installations in chapter five) or, are representations of the human body (Geisler's *Dream of Beauty 2.0*, Feingold's *If/Then* and *Sinking Feeling*, *Huge Harry*, and others in chapter four, Lazzarini's *Skulls* in chapter six) or, are literal representations of the bodily expression of emotions (Viola's *Quintet for the Astonished* in chapter 7). Every possible exception to this representation of the body is left out and/or discarded, along with among others Kittler, as "too technocratic". (See, for example, Hansen's rejection of Kessler's *Transverser* and Reinhart and Wiedrich's *TX-Transform* in chapter seven.)

In Hansen's definition of new media, the ultimate "affective embodiment" of the digital image is Viola's *Quintet for the Astonished* (chapter seven). A work that has been shot using optical 35mm film at a high frame rate, which has subsequently been slowed down in the transfer to digital video tape to extend the representational time, and, thereby, extends the impact of several persons expressing strong emotional feelings. The slow-motion in the final piece was almost entirely achieved by the difference between frame rate at the time of recording and playback speed at the time of transferral of the film material to video tape—with only "tweaks" to the playback speed being done in the digital domain—and, thus, the transformation of the image takes almost entirely place in a mechanical and optical domain.

Perhaps key to this all is Hansen's repeated insistence on the digital domain as "the radically inhuman universe of information" (p. 138), "the weird logic and topology of the computer" (p. 202), "an alien space that is digital" (p. 206), "radically uninhabitable" (p. 208), among others. In this context, Hansen's discussion of the DFI (Digital Facial Image) as a replacement of what he refers to as "the profoundly impoverished, yet currently predominant model of the Human Computer Interface (HCI)" (p. 129) becomes almost a nostalgic longing to give a more, literally, human face to this "alien domain". In the process, Hansen fails to acknowledge the historical context, tradition, and relevance thereof, that the works he describes in relation to this DFI (Geisler's *Dream of Beauty 2.0*, Courchesne's *Portrait No. 1* and d'Urbano's *Touch Me*) come from and refer to—a history that finds its way back through early video art and experimental cinema and has everything to do with a questioning of the human relation to technological representation and very little with the digital specifically. What a lot of these early video-art experiments from especially the late 1960s and early 1970s have attempted, was an exploration of the machine and the image it produces as a physical manifestation.

Undoubtedly, for those who are interested in the purely theoretical side of the narrative, Hansen's insistence on bodily affection renders a fascinating read. However, for those of us who are interested in theories of (new) media art, this book has, despite the double-nousness of its title, very little to offer. In the way that Bergson almost a century ago expressed his ideas in terms of "images" and for Deleuze a few decades ago everything was "cinema", Hansen has

updated the terminology to the more contemporary "new media".

Hansen's theoretical explorations would have been more interesting from a new media point of view if he would have not shun away from everything that is not a literal portrayal of the human body but would have explored Bergsonian affective bodily framing in works like for example Maurizio Bolognini's *Sealed Computers*—a work that consists of 200 computers connected in a digital network. Each computer generates, manipulates, and forwards digital images. None of these computers is connected to an output device, consequently none of the images will ever be seen by human bodies.

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