

PREFACE

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The Post-Media Lab's first life-cycle, which this book documents, ran from September 2011 to February 2014. Its focus was the potential for 'post-media' practices. Its inspiration and name are derived from Félix Guattari's concept of those social and media assemblages which unleash new forms of collective expression and experience. Retrieving Guattari's concept of post-media, which can be found running through 30 years of new media practice and theory, the Post-Media Lab (PML) offered a space in which to reflect and operate upon the networked, mediatised society. Not regarding this as a purely theoretical endeavour, it also drew on the provocative notion of 'post-media operators' developed by Howard Slater through which he linked mediatised (sub-)cultures of all sorts with a programmatics of non-conformist practice.

The PML's activity was centred around a supported programme of visiting fellows – artists, activists, technologists, film-makers, theorists and post-media operators – and the production of a series of associated, international public events and publishing projects. Fellows were invited to join one of four research themes organised in six-month cycles. The themes formed the spine through which related events took shape and therefore also structure the chapters of this book. They are: Digital Networks: Connecting People Apart; The Subsumption of Sociality; The Question of Organisation After Networks; and Life vs. Object, Comrade Things and Alien Life.

As an accompaniment to the fellowship programme and a means to develop its themes in writing, PML co-published a book series together with Mute Books. Claire Fontaine's *The Human Strike Has Already Begun & Other Writings* looked at subsumed subjectivity as the fundamental ground of political resistance. Felix Stalder's *Digital Solidarity* considered how networks remake social struggle and influence social change. *Irrational.org's Traum: A Psychoarchaeologist's Dramaturgy* by the eponymous art collective explored, in multiple fictional registers, the relationship between the administrative, technological, curatorial and emotional conditions of (net)art. And Rodrigo Nunes' *Organisation of the Organisationless* took on the question of how global social movements *move* within networks. Alongside this central axis of activity, the Post-Media Lab also engaged in different events, like Video Vortex #9, and other longer term co-operations. In particular our ongoing work with the transmediale/reSource programme, (sustained with great care by Tatiana Bazzichelli), and a whole ecosystem of Latin-American post-media networks (labSurlab, metareciclagem, Tropixel) all deserve mention.

In the 'post-media era', different content carriers (text, image, audio) recombine in original and unpredictable ways under the levelling

organisation of networked computing that redefines the specificities of each medium. 'Post-media' as a concept was also formulated in antagonism with the emerging framework of post-modernism in the early-1990s, in its emphasis on the production of singularities within conditions of equivalence. It was then revived for the network era in the late-1990s and early-2000s, and for a reconfigured landscape of global geopolitics. To consider the term in its historical development and contemporary vectors, the Lab's first publishing endeavour was the compilation of an anthology eventually published as *Provocative Alloys: A Post-Media Anthology*. A book which brings together early forecasts of post-media practice with analysis by the post Web 2.0 generation, creating rich entanglements of theory, history and practice.

With the growing ubiquity of digital media ushered in by the '90s 'web revolution', and the rise of the 'invisible computer', one might assume that today we are all 'post-media operators'. But this 'media becoming' has in fact rendered the underlying technical and social processes ever more invisible, or at least beyond easy reach. Once again, we are in danger of the media enunciating us, of becoming the media-operated, in tune with the usual doxologies of power. Politically, post-media encourages the building and association of autonomous forms of collectivity within an exploded cultural environment. Such operations release multiple, singularising energies that conflict with hierarchy and centralised monoform broadcast culture in a given local and geopolitical frame.

Our idea was not to simply do research, but to make things, situations, devise tactics, create enunciations. Building apps, making art, developing activist campaigns, writing theory or engineering systems should not happen in isolation but be connected as hybrid practices. Nevertheless, a lot of our output did fall into the categories of production and thought we had initially eschewed, like exhibitions, books and conferences. This division of production was offset, to some degree, by the way we worked across activities in the Lab, so that art exhibitions were curated by activists, artists and philosophers debated tech with hackers, and amateurs became archivists, etc. The diverse specialisms of the participants in each research phase meant that the Lab never fell into one kind of practice. The Lab aimed to build a place where the aesthetic and utopian moments of ubiquitous media could be retrieved, and the multilayered forces and textures of media space were made newly legible. We took up 'post-media' as an inherently critical notion adequate to the media strategies of scenes, movements and collectives – rather than the individualities and normativities produced by commercial

media. In the midst of another wave of hype and massification of network-based technologies, the term seemed to provide a position of criticality over the aggregation of small actors by large monopolies, infrastructural land grabs and powerful private-public institutions.

This tension between the utopian thinking animating the Lab and the limits imposed by the real conditions it unfolded within was also an effect of its funding criteria and the administrative logic we were enmeshed in. The Post-Media Lab was housed within a regional development incubator, funded by the European Regional Development Fund and the State of Lower Saxony. Situated within an EU-funded regional development project at a growing German university, the Lab could be seen as symptom of the European-wide restructuring of education after the Bologna Process.¹ However, the contradiction between the neoliberal hunger for creativity and knowledge development, and its imposition of conditions that attack this inventiveness at its very roots – the pervasive logic of the market – is one that globally afflicts culture, education and ‘knowledge creation’. The fact that Leuphana University has used its EU funding to reinvent itself in the guise of what E.P. Thompson once dubbed the ‘Business University’ is just a local iteration of this ubiquitous logic. If the Post-Media Lab critically engaged this wider landscape in which education and creative practices are subsumed into the logic and form of the market, it did so whilst knowing very well that its own creative and critical labour was always-already precuprated as fodder for indicators, productivity metrics, place branding and reputation economy. Whilst acknowledging that the Lab was not exactly Guattari’s Radio Alice during Bologna’s hot spring of ’77, or the micro-labs that erupted across Europe in the 1990s, (of which Backspace provides an iconic example in this book), this condition of subsumption is also the generalised one in which any and all progressive or resistant thought must find its fissures of opportunity.²

The Lab and its fellows created many memorable moments in which it felt like the psychic container of institutionalisation started to open up. With heartening frequency, dry theoretical conceptions of certain social, political and technical conditions were pierced by the passionate and often self-risking commitment of diverse practitioners. We experienced this in our discussions with Marcell Mars about his attempts to build a truly Public Library at the HAIP festival in Ljubljana (2012). Or Anne Roth’s account of her mounting involvement in privacy campaigns at a conference examining the relationship between social media and social activism at Leuphana University (2011). Or irrational.org’s construction of a woodland

data processing bureau built with wood, charcoal and fire, on the Lüneburg Heath during their Anarchaeology of an Artserver exhibition, December 2013, which worked to break down the assumed neutrality or normalcy of our high-tech world. Or Harry Sanderson's chilling anatomisation of the violence inherent in high-resolution images which caused the weightless slickness of our mediascape to give way, revealing instead a picture of global human and resource exploitation. Or the widening of our geo-political horizons sparked by our exchanges with Aniara Rodado, Felipe Fonseca, Alejo Duque and Karla Brunet that we were lucky enough to experience on both sides of the Atlantic.

Throughout the Lab's course, consistent attention was paid not only to new technologies and their effects but also to the material strata underpinning the intensification of life and work at one end of the 'Big-Data' pipes. If this is evident in this volume (Inigo Wilkins' & Bogdan Dragos' research into high-frequency trading, Sean Dockray's 'fieldnotes from the cloud' and Martin Howse & Jonathan Kemp's computational land art projects), it also permeated many of the conversations and projects from the very beginning of the Lab to the end. Such strata could be glimpsed in early conversations with Graswurzel.tv about mapping brown coal mining (and the resistances this creates), in irrational.org's data archaeological activities, and our final closing conference, Taking Care of Things. The looming environmental question and the intractability of material, human and energetic limits to the current state of technology remains a major challenge to the uncritical optimism surrounding the digital. However, the political ambiguity of what is possible through new combinations of subjects around and through media will continue to be meaningfully probed in post-media practice. As the Post-Media Lab, we hope to have contributed something to this collective endeavour.

Underpinning the knowledge commons is a tremendous amount of hard work and emotional expenditure. It is therefore appropriate to take this opportunity to thank all who took part and contributed to the Lab over its brief but intense first phase.

Recalling all agents!

Footnotes

- 1 The Post-Media Lab was a collaboration between *Mute* and Leuphana University, Lüneburg in the context of MANEC – Media Art: Network and Cluster Creation in the Media at Leuphana University, Lüneburg. MANEC itself sits within the Digital Media Centre of the Innovation-Incubator Lüneburg, a research initiative mainly funded by the European Fund for Regional Development. Aside from this institutional set-up, the Post-Media Lab brought together four different trajectories and biographies in the shape of its co-ordinators, as well as traditions of (Central-European) activism.
- 2 See, Adnan Hadzi & James Stevens, 'Deckspace.TV reSynced diaries', pp.168-181.