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Emmanuel Guez

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Media-archeological art. A re-politicization of art

Emmanuel Guez

- 1 In these troubled times when contemporary art is murdered by the market, as well as by a formal, spectacular and self-assured mannerism, resulting in the fact that nothing resembles more a contemporary artwork than another contemporary artwork, art has still something to say on society and to tell about society.
- 2 In this sense, media-archeological art is a contemporary art.

fig. 1

Tantalum mines in Congo
Eric Feferberg/AFP/Getty Images

fig. 2

Quentin Destieu
(Dardex),
Gold Revolution, 2015

Quentin Destieu (Dardex), *Gold Revolution*, 2015.

© Dardex (2015)

- 3 The term media-archeological art was first coined by theoretician Jussi Parikka. In *What is Media Archaeology?*¹, the author establishes a typology of artists that he calls “media-archeological,” whose production has to be analyzed in the light of a nascent artistic movement possessing deeply political motivations. Artists “make” a movement when they meet as a group, or gather around one artist, or are gathered by a critique or a curator—as is the case of Harald Szeeman with his famous exhibition in 1969. Twentieth-century art has witnessed but a few large political art movements, which are also art policies in the sense that they represent a way to take political action through art. This is the case of Dada, Futurism, conceptual art. Since the 1990s, movements have given way to commercial signatures of an artistic nature, while the notion of movement has become obsolete, simply because the art world has established legitimate art as an individual and social competition rather than a collective and singular issue. Consequently, micro-movements have arisen, such as Net.Art, which have brought art to the public sphere, or rather to the public time of the internet. In the late 1990s, the internet was already a political and economic space-time too. However, if connection is presently one of the greatest sources of wealth for the economic world, the majority of network artists have paradoxically become individual brands, for lack of being unique, or in other words, purely artistic subjects within collective movements.
- 4 A contemporary art is one that affects its time. Michel Foucault is one of the great theoreticians of the notion of “era,” defined as a condition for thought and action. According to Foucault, an era is determined by its *épistémè*, meaning a set of

relationships between sciences or discourses, which are the emerging parts of theories, practices and sedimented institutions that made them possible. Consisting of statements, or in other words uses and configurations of signs, which archeologist of knowledge Michel Foucault strives to expose, *épistémè* defines the discursive possibilities and impossibilities of knowledge and practice.

- 5 Here I would like to draw a quick parallel with the science of physical phenomena. Jean-Philippe Uzan, cosmologist and assistant director of the Henri-Poincaré Institut, explains that mathematics switches roles depending on the complexity of the field of physical objects to which it applies.² When this field consists of a small number of physical objects, with little diversity of states and interactions, as is the case of particle physics (in which there are but a few objects—the electron, proton, etc.), mathematics is prescriptive, which means that it allows for a precise representation of phenomena. The mathematical theories of natural laws can therefore be considered as the nature of reality. This is no longer the case as one gets to higher layers of complexity, where mathematics becomes purely descriptive. The structure of physical theories can thus be considered as a series of layers organized in a hierarchy and interacting with one another, going from the least complex to the most complex. Each layer corresponds to different kinds of causality and the transition from one layer to the next may require a different use of mathematics. This does not justify reductionism though. One cannot explain every aspect of atomic physics while using particle physics. However, what happens in particle physics is a condition for what occurs in atomic physics.
- 6 As far as our issue is concerned, this idea has a particularly interesting effect: when one uses the web software application on the Internet, which is to say a human language since HTML is a human language—the computer machine reading the numbers 0 and 1 only—, one sets the electrons of machines located on the other side of the world of humans, in other words one affects an electronic reality that is nothing but the lowest material condition of transmitted information.
- 7 Why have I drawn this parallel between the layers of physics and that of Foucault's *épistémè*? When one deals with the notion of era, it is hard not to think of Friedrich Kittler. Although less famous than Michel Foucault in France, Friedrich Kittler is considered as the founding father of media sciences in Germany and renowned for elaborating numerous theories, including that of "media archeology." Kittler is the author of *Grammophon, Film, Typewriter* (1986), and *Discourse Networks, 1800/1900* (1985). As we stated in a recent introduction to two of Kittler's conferences³, the German theoretician regrets in the latter work that the French philosopher has only analyzed discourses through statements, leaving aside the conditions of all conditions, which is to determine how the writing of archives is produced, be it the hand for manuscripts or the material stock of print characters for typing, in other words industrial standards. According to Kittler, knowledge archeologist Michel Foucault has forgotten that writing is a medium for the transmission of historically determined production techniques. In short, the set of conditions for the production of discourses and practices includes a deeper layer consisting of the writing devices and machines which determine writing and subsequently, the archive itself.
- 8 In this way, Kittler writes in *Grammophon, Film, Typewriter*, that the "media," namely *the recording, storage and data-manipulation machines*, "determine our situation."⁴

fig. 3

Website proposing the online purchase of a robot trader.
(copie d'écran de <https://trade4.me>)

fig. 4

RYBN, ADM (AntiDataMining) VIII

(copie d'écran de <https://gaite-lyrique.net/festival/taq7-les-robots-traders-de-rybn>)

- 9 So what is this *situation*? Well, it is that of writing, which in historical terms means that of culture. Therefore, it is the situation of everything that is based on writing, which in our Western society amounts to saying all human activities. Let us take the example of literature. One could think that it escapes its media conditions, that it is nothing but the material trace of an immaterial thought, the form of which could at most be *informed* by the technical and economic conditions of publication (from the production to the circulation of the book as a restrictive apparatus). Friedrich Kittler may be a media theoretician, but above all, he is a literature theoretician just like Marshall McLuhan (the other founding father of the theory of media). Be it in terms of its imaginary worlds, its language or its forms, Kittler considers that literature depends on

the dominant medium of the era, or in other words, since the late 19th century, the gramophone, the film and the typewriter, to which we will add the computer and computer network. However, if writing cannot escape its media conditions, then what human activity can, in a society where knowledge and power are based on archives?

- 10 Arts, politics, economics, sciences and technique itself are subjected to this media condition, whatever its form, whether they are considered from the perspective of hierarchy—as is the case of Karl Marx—in which economic activity, resulting from technical conditions, is at the root of artistic, legal or political disruptions in society⁵ (let us note that, here again, we find another set of layers, the layers of human activities, which can be linked to the aforementioned ones), or whether this configuration is considered on a horizontal mode—as is the case of Bernard Stiegler with what he calls “organology.”
- 11 To conclude this first point, an artist who does not act on media, and in particular on the media dominating and shaping an era, *as the condition of all conditions for writing and archive, hence of what is said, felt and shared, is at once outside politics.*
- 12 It is now time to define the term “to act on media,” or *in fine* on their effects. Here, we are not dealing with what David Garcia and Geert Lovink called “tactical media”⁶ which in the late 1990s, following the Net.Art movement, gathered a certain number of artists and theoreticians who aimed to infiltrate and divert *mass media* through a communications guerilla, like the actions of collectives RTMark or YesMen, or on a more literary mode, the Luther Blissett. If it is true that there is no *political art* without art taking action on and with technical media (let me insist on the fact that we are not talking about *mass media*) and that today’s dominating media are digital, then our question is the following: what does acting on and with digital media consist in?

fig. 5

Screenshot of a PC desktop running Windows95.

fig. 6

Sys42 (Jankenpopp & Zombectro), Windows93.

- 13 Once again, Friedrich Kittler's thinking is enlightening. Let's put the teacher in literature aside and focus on the programmer—he is said to have programmed over 100,000 lines of code—and computer theoretician. In two conferences dating back to the early 1990s, entitled *Le Logiciel n'existe pas* and *Mode protégé*, Kittler develops two main ideas that now help us to conceive of the relationship between art and politics. I will refer to what Frédérique Vargoz and I have written about these conferences⁷.
- 14 First idea: *Within the computer, taken as a writing machine, and in the interaction between human language and the language of digital machines, there is a set of layers, and therefore of conditions for writing possibilities.* The higher layer is of a purely symbolic, interface-related, superficial order. It corresponds to the screen and speakers, to what we hear, see or touch. It is conditioned, and through these same conditions, limited by the lower layers. Then one finds the first layers of code (graphic interfaces of software, high-level languages, up to the operating system). Eventually, there is the “last” layer, low-level electronic languages, more specifically the microprocessor, which constitutes the physical foundation on which symbolic superstructures are built. Studying the conditions for writing, media archeologist Friedrich Kittler is indeed confronted with the multiplication of computer languages, starting from the language that is most correlated with the *hardware* operation, up to the highest-level languages, closer to natural languages, which seem more accessible to users than the binary code making up the base, the lowest layer of this pile. As for graphic interfaces, so ergonomic and user-friendly, they make users forget that using the command line is quicker in the case of certain instructions.
- 15 Second idea: *In the series of layers, the lowest—which determine all of the others—have become inaccessible.* In this case, the media archeologist must face up to the fact that the descent—or *katabase*—from the high-level languages down to their underlying operation codes is increasingly harder. For Kittler, users would definitively start to limit themselves to a superficial level of operation of the *hardware-software* in the early 1980s, with the commercialization of Intel's 80286 microprocessor which added a protected mode to the real mode of operation. The protected mode prevents each task

from using more memory than it is allowed, thus enabling multiple programming, which ensures the separation of programs and data of different users. The drawback is that the access to the microprocessor is reserved to a few privileged users, resulting in the victory of high-level languages, to which access was allowed up to a certain point. You will probably note that this seems to be paradoxical, insofar as it is in the very *hardware*, in the 16-bit microprocessor, that this almost-Bourdieuian distinction between privileged users and the others is structured.

- 16 To summarize, Kittler considers that the strategies of digital industries—presently dominating—consists of a dual movement that aims to deny access to the lowest layers or conditions, for example the microprocessor and binary language, while pretending that high-level software and languages eventually represent the reality of the digital within the series of conditions for writing. In this case, the issue is political. Whereas computers are becoming the universal mode of production of writing, the access to the machine is cancelled by software designers, who in fact do not allow one to master it. In this way, the software industry does not hesitate to dissuade users from exploring the machine that yet affects their writing, through user's guides or warning pop-ups mentioning security breaches. Driven by this same strategy, it spreads the idea that an information system can be reduced to the virtually mechanical functioning of a "tool" (instead of a "medium")—as is the case of Apple's iPad—and that its user is nothing but a user (instead of an author/a reader). Associated with the notion of "tool," the concept of "use" is then an ideological illusion designed to hide an initiative of political and economic subjection.

fig. 7

Electronic and computer waste in Ghana.

fig. 8

Benjamin Gaulon, *ReFunct Media*
 (<http://recyclism.com/modular.php>)

- 17 This cover-up effort is backed by a discourse that unfortunately affects artistic creation itself, which consists in making one believe in the “dematerialization” of information. This discourse is based on the software discourse and integrates its productions into the notion of virtuality. One needs only look at server farms, at the nuclear plants powering them, the gigantic open-cast mines from which the rare metals required for the production of components are extracted, the submarine cables crossing the oceans, the African or Chinese dumps where the machines that have become obsolete in regard of the capitalistic cycle of production/consumption are discarded. In this respect, and despite the genius of the exhibition in an era with issues different than ours, Jean-François Lyotard’s *les Immatériaux* has undoubtedly been very detrimental to the perception of what we call digital technologies, which are as material as the paint coming out from the impressionist painter’s tubes, if not more as one gets the measure of the political and economic issues of the materialities involved in the arts that are, in the utmost confusion, called “digital.”
- 18 Therefore, among artists who have long been labeled “digital” according to cultural issues related to the funding of the projects (since the contemporary art world has long remained inaccessible to them), one has to distinguish those artists who do not so much “use” computers as they reveal the layers of writing and ideas potentialities that permeate them. The work of these artists consists in nothing else than making the machines “speak,” be it their lowest layers, including *hardware*, or the ideologies and methods used in their production, such as the so-called “agile” methods.

fig. 9

Descriptive diagram the "scrum" agile method of software production.
(<https://www.maxxor.com/software-developmant-process>)

fig. 10

Scrumology prod, *Sprint#1*
© www.scrumology-prod.com

- 19 In conclusion, media-archeological art seizes the present, not only by deconstructing and thwarting the dominant discourse of *high-tech* and innovation, as well as the strategies of the digital industries, but also by making them “speak.” It explores its artistic, ecological, financial, scientific effects. Going against calculated—even more

than programmed—obsolescence and of the ideology of the new, it explores the materialities of machines by recycling the old ones to question the new ones, by infiltrating the *trader bots*, inventing with humor and delight other histories of media and the future histories of the art world. Going down into the deepest layers of their materialities (*hardware*, network architecture, production methods, raw materials for the components rather than the visual and sound interfaces), it comes to terms with a subjectivity that has become computational, and contributes to the invention of a new materialism. Its art is action: it confronts the spectator-consumer, the user-client, comfortably numbed by the *user-friendly* software of Bill Gates, Steve Jobs, Larry Page and Mark Zuckerberg. Its economics is not that of the big contemporary art fairs, decorative and tired, or that of digital art, increasingly spectacular. In short, it is seen by the market as an *outsider*. Tomorrow, it will tell the story of our world and that which we do not know yet, but that the machines are already designing.

fig. 11

PROJECT SINGE, *LogforData K7*

(capture d'écran à partir de <http://www.projectsinge.net/accueil.htm>)

fig. 12

Nicolas Maigret, *The Pirate Cinema*

(http://next.liberation.fr/cinema/2013/10/08/montrer-le-flux-numerique-a-l-echelle-mondiale_937985)

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NOTES

1. Jussi Parikka, *What is Media Archaeology?*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2012.

2. See Jean-Philippe Uzan, « Les mathématiques et les tréfonds du cosmos », in Cédric Villani, Jean-Philippe Uzan, Vincent Moncorgé (eds.), *La Maison des Mathématiques*, Paris, Le Cherche Midi, 2014.

3. Friedrich Kittler, *Mode protégé*, Dijon, Les Presses du réel and Labex Arts-H2H, Petite collection Arts-H2H, 2015, introduction by Emmanuel Guez and Frédérique Vargoz.
  4. Friedrich Kittler, *Grammophon, Film, Typewriter*, Brinkmann & Bose, 1986.
Friedrich Kittler, *Mode protégé*, Dijon, Les Presses du réel and Labex Arts-H2H, 2015. The next four paragraphs are taken from the editors' introduction and slightly reworked.
  5. Karl Marx, *Contribution à la critique de l'économie politique*, transl. M. Husson and G. Badia, Éditions Sociales, 1977.
  6. Geert Lovink and David Garcia, « ABC des medias tactiques », in Annick Bureau and Nathalie Magnan (dir.), *Connexion Art Réseaux Média*, Paris, ensb-a, 2002, p. 72-77.
  7. Friedrich Kittler, *Mode protégé*, Dijon, Les Presses du réel/Labex Arts-H2H, 2015. The next four paragraphs are taken from the editors' introduction and slightly reworked.
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ABSTRACTS

The following text originates from a conference held at the École nationale supérieure des arts décoratifs, as part of a colloquium entitled “Organogenèse. Pour un nouveau paradigme de recherche en art et en design”*. The argumentation of the colloquium, strongly inspired by Bernard Stiegler’s aesthetic thinking, included the following statement: “If today we have to think of a new political idea of art and design as an alternative to the control and exploitation of affects by a now cultural capitalism, general organology, defined as a science of instruments, places the issue of technique at the heart of research in art and design.” Throughout the conference, images depicting the effects of the digital industries on humans were screened, along with the “answers” brought by media-archeological art.** Since these images constitute the very material from which this text derives, it seemed to me that commenting them was irrelevant.

*International colloquium, 15 and 16 October 2015, held by Igor Galligo (EnsadLab/Iri-Centre Pompidou), Samuel Bianchini (EnsadLab), Everardo Reyes Garcia (Labsic, Université Paris 13), Bernard Stiegler (Iri-Centre Pompidou), with the support of Labex ICCA (Industries Culturelles et Création artistique).

**In order of appearance: *Gold Revolution* (Quentin Destieu, collectif Dardex), *ADM (AntiDataMining) VIII* (RYBN), *Windows93* (Sys 42-Jankenpopp & Zombectro), *ReFunct Media* (Benjamin Gaulon & al.), *Sprint#1* (Scrumology Prod), *LogForData K7* (Projet Singe), *The Pirate Cinema* (Nicolas Maigret)... With the exception of Nicolas Maigret, these artists gathered from 11 to 18 December 2016, at the occasion of the exhibition “Frankenstein Media” at the Médiathèque Ceccano in Avignon—where Athanasius Kircher, an inexhaustible source for media-archeologists from all over the world, lived and worked (1602-1680).

INDEX

Keywords: Friedrich Kittler, media archaeology, media-archaeological art

AUTHOR

EMMANUEL GUEZ

Emmanuel Guez is an artist, author, media theorist, curator and teacher.

His artistic creations endeavor to question, within our digital and mechanical environment, key notions of the Western culture such as authorship, identity (anonymity, pseudonymity, heteronymity), desire for immortality, the art world, the artwork as well as writing and reading. His theoretical works are based on his artistic productions. Through media theory and archaeology, they question digital materiality and its political, cultural and artistic effects... Since 2013 he manages the research unit PAMAL (Preservation & Art-Media Archaeology Lab) at the École Supérieure d'Art of Avignon. He co-directed Les Sondes at La Chartreuse of Villeneuve-lez-Avignon from 2009 to 2012. He is a member of the research group Incertitude des Formes (National Studio of Contemporary Arts, Le Fresnoy). He teaches at the ESA of Avignon and at the Beaux-Arts of Paris.