Cloud Relationality

Emily Rosamond

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In her exhibition *Cloud* at Rodman Hall, Donna Szoke presents a series of multiples: 2-D prints, 3-D prints, and short-run, not-so-mass-produced everyday objects. Subtle, understated and precise, these works present themselves, at first, as compact jokes and puns – funny little riffs on mundane imagery and objects. Slowly, their subtle twists and turns between concreteness and abstraction, between forms and technical processes, open them onto a much longer timescale for contemplating relationality.

What kinds of pull can one object have on another? In one of the central rooms of her exhibition, Szoke dissolves the iconography of coffee into the iconography of donuts. The serigraph *coffee and donut* (2015) presents a diagram of these two objects, reduced to just two concentric circles, as if viewed from above: the top and bottom edges of the coffee cup, the donut's outer edge and inner hole. Above, a topsy-turvy font of Szoke's own design (which feels more hand-printed than typed) reads: "Ground plan view: coffee and donut." This print presents a precise path to similarity, which transforms its objects' metonymic link by association into a link by sameness. The concentric circles are rendered in what appear to be competently hand-drawn lines, tinged with tiny irregularities. Other than this, the only difference between the two objects is rendered in the relative sizes of the circles. Since this diagram provides no easy way to differentiate between positive and negative spaces, its referents can easily flip – "coffee" becoming pastry, "donut" becoming a mug on a

large saucer. This simple print finds a loophole, as it were – an abstract diagram, which morphs one object into the other. In doing so, it plays on the subtle tensions between the absences and presences that can be represented by the edge, between solidity and an abstract liquidity. Reducing these forms, in a sense, speeds them up, renders them similar. Yet there is something of a "cost" to this acceleration. The object wavers, caught between positive and negative space, its certainties undone as its informatic form wanders off into other material substrates.

This diagram-print, in turn, diagrams the exhibition, describes its conceptual tasks in condensed form. *Cloud*, we are told in the exhibition's press release, explores relational meaning. This exploration is all the more pressing, given that, in a highly networked, "cloud" context, relationality itself has fundamentally changed – something that becomes clear if we compare our present moment with that of around a century ago. Many artists of the first modern avant-garde, of course, produced, inscribed, analyzed and managed odd, oblique, idiosyncratic, relational meanings. One need only think of the radically decontextualized readymade, or the fractured images in a Hannah Höch collage, to see how meaning, in modernity, leaked out of objects, hovered in the *frisson* between juxtaposed contexts and things. Producing new kinds of relation was a radical aesthetic, and at times even political, act. In our time, however, relational meaning seems destined to be ever more normalized as a network metalogic. Any scrap of information, networked in a newsfeed, is always, already juxtaposed with many others – as if "collaged" by default. What, after all, does a platform such as Facebook produce, if not visible, tangible, and of course, highly monetized relations – between disparate content sources, friends and contacts, people and platforms? In the realm of cloud computing, surveillant servers and data centers hover in the background of everyday life, and new kinds of relationships

develop between computation and materiality (via 3D printing, for instance). By emphasizing topological relations, examining the differences between information and materiality, and exploring tropes of transmission, *Cloud*, in my reading, theorizes a form of relational meaning suitable to a "cloud" context: one that emphasizes not the juxtaposition of differences as such (this has been largely normalized by networks), but, rather, a host of far more subtle stretches, shifts and sidesteps. In what follows, I will explore a few of the sub-theses on relational meaning this exhibition explores: a move toward the topological production of meaning; a renegotiation of the relations between information and materiality; and an examination of various tropes of transmission.

Toward a Topological Relationality

In *coffee and donut*, diagrammatic representation overtakes the specificity of objects – and a strange feedback loop opens up between forms. In emphasizing the morphological flow of forms, we could even say that this piece intuits the mathematical field of topology: the study of space from the perspective not of a static set of points in a fixed space, but rather from the perspective of a constant set of *features* in an ever-shifting space. Topology understands geometric properties, such as holes, as constant – even if they are stretched or bent. In fact (oddly enough), one of the common illustrations of topology involves a coffee mug and donut. Topologically speaking, the coffee mug and donut share a common feature: they each have one hole (the donut's centre; the mug's handle). Thus, considered topologically, with constant features but fluid, changeable, ever-morphing surfaces, we could imagine the coffee mug morphing into the donut and back again. Indeed, a popular gif, easily searchable online, helps us visualize just that: the mug's cavity fills in, its handle balloons out, its handle-hole rounds to circular perfection. And back again.

How does this fluidity of surfaces speak to contemporary relationality? According to Celia Lury, Luciana Parisi and Tiziana Terranova (2012), topology's significance goes far beyond the mathematical. In fact, they argue, broadly speaking, there has been a *becoming-topological* of culture – a shift, over the past century, toward topology as a "new order of spatio-temporal continuity for forms of economic, political and cultural life today" (p. 3). In so many realms of contemporary life, it is no longer possible to cleanly differentiate between so-called "reality" and its representations. Investors' conceptions of share values drastically reshape the value of the shares themselves. Screens cover "the split between here and there" (p. 10), warping distance and weaving amorphous representation into the spatial fabric of the home. Online objects express the "dynamic recursiveness of processes of sharing, linking and modifying" and "the circulation of the social quanta of beliefs and desires" (p. 19). In what Eli Pariser (2011) calls the "you loop" of social media platforms, actions such as clicking and "liking" directly feed back, distorting and reshaping the content of the newsfeeds that form the background conditions through which "liking" and clicking take place. In all of these senses and many more, an ever-morphing, ever-changing relationality, in Lury *et. al*'s view, becomes the norm. It is not so much that stable representations "affect" the world that they purportedly describe – but more that the spaces of representations and materialities are hyper-connected, continually morphing into each other along a continuum of constant distortion. The mutual pull of Szoke's coffee and donut on each other speak to a new order of cultural relationality, an abstract liquidity of form that comprises the background conditions through which any ostensibly stable form settles into place in the first place.

Many of Szoke's works analyze and mobilize this topological sense of relationality, by exploring a pervasive slippage between representations and material conditions of production. In *Faint Feint* (2015), for instance, Szoke produces a line drawing of a woman sprawled awkwardly on an unseen ground, as if she has fainted. This image is printed on a pillow, prominently displayed on a puce-green, period fainting couch. The fainting couch fits right into Rodman Hall's grand, mid-nineteenth century, mostly Victorian architecture, recalling the space's previous lives as a stately mansion home. The casual, contemporary dress of the fainter on the pillow (she wears a summer tank-dress, necklace, flip-flops, and a purse) pierces through this temporality, sewing presentness into periodicity. The languages of fainting (rendered in image, object, and furniture) skirt around the act itself – the passive act of losing consciousness, of succumbing to the body's temporary frailty. Fainting, of course, is an act decisively coded as feminine. The fainting couch, and fainting pillow, reify the female fainting body, catching, in their very limbs, Victorian-era gestures, experiences and conceptions of fragility – the corset-strained breaths and melodramatic parlour airs that knocked bodies off their feet, caught in a puff of pillow or the curling swoon of an asymmetrical lounger. These domestic frailty-catchers catch, in their long-reach time web, not a flesh-and-blood woman but an image – an image of a contemporary woman, set into the pillow as if falling through the product of her own sewing. For the fainting woman depicted on the pillow is actually the local artisan who Szoke commissioned to make the pillow. Recursively, her picture transforms her labour into her own image. The artisan, Szoke tells me, was more than happy to pose as the fainting woman; by a strange coincidence, she suffers from a rare condition that causes her to faint frequently. Asynchronous synchronicities accumulate in the artwork's thick time. By means of a double looping, the piece's

present falls through its past, and the pillow's producer warps space, appearing as the image of which she has also formed the ground.

The faint is a feint, posed and poised atop the pillow. If anything, feigning the act of fainting protects against the danger of fainting, of falling while upright and unconscious. The mimicked, represented act (much like the furniture, the dressings designed to catch it) somehow sidesteps, vaccinates against the momentary danger it repeats in represented echoes, images, tropes. The representational languages of fainting twist the act, feign the act, protect against the loss of which they speak. And yet the blank, the faint, the break in consciousness remains (with its thick, accumulated histories of silenced women) is a silent spur that churns the piece, that governs its recursive presentational/representational loops.

In a highly networked context, David Joselit (2009, p. 125) remarks - given the unfathomable scale of global networks, and given that connectivity is all but obligatory – it becomes impossible to bracket out an artwork from its context. Rather, paintings (and other discrete, self-contained art objects) must understand themselves not only as sets of internal relations, but also as networked entities, even *transitive* entities – that is, entities that act *on* their surroundings as much as they act within them, performing something of the vocabulary of network-effects. Transitivity – a subspecies of relational operations – well describes the ripples that Szoke's work imposes in Rodman Hall's time signatures. Here, they are woven into a tight feedback loop – a topological sphere in which image distorts production, which distorts image; and information leaks into its material substrates, which then leak into the information to which they bear weight and witness.

Informatic Materialities

How do information and materiality relate to one another? What does it mean for disembodied information to "inhabit" a material? This is yet another way to frame *Cloud's* conceptual procedures, its means of wondering. Take, again, the simple donut. Szoke's recent work *decoy* (2015) – a plate holding five donuts – sits quietly on a fireplace mantle alongside the coffee/donut diagram. The inviting pink icing of the humble Tim Hortons strawberry frosting, with multi-coloured sprinkles, asserts its appeal, drawing us in toward smelling (or even tasting) range. The textures are just so – the shiny glaze, the soft, crinkly dough. But at close range, the sprinkles give it away; they are clearly paint daubs. Slowly, the textural logics of painting spread over the donuts' surface, like another coat of brushmark-icing. What looks like dough and sugar is, in fact, information transferred through a scanner and a file and a program and quite a lot of cabling and factories and mines, channeled through a printer into resin, and then coated and coloured, dressed in makeup, which makes up for its telltale lack of colour.

Let's think of a donut as an information-bearing object. Any donut already is. It carries its recipe – that code which renders it reproducible – in its very tissue. If it's corporate, it carries its corporation's "secret sauce," the particularities of facticity and flavour that will aim to get mouths hooked – not on any donut but on *that* donut, *that* nuance, *that* flavour. Donuts carry many other forms of information as well – of molecule and temperature, geometry and geopolitics, or a diagrammed consumer desire. But the 3-D printing transforms the donut's informatics, by placing information at a remove from materiality.

According to Ted Striphas, the emergence of the scientific concept of information in the 1940s was a key precursor to what we could now call "algorithmic culture" (his term for a state in which machines – and algorithmic machine learning – perform significant cultural work, and even become significant audiences for culture, thus drastically morphing the relational landscape). The concept of information makes it possible to view all events and phenomena – from "genetic material to the temperature inside one's home" (Granieri 2014) – as, in some sense, comparable, quantifiable and similarly analyzable. Thus the donut (or any other thing), understood as information-bearing, bears witness to its environment in its very materiality, its structure, its form. Yet how does information "sit" within the object? Is it material or disembodied, relational or simply a property of the object itself? As Lars Qvortrup (1993) points out, since its inception in the 1940s, information has been fraught with controversy. It remained unclear whether information should be understood as objective – a thing-in-itself – or whether it must come entwined with a subject, existing only as information-to-someone.

This is an ambiguity that N. Katherine Hayles explores, in a critical analysis of the conditions through which the concept took its now most well-known forms (1999). She examines the manuscripts of early conferences that established and consolidated the concept of information in its current form, and argues that information has a problem: though it tries, it cannot truly account for meaning. Early formulations of the concept of information were concerned primarily with transmission (for instance, of signals through a phone line). They emphatically bracketed out meaning, since the latter is complex, relational, context-specific – and thus impossible to quantify. (The same sentence, for instance, can be understood variously as a serious pronouncement or a joke, depending on context and

interpreters. The sentence's semantics transmit information – but its meaning depends on a much broader field of relations.) In subsequent theorizations of the concept of information, meaning was factored in; yet this came at a cost. Meaning, folded into information theory, came to be denatured, demeaned, robbed of its unruly relationality.

The broader cultural significance of such debates is enormous; for the conceptual distinction between information and materiality governs much of economic life. This distinction makes it possible, for instance, for the English theorist of postcapitalism Paul Mason to describe information as the epicentre of contemporary production. "The knowledge content of products," he writes, "is becoming more valuable than the physical elements used to produce them" (2015, p. 111). At every level, manufacturing has been fundamentally transformed through computation, which, in turn, trades in information. Simulation, stress tests, and virtual modeling informatically inscribe the manufactured material object. This leads to fundamental, if barely perceptible, shifts in how manufactured objects work, and what they can do – as when, for instance, engineers at Pratt & Whitney invented a new method for producing a vastly more efficient fan blade for airliner jet engines. Instead of hammering or casting the blades, they learned that they could make a far more efficient blade by growing them out of single metal crystals in a vacuum (Mason, 2015, p. 110). Through computation, information comes to inhabit materials in drastically new ways. Yet recursively, the presupposition that information can be, somehow, separate from materiality also actively informs the languages used to describe business practices in the age of computation, leading to a tendency to overlook the material, or forget about the demands of actual space. Keller Easterling (2015) points out that when, say, a Google car is being programmed, it is so easy for

programmers to forget about physicality that the last thing they take into consideration is the actual length of the vehicle. It becomes so easy – too easy – in a computational context, to divorce information from materiality and space. To remedy this, perhaps what is needed, Easterling argues, is a concept of "Information In Real Space." Szoke's donuts, which subtly pull apart expectations as to how information and ideas inhabit material substrates, present their own form of Information In Real Space, enacting something of the conceptual paradoxes at play in thinking, and rethinking the relations between information and materiality in the "decoy" donut.

Toxic Connectivity and Enabling Relations

In these topological and material senses, Szoke's exhibition examines the complexities of relational meaning in an era in which hyper-connectivity becomes the norm – even as this hyper-connectivity often instantiates subtle partings between information and materiality. Yet hyper-connectivity – the normalization of close, dense, continually shifting, reflexive relations – plays out, in Szoke's work, in both major and minor keys. To close, I want to briefly mention two works, which demonstrate the range of "minor" and "major," tragic and comic senses in which *transmission*, as a relational trope, ripples through the dense relationalities in this exhibition. *Invisible Histories* (2013) presents a flocked serigraph of a fluorescent green mouse on a white background. Its companion piece is a smartphone app, available for free download, which tells the story of 270, 000 radioactive mice, left over from the Manhattan Project (the research and development project that produced the atomic bomb during World War II), stored in the little-known, nearby Niagara Falls Storage Site nuclear waste facility. Depending on the phone's proximity to the storage site, the app makes more, or less, radioactive mice scuttle across the screen, in the direction of the site. The mice, in this story, have been imprinted with

radioactivity – much like the donut file imprints the 3-D printing resin with information. They have been victims of a toxic connectivity: an irreversible, tragic leakage into tiny experiment-bodies. Yet this connectivity is so utterly sealed off from the land around it, from the public, from political consciousness: too much connectivity, not enough information. Szoke's app unravels this problem, bringing the radioactive mice above ground as images, as information, as specters in another cloud of too-much relation, ameliorating the repressed force of toxic connectivity.

On the other hand – and already prefigured in *Invisible Histories* – there is love – a force of care-full attention to the subtleties of transmission between generations, between makers, between forms and language fragments. In *Bold as Love* (2016), Szoke has taken droves of old, black rock t-shirts, ripped them up (using only the plain black parts, not the pieces with bits of colourful screen-printing), and rug-hooked the words "BOLD AS LOVE" from Jimi Hendrix's *Axis: Bold as Love* album (1967). Like the mice, buried in a storage site with barely any public knowledge, the information printed on the t-shirts is missing: unseen, lost information. Yet something of their disposition (transmitted, as it is, through records and labels) is transposed into the words in the sign. "Bold as love" speaks to circulating signs of love in an alienated, commodified form – yet a form reworked, through the craft of rug work, into a crafted expression – one that declines to differentiate between alienated and "true" love. This love is a transmission, in fact, that circulates around that which cannot be traversed: the distance between complicity and personal truth, as these two concepts weave their way through personal lives, families, production networks, cultural histories. This exhibition tells its stories of transmission in the languages of love for simple objects: the love of Jimi Hendrix records, the love of diagrams, the love of donuts.

<u>A Hole in the Object</u>

Transmission, information, topology. *Cloud*'s range of relational procedures explores the ways in which relational meanings respond to the networked conditions that make relations robust, rampant, over-abundant, ever-changing, compulsory. Yet in all cases, the relations Szoke explores accrue around something that does *not* relate: lacunae, gaps, pieces of lost, repressed or unseen history. An unknown – a hole – opens in the object, as it plunges (much like the image of the fainting woman) into a deeper time – troubled, bubbling decades and layers of context.

In the long history of twentieth-century readymades and collage, taking objects and images in and out of place drew attention to the ways in which an object or image's meaning was always context-dependent – relational and never completely self-contained. Images and objects, with their deftly foregrounded contexts, contained a hole – an opening, at their cores, onto the outside. This reflected a kind of thinking made possible by the advent of mass production. The desire to produce disjunction spoke to the production of disjunction already integral to the massively expanding circuitries of modernity, which pervasively and provocatively took objects out of context, inserting an internal split in the process. As Walter Benjamin put it in his fragment "Capitalism as Religion" (1921), even the nineteenth century's biggest critics of capitalism – Nietzsche, Marx and Freud – performed capital perfectly; for capitalism primarily splits everything from itself. In a cloud context, in *Cloud*, Szoke locates the lacunae that still come to bear on relational meaning in an age of networked relation – even as relation seems to vastly outpace the contextual gaps around which it morphs. Reconstructing intimate details of lived histories, and taking them on intricate material detours, this exhibition stitches a patchwork of ways to

situate oneself in a field of relations that still – yes, still – bear the traces of the not-transmitted, not felt, not said.

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