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## Book Review

### Transmediale's Postdigital Proposition

Scott Wark

*Across and Beyond: A Transmediale Reader on Post-digital Practices, Concepts, and Institutions*, edited by Ryan Bishop, Kristoffer Gansing, Jussi Parikka, and Elvia Wilk, Berlin: Sternberg, 2016, 350 pages, €15.00 (paperback), ISBN 978-3-95679-289-2

*Across and Beyond: A Transmediale Reader on Post-digital Practices* was ostensibly published to mark thirty years of Transmediale, the art and digital culture festival that happens in Berlin each winter. Summing up just one iteration of this sprawling festival is hard enough; doing justice to thirty years of art and theory is something else again. Should the editors of this kind of book document its history? Serve up its greatest hits? Try to influence its future? Over its fifteen essays and ten profiles of artworks, *Across and Beyond* does a little of each. The result is a book that uses Transmediale as a platform for a series of propositions about how we might think media now—and imagine its futures differently.

This book's editors include Transmediale's outgoing director, Kristoffer Gansing; Winchester School of Art professors Ryan Bishop and Jussi Parikka; and the writer and editor, Elvia Wilk. To lend it coherence, these editors frame the book with a proposition of their own: our present, they posit, has become "post-digital." Their idea—which builds on previous work presented by Florian Cramer at the festival and developed by others (Berry and Dieter 2015)—is that digital media are so ubiquitous and widely distributed that contemporary culture can only be thought "after and in the digital" (11). This concept sounds grand-historical, but that's not its aim. Media might be everywhere, but their ubiquity is mostly banal. Thinking through this banality is crucial to understanding their influence on contemporary culture and politics. **{AU: The use of italics for emphasis should be minimized, per Chicago style. The italics have been removed from *through*.}** For the

editors, this concept offers us a “heuristic” for analyzing culture and politics today (12). It’s also what gives this book its critical edge.

*Across and Beyond* is divided into three sections. The essays in the first, “Imaginarities,” share a concern for the ideas that shape how digital media are understood and used. One standout is Dieter Daniels’s essay on the institutionalization of media art. This essay helpfully historicizes the crisis confronting media art practice: if it once drew its charge from artists’ tacit belief in “progress” for its own sake (59), “being digital” is no longer a “criterion for artistic or even cultural innovation” (57), but a gauche given. As a result, media art struggles to articulate what it’s for. This essay is complemented by Parikka’s on the “institution” of the media lab (78). Labs, Parikka notes, aren’t just the province of scientists. Thanks to programs like digital humanities, they’ve sprung back up in the arts, too. By studying how these institutions manufacture and circulate “imaginarities” of media, Parikka argues that we can bring the “asynchronous nature of contemporary media culture” into critical view (86). The recent scandal over the Massachusetts Institute of Technology Media Lab’s receiving donations from Jeffrey Epstein, the disgraced financier, played out this point in real time: the mediated worlds peddled by such places is big business, which means it’s also deeply political.

“Interventions,” the book’s middle section, is the most inward looking. Essays by Daphne Dragona, Tatiana Bazzichelli, and Cornelia Sollfrank provide critical reflections on themes dear to the festival itself: respectively, art’s capacity for subversion, the relationship between the festival and the city, and the historical status of cyberfeminist practice within and without the festival proper. All of these essays are of particular interest to those involved in Transmediale itself or who research cultural events like it. Because of their focus on the festival, though, they may be of limited appeal to scholars interested in more general cultural-

political topics. This is less a problem than the natural consequence of editing a book like *Across and Beyond*, which can't fully escape its host organization's orbit.

The book's final section, "Ecologies," is for me its strongest. The essays in this section all place media into broader contexts, making them appealing to readers who may not be so interested in Transmediale itself. Ned Rossiter and Clemens Apprich make a convincing argument that contemporary media have become "sovereign" (270) because their distributed, proprietary infrastructures increasingly elude state governance. Similarly, Bishop argues that distributed infrastructural systems—his example is the planetary-scale sensor array—effect the reorganization of space, sovereignty, and, consequently, political subjectivity. Benjamin Bratton's essay on voice-controlled interfaces, like Amazon's Alexa, skillfully teases out the uncanny encounters we increasingly have with the intelligent machines that populate our homes. It brings these reflections down to the human scale, connecting media's infrastructures back to us, their users. The collection's final contribution, Olga Goriunova's, strikes me as its most incisive. Using media art as its frame, Goriunova unspools the technical entanglement of circulating affect, automated reason, and, crucially, cognition, which is increasingly "colonised with the mounting number of cognitive tasks our bodies have to process" (341). This is the situation, she argues, that media artists—and the rest of us—inhabit today. {AU: **Italics removed from *this*.**} Technology doesn't just produce "extensions of human capacities"; it produces new "autonomic agencies" that challenge us to think how the imbrications of matter, technology, and life effected by media reshape our conceptual categories (345). These essays remind us that the task of critiquing cultural politics in the present must first confront the task of conceptualizing culture *after* media—that is, *across* scales and *beyond* our inherited theoretical frames.

This brings us to the book's other contents: its profiles of artworks. To review any book is to strain against space constraints; to review a book like this one, with so much

content, is worse again. For readers of *Cultural Politics*, the main contribution these profiles make is to show how critique grounded in practice can be generative for artists and theorists alike. Each profile is necessarily shaped by that perennial problem: how is one to document and/or re-present a work of art in a medium not its own? Some of these profiles work: Erica Scourti presents the text of her performance, “Think You Know Me,” which translates neatly to the page. Others don’t. Louis Henderson’s profile juxtaposes quasi-poetic ruminations informed by Arthur Rimbaud with stills from one of his films depicting African subjects. The framing of these stills—a speculative, vaguely sci-fi narrative—is, at best, awkward and poorly thought through; at worst, it’s appropriative. As a whole, readers will find these profiles most useful as overviews of what media art might be today and what examples of this practice one might expect to find at Transmediale.

Henderson’s contribution brings me to the only major critique I have of this collection. Because of its focus on media’s future, I can’t help but recall William Gibson’s oft-quoted claim: “The future is already here—it’s just not evenly distributed” (as cited in Rosenberg, 1992, C1). **{AU: Please cite this quote.}** Much of this book—much of Transmediale—is dedicated to thinking media at different scales, from the intimate to the planetary. To really get across contemporary media, what I’d like to see more of is art and theory from beyond Europe and North America. That the book lacks more of this content is less the editors’ fault, I think, than a legacy of the festival itself and a reflection of the realities of contemporary cultural production. Because this book acts as a re-presentation of the festival’s themes, it establishes this problem as Transmediale’s horizon. If the future is being sold to us as a media-imaginary fiction, it’s clear that we must look beyond this—Euro-American—horizon if we really want to think media otherwise.

Nevertheless, *Across and Beyond* is a useful resource for thinking through the cultural politics of our postdigital present. It makes a convincing case that media exert a wide-ranging

influence over contemporary culture. It also makes a convincing case that a kind of critical thought and practice grounded in art and theory—the kind one finds at Transmediale—offers a particularly incisive means of thinking media in the present and, perhaps, shaping its futures. Anyone in need of a primer on the festival or looking for critical tools for thinking media need look no further than this collection.

## Reference

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