

Sarah Kember and Joanna Zylinska

Creative media: performance, invention, critique

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Joanna Zylinska, *Media Spaces* 01, 2008

Performing a new paradigm

The discussion that follows is an attempt to enact a different mode of doing critical work in the arts and humanities. It adopts the format of a ‘live essay’, performed in (at least) two voices, via numerous exchanges of electronic traces, graphic marks, face-to-face utterances and corporeal gasps. This format is aimed at facilitating collaborative thinking and dialogic engagement with ideas, concepts and material objects at hand between the essay’s authors, or rather conversational partners. Our direct entry point into the discussion lies with what we are calling a ‘creative media project’. It will provide a focus for our broader consideration of issues of cross-disciplinary performance in this piece.

By giving a name to a set of concerns that have preoccupied us both for a long time, we are performatively inaugurating this creative media project. The project arises out of our shared dissatisfaction with the current state of the discipline of ‘media studies’ within which, or rather on the margins of which, we are both professionally situated. In its more orthodox incarnation as developed from sociology, politics and communications theory, media studies typically offers analyses of media as objects ‘out there’ – radio, TV, the internet. Mobilising the serious scientific apparatus of ‘qualitative and quantitative methodologies’, it studies the social, political and

economic impact of these objects on allegedly separable entities such as ‘society’, ‘the individual’ and, more recently, ‘the globalised world’. What is, however, lacking from many such analyses is a second-level reflection on the complex processes of mediation that are instantiated as soon as the media scholar begins to think about conducting an analysis - and long before she switches on her TV or iPod.

What does our creative media project have to do with performance? Through instantiating this project, we are making a claim for the status of theory as theatre (there is an etymological link between the two, as Jackie Orr points out),¹ or for the performativity of all theory - in media, arts and sciences; in written and spoken forms. We are also highlighting the ongoing possibilities of remediation across all media and all forms of communication. From this perspective, theatre does not take place – and never did - only ‘at the theatre’, just as literature was never confined just to the book or the pursuit of knowledge to the academy. What is particularly intriguing for us at the moment is the ever increasing possibility for the arts and sciences to perform each other, more often than not in different media contexts. Witness the theatre that involved the mediation of the Big Technoscience project in September 2008: the experiment with the Large Hadron Collider at the European Organization for Nuclear Research (CERN). The Hadron Collider is a particle accelerator used by physicists to study the smallest existing particles, and it promises to ‘revolutionise our understanding, from the minuscule world deep within atoms to the vastness of the Universe’ via the recreation of the conditions ‘just after the Big Bang’.² Rarely, since the Greeks, has such an attempt to stage metaphysics been undertaken with an equal amount of pathos and comedy, with

¹ Jackie Orr, *Panic Diaries*, (Durham, NC, 2006), p. 6.

² Quoted from the CERN website, <http://public.web.cern.ch/public/en/LHC/LHC-en.html>, accessed on 4.10.2008.

satellite TV networks staging the event for the worldwide audiences in real time! Performances of this sort often incorporate their own metanarratives, or critiques – although these critiques tend to remain latent or unacknowledged. Remediating, via critical and creative intervention, such events, the creative media project we have in mind has the potential to become a new incarnation of the age-old ‘theatre-within-the theatre’ device, whose actors are also at the same time critics.

For Judith Butler, when drawing on Foucault’s work, the critic ‘has a double task, to show how knowledge and power work to constitute a more or less systematic way of ordering the world with its own “conditions of acceptability of a system,” but also “to follow the breaking points which indicate its emergence.” So not only is it necessary to isolate and identify the peculiar nexus of power and knowledge that gives rise to the field of intelligible things, but also to track the way in which that field meets its breaking point, the moments of its discontinuities, the sites where it fails to constitute the intelligibility for which it stands’.³ Taking seriously both the philosophical legacy of what the Kantian and Foucauldian tradition calls ‘critique’, and the transformative and interventionist energy of the creative arts, creative media can therefore perhaps be seen as one of the emergent paradigms at the interfaces of performance and performativity that this volume is trying to map out. What will hopefully emerge through this process of playful yet rigorous cross-disciplinary intervention will be a more dynamic, networked and engaged mode of working on and with ‘the media’, where critique is always already accompanied by the work of participation and invention.⁴

³ Judith Butler, ‘What is Critique? An Essay on Foucault’s Virtue’, *Transversal*, online journal published by the European Institute for Progressive Cultural Politics, May (2001): non-pag.

⁴ In ‘What is Critique? Suspension and Recomposition in Textual and Social Machines’ Gerald Raunig argues that critique in the Kantian sense ‘remains an *ars iudicandi*, a technique of distinguishing. ... All of

[insert Image 2 here - landscape]

Joanna Zylinska, *Media Spaces* 02, 2008

Repetition with a difference

One of the reasons for our interest in developing such a creative media project is our shared attempt to work through and reconcile, in a manner that would be satisfactory on both an intellectual and aesthetic level, our academic writing and our ‘creative practice’ (photography in Joanna’s case, fiction in Sarah’s). This effort has to do with more than just the usual anxieties associated with attempting to breach the ‘theory-practice’ divide and trying to negotiate the associated issues of rigour, skill, technical competence and aesthetic judgement any joint theory-practice initiative brings up. Working in and with creative media is for us first and foremost an epistemological question of how we can perform knowledge differently through a set of intellectual-creative practices that also ‘produce things’. The nature of these ‘things’ - academic monographs, novels, photographs, video clips – is perhaps less significant (even though each one of these objects does matter in a distinctly singular way) than the overall process of producing

these revisions of the existing original material are to be understood as a productive process of recomposition. Instead of introducing the distinction as an essentialist excavation of an origin, it is instead a matter of reinstituting a heterogenetic process: not a pure tree schema, at the head of which there is an original text and an *auctor*, but rather a much more winding practice of continual recombination. ...

Critique is thus to be understood as an interplay between the suspended *iudicium* and *inventio*, between the capacity for judgment, which in “making understandable” clearly goes beyond the practice of empirically distinguishing in the sense of separation and exclusion, and the talent for invention that newly concatenates the (significant) components’. In: *Transversal*, online journal published by the European Institute for Progressive Cultural Politics, August (2008): non-pag.

‘knowledge as things’. In other words, creative media is for us a way of enacting knowledge about and of the media, by creating conditions for the emergence of such media. Of course, there is something rather difficult and hence also frustrating about this self-reflexive process, whereby it is supposed to produce the thing of which it speaks (creative media), while drawing on this very thing (creative media) as its source of inspiration – or, to put it in cybernetic terms, feedback.

But this circularity is precisely what is most exciting for us about the theory of performativity and the way it has made inroads into the arts and humanities over the last two decades. Drawing on the concept of performativity taken from J.L. Austin’s speech-act theory as outlined in his *How to Do Things with Words*, thinkers such as Jacques Derrida and Judith Butler have extended the use of the term from being limited to only exceptional phrases that create an effect of which they speak (such as ‘I name this ship *Queen Elizabeth*’ or ‘I take this woman to be my lawful wedded wife’) to encapsulating the whole of language.⁵ In other words, any bit of language, any code, or any set of meaningful practices has the potential to enact effects in the world, something Butler has illustrated with her discussion of the fossilisation of gender roles and positions through their repeated and closely monitored performance. Performativity is an empowering concept, politically and artistically, because it not only explains how norms take place but also shows that change and invention are always possible. ‘Performative repetitions with a difference’ enable a gradual shift within the ideas, practices and values even when we are functioning within the most constraining and oppressive socio-cultural formations (we can cite the Stonewall riots of 1969, the emergence of the

⁵ See J. L. Austin, J. L., *How to Do Things with Words* (Cambridge, Mass, 1962); Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (New York and London, 1990); Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech* (New York and London, 1997); and Jacques Derrida, *Limited Inc.* (Evanston, 1988).

discipline of performing arts, or the birth of the Solidarity movement in Poland in 1980 as examples of such performative inventions). With this project, we are thus hoping to stage a new paradigm not only for *doing media critique-as-media analysis* but also for *inventing (new) media*.

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Joanna Zylinska, *Media Spaces* 03, 2008

Creative media: a manifesto of sorts

Put boldly, our contention is that conventional forms of media analysis are ineffective in as far as they are based on what we perceive to be a set of false problems and false divisions. The false problems involve current conceptions of interactivity, convergence, determinism, constructionism, information and identity. False divisions, which continue to structure debates on new media in particular, include those between production and consumption, text and image, and language and materiality. We also maintain that there is no rigid division between new and old media, as ongoing processes of differentiation are constantly taking place across *all media*. The underlying problem of 'the media' is precisely that of *mediation*; of the processes - economic, cultural, social, technical, textual, psychological - through which a variety of media forms continue to develop in ways which are at times progressive and at times conservative.

The problem of mediation is for us both contextual and temporal. It centres on the evolution of media in a wider socio-economic context. The role of technology in this process of evolution is neither determining nor determined. Indeed, this role is never 'merely' instrumental or anthropological, as Heidegger argues: it is rather vital and relational. If the essence of technology is inseparable from the essence of humanity,

then there is no justification for positing humanism against technicism, or vice versa. There is also no point in fighting ‘against technology’. But there is every point – or, indeed, an ethico-political injunction - in exploring practices of differentiation at work in the current mediascape. Our creative media project seeks to promote the invention of different forms of engagement with media. This is not to say that differentiation is always welcome and beneficial, and that all forms of difference are to be equally desired, no matter what material and symbolic effects they generate. Our emphasis is on creative/critical practices which are neither simply oppositional nor consensual, and which attempt, in Donna Haraway’s words, to ‘make a difference’ within processes of mediation. To put this another way, we are interested in staging interventions across conventional boundaries of theory and practice, art and commerce, science and the humanities. Such interventions may come to constitute events that cannot be determined a priori.

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Joanna Zylińska, *Media Spaces* 04, 2008

The invention of what (and what for)?

Of course, not all events are equal, and not everything that ‘emerges’ is good, creative or even necessarily interesting. Far from it. Mediation, even if it is not owned, dominated or determined economically, is heavily influenced by economic forces and interests. This state of events has resulted in the degree of standardisation and homogenisation that we continue to see across the board: witness the regular ‘inventions’ of new mobile phones or new forms of aesthetic surgery. The marketisation of creativity ends up with more and more (choice) of the same – even if some of these

‘inventions of the old’ can at times perhaps be put to singularly transformative uses. And yet most events and inventions are rather conservative or even predictable; they represent theatre-as-we-know-it. Our own investment lies in recognising and promoting ‘theatre-as-it-could-be’ (the phrase is adapted from Chris Langton’s founding definition of artificial life, a discipline that manages both to draw on the most conventional metaphysical assumptions about science and life, and to open a network of entirely unpredictable possibilities for imagining ‘an otherwise world’).⁶ We are interested in witnessing or even enacting the creative diversification of events as a form of political intervention against this proliferation of difference-as-sameness. We find such ‘non-creative’ diversification everywhere, including in the increasingly market-driven academy. One can easily blame ‘performance audits’ such as the Quality Assurance Agency’s inspection visits and the Research Assessment Exercise in the UK, or the compiling of international university league tables for the standardisation and homogenisation of the academic output worldwide. But these ‘quality-enhancement’ procedures are just a means to the end of competition and survival within an overcrowded global market, run on an apparently Darwinian basis whereby size (of institution) and volume (of output) really do matter.

In this kind of environment, it is sometimes very difficult to make a difference. But we can remind ourselves here of Haraway’s willingness to recognise the real limitations of a politics she referred to as cyborg politics. In that old, seemingly dated ‘battle of the cyborgs’, she was always going to lose, but never going to concede: it’s like leaving ‘in the hands of hostile social formations the tools that we need to reinvent

⁶ Christopher Langton, ‘Artificial Life’, in Margaret Boden (ed.) *The Philosophy of Artificial Life* (Oxford, 1996), pp. 39-94.

our lives'.⁷ Haraway's cyborg politics may have been a feature of the cold-war (the old one, not the emerging one), but what survives of it is the politico-ethical injunction to intervene, to make a difference, not for the sake of difference but for the sake of a better – more just, more interesting - world. We take the 'making' in making a difference as seriously as the difference itself. Hence our insistence that theory takes the form of theatre; that it is always already performative, and hence our quest for the 'invention of forms ever new', to use Bergson's term. These forms are hybrid, recombinant – and challenging. They represent the kind of conceptual risk-taking and creativity that Rosi Braidotti calls for in her book *Metamorphoses*, and that emerges from feminist philosophy in general. There comes a point, Braidotti insists, when it is no longer enough to deal with the breakdown of hierarchical conceptual dualisms just in the content, but not in the form of our address. As soon as we attempt to performatively engage form and content, reason and imagination, then we are faced with the controversial question of style which relates to the academic conventions of argument and presentation. Hence we are more than willing to join Braidotti when she says: 'I do not support and assumption of the critical thinker as judge, moral arbiter or high-priestess'.⁸ In consequence, an alteration in the traditional pact between the writer and her readers inevitably takes place: the 'writer/reader binary couple is recombined', Braidotti says, 'and a new impersonal mode is required as a way of doing philosophy'.⁹ That is, a new impersonal mode beyond what Karen Barad might refer to as the 'ethico-epistem-ontological' divisions between subject/ivity and object/ivity.¹⁰

⁷ Donna Haraway, *Simians Cyborgs and Women* (London, 1991), p. 8.

⁸ Rosi Braidotti, *Metamorphoses* (Cambridge, 2002), p. 9.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

¹⁰ Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway* (Durham, NC, 2007).

Sarah has been pursuing such an ‘impersonal mode’ in her attempts to write science and fiction in a way which fully recognises their mutual (re)mediation, as well as their existence as relational, non-self-identical differences in kind. Traditional literary fiction can be said to ‘other’ science by either avoiding it or subsuming it within familiar humanist narratives. Science-fiction, in turns, tends to fetishise (or demonise) what literary fiction elides. In so far as there are processes of othering at work in the attitude of science to fiction and, to an extent, of fiction to science, then what exactly lies between them? The impersonal mode requires experimentation in form and content, and entails technical difficulties and problem-solving abilities on a surprising scale.¹¹ In terms of writing, the chief among these is precisely *how* to reconcile the exterior and interior world views normally associated with the sciences and arts respectively. Fiction, traditionally, offers a view of the world from the inside out, while scientific and academic writing would offer a view of the world from the outside in. In her experiments with writing across these two world views, Sarah is learning, the hard way, what it means to cross this tradition.

The Optical Effects of Lightning is a story, which could be a true story, about an experiment in human cloning and what it means to two narrators and to two brothers who are themselves year-twins (clones may be thought of as twins, separated in time). One narrator speaks in what Braidotti might call the ‘judgemental, moralizing high-tone’ of someone who is, or considers himself to be, outside the experiment - commenting on it, reporting on it and on the protagonists involved. The other narrator

¹¹ This was brought home to Sarah, in a way which felt both companionable and inspiring, when she listened to Katie Mitchell discussing her work, *Some Trace of Her*, and when she watched, or rather attended the performance itself.

speaks of his involvement in the experiment, and of his experience, in a more conventionally fictional, or interior voice, which becomes increasingly obsessive and perhaps deluded. His less than likely, in-credible, highly subjective narrative is framed by the other more controlled, more rational and objective one, but we are never entirely sure which one is 'true'. The story complicates this problem of truth when, like two cells in a cloning experiment, the narratives and their narrators are (literally?) fused. This attempt at (literary) sciencefiction plays on an analogy between the electrofusion of cells and the (optical) effects of lightning on the body.¹² One of Sarah's intentions here, or one of her interventions, so to speak, is to assert that scientific processes such as fusion are more than metaphors for fiction, or indeed, for theory. Instead, they become materialised and play a performative role *within theory*. This sort of intervention is therefore also something of an invention.

¹² The effects of lightning on the body are many and varied. They range from things like burns, concussion and heart failure that you might expect, to things like neurological damage and changes in personality that you might not expect. One of the ways that lightning can kill you prosaically (and it rarely does) is by means of a ground strike: the negatively charged lower portion of a passing cloud creates a positive charge in the ground underneath it, and this runs up one leg, through your body, and down the other leg. The effect on cattle can be particularly devastating on account of the fact that they have more legs. One of the ways in which lightning can alter you, physically, psychologically and rather mysteriously, is by using you, instead of a tree, to form an upward streamer – again the current passes up through you from the ground, and connects with the lightning strike descending from above. Sometimes reality is indeed stranger than fiction. When Sarah talked about lightning at a recent conference in which she was presenting and performing various aspects of her story, she encountered, for the first time, one of the non-intentional side-effects of pursuing an impersonal mode – a certain confusion of attendance. Was the science made up and the story really true? Ambiguity is one thing – and it seems totally appropriate to a subject such as cloning. Confusion, however, is perhaps a more problematic if productive affect to manage in the newly recombined writer/reader, speaker/audience relationship.

To a certain extent, Sarah will be repeating this experiment in *Media, Mars and Metamorphosis*, a work of fiction which will appear to be, and which will (up to a point) be a work of non-fiction. Here, the narrator, Jeremy Hoyle, is an academic/cultural commentator and Fukuyama-like figure¹³ concerned with three life-changing experiments in biotechnology. These experiments relate to different spatial realms, but are linked, in part, by their focus on the cell. They incorporate outer or cosmic space, the interior space of the computer and bodily space at the boundary between self and other. These different spaces thereby become analogous. The experiments - in bacteriology, immunology and mediology – include: one to test for the presence of microbial life on Mars, another designed to induce tolerance in face transplant surgery and a third, user-based experiment to test for prospects of intelligent media.

Three different characters, Lou, Hannah and Hal, talk about the life-changing experience of being involved in these experiments. Lou, an elderly and embittered microbiologist, whose previous claims to have discovered evidence of life on Mars have been repeatedly rejected by NASA, declares finally to have evidence of a Martian microbe with characteristics similar to that of green sulphur bacteria. Hannah, a neurotic young woman involved in a traumatic act of violence, claims to have had the first successful face transplant, based not on immunosuppressant drugs, but on the establishment of immune tolerance and hybridity between the donor and recipient. Finally, Hal, a middle-aged curmudgeonly technophobe with a drink habit, who agreed to take part in a smart home experiment because he needed the money, claims that

¹³ Put bluntly, liberal-humanist, judgemental, moralising and conservative.

something ‘weird’ happened when the speech-based, adaptive and so-called ‘intelligent’ objects he was forced to interact with started to sound more and more like him.

Jeremy interviews each character and – understandably – doesn’t really believe them. Not only do these experiments, and others like them, cross the line of good science and the sanctity of human nature (as distinct from aliens, hybrids and cyborgs), they are more than likely to be hoaxes. However, his conclusion is somewhat complicated by his own subsequent experience. Jeremy starts to feel ill. Jeremy is not himself. He must have a terrible stomach bug or something because he is shitting green stuff and hallucinating – he doesn’t even recognise his own face in the mirror and what’s more, what’s worse, neither does the mirror. And it’s telling him so...

The point of these true stories - these ‘factions’ that stay as close as possible to what is happening in the world of technoscience now (*not* in the future) – is not to validate the humanist category of experience but rather to explore the possibilities of what Keith Ansell Pearson terms ‘experience enlarged and gone beyond’.¹⁴ That is, experience gone beyond anything singular, or dual, towards something potentially multiple and inherently non-experiential. The body, poor Jeremy’s body, enacts or performs this enlargement of experience – for us. We (writer and reader) attend his transformation, his metamorphosis in as far as we identify with his rigid and righteous refusal of it. It isn’t a nice trick to pull on him, Sarah’s substitute – the dramatised and somewhat parodied voice of the theorist. But perhaps it’s time we dealt with our alter-egos, cancelled each other out as we are supposed to – at least in the Gothic literary tradition, if not in the academic one - and found a different mode of working and playing.

¹⁴ Keith Ansell Pearson, *Philosophy and the Adventure of the Virtual* (London and New York, 2002), p. 8.

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Joanna Zylinska, *Media Spaces* 05, 2008

Technology and the body

Donna Haraway is an important figure for us in our joint work and play, because she was one of the first thinkers to offer a critical, insubordinate and playful engagement with technological processes within a wider socio-cultural setup. Even though her ‘cyborg’, a Star Wars-era creature which hybridised flesh and metal, carbon and silicon, seems positively old-fashioned in the current era of biotechnological hybrids that can literally get under our skin (or into our digestive systems), the political significance of her intervention into what she termed ‘technoscience’ has not lost any of its validity. For any creative media project to be truly inventive, it needs to work through the ontological and epistemological consequences of technologies and media becoming increasingly closer to us. It also needs to consider what the French philosopher Bernard Stiegler calls our ‘originary technicity’,¹⁵ where technology is comprehended as an originary condition of our being in the world, not just an external object we all learn to manipulate for our advantage and benefit.

This is a very different view of technology and mediation from the one that sees the human as ‘natural’ and technology and media as external agents. This view challenges the instrumental understanding of technology proposed by the Greek philosopher Aristotle, a framework which still shapes the majority of our media stories about IT, the internet or genetics. Within this instrumental framework, technology is

¹⁵ Bernard Stiegler, *Technics and Time, 1* (Stanford, 1998).

seen as just a tool for the human. It is an external object that either promises us pleasure, if it is a gadget such as a digital camera, or threatens our life and well-being, if it is a bomb or a lethal injection. However, what we are trying to do with our alternative media paradigm is argue for the possibility of, and need for, adopting a different model – one proposed not only by Haraway and Stiegler but also by the Australian performance artist Stelarc. All these thinkers are very critical of the story of the human as a master of the universe who can become even more powerful via his media gadgets. Instead, they outline a more systemic and networked model of human-nonhuman relations, in which mediated prostheses are seen as *intrinsic parts* of the human body.

In an interview with Joanna for her 2002 book, *The Cyborg Experiments: The Extensions of the Body in the Media Age*, Stelarc explained his understanding of the relationship between technology and the human as follows: '[T]he body has always been a prosthetic body. Ever since we evolved as hominids and developed bipedal locomotion, two limbs became manipulators. We have become creatures that construct tools, artefacts and machines. We've always been augmented by our instruments, our technologies. Technology is what constructs our humanity; the trajectory of technology is what has propelled human developments. I've never seen the body as purely biological, so to consider technology as a kind of alien other that happens upon us at the end of the millennium is rather simplistic'.¹⁶ So clearly, we shouldn't think that there was once a 'pure' body and that this has somehow been contaminated just as we entered the technological age. Instead, as Stelarc puts it, 'We've been simultaneously zombies

¹⁶ Gary Hall and Joanna Zylinska, 'Probing: An Interview with Stelarc', in Joanna Zylinska (ed.) *The Cyborg Experiments* (London and New York, 2002), p. 114.

and cyborgs; we've never really had a mind of our own and we've never been purely biological entities'.¹⁷

From this critical-cybernetic perspective, the human is seen as having *always* been technological, or having *always* been mediated. To put it differently, technology and media are precisely what makes us human. Even if we agree that the body is somewhat weakened or inadequate in a world of ubiquitous information flows, computer-led wars and nanotechnology, it does not mean we have to bemoan the loss of our human potency, or desire to become *Terminator*-like robots ourselves. We can better understand this position as a pragmatic recognition of our dependency on technical and media objects. The work of techno-artists such as Stelarc, or techno-philosophers such as Stiegler and Haraway should not therefore be reduced to a naïve prophecy of a post-flesh world in which man will eventually overcome his technological limitations. Instead, we're better off seeing it as an exploration of the symbiotic relationship the human has always had with technology and media. In other words, it shows us technology as being an inseparable part of both 'the human' and 'the body'.

Why is it important for us to think of ourselves in this way? Well, for starters, this position allows for a better understanding of the relations and connections we have in the world. It also lets us develop a more interesting and more critical relationship to 'nature' and 'the environment'. If we do accept that we have indeed always been cyborgs, that we have always been mediated, it will be easier for us to let go of paranoid narratives (such as Jeremy's from Sarah's novel) which see technology as an external other that threatens the human, and that needs to be stopped at all cost before a new

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 115.

mutant species – of replicants, robots, aliens - emerges to compete with humans and eventually to win the battle. All this is not to say that in the universe of complex relations between human and nonhuman beings ‘anything goes’, and that all connections are equally good. But seeing ourselves as always already connected, as being part of the system – rather than as kings of the universe to which all beings are inferior - is an important step in developing a more critical and a more responsible relationship to the world, to what we call ‘man’, ‘nature’ and ‘technology’. It is also a promise of the emergence of some more productive media relations and media environments.

Joanna has attempted to enact such a productive relation between technology and the human in her photographic work, in particular in her 2007 project titled *We Have Always Been Digital*. This has been a way for her to actually *practice media philosophy*, and to perform concepts via images. The project started with an attempt to think about the media, both ‘new’ and ‘old’, and the way culture repurposes and remediates its different media forms. It may seem constraining or even reductive to begin describing visual work with the verb ‘to think’. And yet, given her professional background in philosophy and media theory, this is the way of approaching creative media practice and visual culture she is most comfortable with, and one she is not ready to abandon altogether. To be interesting, creative practice, including photography, for her has to mobilise complex thought processes, although without doubt it should do *more* than just illustrate already worked-out ideas and concepts. The very nature of this ‘more’ constitutes part of the invention process activated throughout this project.

Visual work can of course help us articulate concepts or states that exceed the linguistic, and achieve things that spoken and written language cannot do. But then written texts themselves always already entail a certain lack of determination: even the

tightest philosophical argument is always based on a leap of faith, and remains underpinned by numerous investments of which we can only be partly aware. This is a very round-about, perhaps defensive, way of saying that finding a satisfactory way of negotiating between visual and textual narratives is never going to be easy for a media theorist, and that she will not be satisfied with just suspending the latter for the sake of the former.

[insert Images 6-11, files 6.tiff-11.tiff – all landscape]

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Joanna Zylińska, *We Have Always Been Digital*, 2007

Joanna's *We Have Always Been Digital* project explores digitality as the intrinsic condition of photography, both in its past and present forms. Rather than focus on the aesthetic qualities of light, it invites the viewer to consider the formal role of light in the constitution of a pattern, the 'ON/OFF' of the information culture. The project assumes that computation also takes place outside what we conventionally think of as 'computers'. Indeed, it is through the differential effect of the presence and absence of any data - of pattern, electricity, light - that computation occurs in the wider world, engendering complexity and bringing about change. The six images presented here show the digital flow and exchange of data in different media: house walls, furniture,

human bodies. They capture the digital condition: the emergence of a pattern of 0s and 1s.

The project has had numerous inspirations, both textual and visual. It started with W. H. Fox Talbot's 'photogenic drawings' of lace and of light falling through the window panels in Lacock Abbey – a set of images Talbot allegedly sent to his friend Charles Babbage, the inventor of the differential engine (the first computer). This story, hinting at the parallel invention of photography and computing as two ways of capturing the pattern in different media, has been narrated by Geoffery Batchen in his article 'Electricity Made Visible'. For Batchen, 'photography is a binary (and therefore numerical) system of representation involving the transmutation of luminous information into on/off tonal patterns made visible by light-sensitive chemistry'.¹⁸ It is therefore a fledgling form of informational culture, one that since its inception records the presence and absence of data. The images that constitute *We Have Always Been Digital* have also been infused with some splinters of the theory of computational universe developed by the likes of Edward Fredkin, which assumes that all matter is computational, i.e. that it consists in the differentiation between present and absent bits of information.¹⁹ However, any straightforward applications of this theory as allegedly telling us 'what the world is like' are bound to be deeply problematic. The singular materiality of each photographic medium – be it camera, paper, computer screen or human body, from which the image is emitted and on which it is projected - destabilises the universalising seamlessness of Fredkin's propositions.

¹⁸ Geoffery Batchen, 'Electricity Made Visible', in: Wendy Hui Kyong Chun and Thomas Keenan (eds) *New Media, Old Media* (New York and London, 2006), p. 28.

¹⁹ For an interesting reading of Fredkin's theories in the context of arts and humanities research see N. Katherine Hayles, *My Mother Was a Computer* (Chicago, 2005).

It is precisely in the tension between the conceptual and technical ‘liquidity’ of the photographic object *as such*, and the (always temporary) solidity of its medium, that interesting creative possibilities are arguably opened up. The point of such creative experimentation with the photographic medium lies not so much in nostalgically harking back to older, more ‘solid’ media – be it analogue film or mechanical large-format cameras - although sometimes these particular choices may present themselves to us as aesthetically better and more fitting. What is much more important, however, is not foreclosing the performative invention of photography, or any other medium – an invention which is always potentially ongoing, even if not always enacted – with ready-made decisions about its effects and affects, aesthetic, ethical or political ones.

[insert Image 12 here - landscape]

Joanna Zylińska, *Media Spaces* 12, 2008

Ethical openings

Even though human agency does not withdraw altogether from these processes of creative and critical invention, it is distributed throughout a system of forces, institutions, bodies and nodal points. This acknowledgement of agential distribution - a paradox that requires a temporarily stabilised self which is to undertake this realization – allows for an enactment of a more hospitable and more enmeshed relationship with technology and the media. This brings us to an interesting point made by Stelarc, who, when commenting on his performances, mentioned adopting ‘the posture of indifference’ in relation to them. This involves abandoning any desire to entirely control the event and allowing it to just unfold after starting it off. Stelarc’s pronouncement

conveys a tension between the modernist notion of artist as lone creator and instigator of ideas on the one hand, and the cybernetics-informed understanding of artist as a node in the network of exchange. Naturally, the decision about adopting this posture of indifference, about not having any expectations, is made by him, from a temporarily stabilized point of human agency. Still, we should perhaps read it as not *just* a rational decision, but also as bodily passivity, as letting oneself be-together-with-difference, with-technology. To cite Judith Butler again, ‘At stake here is the relation between the limits of ontology and epistemology, the link between the limits of what I might become and the limits of what I might risk knowing’.²⁰ It is via points of temporary stabilisation between human, corporeal and technical agency that partial decisions are being made, connections between bodies are being established, aesthetic and political transformation is being achieved, and power is taking effect over different parts of ‘the network’ in a differential manner. There is therefore no guarantee that temporary outcomes of any such ongoing performative processes will be critical and transformative rather than just repetitive and conformist. But it is this possibility of emergence of such transformations and inventions, of making *a difference that matters*, that can turn this media project from the theatre of mere form to an ethico-political performance.²¹

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²⁰ Judith Butler, ‘What is Critique? An Essay on Foucault’s Virtue’, *Transversal*, online journal published by the European Institute for Progressive Cultural Politics, May (2001): non-pag.

²¹ This last paragraph develops some sentences and ideas from Joanna Zylińska, *Bioethics in the Age of New Media* (Cambridge, MA, 2009).

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List of images

NB The essay includes 12 BW images, all in landscape format. Images 1-5 and 12, which all come from the same photographic project, serve as interludes between different sections of the essay. Could we make sure they are all printed in the same size please (they're quite detailed so, size-wise, the bigger the better ;)? Images 6-11 are part of a different project described in the essay – could they be all printed on one page in (seamlessly combined) pairs of two, the way it's shown below? Thanks!

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1. Image 1, file:1.tiff

Caption: Joanna Zylinska, *Media Spaces* 01, 2008



2. Image 2, file: 2.tiff

Caption: Joanna Zylinska, *Media Spaces 02*, 2008



3. Image 3, file: 3.tiff

Caption: Joanna Zylinska, *Media Spaces 03*, 2008



4. Image 4, file: 4.tiff

Caption: Joanna Zylinska, *Media Spaces 04*, 2008



5. Image 5, file: 5.tiff

Caption: Joanna Zylińska, *Media Spaces 05*, 2008



6. Images 6-11, files 6.tiff-11.tiff

Please display all 6 images on the same page; all in the same size, in 3 pairs (with 2 images in each pair combined seamlessly, with a small gap between the 3 pairs) – just as shown below.

Caption: Joanna Zylińska, *We Have Always Been Digital*, 2007





7. Image 12, file: 12.tiff

Caption: Joanna Zylynska, *Media Spaces 12*, 2008

