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Materiality, Posthumanist Performativity, and Wearables

Matter, like meaning, is not an individually articulated or static entity. Matter is not little bits of nature, or a blank slate, surface, or site passively awaiting signification; nor is it an uncontested ground for scientific, feminist, or Marxist theories. Matter is not a support, location, referent, or source of sustainability for discourse. Matter is not immutable or passive. It does not require the mark of external force like culture or history to complete it. Matter is always already an ongoing historicity. (Barad, 2003, 821)

Abstract

This paper outlines how wearables reconfigure notions of performativity because of their admixtures of human/nonhuman agencies. It argues that contemporary wearables, in a continuum with technological/body performative entanglement dating from early 20th century art (Avant-Garde), *materially* alter practices of performativity because they propose new and intimately co-dependent agencies of the human/nonhuman. The theoretical arguments to substantiate this human/nonhuman reconfiguration of performativity via wearables are culled from recent Science Technology and Society (STS) and posthumanist approaches to materiality and performativity.

Materiality

Art is material. It always exists in a substrate, a substance, a history of expertise, tools, practices, and in association with the lived physical world – be it in the object or the receiver. Furthermore, when art is technological it enters into a relation with the event. Technology is active – it moves, signals, modulates, and transforms over time, in short it “performs.” Technological art is event-making. Latour argues that the incommensurable divide that Modernism created was to conceptually and materially separate nature from culture (Latour, 1993). To uphold the “illusion” of human supremacy over the environment, and over the nonhuman, however, is an untenable premise

which supposes a material divide between human bodies/intentions and that of technologies/nature. I would like to argue that this divide has long been bastardized in arts. We’ve been tinkering in consort with, and in sympathy/sympathy with machines certainly since the Modern age, since the Avant-Garde, since Vsevolod Meyerholds’ biomechanics or Frederick Kiesler’s control walls. (Poggioli, 1968; Salter, 2010) We’ve been courting material as agency, and machines as “beings” for quite some time now. And we have enlisted them (the nonhumans, the material, the machines, the technology) for more than our servitude – we have enlisted them as active creative collaborators.

Posthumanist Performativity

“Matter,” as a platform for enquiry, has had a recent surge of importance. The transformation of matter – in creative and scientific domains – is increasingly at the fore of the shaping and constitution of our rapidly changing world (think: physics! biology! telecommunications!). We can look to the performative turn (in Sociology, Anthropology, Ethnography) as one of the first steps towards the material, the “real,” and the lived to better understand the world. Today, techno-scientific practices in the field of STS are increasingly engendering a shift from representational models of the world to actively engaged ones which seek to encounter “materiality.” Emphasis on the mechanics of the production of knowledge – laboratory contexts, specific uses of apparatuses, human/nonhuman interactions – have shifted scientific paradigms both towards the physical world (which engages the human and nonhuman) and towards the “active” world with a particular interest in “performativity.” (Knorr Cetina, 1999) This interest in the non-representational raises a critique of the premise that scientific knowledge is only encoded in inscriptive forms (documents, theories, papers, texts) – and rather looks at the modalities, the actions and the messy relationship between humans and nonhumans as a platform for the construction of knowledge. (Barad, 2003)

Feminist scholar Karen Barad’s quantum physics-inspired posthumanism redefines the concept of performativity from a techno-scientific standpoint to argue that science “performs” – in experiments, in laboratories, with specialised instruments, with human agents etc. Science, as a knowledge-based endeavour, is inherently “performative” for Barad. She notes:

the move towards performative alternatives to representationalism shifts the focus from questions of correspondence between descriptions and reality (e.g., do they mirror nature or culture?) to matters of practices/doings/actions. (Barad, 2003, 802)

Wearables

I wish to investigate wearables as a practice which is specifically reconfiguring the notion and process of performativity via its intimate integration of human and nonhuman actors – both from a production and presentation standpoint. Wearables, intelligent garments/textiles, have as their depar-

ture point to act as second skins, as translators, interpreters, sensors and vehicles for the processes of data which must be lived on/by/with the body. Wearables, as a technology, co-habitate with the body and “perform” in such a way that gives agency, materiality and meaning to both the organic (the body, organism) and the technological (electronics, sensors). Of interest is: How do these two agencies interpolate? What kinds of performative admixtures are produced by the conflation, overlap and feedback loops of these two systems, these two “matters”? And how do wearables rethink “performativity” via “materiality”?

References

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