

## What Makes an Event? Considerations for the Occurrent Arts

Keynote

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The 'occurrent arts' is a name suggested by philosopher Suzanne Langer for arts of the event. Digital media have complicated the question of what constitutes an art event – or for that matter an event in general – by making spatially and temporally distributed events the new norm. What makes an event an event when its occurrence is dispersive: when no unified perspective on it or integral experience of it is possible? The notion of distributed cognition is often appealed to in answer to this question. Does distributed cognition solve the problem, or complicate it further? The questions of distributed events and distributed cognition are not only relevant to art, but also have been a central topic for military theory in the age of 'netwar'. This paper considers some of the questions raised by the notions of distributed events and distributed cognition, in art and war, drawing on the philosophies of experience of William James and A.N. Whitehead.

The following text is an excerpt from: Brian Massumi, "The Thinking-Feeling of What Happens" *Inflections* 1.1 "How is Research-Creation?" (May 2008)

... I think the concept of "media" is in crisis. It's in tatters. That's because the digital isn't a medium, but it is what is now dominating the media field. Digital technology is an expanding network of connective and fusional potentials. You can take an input in any sense modality, and translate or transduce it into any other, say sound into image. You can take any existing genre of artistic practice and fuse it with any other, say animation with cinema. Digital technology has no specificity as a medium in its own right. That is why commentators like Lev Manovich call it a "meta-medium." But that doesn't get you very far. From there the best you can do is catalogue the kinds of connections that are possible, chart their permutations. It leads to an encyclopaedic approach. At best it gives you a combinatory flow-chart. It entirely shelves the question of art and artfulness. It doesn't give you any vocabulary to think the properly aesthetic dimension, what makes digital art "art." Part of the problem is that the concept of media was never well-formed. Is a medium defined by the material support, say celluloid for cinema? If so, is digital cinema then not cinema? Is a medium defined by the sense modality the product presents itself in – sound for music, vision for cinema? That alternative

misses the absolutely fundamental fact of experience that the senses can take each other up. Michel Chion made that point about cinema. He showed that it is not visual. It operates through what he calls audiovision, a singular-generic fusion-effect of sound and image that emerges when they operate in resonance with one another. Neither sound nor image, audiovision is a kind of effective cross wiring of their potentials. The cinematic image, according to him, is a singular kind of relational effect that takes off from both vision and audio but is irreducible to either. It's a thirdness, a supplement or boosting, that needs them both to happen, but isn't one or the other. It has an experiential quality all its own. It's not a simple mix. A fusion is more than a mix. Mixing as a concept doesn't go much further than meta-medium. It has the same limitations. It's just a general name for the operations that the idea of meta-medium attributes to digital technology. Beyond that, there's the whole problem of the unexamined assumptions about perception that go into the very notion of "mediation." Perception as I have been trying to talk about it, as Whitehead's philosophy says and as embodied cognition also says, is always direct and immediate. It's always its own self-embracing event. It always has presentational immediacy.

All arts are occurrent arts. That's another phrase of Suzanne Langer. All arts are occurrent arts, because any and every perception, artifactual or "natural," is just that, an experiential event. It's an event both in the sense that it is a happening, and in the sense that when it happens something new transpires. There is eventfulness in art, just as there is artfulness in nature. And there is creativity across the board. Because every event is utterly singular, a one-off, even though with and through its one-offness a "likeness" is necessarily thought-felt to a whole population of other events with which it forms an endless series of repeated variations. Langer has probably gone farther than any other aesthetic philosopher toward analyzing art-forms not as "media" but according to the type of experiential event they effect.

You have to rethink what the typology is based on, but also what a typology can be logically. It doesn't have to be a classification system, in the sense of subsuming particulars under an abstract, general idea. It can be based on a differentiating singular-generic thought-feeling. That is to say, it can try to take into account the kind of abstraction that effectively makes a perception what it actually will have been – the really lived abstraction of the virtual. This is a generative typology, a typology of dynamic forms of perception's speculative appearing to itself and in itself. It is an immanent typology or typology of immanence. It amounts to the same thing. The kind of logic called for is what Simondon called allagmatic, an operative logic of the analog expressing "the internal resonance of a system of individuation." Of individuation, because this kind of typology will always have to keep generating variations on itself, as the experience is always being restaged as an event and in the event, recomposed from within. New dynamic forms are always immanently emerging. Art is part and parcel of that process. Its practice speculatively advances its own generative typology. It practically contributes to its own thinking.