

The Silently Percussive – On a Disoriented Phenomenology of Digital Objects

In a recent interview, Toronto-based media artist Lorna Mills commented that her GIFs – brief, looping, and rhythmic – are like visual instantiations of a silent percussive instrument. Part of a larger interview-based project concerning the metaphysical parameters of the digital, Mills was not alone in her deployment of aural and sonic metaphors to help conceptualize the processual and prehensive complexity of digital objects.

As Mills' interview corroborates, discerning the ontological underpinnings of digital objects is becoming an increasingly pressing line of inquiry within numerous disciplines, spanning the humanities, social and hard sciences. According to Parikka (2012), this recent academic interest in objects stems from a series of mediatic phenomena (such as ubiquitous computing and algorithmic futures) that are not only systematically undermining established perceptions of what constitutes an object, but are also giving rise to new forms of technical substance, that philosophy is not yet equipped to account for (Bryant 2014; Hui 2012). In addition to the processual and cascading grounds of digital objects, because computer programs are said to “work on the presupposition of representation” (Hui 345), much of the scholarship on digital objects has been limited to that which could be made visible to a user. Given that mediatic phenomena are increasingly taking place outside the phenomenal field of human perception (Hansen 2014; Thrift 2005), visual approaches can only offer limited insight into the speculative world (Whitehead 1979) of digital stuff.

Drawing upon interviews conducted with 35 contemporary media artists as part of my doctoral research, this paper will locate and map out occasions where respondents conjured sound, both literally and metaphorically, as a means of grasping at the rhythmic anarchitecture that undergirds the appearance of digital objects. Building on this, and following Whitehead (via Goodman 2009), my aim will be to explore how an “aesthetic ontology of pulses” (95), meaningfully disorients emerging approaches to digital objects, eschewing the representational baggage of the visual in order to more effectively engage in a speculative analysis of the vibrational concrescence of digital entities.

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Ashley Scarlett is a doctoral candidate in the Faculty of Information at the University of Toronto. Working in close collaboration with Semaphore, a UofT based new media maker and research cluster, her dissertation explores contemporary new media artworks and making practices as a grounded means of engaging with the phenomenological parameters of digital objects and materials. Ashley has presented widely on this work, and has acted as a visiting scholar at both Humboldt University (Berlin) and Cornell. In addition to her doctoral work, Ashley is a regular lecturer at OCAD University, where she teaches courses on the history of new media art and critical theory.