

In Formation

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Abstract

In this article, I investigate how the characteristics of information—speed, instantaneity, newness, impersonality—influence human perception. I contrast these characteristics with the artwork *Moule* by Anna Lena Grau, a work that slows down understandings and asks its audience to take their time in making sense of it. If an artwork slows down processes of meaning-making, it allows recipients to

become aware of their own semiotic activities. I argue that information is a specific form of message, that is far from objective because it does not take personal experiences and historical, cultural, and geopolitical situatedness into account. With both kinds of procedures, I will ask what is at stake and develop an alternative vision of connecting people, histories, and events that are taking place afar.

How is aesthetic experience used for political goals and how can it be harnessed to withstand manipulation, to serve insight and understanding? In this day and age, it seems as if bodily experience—to have seen something with one's own eyes or to have experienced an event first-hand—is no longer the pinnacle of the trustworthiness of news. As I finish this essay, journalists, members of the German parliament, the president of the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution of Germany, and a diffuse German public, are debating whether a video uploaded on Twitter by the user Antifa Zeckenbiss on August 26, 2018, is fake news. The video showed a handful of white German men shouting racist remarks and manhunting a bystander during a demonstration in Chemnitz. Although the discussion surrounding this video might be a good starting point for an essay that examines how artistic works—as well as political statements, decisions, actions, and different news media—affect the senses and thereby perception, there is another aspect of the discussion that I find noteworthy: Why does the discussion revolve around one video, if there are eyewitnesses, including professional news reporters, and dozens of people who filed charges against protesters like the ones depicted in the video—the latter being demonstrators who allegedly displayed Nazi symbols, shouted Nazi slogans, and who have been accused of threatening people of color, leftists and journalists at the sidelines of the demonstration? That the video prevails in the discussion seems to support Paul Virilio's thesis that media perspectives have taken a “new preponderance” over our bodily experiences of events in time and space, and so constitute our new horizon (14).

This essay investigates if and how artworks in general and the sculpture *Moule* by Anna Lena Grau in particular can counter the process by which knowledge about (events in) the world is mediated more and more through media and less through our bodily perceptions. At the heart of Grau's *Moule* stands a radical indeterminacy which influences *Moule*'s audience to search for possible meanings, a process that takes time. *Moule*'s aesthetic effects differ greatly from those associated with the hegemonic and prevalent narrative form of the 20th and 21st century: information. In contrasting the possibilities that *Moule* opens up, I want to show—relying on (media) theories by Walter Benjamin, Henri

Bergson, Gilles Deleuze, Tiziana Terranova, and Paul Virilio—to what extent information is meant to explain the present completely, without recourse to other times, stories, or to geopolitics.

The current information policy also has an impact on the body, which it affects with the apparent objectivity of news. Thereby information cannot effectuate what *Moule* initiates through its formal aspects. Information has no duration, but has an actuality: it affects, but does not give us time to analyze media effects which act upon our bodies; it is ostensibly objective but leaves out important components from events as it avoids rendering subjective experiences. In this essay, I want to explore how *Moule* in particular and artistic works in general can induce other possibilities for being affected when the sculpture forces its audience to slow down their sense-making activities and to become potentially aware of how they bestow meaning upon arbitrary forms.

To politicize aesthetics means to ask how our sensory perception is enmeshed in political processes. The sculpture *Moule* lends itself to an exploration of the entanglement between our bodily senses and our political being. *Moule* is a larger than life walk-in form, a negative imprint of a closed hand modeled from clay that could potentially be the casting mold for a three-meter-high clenched fist. If we enter the sculpture, it is not the fist that we see, but its inverse mold. The fist is only present as an absence, as an emptiness in the heart of the sculpture. I regard the emptiness in the heart of the figure as an essential part of the artwork, that calls for important learning steps. If we want to read the clenched fist as a symbol of rebellion, resistance, and social struggle, *Moule's* pictorial and spatial language suggests that these ways of asking for social justice are only indirectly accessible.

The void, in particular, opens up a space that needs to be made meaningful. The sculpture forces one to think and to take one's time to fulfil this task. In addition, *Moule's* inverted and therefore estranging form ensures that processes of meaning-making are slowed down. The sculpture thus initiates an important break away from the speed and global distribution of information in our everyday world. Therefore, I want to contrast the mode of thinking that *Moule* instigates with the politics of information nowadays. Furthermore, I want to ask: what



Figure 1. Anna Lena Grau. *Moule*. 2015, plaster, carbon steel, 300 x 215 x 265 cm. View from the outside. Photographer: Ottmar v. Poschinger.

possibilities for being affected and creating meaning are inherent in the slowing down of sense-making that *Moule* induces? I will answer that question by using Gilles Deleuze's distinction between affect and affection, derived from Baruch Spinoza's philosophy. In my reading, the physical experience of temporal duration, which is important for registering affects, will play an important role too. The concept of affect can contribute to a debate about aesthetic procedures, in that it brings to light how different media, including time and space, condition our ways of conceiving phenomena. It identifies how an ethically and politically justifiable politicization of art could take place.

According to Deleuze and Spinoza, the affection is an idea of the effect that an action of one body has on another. For example, when the sun shines on someone's skin, and that person realizes that he or she is getting warmer, they have an idea of an effect that has been caused by a specific situation. This idea is inadequate insofar as it presents only effects and not causes: it confers no knowledge about the sun, or the body, nor about their relationship to each other. In addition, the knowledge gained by the registration of an affection is purely random and indiscriminate: in the example above, the insight was only obtained because the sun shone on someone's skin. However, affection can bring forth another form of perception: affect (Deleuze, "Lecture Transcript" 4). For Deleuze, affect has a direct relation with the duration of time: it describes the lived passage from one state of the body to the other ("Lecture Transcript" 7). Because affect registers the constant modification of affections over a period of time, it allows one to discover differences. For example, one might learn that long exposure to the sun causes burns, and from this insight can draw conclusions as to how the ratio of sunshine to one's well-being may be shaped. In contrast to affection, affect can adequately name causes, and above all, it can ensure that one actively seeks out relationships with other bodies that are beneficial and strengthen, rather than weaken, the *joie de vivre*.

As I want to show in the following, media users today are constantly exposed to affections. This in itself would not be problematic if the affect that every affection virtually contains had time to unfold. But the prevalence of a particular form of communication, namely information,

does not allow phenomena to be permanent. In 1936, Walter Benjamin already wrote in his essay “The Storyteller” that information is a “new form of communication” whose value “does not survive the moment in which it was new. It lives only at that moment; it has to surrender to it completely and explain itself to it without losing any time” (90). As Shunya Yoshimi has pointed out, the term “information” is associated with news about people and events that reach us from afar. Circulation characterizes information, a characterization which distinguishes information from other forms of meaning-transfer, such as knowledge or wisdom. To paraphrase Yoshimi, knowledge can be accumulated and is connected to the archive; wisdom precedes insight and is linked to storytelling and verbal transmission by older and more experienced people. While knowledge and wisdom recur through preservation and disclosure, information has its own novelty. Therefore, information is inextricably linked to technologies whose speed bestow importance upon it, enabling messages to reach their destination at lightning speed while also assuring quick dissemination. Examples of such media are the post office, the printing press, the telegraph, and the Internet. According to Benjamin, information only explains a moment in time, an actuality. It lacks a permanence essential to the development of affects. In addition, information lacks a dimension that determines the power of storytelling: “the ability to exchange experiences” (Benjamin, “Storyteller” 83). For Benjamin, the power of storytelling is evoked through its indeterminacy when rendering events, since it keeps them free from explanations (“Storyteller” 89). When listening to a story, audiences have to use their imagination, their experiences, their hopes and wishes to fill in the story’s indeterminacy.

It is this indeterminacy that *Moule* shares with the procedures of storytelling. The representation and meaning of the clenched fist, symbol of resistance and rebellion, is only accessible to observers if they imaginatively reconstruct the void in the center of *Moule*. First, observers have to decipher the folds and crevices left by a fist in plaster, the imprint of which was a model for the three-meter-high sculpture *Moule*. While wrinkles and crevices are basically always and everywhere part of every fist, we are accustomed to focus normally on its outer shape. In other

words, we usually do not recognize a fist by its imprint but by its contours. Viewers are thus exposed to strange impressions: in *Moule* where the thumb crosses fingers to make a fist there is a deep cleft and where fingers dig deep into the palm of a hand, a sharp wedge now protrudes. *Moule* thereby hinders viewers to reconstruct the counterpart of the mold, the shape it encases, without recourse to their imagination.

Moule initiates a process that consists of two movements. On the one hand, it enriches perception by representing surrounding space, thereby making it comprehensible, in the truest sense of the word. Normally, we do not perceive what the space that surrounds a fist looks like; now, by way of the sculpture, we can register it. In addition, the impact of its monumentality makes perception imperative: it ensures that the viewer cannot escape perceiving its materiality, and with it a space that is normally neglected. To come back to the differentiation between affection and affect that has been previously established, it could be said that *Moule* affects the observer precisely through his monumentality. Nevertheless, it remains questionable whether the observers can even recognize that *Moule* is a larger than life imprint of a fist. By enlarging the molded hand, the fine gaps between fingers become a grooved dome that viewers can enter through an open gap. As Anna Lena Grau told me, some exhibition visitors considered the sculpture an oversized shower cubicle, others a mysterious grotto. Even the smell of clay and plaster does not make one think of human hands. In addition to the perception of form, *Moule* therefore initiates a perception of perception itself that is characterized as inadequate. *Moule's* viewers may experience that their perception normally sticks to the contours of forms, and therefore do not know what the surrounding space looks like and how it is shaped. In the worst case, this lack of knowledge can provoke defensiveness, and at best curiosity: affects evoked through being affected by the sculpture, that only yield insights if one takes the time to analyze their origin and causes.

It could therefore be said that *Moule* sets a process of cognition in motion, precisely because it causes affects in addition to direct sensory affection. Under the condition that the observers engage in a search for content and meaning that are not given from the outset, another coordinate comes into play: namely time itself. Knowledge needs time to be



Figure 2. Anna Lena Grau. *Moule*. 2015, plaster, carbon steel, 300 x 215 x 265 cm. View from the inside. Photographer: Ottmar v. Poschinger.

formulated and communicated, and *Moule* demands a certain slowing down, which can be extremely productive. *Moule* does not disclose from the outset what it is referring to and withholds information about its referent. As a result, the work of art cannot exhaust itself in the speed of the present moment. Rather, the slowing down achieved by the lack of a direct reference might activate the entire reservoir of experience as a potential source of knowledge. It activates past experiences, present perceptions, and visions of the future, which are not separated and can mutually reinforce each other. The slowing down thus shows that experiences are gained in time. This form of time is called duration.

There are two reasons that the concept of duration, derived from Bergson, is relevant for my consideration of the radically different forms of perception discussed in this essay, that of *Moule* and that of contemporary media. On the one hand, the term duration indicates that it takes time to gain insights. On the other hand, duration helps to reveal the conditions through which insights and revelations become overpersonal, since they are no longer limited to individual subjects. This is the case because, in Deleuze's reading of Bergson, duration goes beyond the lived experience of individuals (*Bergsonism* 37). Deleuze extends the meaning of the term duration by understanding time as an ontological category, that is, as being-in-itself. Duration allows us to experience that we are *in* time (Deleuze, *Cinema* 2 80). This is the case because duration allows us to perceive that time harbors a variety of different experiences and beings, each with a different form of permanence. By differentiating between time and duration, Deleuze is able to shift an understanding of time as a category derived from our experiences towards an understanding of time as a dimension that exists independently of them. It is intuition that makes this temporal diversity, which goes beyond singular experience, accessible. When we are impatiently waiting for something or someone, we experience not only our own duration, but are exposed to other rhythms and divergent forms of being-in-time that belong to people, animals, and objects (see Deleuze, *Bergsonism* 32).

According to Deleuze, the intuitive recognition of essential differences between memory and perception enables an abstraction that goes beyond concrete experience. Perceptions can be added to other percep-



Figure 3. View of the studio, 2015. Lost mould from clay during the production process of the sculpture *Moule* by Anna Lena Grau. Photographer: Claudia Unruh.

tions, memories to other memories. If we intuitively grasp these processes, that is, if we understand that perception and memory exist beyond their present existence, we can let this knowledge bear on other people, animals, and things. Intuition allows us to leave our own time and to ascertain the existence of other times and existences, on the basis of our own duration (Deleuze, *Bergsonism* 32-4).

Grasping different times, temporalization, and rhythms intuitively—a process for which duration is essential—can thus reveal fundamental and essential differences in time and in space, provided that a conceptual reflection embeds these differences in linguistic reality. To return here to the distinction between affect and affection, which is decisive for Deleuze, one can conclude that perceptions only give rise to insights when we have time to register their limitations, and these experienced limitations come into being when other memories and other rhythms of existence are registered in addition to one's own perception. In addition to the affection of the body, memories must be evoked, which must in turn be divorced from the current state of the body. However, this perception of a perception is conditioned by our being-in-time, our duration. The slowing down that *Moule* enables, through its inversion and aggrandization, is thus indispensable for the process of making sense. The artwork conveys processes of perception that have to be unfolded. The slowing down of the process of sense-making, the exposure to duration and to a realization of temporal and spatial differences, thus give rise to a mediation and an exchange: between the present, the past, and the future, between individual perceptions, social conditions, and future possibilities. This complex experience which is open to other forms of being-in-time and in-space is achieved through the particular aesthetics of the artwork, that can be understood to politicize in a sustainable and respectful way because it allows for differences to emerge.

In the following, I will compare the form of affection and affect evoked by *Moule* with the politics of today's news media, drawing on the theories of Paul Virilio and Tiziana Terranova. Both media theorists have convincingly demonstrated that media are nowadays mediating and informing their audience about events and people, but disallow the

exchange of experiences that, according to Walter Benjamin, storytelling evokes (“Storyteller” 83).

In order to make the distinction between affect and affection come to fruition, one could say that news media are nowadays reporting events and that their reporting influences us affectively. As I have stated earlier, an experience can only then move beyond a perception rooted in the present when it is confronted with differences in time and space. The perception itself must therefore be exposed as limited and not all-encompassing. But this requires the registration of differences, triggered for example by a memory that evokes temporal difference, or by the physical perception of the different temporal rhythms of other worldly beings. However, it is precisely this perception of duration, of being-in-time, that today’s information media are annihilating with the real-world dimensions of time and space destroyed by the speed and potential reach of information: a process that, according to Paul Virilio, can be considered as a military technique, which is why he speaks of an “information bomb.”

According to Paul Virilio, older forms of transmission and distribution through media—such as writing, the printing press, postal services, the telegraph, and the locomotive—provided a so-called compression of time and space, while new media such as the Internet would bring an end to history, space, and reality. According to Virilio, this erasure of reality comes about because new media wipe out spatial and temporal distances, while the speed of information destroys our ability to perceive this destruction of scale. Today’s quasi-immediate transference establishes “planetary grand-scale optics,” (Virilio 12) in which the geophysical world becomes tele-continental: time differences would become a world time, “‘tele-present’ twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week” (13). The measure of knowledge, the horizon, is replaced by the horizon of a screen or monitor and virtual worlds replace the body-measurable reality of space and time.

In her essay “Futurepublic: On Information Warfare, Bio-racism and Hegemony as Noopolitics,” Tiziana Terranova comes to similar conclusions as Virilio. Today’s media use has far-reaching consequences for the constitution of publics. Public spheres are no longer produced by

civil society. Instead, the media take the population as their biopolitical object. By referring to Michel Foucault's term biopolitics, Terranova implies that the changes of public spheres are produced by state apparatuses and their discursive exercise of power.

The domination of communication media themselves constitutes an important difference between older and newer forms of media influence. Orientalism, for instance, was produced by travelogues, fictional and scientific literature (Said). New Orientalism, as Terranova points out, is constituted by news that is given the right spin for publicity by a host of spin doctors. As an example, Terranova mentions the US consulting firm Hill & Knowlton, which was hired by the Kuwaiti government during the First Gulf War to market the fighting in Iraq to the American public. If we take this form of influence, to which countless examples could be added, for granted, we could come to the conclusion that wars are marketed by governments and groups. For Terranova, this domination of the information sphere is achieved through the use of new techniques of power and warfare, for which new media are essential. The new wars are wars over perception, in which the media play an active role. Media is used tactically, to influence enemies in such a way that they can no longer understand the situation in which they are embedded or cannot make any effective use of a correct assessment (see Terranova 132).

Furthermore, as Terranova suggests, power formations that are mediated by new media target the biological lives of their audiences directly and therefore act on them biopolitically. New forms of information transmission do not work by logical-discursive statements but by the tele-technological dissemination of affective facts. These new forms of transmission affect the body directly by impinging upon the senses and the perception. More importantly, new forms of transmission take possession of the field of perception that is relevant to the public opinion. They constitute audiences as recipients of affects that act upon their bodies and perceptions, thereby influencing them politically by capturing their biological lives. According to Terranova, new media are not only biopolitical but are also a form of government: governmentality. This power formation "addresses the biological, economic and spiritual life of the

population: its way of living, producing, consuming, thinking, feeling and acting” (126). Information conveys the impression of objectivity through the concreteness of the events that it communicates, despite the fact that essential historical, (geo-)political and sometimes subjective aspects of events are left out of the new media narrative. Mediation, in particular the compression of time and space, prevents the limitations and effects of affections and ensuing affects from being questioned.

There are several possibilities to counteract biopolitical affection with information. Terranova proposes manifold publics that can withstand information’s politics. These inventive publics could undermine the separation of populations by pointing to their similarities, overlap, and inseparability. Instead of, for instance, dividing the world into East and West, or into citizens and refugees, we might as well look at what we share with others—from an enthusiasm for sports, art, and culture, to life experiences and worldviews. This solution requires communication and thus differs fundamentally from a one-way consumption of information-based media. As shown, information is contrary to exchanges of experiences. Information constitutes a very limited knowledge of events and people, precisely because it does often not convey subjective narratives. As mentioned before, information often contains abbreviated knowledge in that it only explains the present and has no regard for historical, as well as geopolitical and geographic, particularities. We should thus become better storytellers to explore historical and utopian possibilities.

Following my reflections on Anna Lena Grau’s *Moule*, it seems necessary for me to contemplate the conditions for developing new public spheres and practices that may obstruct the simplification of life and reality. In my analysis, I tried to express that it takes time to develop resistant practices. Accordingly, it is thus necessary, for a responsible, just, and sustainable form of politics to first pause and to inventory different experiences that are grouped around an (ideal or material) object and its links to the past, present, and future. This too requires storytelling, even the invention of stories and their exchange.

Finally, as Terranova points out, imagination is an important means for creating new audiences (142). I want to add that it is a specific form of imagination that is needed: one that is aware of its world-making ac-



Figure 4. View of the studio, 2015. Form construction during the production of the sculpture *Moule* by Anna Lena Grau. Photographer: Mia Grau.

tivity. Our ideas have an influence on how the world is understood and affect our actions. Thus, ideas are by no means out of the world but are directly involved in it. Therefore, it is also important to have assessment criteria for the effects of the imagination. According to Spinozist feminists such as Rosi Braidotti, Moira Gatens, and Genevieve Lloyd, these criteria could be based on an analysis of the connections that people make between themselves or with events and places. Are these beneficial to life's joys and do they ensure that the talents everyone has can be realized? Or do they reduce the potential of individuals and societies? Moule shows us that, in addition to the time it takes to develop these questions, we need freedom to answer them.

Braidotti, Gatens, and Lloyd have rejected, along the lines of Spinoza's philosophy, a series of assumptions that are characteristic of Western philosophy. These include the separation of body and mind or soul, the senses and the intellect, nature and culture. Classical Western philosophy sees the mind, intellect, and culture as achievements that stand out, surpass, and possibly dominate the inadequate matter of the body and its senses, as well as nature in general. Spinozist feminists, on the other hand, postulate the inseparability of these realms; they regard them as different modalities of the same matter. For example, the mind is the idea of the body, it is shaped by bodily experiences. Similarly, we interact with nature and are inseparable from it. At the same time, nature influences us and shapes us, which for Spinozist feminists is an ability: the ability to be affected. The senses, the body, the mind, nature, and culture constantly interact with each other insatiably as part of an ongoing process of becoming. In order to grasp this process, we inevitably develop ideas that are, according to Spinozist feminists, always inappropriate: our imaginations cannot grasp the whole. But that does not mean that human imagination cannot be extremely beneficial. Besides, there is nothing but our imaginations with which to grasp the world; we are condemned to imagine our interactions with the world. The aim is to get an idea of the work of the imagination, to examine it itself.

What exactly do ideas bring about? As I have mentioned before, it is necessary to scrutinize how our imaginations affect our own body and the bodies of others: is life's force enhanced by joy, or do the ties

that are formed trigger sadness, thus reducing the life force? For Spinozist feminists, through this set of questions we can judge the connections that we enter as body-mind-sense-intellect-nature-culture creatures.

Concerning the problems evoked by the speed and one-sidedness of information media, I have shown that they prevent the rendering of personal narratives and thereby inhibit an exchange of experiences. Furthermore, they make it difficult to determine the history of specific places, events, and people with greater precision. Focusing on information reduces the ability to build connections with people, events, and places. To counter this tendency in today's world of media and mediated worlds, we need to develop our capabilities to connect perceptions with memories and to thereby widen our experiences. As I have shown, it is necessary to distill the affects that are caused by an affection of our bodies. This requires time, which we should urgently take, if we want to follow our human peculiarity of being imaginary and narrative beings. *Moule* gives us time and space. It is up to us to explore how we can connect with others and how we can shape those connections.

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Biography

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