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Cornelia Sollfrank / Felix Stalder

Contemporaneity in Embodied Data Practices

The Contemporary Condition

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According to Cornelia Sollfrank and Felix Stalder in their new book, planetary contemporaneity is characterized by polytemporality, a simultaneity of different times and their actors that produces “more noise than harmony.” They substantiate this thesis with their own research, using examples that make these new time scales aesthetically tangible and bring their data-driven and embodied situations to the fore.

Their pleasantly slim book *Contemporaneity in Embodied Data Practices*, published in the series *The Contemporary Condition*, ties in with the series' central question about the characteristics of planetary contemporaneity in art and society. According to series editors Geoff Cox and Jacob Lund, the peculiarity of the contemporary condition lies in its “temporal complexity.” This arises “from the convergence of heterogeneous cultural clusters in the same cultural space, which have emerged along different historical trajectories, across different scales, and in different locations.” Sollfrank and Stalder expand this definition by looking at the simultaneity of different times and more-than-human processes in the ambiguity of datafication and sensitization through ubiquitous sensor technologies. Their method: conversation.

The book is structured in four chapters, “LIVED TIME,” “HISTORICAL TIME,” “EVOLUTIONARY TIME,” and “DATA TIME,” framed by the introductory ‘DEPARTURE’ and the concluding “COMING TOGETHER” with the appendix “SHARE YOUR AIR – SHARE YOUR ILLUSION: Breathing Data,” the transcript of a performance by Cornelia Sollfrank and the artist group #purplenoise.

The division into the four time grids is less definitional than derived from the needs of the projects themselves. At the same time, overlaps are also emphasized: *Lived time* encompasses both the embodied singular experience and the experience of being part of a social collective and larger environments. *Historical time* is the anthropocentric time of humans and their non-human companions, as opposed to the evolutionary time of natural history. Data time occupies an overarching position: due to its synthetic nature, data can be used for measurement and interpretation for all time.

Sollfrank and Stalder discuss matters of common interest based on their different projects. In *Breathing Data*, Cornelia Sollfrank makes herself the subject of investigation: she deals theoretically and practically with controlled breathing, in particular with breathing techniques from yoga and their effects on her body. In contrast, Felix Stalder and Gordan Savičić pursue the EU reintroduction project of the northern bald ibis, which has been extinct in Central Europe for 400 years, in *Animal Data*. In both projects, data as well as embodiment and sensitization through sensor technology play a central role: while Sollfrank measures her bodily functions before and after yoga using sensors and contextualizes them through diary entries, the Max Planck Institute tracks

northern bald ibises using GPS. And while Sollfrank communicates her artistic research in the form of workshops, performances, and interventions, Stalder and Savičić, with the help of Vladan Joler, create a map that visualizes the times, institutions, economies, technologies, etc. involved.

Both understand their research-based design as an aesthetic strategy that, contrary to the dominant control dispositif, presents a different, caring, and embodied approach to technologies. In the Waldrapp project, concern for the bird through innovative technologies is already part of the scientific approach: the migratory birds, raised and tracked by humans, can be followed by citizens via an app. Airplanes show them the migration route or car transports take them across the Alps because the birds have left too late for the south as a result of global warming. In addition, the question arises as to whether the Waldrapp was ever a native bird in Central Europe or whether an alien species is simply being reintroduced here. Such questions sum up the complexity of the contemporary and the ethics of contemporaneity: Not only does the techno-scientific-emancipatory reintroduction of a species wiped out by humans centuries ago prove to be broken, but it also updates the ontology of the migratory bird against the backdrop of global warming, highlighting the fundamental migrant and property-less nature of all living beings: when a place becomes hostile to life, you move on—or die out. Sollfrank also deals with similar questions, specifically regarding the migration and decolonization of yoga.

Through their mutually questioning conversation, the authors strive to find connections and parallels despite their differences. This does not always seem easy—sometimes they interrupt and correct each other, or they encounter unfamiliar “connections” (which are not normally connections). This is inspiring, but at times their associative and erratic thinking can also be exhausting. Yet it is precisely this searching mode that is convincing, because it stages the handling of incompatibility and the “contemporary condition” as a self-experiment: they remain in relationship, even when something doesn’t fit, drifts apart, or remains open.

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