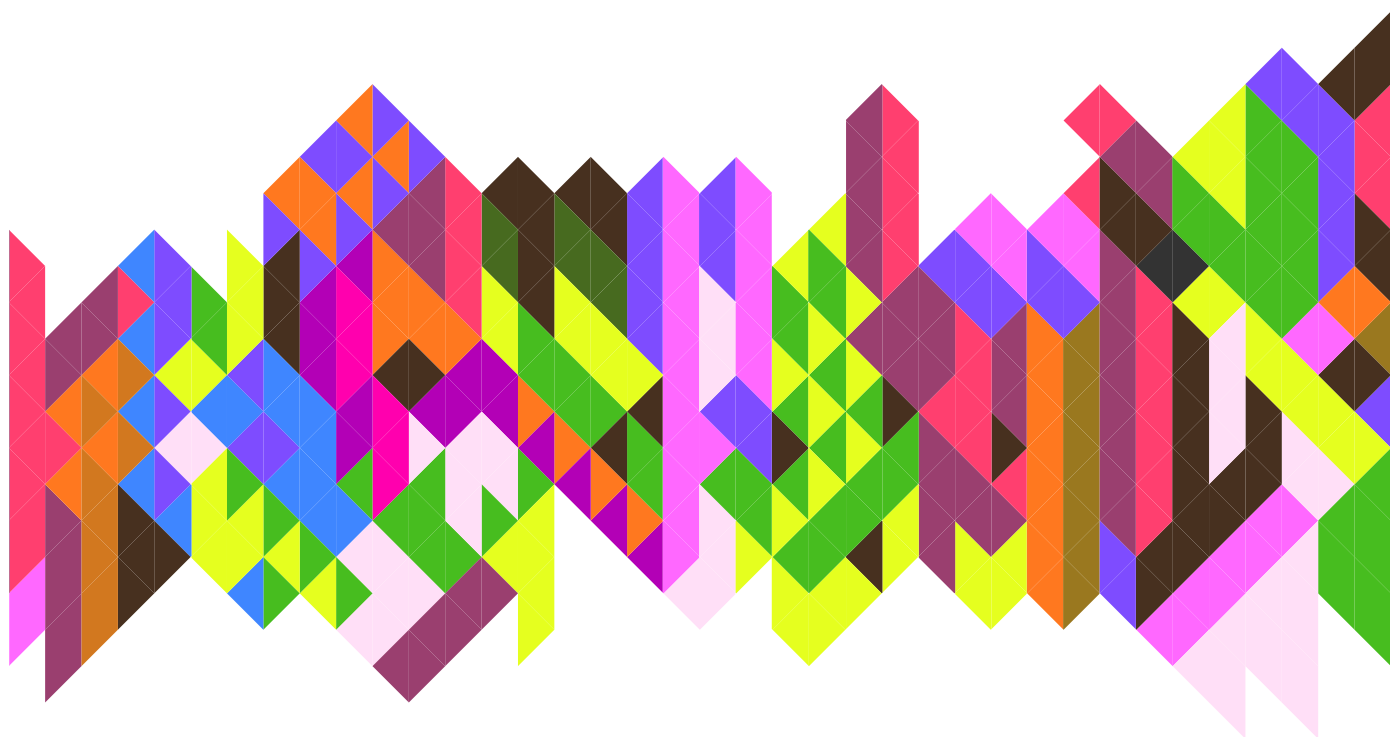


The Fibreculture Journal

DIGITAL MEDIA + NETWORKS + TRANSDISCIPLINARY CRITIQUE



Issue 17 : Unnatural Ecologies

edited by Michael Goddard and Jussi Parikka



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About the Fibreculture Journal

The Fibreculture Journal is a peer reviewed international journal, first published in 2003 to explore the issues and ideas of concern to the Fibreculture network.

The Fibreculture Journal now serves wider social formations across the international community of those thinking critically about, and working with, contemporary digital and networked media.

The Fibreculture Journal has an international Editorial Board and Committee.

In 2008, the Fibreculture Journal became a part of the Open Humanities Press , a key initiative in the development of the Open Access journal community.

The journal encourages critical and speculative interventions in the debate and discussions concerning a wide range of topics of interest. These include the social and cultural contexts, philosophy and politics of contemporary media technologies and events, with a special emphasis on the ongoing social, technical and conceptual transitions involved. More specific topics of interest might include:

- :: informational logics and codes
- :: the possibilities of socio-technical invention and sustainability
- :: the transdisciplinary impacts of new media technologies and events in fields such as education, the biosciences, publishing or knowledge management
- :: information and creative industries, media innovation, and their critique
- :: national and international strategies for innovation, research and development
- :: contemporary media arts
- :: new forms of collaborative constitution made possible by contemporary media
- :: software and hardware develops in relation to the social
- :: networks :: media change, convergence and divergence
- :: the use of contemporary media in socio-technical interventions

The Fibreculture Journal encourages submissions that extend research into critical and investigative networked theories, knowledges and practices.

The Fibreculture Journal values academic scholarship in the field, and demonstrates this through the publication of refereed articles. The journal is fully supportive of Open Access communities and practices, and is committed to contemporary metadata provisions and uses. It is also open to expanded notions of scholarship which might include collaborative hypertexts, database compositions, and low-band electronic installations that experiment with the philosophy, politics and culture of information and communication technologies.

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DIGITAL MEDIA + NETWORKS + TRANSDISCIPLINARY CRITIQUE

// issue 17 2011 unnatural ecologies

Editorial

Michael Goddard
University of Salford

Jussi Parikka
Anglia Ruskin University

This issue is an exercise in media ecology that is paradoxically unnatural. Instead of assuming a natural connection to the established tradition of Media Ecology in the Toronto-school fashion of Marshall McLuhan, Neil Postman, and the work of scholars involved in the Media Ecology Association (http://www.media-ecology.org/media_ecology/), our issue stems from another direction; its theoretical orientation is more inspired by the work of Felix Guattari and engages with several overlapping ecologies that are aesthetico-political in their nature. It stems from a more politically oriented way of understanding the various scales and layers through which media are articulated together with politics, capitalism and nature, in which processes of media and technology cannot be detached from subjectivation. In this context, media ecology is itself a vibrant sphere of dynamics and turbulences including on its technical level. Technology is not only a passive surface for the inscription of meanings and signification, but a material assemblage that partakes in machinic ecologies. And, instead of assuming that 'ecologies' are by their nature natural (even if naturalizing perhaps in terms of their impact on capacities of sensation and thought) we assume them as radically contingent and dynamic, in other words as prone to change.

The concept of media ecology was revived in 2005 by Matthew Fuller's theoretically novel take on the idea. His *Media Ecologies: Materialist Energies in Art and Technoculture* set out to map the 'dynamic interrelation[s] of processes and objects, beings and things, patterns and matter' (Fuller 2005: 2) in a culture where the relation between materiality and information has been redefined. Steering clear of earlier celebrations of media as informational environments which dismiss any connection with the physical as for example with the cyberculture of the 1980s and 1990s – Fuller is keen to map out how we can develop a material vocabulary for media ecological processes. The roots of such a vocabulary—that bends itself to the intensive connections of pirate radios and voice, the photographic medium and the Internet as well as such informational entities as memes—come from Whitehead, Simondon, Nietzsche as well as Guattari and contemporary writers such as Katherine N. Hayles. What emerges is a different genealogy for theories of media ecology.

What was demonstrated already in Fuller's take on the concept was a special appreciation of material practices involved in establishing the regimes of media ecologies. Media ecologies are quite often understood by Fuller through artistic/activist practices rather than pre-formed theories, which precisely work through the complex media layers in which on the one hand subjectivation and agency are articulated and, on the other hand, the materiality of informational objects gets distributed, dispersed and takes effect. Media ecological platforms can be seen to range from network environments for philosophy and media activism as in Rekombinant (<http://www.rekombinant.org>) to art platforms on the net such as Runme.org (<http://runme.org/>). Related themes can be detected in the various negotiations of nature being remixed, resurfaced, revisualized or sonified through media environments. Examples include Natalie Jeremijenko's work, the Harwood-Yokokoji-Wright Eco Media collaboration (featured in Parikka -this Issue), biological art projects such as Amy Youngs's The Digestive Table (2006, <http://hypernatural.com/digestive.html>), the work of activist/artistic groupings like Critical Art Ensemble, the Yes Men or the Wu Ming foundation and various bio-art projects of recent years. In all these cases a dynamic media ecology is generated, incorporating natural, technical and informational components and giving rise to singular processes of subjectivation that are equally an essential part of the media ecology.

For Fuller, the question of affordances is a central way to understand the interaction of various regimes of materiality. Affordance is a term that stems from J. J. Gibson's ecological psychology and is attributed to the capacities for interaction of living bodies. For Fuller, this concept is applicable more widely, and affording capacities became a methodological pathway to understanding various art/ecology-practices:

Just as capacities of thought, of being, are made in lived bodies, in complex and delicately conjoined tissues and processes, and just as powers are inherent in all matter, materialism also requires that the capacities of activity, thought, sensation, and affect possible to each composition whether organic or not are shaped by what it is, what it connects to, and the dimensions of relationality around it. (Fuller 2005: 174)

In this sense, artistic work, whether engaging with animal bodies, technological assemblages, or their combinations and relations, can be seen as an ecological – or even ecosophical – mapping of potential universes of enunciation as well as sensation (see also Parikka, 2010).

More than a question of interpretation, media ecology addresses the crucial question of activity; what do media do? The classical media ecological theorists already asked similar questions about the effects of media environments on the human sensorium and mental capacities but increasingly, with this more recent wave of media ecological interests, we are attached not only to questions concerning molar formations as the human organism, but also the molecular fluxes in which bodies are formed. We are as interested in ecologies of non-humans, whether on the microbial scale or on the scale of techno-scientific objects. All demand a new attitude tuned to matter and defined through its vibrancy (see Bennett, 2010). We are interested in bodies, and in forces (in)forming those bodies, in their state of emergence; the processes in which and through which bodies consolidate, stabilized, form, and further deform.

In our view, theories of media ecology are closely linked with practice in the sense that theory itself is viewed as a media ecological practice. Fuller's book opens with a key statement regarding theory itself as media ecological

practice : 'This is a media ecology made in bits of paper' (Fuller, 2005: 1). His contribution to this issue extends this concern. He explores the generativity of 'Faulty Theory' - theory given over to the potential of the indeterminable, the anomaly, the 'pata-physical'. Sites of enunciation, or indeed ecologies of enunciation in which both theory and practice take place become concerns from a media ecological perspective. The question of disciplines, institutions and, increasingly, of transdisciplinarity, haunts not only the theoretical mindset but the wider frameworks in which processes of subjectivation are to be situated within techno-capitalist contexts. As Matthew Fuller outlines in this issue, theory itself is a thick, materialist practice. It is far from immaterial or simply representational, displaying a unique affordance for 'graspings and imagination'. The articles in this issue unpack related concepts and practices of media ecologies from a variety of perspectives.

In Goddard's article, 'Towards an Archaeology of Media Ecologies', an effort is made to distinguish the emergent paradigm of media ecologies (with an 'S' as Jean-Luc Godard might say) from 'actually existing' media ecology. The appearance of Fuller's book was understandably unsettling for those of the media ecological school and certainly marks at least a profound rupture in the media ecological paradigm, if not a total break. The article goes on to examine one of the key sources for this break, namely Felix Guattari's engagements with both media and ecology. It especially focuses on the way Guattari's media ecologies were energised by and engaged with free radio movements in both Italy and France. The media ecological dynamics surrounding free radios were inseparable from the radical political movements from which they emerged and of which they were a key component. The article traces how, with the decline of these political energies, these ecologies could no longer be sustained. Nevertheless, in examples ranging from the London pirate radio analysed so brilliantly in Fuller's book to forms of tactical and sovereign media, the political potential of media ecologies remain active and effective in contemporary digital conditions, especially in relation to new and diverse modes of subjectivation.

Michel Bauwens, one of the theorists Moore draws upon in this issue, has elaborated the political economy of peer to peer as an ecology of peer production, governance and property - of the 'Commons'. This is a crucial theme for contemporary political networks and social production. In her text on the concept of autcreativity and artistic media ecological platforms Olga Goriunova elaborates the specific modes of production/creativity that go hand-in-hand with ecologies of software and other technical platforms. Goriunova emphasises the work of art platforms in offering catalyst forces, coherence and maintenance to aesthetic processes and practices. Defining the notion of 'art platforms' as 'a terminological solution for describing a website or an ensemble of human-technical objects reflexive of their own processual devising, which act as a catalyst in the development of an exceptionally vivid cultural or artistic current,' she is able to address the multiplicities of forces engaged in what could be called the organization of creativity. Again, we can bluntly state that of course there has not been a lack of such organization in the midst of the hype surrounding creative industries, but Goriunova maps out the more 'dirty' and processual forms of activities that might self-conceptualise themselves as art—if not necessarily always as "art". The article employs the idea of self-organization, but again in a Guattarian wake flags it as a process of differentiation; again, we are dealing with media ecologies that both resist hylomorphism (the technicality of such platforms is not detached from the artistic, the ideational), and employ an 'unnatural' ecology characterized by metastability, to use a term from Gilbert Simondon.

Jussi Parikka's text on nature reframed as media also employs theoretical support from Simondon among others to argue that projects such as EcoMedia (Harwood-Wright-Yokokoji) and Dead Media (Garnet Hertz) encourage a wider understanding of media. Here, media ecology is taken to be the investigation of the complex transformations, transactions and reemployments of "nature" as a force from which our understanding of media stems. The art projects

themselves act as catalysts for a non-human perspective on contemporary media, and natural processes are used to investigate the idea of media as an affordance—less a substance than a process of affording spatial and temporal relations between people, but also between things non-human. In this context, Parikka's text maps the relations between media ecology and media archaeology as well, through the question of the complex temporal timescales in which media and ecology take place.

It seems that we increasingly need such perspectives that are able to analyze and understand natures and technologies as interlinked; for example the environmental contexts of information technology where it is quite rarely realized that social networks might run on coal powered energy [1], or in the way in which supposedly immaterial information technologies are a key origin of a future ecocatastrophe of toxic chemicals [2], or in the way in which natures and cultures are constantly mediated in networks of relations of political ecology, in what Jane Bennett calls aptly 'a knotted world of vibrant matter' (2010: 13).

Hence, the translations and transpositions from biology to media ecologies and spheres need careful scrutiny. Such a critique is addressed in Matteo Pasquinelli's article 'Four Regimes of Entropy: For an Ecology of Genetics and Biomorphic Media Theory'. He investigates the figures of the biological inherent in our current vocabulary of political media cultures, and in concepts from multitudes to swarms. He also focuses on how inherently we have grown to think of the digital, and code, through notions that suggest a seeming universality adopted from biological research, especially from DNA. Pasquinelli argues for a detailed, multi-layered genealogy of entropy not only in relation to digital code, but also from the viewpoints of the biological, as well as the mineral. Hence, the article argues that instead of enthusiasm for 'code' as the final referent for media ecologies of network culture, we should turn to energetics, understanding political ecologies in the light of the life of micro-organisms. In order to avoid code reductionism, what is proposed is a "wetter" approach to bodies, and ecologies of machines of heterogeneous kinds, through which, methodologically, one is able to map the biopolitics of network organisms and their reliance on the processes of abstraction at the core of this ontology of code. In this way one can also provide alternatives that are more material, more heterogeneous in their ecology.

Finally, the politics of media ecology is picked up by Phoebe Moore in her article 'Subjectivity in the Ecologies of P2P Production'. Moore addresses P2P forms of organization in the context of media ecology, and mobilizes the force of change as part of the investigation; how is real social change possible, and how do alternative forms of organization – such as horizontal, non-hierarchical networks among peers – challenge and function in neoliberal digital media culture? Also proceeding from a Guattarian perspective to the multiple ecological spheres in which aesthetics, organization, political economy and activism co-function in complex ties, her article addresses media ecology as an analysis of subjectivation; responding to the question of how to invent such forms of productive relations which fall outside the proprietary logic and function according to an 'open source model.'

The next contribution to this issue and its concerns with the materiality of media ecologies, comes from Matthew Fuller's already mentioned essay entitled 'Faulty Theory.' Rather than continue the exploration of media ecologies began in his earlier work, Fuller turns his attention towards "theory," finding it every bit as thick and material as the other more obviously material ecologies dealt with in this issue. In particular, Fuller is interested in the anomalous theories and thinking machines of figures such as Gordon Pask, Alfred Jarry and Charles Fort, as modes of theory that do far more than disturb conventional distinctions between theory and practice. Rather, as "faulty theories" for which error is not so much a fault to be corrected as a fault-line to be followed, they constitute experimental engage-

ments with the world that are perhaps more practical than practice itself since they consider language, ideas, thinking machines and the other components of theory as materials to be worked with rather than as representational abstractions. More than this, rather than just working through words and their conventional supports of the printed page, faulty theory also engages with, in Fuller's terms, 'forms of ideational devices, robots, blags, and the ruses of things, rules and jokes.'

As the articles in this issue argue, media ecologies is able to provide methodological clues with which to map the messy ontologies of contemporary culture—the translations and transpositions between nature and technology, but also between subjectivity and media, the social and the political, and the political economy in which such energetic processes take place. The articles show how media ecology, as a direction within media studies, has resonances with other new ideas—in new materialism, media archaeology and political philosophy—that deal with new kinds of bodies. These bodies are not always human, not always solid, and not always clearly visible/representable. Media ecology is able to analyse a media culture that is becoming less about apparatuses and solids, and more about waves, vibrations, streams, processes and movements. As such, media ecology is expanding the possibilities of where media studies can go.

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Endnotes

[1] See 'Facebook faces campaign to switch to renewable energy,' *The Guardian* September 1, 2010 . See also the Harwood and Yokokoji project *Coal Fired Computers* (2010) which brilliantly maps the long networks in which coal and computers are interlinked. <http://www.avfestival.co.uk/programme/10/events/coal-fired-computers>. See also 'Pits to Bits,' Matthew Fuller interviewing Graham Harwood (July, 2010).

[2] See Garnet Hertz's *Dead Media Project*, , and also Mel Chin's *Revival Field* in which he uses specific plants to clean the soil of toxics through the process of 'hyperaccumulation' where the plant sucks heavy metals to itself.