Black Box Feed-back:
The Politics of Machines in Early Nordic Media Art

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This paper show-cases and investigates two events in 1966 (Billy Klüver's *9 Evenings* and Knut Wiggens' *Visions of the Present*) that both can be seen as feed-back from an advanced Nordic art-tech-scene to an international scene from which appeared (at least) two different visions for technology and art that are still with us today. One vision could be termed a 'Nordic vision', which wanted art to be critical of and find alternatives to an increasingly technologically dominated culture and society; the other vision could be called a 'new American vision', but its roots were the same Nordic context. However, in this vision art is seen as a vehicle to techno-creative experiments, good at testing and creating 'new' more effective machines and solutions (ultimately, playing into the politically motivated competition with the Soviet Union at the time, most symbolically carried out in NASA's Apollo program and plan to land on the moon). Whereas the first vision remains a primarily North-European techno-critical discourse, the second gave birth to a 'New Media Art' and a pervasive design-driven discourse which dominates the global art-tech discourses today.

Nordic Media Art. Politics. Machines. Art and Technology. Subjectile inscriptions.

1. INTRODUCTION

Nordic art and technology practices impacted the International art-tech scene in fundamental ways, not only in events such as the '9 Evenings' in New York, but with a certain conflictual notion of a 'politics' of the machines; with an intention of a - sometimes liberating, if not in reality then in intention – subjectile feed-back from the surfaces of effects from the black-box of technology. It was, as I am arguing and show-casing in the following, as much a political dispute as it was an artistic one. The question of the impact of machines in artistic practices is closely connected to the conceptions and receptions of machines in art. On one level, it seems to be a question of how machines are positioned and operationalized on the thresholds of art's entanglements with technology, which never seem to quite make it past a mere superficial 'fascination' of what the machines can do without a critical understanding of what goes on inside the 'black box' of those machines and the technologies operating them. On another level, it is as if researchers in the humanities have thrived in producing almost the opposite or inverse positions, in manifold. It often appears as if there are no acceptable receptions of the use of technology in art, and the conception(s) of machines follow an extreme interpretation of that which Heidegger termed 'gestell' – the negative effects of technology, in absolute (Heidegger, 1977, p.10).

The black box remains black and uncharted in both conceptions, like two faces of the same coin where there is no critical reflection nor even analysis of the machines as physical part of our reality, nor on the contextual impact of machines on culture, society, art, thinking.

However, as Jacques Derrida has pointed out in *Paper Machines*, the question of machines and technology cannot be reduced to the effects of something 'happening' in a black box; it changes the epistemological setting(s) of all our cultural and social activities, including that of writing books on paper with and on (various) machines. It produces newtools with which to raise questions of the role and function of the medium(s) of cultural production; in other words, what I wish to term, here, a politics of the machines emerges, involving a restructuring of the way art/technology entanglements are operationalised.

Written in 2001 (translated 2004), and even though seemingly on the topic (and machinic medium) of the book, Paper Machines, as I will put it forward here, is addressing a number of situated issues concerning the impact of technology on the conditions for artistic expression, representation, and reflection that follows from that:

"Paper echoes and resounds, *subjectile* of an inscription…Beneath the appearance of a surface, it holds in reserve a volume, folds, a labyrinth whose walls return the echoes of the voice or song that it carries itself; for paper also has the range or the ranges of a voice bearer…"

2. NORDIC ENTANGLEMENTS

The Nordic countries have historically and culturally had a position between the 'West' and the 'East'. The social construction of the Nordic hemisphere was always conscious about being, or seeking to be, independent and rather different from the continental, anglo-saxon, and eastern cultural traditions, however being inspired and influenced from all over time for various geopolitical and historical reasons. This is also the case in the vision of art and technology: the Nordic countries have often created montages of 'the best' from all, and added a number of ultralocal subjectlie inscriptions. In the 1960s, which was a time of political and social change, with ideological disputes resonating from a century of world wars and revolutions, dictatorship and democracy, and industrial and national power on an unprecedented scale. This is the time when the Nordic countries really was formed as social-liberal democracies and with a critical tradition in philosophy, politics,

technology and art which is as unique as it is unrecognized in art (and other) histories.

In the following, I will show-case subjectile inscriptions of art and technology from the Nordic scene (artists, engineers, thinkers, curators, directors, institutions etc) of which some impacted the international scene directly, and some that only later (if at all) were noticed (and, then, mostly were considered, well, as 'historical', and not, as they should be as I am arguing here, as 'political').

I am building my argument on the entanglements of those inscriptions, most notably indicated in the heated dispute that lead to Billy Klüver's 9 evenings being shown in New York and not in Stockholm; and I am show-casing how those entanglements are framing not only the '9 evenings' and one of the performative pieces from that event, Ôyvind Fahlström's *Kisses Sweater than Wine*, but also how they inscribe two

distinctly different approaches to art and technology which would shape, so I argue, the way Art and Technology and (New) Media Art, as concepts and practices are most commonly understood and approached on the international scene, today.

But it also created a lesser known, more critical tradition that has a different and more political 'take' (in the sense of being self-investigative of preconceptions and the cultural and unconscious patterns technology creates), mostly found today in the Nordic (and Baltic) countries, that looks at technology and art practices as socio-psychological and cultural-structural issues we have to debate how to tackle in view of humanity and global climate etc., rather than isolated experimental practices.

3. KISSES AND MACHINES

In October 1966, the Swedish artist Öyvind Fahlström created *Kisses Sweeter than Wine* for the *9 Evenings: Theatre and Engineering*, which premiered at the 69th Regiment Armory in New York.

Functionally a performance (in 9 parts), *Kisses Sweeter than Wine* demonstrated, however, a profound engagement with machines and memory (a parallel 'reality' that does not progress over time, like a performance does). Staging machines of all sorts – audio- and film-recorders, computers, car engines, television, radio etc. – even the main human actors (Robert Rauschenberg being one of them) were simulating 'computional' capabilities or effects (like 'autistic' fact- or number- processing). One of the most striking elements is the linking of (an audio- recording of reactions to) the parodic and absurd (fake) Mao-Hope demonstration with a screening of excerpts from Welsey Barry's science fiction film The Creation of the Humaniods (1961).

This, I would like to propose, is a subjectile inscription where a volume of political issues resounds beneath the appearance of a surface - a film projection (to echo Derrida, from just before).

The situating of these experiments in art and technology within *Kisses Sweeter Than Wine*, and via the infusion of performativity as vernacular of this situating, the '9 evenings' itself is a surface upon which Fahlström inscripes political volumes.

Even if the whole event is commemorated and hailed by some leading art historians as one of the milestones of 'the 60s art-scene' (Burnham, Hultberg, Popper, Paul, Shanken, Bäckström), it certainly was not the case in its time. Leading art critics in the day, such as Greenberg, described it in less than positive terms. This points to the fact that the '9 Evenings' event created intellectual conflicts in the interpretation of how technology should be addressed; and if it even should be included into

the study of art, which was the view of more traditional art historians and critics. The repercussions of the latter position, I will not go further into in this short paper, but only point to the fact that this position is still predominant among art historians today.

However, within the circles who were finding it important to include technology into their work and into the reception of art as a whole, another equally formative (and politically tinged) dispute emerged. As it is almost never mentioned in art historical reception (see Fondation L'Anglois and Hansen (2013) for some of the rare documentation), the 9 evenings event was originally developed and conceptionalised to be part of the Stockholm Festival of Art and Technology, *Visions of the Present*.[i] Due to a dispute concerning the artistic focus between the Stockholm festival director and chair of Fylkingen, Knut Wiggen, and the head engineer of 9 evenings, Billy Klüver, it was cancelled from the festival program in Stockholm – and, eventually, the 9 evenings was then moved to the Armory in New York.

"9 Evenings: Theatre and Engineering" was to be presented as part of the Stockholm Festival of Art and Technology in 1966. But when the festival's American program was cancelled, Billy Klüver moved the event to the 69th Regiment Armory (New York), where it ran from October 13 to 23, 1966. (Fondation L'anglois)"

Visions of the Present was still realized as planned, however, without the artists from the *9 Evenings*. As the restaging of this festival by Moderna Museet in 2012 showed, the visions and artistic ideas of how to approach technology with art were also groundbreaking and…

"…included prominent speakers such as Iannis Xennakis, Yona Friedman, Sven Fagerberg and Kostas Axelos, and also showed art and music works by artists like Alvin Lucier, Karl-Birger Blomdahl, Ralph Lundsten, Åke Karlung and Nam June Paik." (http://www.visionsofthenow.com)

As it appears from this listing, the difference between *Visions of the Present* and *9 Evenings* hinges on the format and character of the artistic impact on discussions and thus on its political presence, as it were: they were as much talks and presentations as they were works of art in their own right.

As Wiggen himself writes at the time, Visions of the Now was about 'what consequences the expansion of technology will have for all of us.'

He continues:

"… if we do not work on becoming adequately "aware of", "express", and "transform" that which we call "our image of the world", we risk to lose control of the pervasive changes in the external reality, resulting from of scientific research and technological developments. (Wiggen (1999), p. 29)"

Here, Wiggen is voicing the concerns that are shared across a rich scene of experimental practices in the Nordic Countries at the time. A scene, which already from the mid-50s had been playing with and criss-crossing in and out of concrete art, concrete poetry, processual and performative aesthetics, sound recording and -playback modalities, information theory and 'soft' cybernetics, as well as a certain region-specific strong interest in addressing the situation of mass medias, power structures and ideas of social and political reformation of society.

In comparison to this, it is interesting to read Billy Klüver's response in the journal Artforum (Klüver, 1967) to the critique that emerged after the opening of 9 Evening. He is defending the technology and engineering against criticism that it all allegedly failed (at least on the first evening), claiming that art made the machines work in new ways, better even than what they were intended for (and that the art critics were unable to see that with their inadequate training to look at technological processes and screens). Art has a position, Klüver's claims, to push technology and machines outside their intended functions, and thus artistic experiments play a crucial role in perfecting American industry. It could be argued that Klüver, then, is voicing an American industry keen on being best at innovation and win the politically motivated space-race against the Soviet Union.

Whereas the '9 Evenings' in effect moves art towards an industrial language and syntax, putting art in the service of engineering, the Nordic situations and events, such as *Visions of the Present,* when rewritten or re-inscribed into an alternative history of technology and machines in art, show evidence of a creative use and critique of machines, not as black boxes which are out of our phenomenological grasp, but as resonant machines, pushed and pulled by gravitational forces which (only) art arguably has the capacity to capture or map out into a participating audience awareness. Subjectile of political inscriptions.

4 On the Threshold

In effect, in each their very different ways, the experiments of *9 Evenings* and the *Visions of the Present* are restructuring the entanglements of art and technology and positioning human political awareness into the circuits, revealing a(n artistic) curiosity towards, as well as a critique of, technology as artistic material. And how they, in the process, engage in a political dispute over machines: Should art make technology 'better' and work together with industry towards more effective experiences? or should art use technology as a material for social and cultural awareness and engagement to avoid exploitation?

It is my argument that when the location of 9 Evenings was moved, it's subjectile inscriptions

of the politics of the machines found a new resonance of the original Nordic ideas in the context of the American industrial complex poised on being the first to put a man on the moon. In the process, it created a dispute which is still with us today: Is art and technology a creative and experimental relation without implications for bigger political issues? or is it essentially a political relationship which needs to be examined and reinterpreted constantly with great ethical, gender, geo-political and environmental issues at stake?

The dispute is formative of the current discussions and positions. The first is in many ways the sandbox of the reality of the current construction of global art-tech discourses; the latter rather a goal or dream to be achieved in the future, as they were most notably voiced at the first Politics of the Machines conference in Denmark May 2018. The effort, shared by academics and artists, in the spirit of Derrida (and indeed threshold-theoreticians such as Katrine Hayles and Donna Hathaway and many others) is to formulate new (post-cognitive and situated) framings to navigate the art- tech scene; and for that to succeed, as I am proposing here, alternative genealogies of how local disputes of politics of machines, like the Nordic dispute between Knut Wiggen and Billy Klüver in 1966, affects and impacts the international discourses in a variety of complex subjectile inscriptions. Let me therefore end this paper with a quote from Fahlström, who was dismayed because his art generally was praised for its innovative qualities whereas his (utopian) reflections in the political and social spheres were all dismissed (in Hultberg, 2001, p. 209):

"The merging of political activism and analysis – an artistic / open attitude to life – is for me a fundamental notion by which I willingly stand or fall."

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