Writing Across Body and Machine: Cybernetic Methodologies in Art History

How can we better read the machine object in its native programming language? This is the essential question posed by my master's thesis research, which is focused on cybernetic artist Nicolas Schöffer, the origins of cybernetic art history, and its continued relevance in the context of contemporary media art. This research, conducted within the MA Art History program at Concordia, proposes that early developments in cybernetic science and especially its elaboration in art spheres during the 1960s and '70s offer a lens with which to write contemporary media art history. With its attention to communicative feedback loops as well as the operational or mechanical looping that occurs in the machine, cybernetics is a vehicle for asking essential questions about the responsibility of media art historians to their objects. I argue that with the proliferation of art practices that take advantage of established online structures and platforms, such as performance through Instagram or curated Tumblr blogs, it is imperative for the media art historian to pay closer attention to the materiality of their objects. Learning "how it works" feels especially crucial in the contemporary context if historians are to fully grasp the nuances across the vast network of what today constitutes media art. Importantly, I believe in working against the terminology "new media," which attempts to create a historical divide between pre-digital and post-digital technology; in my research, I occupy the position that chronological histories are an inadequate means of understanding machine art, not only because they tend toward reductionist, technologically determinist narratives, but because they serve to create measured – and therefore greater or lesser – distance between machines from different periods.

I am interested in understanding machines through a collapse in time, where the loom can restore its kinship with the computer.

In the Media Archaeology seminar, I will use the Depot's collection as a starting ground for the development of a cybernetic art-historical methodology, which can be applied to my ongoing thesis research. Material explorations of technologies (which necessarily includes processes of distribution and reception, in addition to the hardware itself) lead to specific vocabularies and ways of articulating different media objects. The technologies that produce a given artwork must inform the vocabulary and historical approach we apply to the artwork they produce. The video game consoles housed in the Depot's collection offer an avenue for exploring feedback between body and machine; I will be looking at the consoles in relation to cybernetic art projects that rely on participation to complete their communicative loops, such as Gordon Pask's (ultimately never built) "Proposal for a Cybernetic Theatre." Gaming will be viewed in an expanded sense, as a means of engaging the body as an active participant in media. The notion of the unfinished raised by Pask's project and others can be further explored in terms of the unfinished loop, or the perpetual necessity of developing new software and hardware—made necessary to achieve compatibility between the two. This research will be documented in writing, a series of methodological experiments and collaborations with machines that require an experimental format. Examples of such formats might include writing statements in binary or programming language(s), or working in more creative genres such as ficto-criticism. The vocabulary that has developed around the technologies in the Depot collection, evidenced by the corresponding ephemera it holds, will be analyzed and integrated into the project in an effort to realize the goal of learning machine languages—defined equally by the technical language of development, and the applied language constitutive of the machine in social space.

Pask, Gordon. “Proposal for a Cybernetic Theatre.” Unpublished manuscript, available at http://www.pangaro.com/pask/ProposalCyberneticTheatrePask1964r.pdf.