Never Judge a Network by its Cover

Laurie White

> Time to grasp the handles, he said to himself, and crossed the living room to the black empathy box.
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> When he turned it on the usual faint smell of negative ions surged from the power supply; he breathed in eagerly, already buoyed up. Then the cathode-ray tube glowed like an imitation, feeble TV image; a collage formed, made of apparently random colors, trails, and configurations which, until the handles were grasped, amounted to nothing.
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> Phillip K. Dick, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep*, 1964.

In "Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism" Frederic Jameson observes that despite contemporary culture's reliance on networked computer technologies, the external appearance of the machinery itself does not adequately represent the new types of subjectivity they enable. Unlike the older industrial forms, such as grain elevators, smokestacks, or the streamlined profile of the railroad train, "all vehicles of speed still concentrated at rest," new technologies like the television or desktop computer "whose outer shell has no emblematic or visual power" instead articulates "nothing but rather implodes, carrying its flattened image surface within itself." 1 Yet for Jameson, this representational lack paradoxically offers a visual shorthand "for grasping a network of power and control even more difficult for our minds and imaginations to grasp—namely the whole new decentred global network of the third stage of capital itself." 2

In Philip K. Dick's 1964 novel, alienated users on an irradiated planet gain solace through the 'empathy box.' Uninspiring to look at, when its twin handles are grasped the box transports its user into a collective networked experience, where the joys and sorrows of one become the joys and sorrows of all. Patrick Jagoda notes the paradox of this networked sublime as "crisis lived within ordinariness," in which the disruptive events of systemic injustice or financial collapse are intermingled with the "thick atmosphere of affects that opens up as soon as one picks up a smartphone." 3

McKenzie Wark suggests that, as the transition to digitally networked technologies renders information into a commodity, subject to the laws of private property, this generates a new producing class, "the hacker class, producers of the new, of what is captured by intellectual property" and a new ruling class, "the vectoralist class, which owns the means of realizing the value of what the hacker class produces." 4 In this culture of databases, David Joselit argues, the logic of art gives way to "the logic of networks [in which] links can cross space, time, genre, and scale in surprising and multiple ways." 5 What gives an image its value is its capacity to connect, "not only to messages, but to other social currencies like capital, real

estate, politics, and so on." 6 Under these conditions, private consumption appears "active, touted as a form of production in its own right." For Lane Relyea, this form of consumption, when framed as liberatory bricolage, "helps erase what is at base the social nature of production, not by treating culture as a means of passive and private consumption, as with spectacle, but by diverting attention away from the massive investment and profit taking generated by increasingly corporate owned libraries, warehouses, and databanks, which too often are portrayed as themselves passive, like natural resources waiting to be mined and exploited by trailblazing, innovative bricoleurs." 7

The cultural bricoleur might be considered a sub-genre of Wark's hacker class, one who is able to navigate the overproduction of information and images and to make new cultural products from this heap of fragments and ruins. Within this context, sculptural bricolage re-appears in contemporary art, but as Relyea notes, its constituent parts have undergone a change in status: "trash goes from being the marked term—that which is excluded, a threat—to being that whose value is underdetermined, in flux, mobile. Like other kinds of databases, the spaces of trashcan and storage bin ... become sites not of prohibition and exclusion so much as flexibility and conversion ... where emptied-out signifiers can wait their turn to be filled anew."8 As such, for Relyea, bricolage sculptures using found, salvaged, re-valued items begin to appear as anthropomorphic "portraits of the trader, the consultant, the networker or multitasker, the free agent or proximate manager." 9 The salvaged computer shell, which at first failed to represent the networked realities it housed, paradoxically comes full circle as marker of contemporary networked subjectivity. Thus Relyea continues, "A type of artwork, or any entity for that matter, that is entirely makeshift, that is nothing but fragments and temporary solutions, seems surprisingly well suited to negotiate today's entrepreneurial and communicational mandates, in which supreme value is placed on flexibility, on the ability to improvise identities and relationships, to relentlessly search and capture, to connect and extend, to point-and-click things in and out of existence—in short, to cast the widest informational net possible and ad lib the most novel conjunctions out of whatever happens to wash up in the mesh." 10

If Relyea's position on the new bricoleur as one who can, to use Simon Critchley's words, "ride the surf of late capitalism"11 has a cold ambivalence to it, Wark maintains a more hopeful outlook premised on the fact that information, liberated from its material substrate by the digital revolution, wants to be free. "Information, unlike land or capital, knows no scarcity. The property form has become so abstract that its ambition is to encompass the very thing that escapes it."12 The new terrain of class conflict engendered by this transformation creates the possibility for the production of a new kind of information commodity, but it also creates the possibility for something other than the commodity economy. "The challenge is not only to think what else it could be, but to practice the production and reproduction of information otherwise." 13

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1. Fredric Jameson, "Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism," New Left Review, no. 146 (July-August, 1984), 78.
2. Fredric Jameson, "Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism," New Left Review, no. 146 (July-August, 1984), 78.
3. Patrick Jagoda, Network Aesthetics, (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 2016), 222.
4. McKenzie Wark, "Information Wants to be Free (But is Everywhere in Chains)," Cultural Studies, 20:2-3, (2006), 180.
5. David Joselit, After Art, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), 89.
6. Joselit, After Art, 56.
7. Lane Relyea, Your Everyday Art World, (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2013),192. Just as Jameson notes that the offensive features of postmodernism no longer scandalize anyone and have been fully institutionalized and incorporated into the official culture of Western society (56), Relyea observes that the figure of the bricoleur, hailed as liberatory since Levi-Strauss's articulation of the concept, has also been absorbed and the techniques made not only ubiquitous but necessary for cultural survival and cache.
8. Relyea, Your Everyday Art World, 195.
9. Relyea, Your Everyday Art World, 197.
10. Relyea, Your Everyday Art World, 200.
11. Simon Critchley, Ethics, Politics, Subjectivity, (London: Verso, 1999), 139. Cited in Wark, "Information Wants to be Free," 177.
12. Wark, "Information Wants to be Free," 181.
13. Wark, "Information Wants to be Free," 174