

Transindividuality of memory

Tags:

#individualism

#transindividuality

#prosthetic memory

With this concept I want to invite the reader to follow this train of thoughts:

- For thousands of years, humans have exteriorized their individual memory and inscribed it in technical objects.
- Artworks are among these objects, and as such they can be understood as “mnemotechnical devices”.
- Films, music records, CDs, books, paintings etc. transmit human experience, skills, knowledge and visions from generation to generation, region to region, epoch to epoch.
- Art is always a transindividual deed and can belong only to everyone.
- Ecological and socially responsible curating should never allow nor justify privatization of the general intellect inscribed in artworks.

If we accept these basic postulates, to think about the transindividual character of human memory and its exteriorization by technics is another way to think about the political dimension of art; the one which supersedes the delusion that neoliberal capitalist democracy cares about people, what they think, know or dream about...

To give a brief general account on the notion ‘the transindividual’ I will touch upon an ontological question that concerns the process of ontogenesis (the development of the individual) and the relationship between the individual and the collective. To open this issue, I would claim that in our society the individual is commonly seen as a primordial category, while the collective is an entity in which formed individuals enter.¹ When it comes to art, that view commonly manifests itself in the notions of authenticity and originality of artistic gesture, the figure of solitary artist, the imagery of a genius who creates ex-nihilo etc. The collective is in the dominant neoliberal narrative a potentially

¹ Here I basically repeat Gilbert Simondon’s working hypothesis of the theory of individuation. See Gilbert Simondon, *Individuation in Light of Notions of Form and Information* (University of Minnesota Press: 2020).

oppressive formation, in which the individual needs to sacrifice their freedom, personal preferences and free-will in order to be subsumed under a universal, usually totalitarian worldview. The sacrifice implies a subtraction from something that is complete, which is the individual. However, the ontogenesis observed only starting from a formed individual misses the very process of individuation, which has a collective dimension, embedded in each individual. In alternative, socialist and communist narratives the collective is not necessarily oppressive to the individual. The individual in fact largely benefits from entering the collective, and as its member becomes more than they could individually ever be. However, since we are all, or almost all, born in the ruling ideology, we are used to perceiving ourselves primarily as liberal individuals. Therefore, even in these narratives, many people struggle with a sense of sacrifice and restriction, although they may collectivize for a bigger cause in which they believe. Even more radically, thinkers such as Simondon and later Bernard Stiegler and Paolo Virno falsified the very premise of the primacy of the individual over the collective.² According to Simondon, an already formed individual is only a phase, a point in a larger process of individuation. During that process, an individual emerges from their pre-individual conditions - biological, social, technological – while the transindividual appears in collective individuation, where an individual is individuated through the reciprocal individuation of the collective. Furthermore, with their actions and deeds, the individual contributes to transindividual achievements that form our civilization and legacy for future generations (artworks, machines, bridges, films, public institutions etc.), as elaborated by Virno and Stiegler. Therefore, as Jason Read noted: “At the basis of Simondon’s understanding is a fundamental fact of existence, that Marx indicates (and Virno underscores): the very things that form the core and basis of our individuality, our subjectivity, sensations, language, and habits, by definition cannot be unique to us as individuals.”³ This also means that we need to rethink how we share that which we use and which has never been ours. And this is how we come to art.

Starting with this revisited ontology, in *Technics and Time, 1* Stiegler focuses on technical objects as transindividual creations, which contain and transmit human general intellect. Here he proffers the thesis on a prosthetic character of human memory, in a long history of imaging, storytelling, writing and

² See Bernard Stiegler, *Technics and Time, 1: The Fault of Epimetheus*, Stanford CA: Stanford University Press, 1998; Paolo Virno, *A Grammar of the Multitude: For an Analysis of Contemporary Forms of Life* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2004); Paolo Virno and Jun Fujita Hirose, “Reading Gilbert Simondon: Transindividuality, Technical Activity and Reification (interview),” *Radical Philosophy*, no. 136, 2006, 38.

³ Jason Read, “The Production of Subjectivity: From Transindividuality to The Commons,” *New Formations*, no. 70 2011, 118.

digitalization, from cave drawings to DVDs. For Stiegler, 'technics' comprises not only tools and machines in a narrower sense, but also artifacts and writings. At the same time, he distinguishes between three types of memory: memory of the species, inscribed in the genetic code; epigenetic memory, associated with the central nervous system and corresponding to the individual's own experience of music, events, faces, etc.; and epiphylogenetic memory, which is stored in technical systems and transmitted through objects and texts, such as legal treatises, historical books, music records, photographs, video recordings, cars, hammers, computers etc. The third type of memory has a social-political dimension because the individual acquires it from their social surroundings, and once interiorized, it influences the individual's own experience. Epiphylogenetic memory is thus not only an a posteriori exteriorization of our epigenetic memory; it constantly rewrites it, even when we observe it on the level of personal experience of listening to music, cutting bread, or going to the theatre. In that sense, transindividual character of exteriorized memory speaks about the political dimension of art in terms of an onto-political capacity. Furthermore, the retroactive dimension of memory formation does not turn towards the past only; it is also an anticipation. It influences our future perception and behavior. Inheritance of mnemotechnical devices is thus as important for transindividuation as the creation of tools is. Moreover, these two processes are intertwined:

When I inherit an object, a flint-cutting tool, for example, I inherit through its mode of use, that is, the gestures, the motor behaviors that lead to the production of the flint-cutting tool. With the appearance of technical objects, a new stratum of memory is constituted, which permits the transmission from generation to generation of individual experience and permits mutualisation in the form of what we call a we.⁴

To reverse the explosion of individualism and the imperative of private property, and reclaim agency over our past and future, we therefore have to look for a 'we' engraved in our tools. Since our epigenetic memory and our genetic memory don't communicate, we need that prosthesis, of which art is a precious example. Stiegler helps us to discern where its onto-political dimension lies, and equipped with that knowledge we can better understand why the questions of technology and property, when it comes to art, are of paramount political importance.

References:

⁴ Bernard Stiegler, *Acting Out* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 68.

- Bernard Stiegler, *Technics and Time, 1: The Fault of Epimetheus*, Stanford CA: Stanford University Press, 1998
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- Paolo Virno, "Angels and the General Intellect: Individuation in Duns Scotus and Gilbert Simondon," *Parrhesia*, no. 7, 2009

Ana Vujanovic

