Not Now? Feminism, Technology, Postdigital

Caroline Bassett

‘Ours is a world that is both everywhere and nowhere, but it is not where bodies live’ – so said John Perry Barlow in the 1990s Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace, which diagnosed and made demands around a new reality. A quarter of a century later, in the era of the quantified self, in which computational devices and bodies intertwine to measure the human day and co-constitute the world in which we live, it is clear that something has changed. This change concerns the materialization of bodies, a classic feminist preoccupation, as well as the materials of technology – ours is a world that is everywhere and nowhere, in which bodies are redistributed through a technological economy. But the sense of distance this change engenders applies not only to the matter-free and invulnerable lives Barlow glimpsed in the 20th-century net,1 but to the early 21st-century web (pre/post-9/11) and later; even voices celebrating the social in the Web 2.0, or the pre-Snowden era, sound distant now.

All these voices are taken to speak for some older situation, and in some cases they are bundled up as ‘new media’, with the term itself at once utilized (to describe the old) and simultaneously rejected because it implies an outworn concentration on novelty (the new) at the expense of the embedded and increasingly heterogeneous operations of media technologies of all kinds, embedded in, and continuous with, many other things. The same arguments are being made for ‘the digital’, a term said to (i) divide the ‘new’ from the ‘old’ in unnecessary ways and (ii) prioritize a line of enquiry that reifies digital aspects of material culture in ways that are no longer interesting or relevant; contemporary life is digital and therefore is post-digital.

The postdigital says that the analogue–digital distinction never made sense, and that the question of digital transformation is no longer the main event (Cramer 2015, this volume). As Berry puts it, drawing on Cramer, ‘[i]n a post-digital age, the question of whether or not something is digital is no longer really important – just as the ubiquity of print, soon after
Gutenberg, rendered obsolete all debates (besides historical ones) about the “print revolution”’ (Berry 2013). This renders irrelevant – or simply ‘historical’ – these older voices and their concerns and claims and desires. It also shifts the focus away from events ‘on the screen’, and from the representations the screen supported. The postdigital asserts that computational technology is now (or once again) ‘post-screenic’ (Bosma 2014), that it has broken out of the confines that divided it, as new media, from other media technologies, and has now come to saturate the everyday environment. It becomes, perhaps, in its arrived state, a condition of possibility for, rather than instantiating new forms of, everyday contemporary life. Extending this, its primary interest is no longer in questions of media, but in questions of life (Galloway 2012; and see Bosma 2014). Pace Barlow, then, this is a world where bodies do live² and where digital technologies are.³

There are many postdigitals, but a characteristic they share – and a key way in which I am making the cut here – is that they claim to speak from, as well as about, the present, and, in doing so, to connect an aesthetic with an emergent popular sensibility (see Paul and Levy 2015, this volume). The New Aesthetic (the clue is in the name) lines up with this orientation, and also deals with overflow, saturation and a hybrid aesthetic – albeit through works that – paradoxically – deal largely in the visual and remain representations. Arguably the New Aesthetic prefigured on the screen, much of what the postdigital now recognizes is environmentalized in the real – and Hito Steyerl’s demand to deal with the image as thing, and to understand representation as practice, complicates but also confirms this connection (2013; see also Kwastek 2015, this volume). As she put it, ‘The internet is not dead. It is undead and it’s everywhere.’ Indeed, the New Aesthetic might be (retrospectively) largely subsumed into, or rather, perhaps, considered a specific variety of, the postdigital, which represents a more expansive concept to think with, looks like it has more ‘legs’, even if it notoriously ‘sucks’, as Florian Cramer notes (Cramer 2015, this volume).

The postdigital disenchantment with the ‘digital’ as a privileged site to explore contemporary formations entailing new forms of life arises at the end of an enchantment with the technological as new (with the shock of the new). Digital technology in general, I argue, becomes less salient as a cultural index of innovation and disruption, even as its material operations (the operations of the computational) continue to expand, and the transformations it effects continue to have impacts – and this is a cyclical process. This time around, the postdigital says (i) that questions about technology become less salient than questions about newly materialized worlds, or perhaps newly materialized forms of life – the latter implying both environments and subjectivities – and (ii) that issues of change and disruption, and/or the temporality or pace of change and its located historical contexts and engine, become less salient than considerations of what constitutes the ‘there-ness’ of this new situation, and how it can be described. The priority is,