Artistic Practice as an Alternative Research Method:
Investigating Non-representational, Nonlinguistic, and Affective Forces in Technology Through Artmaking

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Abstract

During the pandemic, we were compelled to migrate our lives to the digital space. Despite technological advancements, it became evident that virtual experiences cannot fully replace real-life, in-person interactions, exposing the limitations of digital representations. Nonrepresentational and affective aspects are often under-valued, and disregarded, as most human experiences are digitized. This paper contends that these ephemeral and intangible phenomena deserve further attention, particularly for cultivating a sustainable relationship with technology. Recognizing these challenges due to their nonlinguistic and invisible natures, the author proposes artmaking as an alternative research method to overcome such obstacles. Drawing on personal experiences as an artist, the author demonstrates affective experiences and cognitive interactions with technology — beyond consciousness and digital representations. The paper highlights that media artists are in an advantageous position to investigate such intangible and nonrepresentational aspects in technology. They can examine their first-hand experiences in the artmaking process and demonstrate them through artworks in nonlinguistic ways. The author also posits that such bodily experiences with digital media lead to an affective and sustainable assemblage of human-technology cognition.

Keywords

Nonrepresentation, Nonlinguistic Experiences, Human-Machine Cognition, Affect, Practice-based Research, Artmaking, Media Art, Sustainable Human-Technology Relationship.

Introduction

Many parts of human experiences are converted into computable numbers, and we tend to believe them as a true representation of reality. During the COVID-19 pandemic, we had no choice but to replace in-person human interactions and experiences with virtual ones, including online classes, meetings, and tours. The digitization process requires the interpretation of human experience into machine languages; therefore, it only occurs within the scope of conscious mind, filled with linguistic, visual, and numeric representations. Despite the convenience and accessibility, the new forms of lifestyle have revealed their limitations to substitute real-life and made us long for bodily, tactile, and sensory experiences beyond their digital representations. Such phenomena prove the presence and significance of nonrepresentational information, which is inaccessible to our awareness as well as computation. In the highly networked technological society, such nonrepresentational aspects in our experiences seem overshadowed while we are captured and dominated by represented data that we unceasingly produce and consume every day.

This paper advocates and heightens attention to such a nonlinguistic and nonrepresentational experience in the cognitive relationship of humans and technology. This approach pursues more inclusive and comprehensive digital culture, leading us to overcome anthropocentric perspectives that have conventionally relied on representations. It is challenging to analyze and demonstrate phenomena outside of consciousness and representation thoroughly due to their nonlinguistic nature. Therefore, this paper investigates nonlinguistic forces, noise, and affect that underlies embodied and datafied cognition focusing on my own experiences as a media artist and practice-based researcher, who sees digital media from diverse perspectives as a user of software, observer of human-machine interaction, and creator of digital media. In this research, art-making and creative practice become an alternative research method to explore and identify the complexities of affective experiences. This paper delves into the possibility of the affective relationship between humans and technology and its cognitive implications by demonstrating how digital media augments my sensibility, experiences, and actions in the process of artmaking. In this way, this paper probes a way for technology to facilitate the embodiment of nonlinguistic and intangible forces flowing between heterogeneous cognizing bodies.

Exploring Nonrepresentational Aspects in Technology Through Artistic Practices

Nonrepresentational Data in Technological Society

The improvement of/in frequency, affordability, and efficiency of data processing has facilitated higher-resolution information collection and generated a plethora of digital

data. Algorithmic architectures that parse big data allow nonrepresentational and incomputable data, which has been dismissed as noise [1], to participate in programs of measuring, especially populations in sociology, dismantling its conventional epistemological foundation [2]. Digitized human life has moved away from centralized systems and become rather attuned to the nonrepresentational and occasional in a transformative world. Unlike mass media, contemporary media provides personalized experiences for users, which are often rendered from nonconscious interactions between a user and machine. In this process, human and technological nonconscious cognition is enmeshed in continuous and shifting networks, and both humans and nonhumans engage in the cognitive process. In the highly networked digital world, human consciousness is no longer the center of a cognitive system, and nonrepresentational noise and affect emerge and play a vital role in overcoming "the illusion of a human and system-oriented sociology" [3].

Although big data and algorithms enable the nonrepresentational to be better recognized, still a large portion of human experiences and affects emerge momentarily and remain ephemeral without being datafied. Such nonrepresentational and affective forces may seem only faintly discernible at the personal and experiential level – almost invisible, yet they underlie our awareness and representational data. Human cognition is enacted through a coupling with one's history of interactions with the worlds. Varela's Enactivism highlights that propensity and subjectivity act as an anchor and "locus" of experiences and relations with the external world [4]. Mark B.N. Hansen conceptualizes the feed-forward of data into consciousness to argue that advanced intelligent machines enhance human experiences. Through an art-making process, I experimented Varela and Hansen's ideas that demonstrate the intimacy between human cognition and digital media as a huge portion of external worlds. To create the interactive virtual landscape, *Enacted Scene* (2019), I explored an unfamiliar city, constructed the explored space in a digital space every day, and observed the interplay between my understanding of the external world and actions in the digital world. In this process, I adopted art-making and artistic practice as a research method to recognize the interdependency between the representational and nonrepresentational as well as intangible and affective cognitive forces beyond consciousness in this relationship.
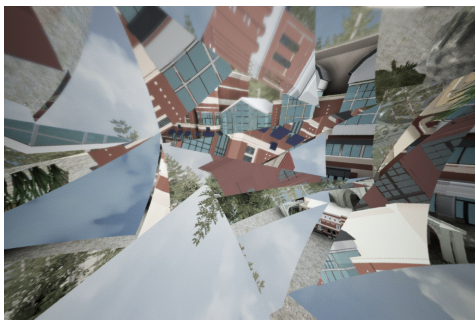

Figure 1. The author investigated Varela's concept, Enactivism, through the process of creating the interactive game art <Enacted Scene>. A screen capture image of <Enacted Scene>.

Affective Process of Artmaking with Technology

Artists' creative practice, critical thinking, and experimental approach push the boundaries of digital media beyond, beneath, and beside its interface of exchanging data and communication. Using technology for artmaking is a complex process engaging not only conscious cognition but also dynamic affects and bodily experiences while embodying conceptual ideas, and this process often expands one's sensibility and embodied understanding of digital media. To create my experimental video composite, *Woven Milieu* (2012), I cropped almost two thousand videos pixel by pixel in graphic software, even though this repetitive process could be automated by a machine. Although this process seems inefficient and unnecessary, it provided me a meditative experiences and affective interactions with digital media, allowing me to see beyond representations.
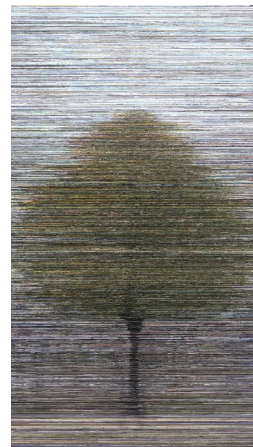

Figure 2. <Woven Milieu> (2012), HD Video – Vertical Display, 12 min.

The profound engagement of dynamic feelings and affects complicates the seemingly logical procedure of working with digital media but fosters my intuitive response to a machine rather than following logical rules – Robert M. Pirsig calls this "Mechanic's feel" [5]. In this process, the technical process does not rely on the rule-driven engineering practice but rather flows with my desire to embody what I as an artist envision in terms of the artistic instinct for project implementation. The art-making process brings me affective experiences resonating between my body and technologies. As I attend to affects, it becomes clear that nonlinguistic forces and dynamic feelings coupled with my disposition and history stir and vitalize my sensibility, vitality, and cognitive activity that underlie conscious awareness. Although such affective forces are enormous, intense, and influential in this relationship, they mostly remain intangible, nonlinguistic, and nonrepresentational. Through the process of artmaking, the affective possibility in digital media becomes accessible and embodied into the artwork, nonconsciously affecting my actions and sensibility.

Artmaking for Assemblage of Human-Machine Cognition

Following Silvan S. Tomkins's notion, Ruth Leys acknowledges the gap between systems of cognition and affect in human bodies, and the power of affect arises from this disjunction that liberates human cognition from logical deliberation and sociocultural reference [6]. This rupture makes affects "nonsemantic, nonlinear, autonomous, vital, singular, indeterminate, and disruptive of fixed (conventional) meanings" [7]. I confirmed these ideas in my art practice witnessing that affects work as unintentional drives for cognition, such as nonconscious actions and knowledge. The unintentionality, unlearning, and groundlessness guide me to break through habitual thoughts and behaviors. Such dynamic intensities resonate in my creative activities, and artistic concepts, and complex feelings in the process allow me to obtain technical skills and knowledge in other than conscious ways. Affective feelings, including excitement, fear, and longing, act as motivation for me throughout the process of embodying artworks, and ultimately bring me nonconscious know-how – built upon my personal history, experience, and disposition.
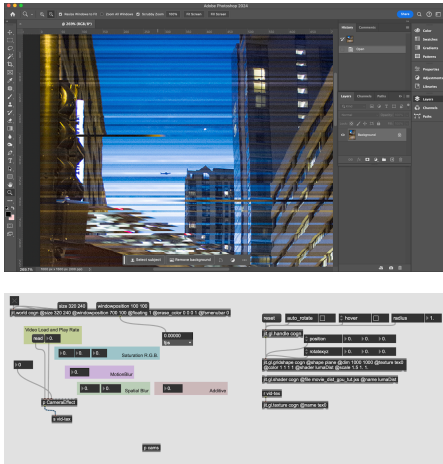

Figure 3. Digital tools the author utilizes as a media artist. User-friendly graphical software, Photoshop (top) and programming tool, Max/MSP (bottom).

Using digital media for artmaking – ranging from user-friendly graphical software to command-based programming, I interact with them in a quirky way, staying curious, attending to trivial phenomena, and often overcomplicating the technical processes. Such experiences transform my understanding and perceptions in the real world and lead me to further experiments with my extended sensibility, perception, and creativity in digital media. The whole process is driven by a complex assemblage of biological and technical cognition entangled with inarticulate inspiration and affect that flows beneath/beyond my consciousness and digital representations.

In the technological society, digital media is networked, instantaneous, and responsive, enmeshing human consciousness with the realm of technological cognition – for example, ever-changing personalized contents on social media. Our conscious and nonconscious actions are datafied and fed into networked machines, and readily permeates our cognition to affect our languages, habits, and dispositions. In this research, I interrogate what remain outside of the cognitive network and seek a way to embrace those nonrepresentational and invisible aspects in the human-technology relationship. Artmaking provides me with means to not only access the intangible information but also demonstrate the vibrancy of the nonrepresentational – which is often overshadowed by representational data in the technological society.

Conclusion

The cognitive network in contemporary society blurs the boundary between humans and nonhumans and entangles conscious and nonconscious cognition. However, our experiences are dominated by datafiable representational data, becoming desensitized to the rich yet ephemeral phenomena. Affective and nonconscious experiences are processed quickly and dynamically even before human conscious cognition realizes it while playing a critical role in constructing human awareness. A significant portion of cognitive activities function beyond/beneath/beside conscious cognition in a nonlinguistic way, and in the technological society, such nonconscious cognitive activities occur between humans and nonhumans, especially technology [8]. This paper argues that acknowledging nonrepresentational aspects could enrich our experience by enabling the affective relationship with technology. As examining such affective forces and nonconscious cognitive modes is challenging with text-based, traditional research methods, the artmaking process that promotes immediate experiences and practical approaches can be an alternative method to identify such an affective and other than conscious knowing.

My experience as a media artist allows me to access nonrepresentational affects and nonconscious cognition through the art-making process, and such dynamic experiences, emotions, and ideas are interwoven and embodied as an artwork. Media artists and practice-based researchers can explore such nonrepresentational and affective forces in digital media through bodily experiences in the creative process. Furthermore, diverse forms of media art projects, including interactive art and media performance, can be an alternative embodiment of the research in such intangible phenomena providing audiences a chance to recognize them through a sensory experience. This paper acknowledges and embraces the complexities beyond representations in the cognitive relationship between humans and machines to not only better understand our coevolution with technology but also foster discussions to diversify research methods in media studies.

References

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[3] Ibid, p. 155.

[4] N., H. M. B. (2015). Feed-forward: On the future of twenty-first-Century media. University of Chicago Press.

[5] Pirsig, R. M. (1989). Zen and the motorcycle maintenance: An inquiry into values. Vintage.

[6] Leys, R. (2017). Chapter seven/ the turn to affect. The Ascent of Affect, 307–350. https://doi.org/10.7208/chicago/9780226488738.003.0008.Tomkins and his followers posit a constitutive disjunction between our emotions on the one hand and our knowledge of what causes and maintains them on the other, because according to them affect and cognition are two separate systems. As Tomkins has put it, there is a gap or "radical dichotomy between the 'real' causes of affect and the individual's own interpretation of these causes".

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Author Biography

Su Hyun Nam, an interdisciplinary media artist and researcher, explores the evolving interplay between humanity and technology. Her digital art spans interactive video installations, 3D game art, and experimental animation, exhibited nationally and internationally. She was an artist in residence at LMCC, Harvestworks Media Art Center, and Laboratory, and was also selected as an artist of the year by KCCDC. Su Hyun Nam holds an M.F.A. in Art and Technology Studies from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and a Ph.D. in Media Study from the State University of New York at Buffalo. Currently, she is an Associate Professor in the Department of Contemporary Art at Konkuk University in Seoul, Korea.