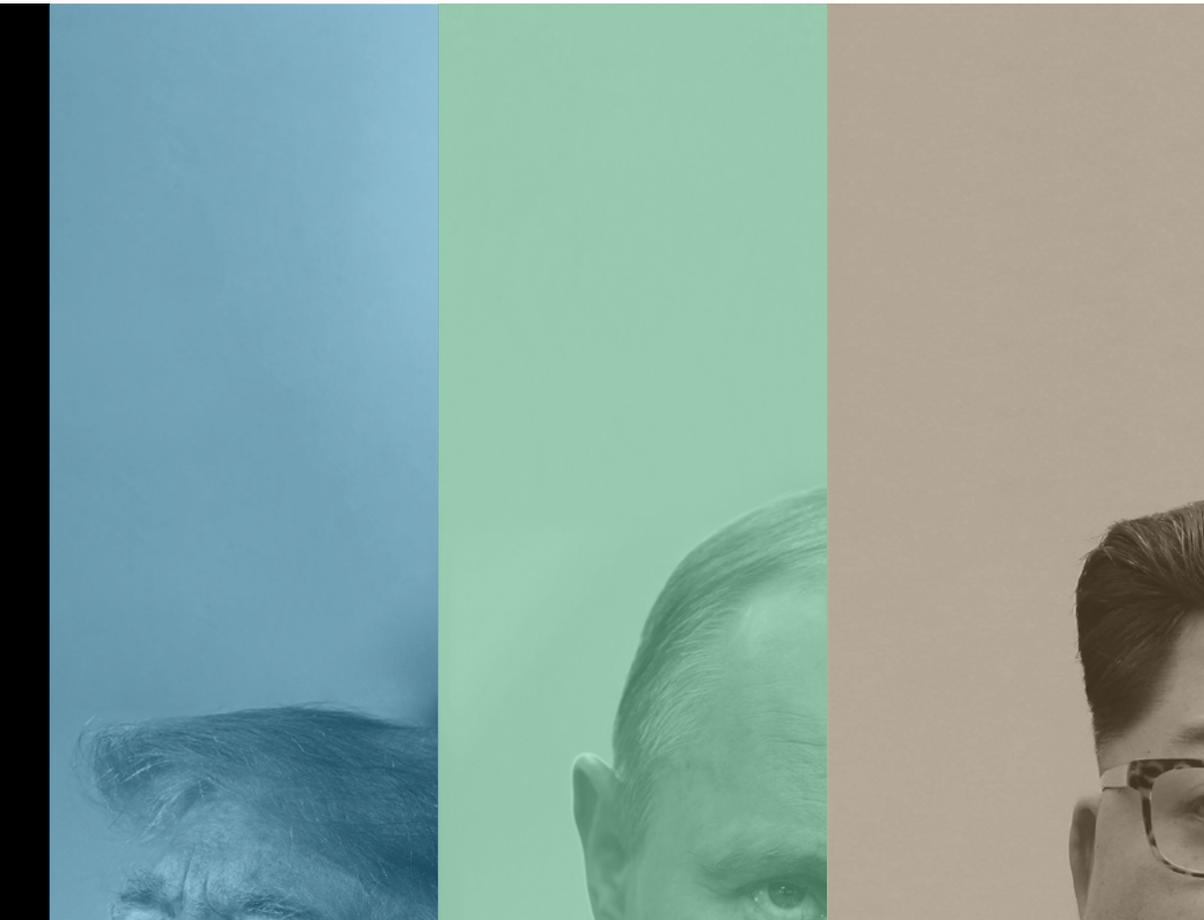


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In formation

Doro Wiese

Abstract

In the current debates about the contested line between fact and fiction, little attention is paid to a genre closely associated with factual narratives: the information. However, information is a specific form of narrative that is historically connected to news about distant places, events, or people. This means that information conveys stories that listeners have, per definition, never experienced through their own senses. Furthermore, information is nowadays, through the internet, nearly instantaneous, and it loses its value once its content is not brand-new anymore.

In this article, I investigate how the characteristics of information—speed, instantaneity, newness, impersonality—influence human perception when they impinge upon the senses. I want to contrast the characteristics of information with the artwork *Moule* by Anna Lena Grau (2015) that slows down understandings and that asks of its audience to take their time when they try to make sense and give meaning to it. If an artwork slows down processes of meaning-making, it allows recipients to become aware of their own semiotic activities. I will argue that information is a specific form of message that is far from being objective, because it does not include personal experiences and historical, cultural, and geopolitical situatedness in its account. I will ask what is at stake with both kinds of procedures, and develop an alternative vision of connecting to people, histories, and events that are taking place afar.

Keywords:

Information as a narrative genre; the production of experiences in art; semiotic activity of viewers; affect and affectivity; time and duration.

O. Introduction

How is the aesthetic experience nowadays used for political goals, and how can it be harnessed to withstand manipulation to serve insight and understanding? In this essay, I investigate if and how artworks in general and the sculpture *Moule* by Anna Lena Grau (2015) in particular can counter a development in which our knowledge about the world is more and more facilitated by media and less through unmediated bodily experiences of real-time events. To politicize aesthetics means to ask how our sensory perception is enmeshed in political processes. The sculpture *Moule* (2015) lends itself to an exploration of the entanglement between our bodily senses and our political being. *Moule* (2015) is a larger than life, walk-in form, a negative imprint of a closed hand modeled from clay that could potentially be the casting mold for a three-meter-high clenched fist. If we enter the sculpture, it is not the fist that we see, but its inverse mold. The fist is only present as an absence, as an emptiness in the heart of the sculpture. I regard the emptiness in the heart of the figure as an essential part of the artwork that calls for important learning steps. If we want to read the clenched fist as a symbol of rebellion, resistance, and social struggles, *Moule's* pictorial and spatial language suggests that these ways of asking for social justice are only indirectly accessible. In this essay, I want to explore how *Moule* (2015) in particular and artistic works in general can induce other possibilities for being affected when the sculpture forces its audience to slow-down its sense-making activities and to become potentially aware how they bestow meaning upon arbitrary forms.



Caption: Anna Lena Grau, *Moule*, 2015
View from the outside, plaster, carbon steel, 300 x 215 x 265 cm
Photographer: Ottmar v. Poschinger

Moule's aesthetic effects differs greatly from those of the hegemonic and prevalent narrative form of the 20th and 21st century: the information. Contrasting the possibilities that *Moule* (2015) opens up, I want to show, relying on (media) theories by Walter Benjamin, Henri Bergson, Gilles Deleuze, Tiziana Terranova, and Paul Virilio, to what extent information is meant to explain the present completely—without recourse to other times, stories, or geopolitics. The current information policy has an impact on the body, too, and affects it with the apparent objectivity of news. Thereby information cannot effectuate what *Moule* (2015) initiates through its formal aspects. Information has no duration, but actuality; it affects, but does not gives us time to analyze media effects which act upon our bodies; it is ostensibly objective, but leaves out important components from events as it avoids rendering subjective experiences.

1. Affection and Affect

According to Deleuze and Spinoza, the affection is an idea of the effect that the action of one body has on another. For example, when the sun shines on someone's skin, and that person realizes that he or she is getting warmer, they have an idea of an effect caused by a specific situation. This idea is inadequate insofar as it presents only effects and not causes: it confers no knowledge about the sun, or the body, nor about their relationship to each other. In addition, the knowledge gained by the registration of an affection is purely random and indiscriminate: in the above example, the insight was only obtained because the sun shone on someone's skin. However, the affection can bring forth another form of perception, the affect (Deleuze, 1978, p.4). For Deleuze, the affect has a direct relation to the duration of time: it describes the lived passage from one state of the body to the other (1978, p.7). Because the affect registers the constant modification of affections over a period of time, it allows one to discover differences. For example, one might learn that a long exposure to the sun causes burns, and from this insight conclusions can be drawn as to how the ratio of sunshine to one's own well-being can be shaped. In contrast to affection, the affect can adequately name causes, and above all, it can ensure that one actively seeks out relationships with other bodies that are beneficial and strengthen the *joie de vivre* instead of weakening it.

As I want to show in the following, media users today are constantly exposed to affections. This in itself would not be problematic if the affect that every affection virtually contains had time to unfold. But the prevalence of a particu-

lar form of communication, namely information, does not allow phenomena to be permanent. In 1936, Walter Benjamin already wrote in his essay “The Storyteller” that information is a “new form of communication” whose value “does not survive the moment in which it was new. It lives only at that moment; it has to surrender to it completely and explain itself to it without losing any time” (1968, p.90). As Shunya Yoshimi (2006) has pointed out, the term “information” is associated with news about people and events that reach us from afar. Circulation is what characterizes information, a characterization which distinguishes information from other forms of meaning-transfer such as knowledge or wisdom. To paraphrase Yoshimi, knowledge can be accumulated and is connected to the archive; wisdom precedes insight and is linked to storytelling and the verbal transmission by older and more experienced people. While knowledge and wisdom recur through preservation and disclosure, information has a novelty of its own. Therefore, information is inextricably linked to technologies whose speed bestow importance upon it, that enable messages to reach their destination at lightning speed and that assure a quick dissemination, too. Examples of these media are the post office, the printing press, the telegraph, and the Internet. According to Benjamin, information only explains a moment in time, an actuality. It lacks a permanence essential to the development of affects. In addition, information lacks a dimension that determines the power of storytelling: “the ability to exchange experiences” (Benjamin, 1968, p.83). For Benjamin, the power of storytelling is evoked through its indeterminacy when rendering events, since it keeps them free from explanations (1968, p.89). When listening to a story, audiences have to use their imagination, their experiences, their hopes and wishes to fill in the story’s indeterminacy.

It is the indeterminacy that *Moule* (2015) shares with story-telling’s procedures. The representation and the meaning of the clenched fist, symbol of resistance and rebellion, is only accessible to observers if they imaginatively reconstruct the void in the center of *Moule* (2015). Firstly, observers have to decipher those folds and crevices left by a fist in plaster, whose imprint stood model for the three-meter-high sculpture *Moule* (2015). While wrinkles and crevices are basically always and everywhere part of every fist, we are accustomed to focus normally on its outer shape. In other words, we usually do not recognize a fist by its imprint but by its contours. Viewers are thus exposed to strange impressions: where the thumb crosses fingers to make a fist, in *Moule* (2015) there is a deep cleft; where fingers dig deep into the palm of a hand, a sharp wedge now protrudes. *Moule* (2015) thereby hinders viewers to reconstruct the counterpart of the mold, the shape it encases, without recourse to their imagination.



Caption: Anna Lena Grau, Moule (2015)
View from the inside, plaster, carbon steel, 300 x 215 x 265 cm
Photographer: Ottmar v. Poschinger

Moule (2015) initiates a process that consists of two movements. On the one hand, *Moule* (2015) enriches the perception by representing the surrounding space, thereby making it comprehensible, in the truest sense of the word. Normally, we do not perceive what the fist-surrounding space looks like; now, by way of the sculpture *Moule* (2015), we can register it. In addition, the impact achieved through its monumentality makes a perception imperative: it ensures that the viewer cannot escape to perceive its materiality, and with it a space that is normally neglected. To come back here to the differentiation between affection and affect established previously, it could be said that *Moule* (2015) affects the observer precisely through his monumentality. Nevertheless, it remains questionable whether the observers can even recognize that *Moule* (2015) is the larger than life imprint of a fist. By enlarging the molded hand, the fine gaps between fingers become a grooved dome that viewers can enter through an open gap. As Anna Lena Grau told me, some exhibition visitors considered the sculpture an oversized shower cubicle, others a mysterious grotto. Even the smell of clay and plaster does not make one think of human hands. In addition to the perception of form, *Moule* (2015) therefore initiates a perception of perception that is characterized as being inadequate. Viewers of *Moule* (2015) can experience that their perception normally sticks to the contours of forms, and therefore do not know how the surrounding space looks like and is shaped. In the worst case, this non-knowledge can provoke defensiveness, and at best curiosity: affects that are evoked by being affected by the sculpture, and that only yield insights if one takes the time to analyze their origin and causes.

2. Being *in* time

It could be said that *Moule* (2015) sets a process of cognition in motion, precisely because it causes affects in addition to its direct sensory affection. Under the condition that the observers engage in a search for content and meaning that is not given from the outset, another coordinate comes into play, namely time itself. Knowledge needs time to be formulated and communicated, and *Moule* (2015) demands a certain slowdown, which can be extremely productive. *Moule* (2015) does not disclose from the outset what it is referring to and withholds information about its referent. As a result, the work of art cannot exhaust itself in the speed of the present moment. Rather, the slowdown achieved by the lack of a direct reference possibly activates the entire reservoir of experience as a possible source of knowledge. It activates past experiences, present perceptions and visions of the future, which are not separated and can mutually reinforce each other. The slowdown thus shows that experiences are gained in time. This form of time is called duration, a concept derived from Bergson's philosophy of time. In Deleuze's reading of *Bergsonism* (1991), duration allows us to perceive that time is an ontological category that exists independently of our own being. Existence is situated *in* time, that is: time is a dimension that goes beyond individual experience. An insight into time's over-personal character can allow us to perceive, too, that all being exists in its own duration.



Caption: Lost mold from clay during the production process of Anna Lena Grau's sculpture *Moule* (2015), view of the studio.

Photographer: Claudia Unruh

Grasping different times, temporalization, and rhythms intuitively, a process for which duration is essential, can thus reveal fundamental and essential differences in time and in space, provided that a conceptual reflection embeds these differences in linguistic reality. To return here to the distinction between affect and affection, which is decisive for Deleuze, one can conclude that perceptions only give rise to insights when we have time to register their limitations, and these experienced limitations come into being when other memories and other rhythms of existence are registered in addition to one's own perception. Besides the affection of the body, memories must be evoked, which in turn must be divorced from the current state of the body. However, this perception of a perception is conditioned by our being-in-time, our duration. The slowdown that Moule (2015) enables through its inversion and aggrandization is thus indispensable for the process of making sense.

3. New Media and Affect

In the following, I will compare the form of affection and affect evoked by *Moule* (2015) with the politics of today's news media, drawing on the theories of Paul Virilio and Tiziana Terranova. Both media theorists have convincingly demonstrated that media are nowadays mediating and informing their audience about events and persons, but disallow the exchange of experiences that, according to Walter Benjamin, story-telling evokes (1968, p.83).

In order to make the distinction between affect and affection come to fruition, one could say that news media are nowadays reporting about events and that their reporting influences us affectively. As I have stated earlier, an experience can only then go beyond a present perception when it is confronted with differences in time and space. The perception itself must therefore be exposed as limited and not all-encompassing. But this requires the registration of differences, triggered for example by a memory that evokes temporal difference, or by the physical perception of different temporal rhythms of other worldly beings. But it is precisely this perception of duration, of being-in-time, that today's information media are annihilating when the real-world dimensions of time and space are destroyed by the speed and potential reach of information: a process that, according to Paul Virilio (2006), can be considered as being a military technique, which is why he speaks of an "information bomb."

In her essay “Futurepublic: On Information Warfare, Bio-racism and Hegemony as Noopolitics,” Tiziana Terranova (2007) comes to similar conclusions as Virilio (2006). Power formations mediated by New Media target, as Terranova (2007) suggests, the biological lives of their audiences directly and therefore biopolitically acts on the latter. New forms of information transmission do not work by logical-discursive statements but by the tele-technological dissemination of affective facts. These new forms of transmission affect the body directly by impinging upon the senses and the perception. More importantly, new forms of transmission take possession of the field of perception relevant for the public opinion. They constitute audiences as recipients of affects which act upon their bodies and perceptions, thereby influencing them politically through a capture of their biological lives. According to Terranova (2007), new media are not only biopolitical but also a form of government: governmentality. This power formation “addresses the biological, economic and spiritual life of the population: its way of living, producing, consuming, thinking, feeling and acting” (Terranova, 2007, p.126). Information conveys the impression of objectivity through the concreteness of events that it communicates, although essential historical, (geo-)political and sometimes subjective aspects of events are left out of the new media narrative. The mediation, in particular the compression of time and space, prevents that the limits and effects of affections and ensuing affects are questioned.

4. Solutions

There are several possibilities for counteracting the biopolitical affection with information. Terranova proposes to manifold publics that can withstand

information's politics. These inventive publics could undermine the separation of populations by pointing to their similarities, overlap, and inseparability. Instead of, for instance, dividing the world into East and West, or into citizens and refugees, we might as well look at what we share with others, from an enthusiasm for sports, art, and culture to life experiences and worldviews. This solution requires communication and thus differs fundamentally from a one-way consumption of information-based media. As shown, information is contrary to the exchange of experiences. Information constitutes a very limited knowledge of events and persons, precisely because it does often not convey subjective narratives. As mentioned before, information often contains abbreviated knowledge in that it only explains the present and has no regard for historical as well as geopolitical and geographic particularities. We should thus become better storytellers to explore historical and utopian possibilities.

Following my reflections on Anna Lena Grau's *Moule* (2015), it seems to me necessary to ask about the conditions for developing new public spheres and practices that may obstruct the simplification of life and reality. In my analysis, I tried to express that it takes time to develop resistant practices. Accordingly, it is thus necessary, for a responsible, just, and sustainable form of politics to first pause and to inventory different experiences that are grouped around an (ideal or material) object and its links to the past, present, and future. This too requires storytelling, even the invention of stories and their exchange.

Concerning the problems evoked by information media with their speed and one-sidedness, I have shown that they prevent the rendering of personal narratives and thereby inhibit an exchange of experiences. Furthermore, they make it difficult to determine in greater precision on the history of specific places, events, and persons. Focusing on information reduces the connectivity that we can build to people, events, and places. To counter this tendency in today's world of media and mediated worlds, we need to develop our capabilities to connect perceptions with memories and to thereby widen our experiences. As I have shown, it is necessary to distill the affects that are caused by an affection of our bodies. This requires time, which we should urgently take, if we want to follow our human peculiarity of being imaginary and narrative beings. *Moule* (2015) gives us time and space. It is up to us to explore how we can connect to others and how we can shape those connections.



Caption: Form construction during the production of Anna Lena Grau's sculpture *Moule* (2015), view of the studio.
Photographer: Mia Grau

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