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2017

<https://doi.org/10.25969/mediarep/2032>

Veröffentlichungsversion / published version

Sammelbandbeitrag / collection article

### Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Leeker, Martina; Schulze, Tobias; Caygill, Howard: Introduction. Interventions in Digital Cultures. In: Howard Caygill, Martina Leeker, Tobias Schulze (Hg.): *Interventions in digital cultures. Technology, the political, methods*. Lüneburg: meson press 2017, S. 11–18. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25969/mediarep/2032>.

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# Introduction: Interventions in Digital Cultures

**Martina Leeker, Tobias Schulze  
and Howard Caygill**

## **Focusing Ambivalences of Interventions in Digital Cultures**

This volume intends to outline and analyze interventions, under the specific conditions of digital cultures, as theory and practice of critique; political action (for example protest, demonstration, or occupation), and public spheres (politische Öffentlichkeit). Interventions are understood as activities that engage in social and political contexts, often with artistic means, hoping to interrupt critical situations and ultimately change social, economic, or technological conditions. Activist applications of interventions eclipse the managerial and military sense of interventions related to war, oppression, and control; the focus is on applications that represent the positively valued emancipatory efforts of self-organized, collective, subversive intervention by political, activist and artistic communities, among others.

The premise of this volume is that interventions are influenced and shaped by the conditions and epistemologies of digital

12 cultures, even when not directly technological. Exploring the possibilities of participating and intervening in digital cultures requires a prior analysis of the cultures themselves, for such interventions happen within zones of infrastructures that are not fully visible, understandable, or controllable. The task is no less than to intervene in the socio-technological and techno-political conditions of existence that lie beyond our consciousness and appear to be out of our hands. As technological environments and concepts are understood as ubiquitous, we cannot escape them, so interventions always have to reckon with them. In order to intervene effectively in such environments and conceptual structures we must be able to analyze them and, if necessary, adapt to them. This predicament of being shaped and shaping becomes constitutive for intervention. It is against this background that the book asks how interventions are shaped by the conditions of digital cultures, and how they can contribute reflexively to altering and reshaping these conditions.

Engaging with these questions and situations, the book adopts a twofold approach. The first involves studying interventions and focuses on the reciprocal shaping and reshaping of digital cultures and interventions. A deeper understanding of the constitution of interventions in digital cultures is required, because it may be that not every aesthetic of interventions is able to interrupt digitality. Could interventions unwillingly repeat the constitutive conditions that they intend to intervene in? This problematic situation leads to the second approach, which follows the conditions of interventions in digital cultures and explores, furthermore, their proper constitution, concerning, for example, their genealogy (Fred Turner's contribution), their involvement in the history and constitution of the political (Howard Caygill's contribution), their entanglement with the sometimes ideological constitution of technology (Wendy Hui Kyong Chun's contribution), gender aspects (Kat Jungnickel and Ulrike Bergermann's contributions), and the politics of space (Ulrike Bergermann's contribution).

With these contributions, the volume aims to intervene reflexively and critically in the field of interventions through a close reading of their conditions, genealogies, constitutions, and entanglements, and hence their hidden political sense and regime.

## Challenges of Interventions Under the Conditions of Digital Cultures

It is remarkable that interventions have been in vogue (Hartmann, Lemke, and Nitsche 2012) since the 2000s as “the” form of critique, political action, and public spheres (politische Öffentlichkeit) in digital cultures. In 2012, Friedrich von Borries, professor and curator of design at the Academy of Art in Hamburg, published a glossary of interventions subtitled: “Approximations towards a too-much-used, but too-little-defined notion” (von Borries et al. 2012).<sup>1</sup> Borries maintains that: “Interventions are the miracle cure of our times. Quickly in, intervening, quickly out. Great effect—little effort. In war, in the arts, in urban development, in therapy”<sup>2</sup>. This estimation also holds for the aesthetics of contemporary interventions with artistic means or in activist contexts, which focus on performative approaches (Klein [2012] 2013). They tend to make intervening an end in itself, establishing acting as a recursive system. Interventions are always ready for the next action; they are self-referential, performing for a potential future and coming up with not a new order but the next intervention, pointing to a further intervention. The question is whether and how this hype is related to digital cultures.

1 German title: *Glossar der Interventionen: Annäherung an einen überverwendeten, aber unterbestimmten Begriff*.

2 “Interventionen sind das Wundermittel unserer Zeit. Schnell rein, eingreifen, schnell raus. Große Wirkung mit wenig Aufwand. Im Krieg, in der Kunst, in der Stadtentwicklung, im therapeutischen Bereich” (von Borries 2012, verso). English translation by the authors.

- 14 It is striking that in a situation where digital cultures become performative (Leeker, Schipper, and Beyes 2016) and unleash automation and self-organizing infrastructures, interventions are really hyping performative manners of acting and protest (Klein 2017). While technological devices become agents themselves, generating reality and engaging with human agents in affective (Angerer 2015) techno-social ensembles (Sprenger and Engemann 2015), interventions invented themselves as a performative force, and engage in social change just by performing. While globally networked infrastructures fall into a continuous and self-reliant processing of data, intervention emerges as the engendering, even the installing, of a regime of endless processes of intervening.

This logic opens a comparison to what Orit Halpern (2017) as well as Halpern and Robert Mitchell (2017) call the “smart mandate” of infrastructures in digital cultures. This mandate points to a further aspect according to the actual insights of research on digital cultures. It is not just about a regime of infrastructures that are invisible to human agents and operate beyond human consciousness, collecting and processing data for profiling and predicting future activities. Nor is it purely about subjects being constituted and controlled, as Antoinette Rouvroy (2013) explains, by “data-behavior” and an “algorithmic governmentality.” It is particularly to do with a culture of distributed, worldwide, smart infrastructures that comes up with an epistemology of uncertainty and resilience. Resilience is constituted by the idea and practice that reality is too complex to be controlled or predicted and that the self-organized infrastructures should be capable of resisting and surviving political or ecological attacks by virtue of their own capacities and organization. In this epistemology of resilience, socio-technological existence becomes, according to Halpern and Mitchell, a permanent demonstration or test for the adaptation of the next unpredictable event. This demo-regime announces the end of the socio-political task of problem solving. There are no problems, only affordances for the optimization of resilient

adaptation. This regime of smartness corresponds interestingly with the hype of performative interventions mentioned above. Both deny solutions and instead perform interventions—the pure and continuous testing and experimenting of resilience.

The epistemological similarity between the hyped performative aesthetics of interventions and the infrastructural environment reminds us that the constitution of interventions takes place according to the technological conditions of digital cultures. They are then not just intervening in, but perpetuating, digital cultures, supporting them and generating a kind of digital impotence via interventions. People become hyper-occupied with intervening the moment they are asked to perform as data providers in accordance with the technological and economic needs and interests of digital cultures. Intervening with performative aesthetics means feeding, unwillingly, the whole-earth-data-network with performances of itself. In this ambivalent situation, we need to investigate whether the interventions that constitute our capacity to reflect and act, and even our ability to resist, are not inextricably entangled in the conditions that we want to intervene in.

## **Intervening and the Constitution of Interventions**

A critical and reflexive use of interventions must be envisaged to avoid the unwilling repetition of those regimes of digital cultures. This book proposes a twofold method to establish such usage—combining analysis of digital cultures and the role of interventions in them with systematic exploration of the constitution of interventions. It could be realized by reconstructing genealogies of interventions or by rethinking the concepts and discourses of interventions—an integral element of the contributions to this volume. Another option would be to carefully revise intervention methods by comparing them with the techno-epistemological impacts of digital cultures.

- 16 What is revealed is that interventions with artistic means can be part of a politic of forced democratization, as in the Cold War (Fred Turner's contribution), as well as an instrument of resistance in war and revolution (Howard Caygill's contribution). Following the twofold analysis can inform us about intervention methods, showing that pure interruption has become senseless in digital cultures, as it is part of digital recursion. Suddenly, it is the establishment of sustainable, alternative structures and technologies (Alexander R. Galloway and Wendy Hui Kyong Chun's contributions) that becomes the perfect and adequate intervention.

Interventions should be accepted and taken seriously in their ambivalence and doubleness. Interventions are highly relative, driven by theories and discourses on their constitution. Interventions may therefore look completely different according to the theoretical insights in which they are couched. Interventions are not a priori "good" in the sense of emancipatory potentials and effects. Their constitution means that interventions can be included in regulation and control, and they can be engaged for social change, making themselves obsolete, as Steve Kurtz points out in his interview, once the structures and dominance relationships that are the target of interventions have been dismantled.

## **Outline of the Book**

To undertake the explorations needed, this volume brings together scholars from philosophy, political theory, media studies, and sociology/ethnology as well as practitioners of interventions. Their texts unfold to reveal an assemblage of diverse intervention methods. Beyond the perspectives of single disciplines or specific aesthetic approaches to interventions, methods can be seen as the common ground of the different contributions. Each considers a specific aspect of intervention in digital cultures and develops from it a critical and practical engagement. It is hoped that this interplay of methods and their

theoretical foundation will support a productive thinking, which is inspired by the ambivalences of interventions, and lend the volume relevance as a critical and practical guide for future interventions.

## Acknowledgements

This volume originated from the symposium *Technological Conditions of Interventions: History, Epistemology, Dramaturgy*, held in May 2015 at the Digital Cultures Research Lab (DCRL) of Leuphana University.<sup>3</sup> We are very thankful to the symposium participants (Ulrike Bergermann, David Berry, Howard Caygill, Hervé Fischer, Bernard Dionysius Geoghegan, Kat Jungnickel, Marcell Mars, Alexandre Monnin, Imanuel Schipper, Fred Turner, and Nina Wakeford) for their valuable and inspiring talks and vivid discussions, as well as, of course, for the individual contributors' essays for this volume that arose from the symposium. The book also contains interviews with scholars who play an important role in the research and practice of interventions: they enrich the volume enormously, referring to the conditions of interventions in digital cultures, and we are thus very grateful to the interviewees we were able to lure into participating.

This book itself wouldn't be as it is if it weren't for the helpful and professional aides and assistants. A big thank you goes out to Inga Luchs for her work on typesetting and formatting the manuscript, to Janet Leyton-Grant for her patient and accurate proofreading, and to Sara Morais for the transcription of interview material. Moreover, we want to express our gratitude to the editorial board for cooperative and important critical reviews. Finally, we are indebted to and want to thank Ina Dubberke, Samantha Gupta, Irina Kaldrack, and Armin Beverungen for their support and paramount organizing talent, for both the symposium and the publication; their commitment, and that of

3 For documentation of symposium contributions, see Leeker 2015.

- 18 our DCRL colleagues, affords us the opportunity for truly trans-disciplinary scholarship, discussions, and academic exchange.

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