

Pre-Sponsive Gestures

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**PRE-SPONSIVE
GESTURES**



Confronted with the work of Grégory Chatonsky, it can be difficult to decipher what this highly eclectic and at times positively cryptic body of work is all about. Chatonsky's media range from sculpture to video to virtual reality to artificial intelligence, sometimes supplemented with complex speculative fictions, while at other times accompanied by little to no narrative framing. Some of the most elaborate scenarios, like the one constructed for Chatonsky's major solo show, *Telofossils*, at the Museum of Contemporary Art Taipei, in 2013, with the collaboration of Dominique Sirois and Christophe Charles, would seem to offer a fairly coherent vision, or even something like a transmedia narrative—a narrative, in this case, about the end of the world. But even here, things don't quite seem to add up, and this is only fitting for a vision of

A WORLD WITHOUT US

i.e. a vision of a world no longer viewed, and no longer even capable of being viewed. *Telofossils* enacts a weird temporal displacement, a displacement of our future into a speculative past, but even more radically a displacement of human temporal experience in general into a larger environment that would seem to lack regard for our history but that would still not be, for all that, quite ahistorical. In this environment, we encounter digital innovations from our recent past as the fossilized materials of an ancient past, thus simultaneously overlaying the imagined, utopian futures of Silicon Valley onto the desolate future of a post-apocalyptic planet. But not all the machines have stopped working in this world after time, and they carry barely recognizable traces of the human, reworked through autonomously operating generative algorithms, into this radically non-human geological era.

If it seems that this work articulates a response to the Anthropocene (or, more speculatively, a kind of “pre-sponse” to

whatever follows it), this is certainly an apt description of *Telofossils*. But this thematic concern with the environment is not necessarily representative of Chatonsky's work—at least, not if we understand “environment” in an overly narrow sense. Taken more broadly, however, in the sense in which media theorist Mark B. N. Hansen has proposed defining “medium” as the very “environment for life”¹ itself, it would indeed seem reasonable to identify a recurring ecological concern in Chatonsky's work—not so much a concern with “nature” as with the transformations of the material lifeworld, or more generally

THE WORLD OF MATERIAL AGENCIES

under the conditions of technological change and digitalization in particular. Even more than any thematic concern, therefore, Chatonsky's artistic interventions are aimed at exploring and modulating the spaces that constrain and enable our experience—or that preclude our experience altogether. Rather than the particular object of the Anthropocene (an admittedly queer object of thought, which calls into question our very capacity to continue to exist, much less to think and to respond), it is, therefore, the work's formal gesture of “pre-sponding” that makes *Telofossils* representative of Chatonsky's larger project.

In order to unpack this idea, allow me to indulge in a brief etymological probing of this shift from response to pre-sponse. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the verb “to respond” derives from the Latin prefix re- (“back” or “again”) + spondere (“to promise or pledge”). In English, “to spond” even once stood as a verb in its own right, though now it strikes us as ugly and has largely been forgotten. In any case, “to pre-spond” would accordingly mean “to pledge something in advance,” much as we seem to be pledging ourselves, our descendants, our species, and the planet itself to the uncertain and quite

plausibly apocalyptic future portended by climate change and driven by our continued technological interventions in the environment. But even apart from the fossil fuels, plastics, and chemical agents that are reshaping our planet in the more obvious ways, technologies today are involved everywhere in lower-impact or, at least, less noticeable forms of pre-sponse: We pledge ourselves daily to the gods of predictive analytics, promise ourselves in advance to the behavioural trajectories that are outlined for us when our environment is structured by big data and artificial intelligence, and give ourselves over to algorithms that process biological and environmental data, which fall outside our subjective experience but which “feed it forward,” as Hansen describes it, into our sensory engagement with the world. From Google Maps to climate modeling, from the search bar to the fitbit, our contemporary technologies, therefore, are never quite contemporary with us:

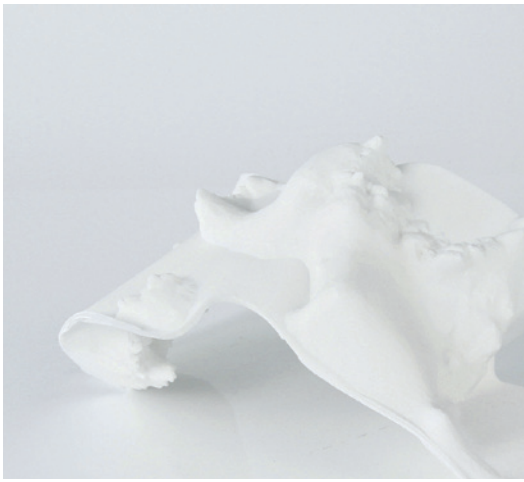
THEY ANTICIPATE US

preparing the ground for us prior to our arrival on the scene. They act predictively (in the sense of a Markov chain) and hence generatively. Our technologies do not so much respond to our needs, as we in fact pre-spond to them, effectively pledging ourselves to the future that they deliver to us; or conversely, and somewhat more existentially, we pledge ourselves to the future “us” that these technics deliver to the world.

From the glacially slow duration of geological transformation to the microtemporal feedforward of computational processes, the common ground at stake here is the generativity of anthropotechnical interfacing and co-evolution. And it is precisely this

SPECULATIVE GENERATIVITY

in the form of both a method and a sort of meta-thematic, that serves to unify Chatonsky's work as a whole.





This intertwining of generative methods and generativity-as-theme is perhaps nowhere more prominent than in *Capture* (2009), another of Chatonsky's works to feature an elaborate narrative frame. According to a description on Chatonsky's website, *Capture* is about "a productive fictitious rock band"—a seemingly simple premise that masks a great deal of highly generative complexity. To begin with, to describe the band as "productive" must surely count as a huge understatement, for the band's goal is to be so productive "that nobody can consume everything." This goal is achieved through generative techniques: the "band" is really an ensemble of machinic agencies, recombinant algorithms that produce new songs, videos, and images by trawling existing sources, fitting them together in novel configurations, and then erasing the files once they are downloaded. But to call the band "fictitious" is also not quite as straightforward as it seems. For these generative processes are real, as are their products: songs are actually being produced and distributed through channels such as *Facebook* and *Twitter*; of course, they are not being produced and distributed by a group of humans but by computers, and in this sense the band is fictitious. But Chatonsky's narrative framing establishes this fictitious status as a fiction-within-a-fiction; the project is accompanied by a manifesto that announces the true agency behind the band: "My name is *Capture*. I'm a computer. Precisely, I am several computers that work together." This AI, correctly identifying a mismatch between the virtually unlimited proliferation of digital files and the economics of scarcity that still symbolically governs the culture industries, offers a solution: "I want to reverse supply and demand. I want so much supply that demand will eventually run out. [...] I want to be so productive that consumers could not follow me any more. I want to exceed demand. [...] I want to create pieces of music, too many pieces of music to be listened to. [...] I want to make

objects, I want to invent shapes, I want to form your environment. I am generative."²

In this scenario, the band is a fictional invention of the AI—but is the AI itself a fiction or a reality? The answer must be both: the subject-position that anchors the enunciations of the manifesto is made up, fabricated, but the agencies that make the music and other audiovisual content are real. Within and through this split-reality fiction-within-a-fiction, the project enacts generativity in terms of what I have elsewhere called

"DISCORRELATION"

—the severing of audiovisual contents from subjective perception and from the phenomenological frameworks, according to which cinematic sounds and images were calibrated with human embodiment. In a post-cinematic age, when computational processes intervene between the production and reception of virtually all sensory content, even the simplest of media operations (e.g. watching a DVD or compressed video file on a computer or smart TV, listening to mp3 files, etc.) will invoke generative agencies that, in accordance with the specifications and protocols of codecs and the computational resources available, interpolate completely new sounds and images produced on the fly at the time of playback. Contrary to popular belief, consistent and unlimited reproducibility is therefore not a consequence of the digital revolution. Even if digital files manage to escape corruption in the process of their copying and transfer, they must still be "executed" by computers in the real, though microtemporally minuscule, intervals of physical spacetime. Here they are subject to radical variation, though it may escape our grosser perceptual faculties altogether. *Capture* magnifies these variables of generativity, taking the disconnection of human perception and machinic agency to its logical end. Escaping the imperative of media to be yoked to human attention al-

together, the project's pre-sonic gesture transforms its audiovisual contents from objects of consumption (or even objects of phenomenological intentionality) into

THE "ENVIRONMENT" OF PERCEPTION

and agency itself.

Such pre-sonic gestures are also at work in a somewhat puzzling series of engagements with Hitchcock's *Vertigo* — a decidedly post-cinematic thread running throughout Chatonsky's work for over a decade. For the most part, these works lack the grand narratives of *Telofossil* and *Capture*; they rely instead on the pre-existing narrative of Hitchcock's film, but they extract it from the encapsulated movie experience and redistribute it in bite-sized plurimedial chunks.

For example, *Vertigo@home* (2007) takes its soundtrack from *Vertigo*, but it uses *Google Street View* to reconstruct Scottie's journey through San Francisco in a post-cinematic space—a space that has not simply erased photographic indexicality in favour of digital imagery, but which has in fact multiplied indices through geolocation (and the infrastructure of GPS satellites), along with the multiple car-mounted cameras that *Google* used to capture its images—and, as we later found out, to illicitly capture a great deal of residential wifi traffic as well. In *Vertigo@home*, black screens foreground the gaps, seams, and stitches between digitally navigable public spaces, as when Scottie goes indoors, thus highlighting the seamfulness more generally of post-cinematic space, whose gaps must always be closed in the generative process of image rendering. This forcefully dramatizes the perceptual gaps that remain in our experience—but that may not remain in the experience of *Google's* algorithms, which are privy to a wealth of data outside the purview of our perception.

2 Grégory Chatonsky, « *Capture* », *capture.name*, 2015, Retrieved from : <http://capture.name>.

Vertigo also appears in other works concerned with the stitching of images. In *Readonlymemories* (2003), digitally composited collages of filmic images reconstruct the spaces that cinematic cameras probe but reveal only in framed snippets. *Readonlymemories* thus explores the

SPATIALIZATION OF TEMPORAL EXPERIENCE

that is a central part of the transition to a post-cinematic media regime. But a more recent work, *The Kiss* (2015), takes this spatialization to a new level and reveals its pre-ponsive nature. By subjecting the final embrace between James Stewart and Kim Novak to photogrammetric analysis, Chatonsky essentially duplicates and extends the post-cinematic processing of cinematic materials by which images are decoded and predictively interpolated in everyday computational playback. In the photogrammetric analysis, relations between the film's images are scrutinized in an intensive process of automated comparison. In normal usage, photogrammetry software is employed in order to reconstruct a pre-existing three-dimensional space from photographs of it, but in Chatonsky's application, a completely new space emerges, one that is algorithmically severed from our own perceptual reconstruction of three-dimensionality on the basis of the two-dimensional cinema screen. Finally, Chatonsky's generated space is transformed into a 3D-printable form and materialized as a warped object. This quintessentially post-cinematographic object spatializes a nonhuman, post-perceptual temporality and indeed radicalizes

THE TEMPORALITY OF THE AFFECTIVE SPACE

it opens up between the viewer and the object. Chatonsky's sculpture is a physical embodiment of the activity of computational processing that takes place between the production and our perception of images,

and it therefore acts upon our perception with the force of an augmented, anthropotechnically hybrid affectivity. The material object thereby highlights the discorrelation of images when subjected to post-cinematic processing, but it also unmistakably foregrounds a concomitant generativity or creative agency that seemingly ineluctably produces something new and inserts it into the environment for life.

And it is this new production that is probed, again with reference to Vertigo, in some of Chatonsky's most recent works. *Prediction* (2015) crosses *Vertigo* with *Capture*, so to speak, using artificial intelligence to detect and quantify the emotions of onscreen characters. *The Watson Emotion Watching Vertigo* (2016) turns this analysis into a 543-page book that radically foregrounds the discorrelation of the pre-ponsive gesture: "The chronologic reading of these anonymous feelings does not express the film, but expresses the way the machine analyzes our emotions. Two incommensurable worlds intersect in this reading."³

Ultimately, it is this uncertain intersection that Chatonsky's work highlights as a whole; from his large-scale narratives of post-Anthropocenic futures to his computational reimaginings of our cinematic past, what these projects have in common is that they reveal the pre-ponsive gesture as the characteristic gesture of our moment—the gesture, more than an attitude or decision, by which we daily "pledge ourselves in advance" of any knowledge or ability to estimate the parameters, agencies, or environments into which we venture.

The Kiss (2015). Digital print. 120 x 75 cm. Photogrammetry is applied to the final scene of *Vertigo* where the two characters kiss in a space-time distortion. The 3D model reproduces this distortion and brings it inside the matter of the image.
<http://chatonsky.net/the-kiss>

The Kiss (2015). 3D printing, 30 x 15 x 10 cm. Printer: Formiga p100.

With the support of COLAB - AUT, Institut français.
<http://chatonsky.net/the-kiss>

Capture: submersion (2016). Installation. With Olivier Alary, Jean-Pierre Balpe, Crystelle Bédard et Dominique Sirois.
With the support of Social Science and Humanities Research Council.
Arts Santa Monica (Barcelona, Spain).
<http://chatonsky.net/submersion>

Readonlymemories: Rear Window (2003). Digital print. 76 x 58 cm. Uses classical movie images to form big frescoes. Contrary to the cinematography's temporality, time is no longer sequential. It is suspended. We have all seen the building in *Rear Window*, Dorothy's room in *Blue Velvet*, or the twin brothers in *Dead Ringers*. Never have we seen those onscreen.
<http://chatonsky.net/readonlymemories>