
Reviewed by Alex Zivkovic (Columbia University)

Published on H-Sci-Med-Tech (November, 2023)

Commissioned by Penelope K. Hardy (University of Wisconsin-La Crosse)

Drawing on a range of disciplines, including science and technology studies (STS), media theory, art history, and performance studies, Michael Nitsche advocates for an interactive, multitudinous understanding of media. *Vital Media: Making, Design, and Expression for Humans and Other Materials* is motivated by a crucial question for designers: “How can we build media that give voice to both the human and nonhuman?” (p. 5).

The first chapter is a short introduction to the key themes of vital media with a brief overview of the book’s layout. Nitsche suggests that two recent conditions of design and media motivate the urgency of that question: the transformative insights of new materialist scholarship and the rise of new media. Using these thinkers and responding to the available new media options, Nitsche productively situates design work within diverse theories of agency. Overall, he advocates for “balance,” a way of supporting various interdependent parts that acknowledges the contributions of cognitive and noncognitive actors—what he beautifully calls a “continued emergence of all partners involved” (p. 4).

At the end of the second chapter, Nitsche offers two governing metaphors for how to understand balanced design: the ecological connections of a web and the engineered, structural logics of a hanging mobile. The web, in particular, recalls the writings of Donna J. Haraway (Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene [2016]) whose ideas of “string figures” he invokes. Similarly, the mobile requires consideration of how to “weigh” different partners, a guideline for designers in acknowledging their respective needs.

Chapter 2 covers various concepts media theorists have used to understand how humans shape media, how media shape humans, and how media shape themselves. Nitsche opens his chapter with a discussion of the first “earthrise” image sent back to Earth (a picture of our planet from the perspective of an orbiter around the moon sent back to our planet), which gets at the literal (in this case, very distant) displacement of
media away from human operators. This photograph forces us to acknowledge the material possibilities of technologies largely left on their own, hinting at the nonhuman agencies that Nitsche invokes throughout.

The rest of the chapter is a useful literature review of issues of materiality and agency in media today. This chapter outlines core ideas of various thinkers and productively connects diverse terms like “relational art” (Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics* [2002]), “élan vital” (Henri Bergson, *Creative Evolution* [1911]), “actor-network theory” (Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network Theory* [2005]), and “technics” (Gilbert Simondon, *On the Mode of Existence of Technical Objects* [1958]), among others. In illuminating sentences, these various concepts are succinctly put into conversation with each other. For example: “Simondon talks about the mastery and control of humans over technical objects. Even though the creative powers are distributed, this does not directly map onto the flat hierarchies suggested by [Karen] Barad, [Jane] Bennett, or Haraway. Yet, in the construction of vital media, the open individuation is one building block adopted from Simondon” (p. 48).

The remaining three chapters explore different conceptual paradigms: performance, craft, and folk. Each of these guiding principles offers a way to understand design that goes beyond the products of a sole (often implicitly human) creator. These three frameworks all emphasize material relationships that make any action partially a reaction. Nitsche's take on performance studies shifts it from studies of the ephemeral output of a person to also engage other “material voices”—so too studies of craft’s “active material component” as well as folk’s community-based traditions (p. 151).

Chapter 3 explores in part how performance studies might inflect our understanding of digital media. He begins with two projects: Joseph Beuys's *7000 Oaks* (1982) and Eva and Franco Mattes’s reenactment of it in 2007 on the platform *Second Life* (2003). Nitsche explores how the different platforms for the works—installations around a real city versus a digital website—produce different communities and networks. His other examples of performance projects involve people interacting with blenders, puppets, and augmented reality phone applications. These diverse examples reveal how his understanding of vital media advocates for projects that explicitly make present the agency of other objects. For example, for the project *Blendie* (2004), Kelly Dobson hacks a blender to play human voices, but the project simultaneously reveals its inherent operational sound—showcasing not just the blender's inherent function but also its other perceptible characteristics. These creative projects intervene into everyday devices and help estrange us from the rote usage of machines. The lessons of these projects is to point to the characteristics of other things and to teach lessons about attuning to different sensorial processes as we interact with all machines and designed objects.

Craft is the central discipline discussed in chapter 4. On face value, it is the discipline most inherently aligned with vital media as Nitsche defines it. Much like his idea of balancing various partners, he explains that “crafters read materials, build and optimize tools, and they do so situated in communities of practice that are defined by not only social but also local and environmental conditions” (p. 117). In addition to the inherent responsive quality of craftwork, craftspeople can also exaggerate this dialogue between art and object, as in Hannah Perner-Wilson's vests that are designed and prototyped outside, in response to the environment. In this chapter, we also get a peek at Nitsche's pedagogical approach since he briefly describes an assignment in which students develop projects that engage conceptual challenges like engaging a particular material. Since the book is geared toward media designers, this insight into his own pedagogy is welcome and
more such examples throughout the chapters would have been fruitful to help guide other design instructors.

Chapter 5 examines folk techniques. Here, Nitsche draws similar conclusions about community learning or group performances as in earlier chapters, although not clearly articulating how folk substantively differs from craft or performance (and their intersections). That said, his analysis of “digital folk” fascinatingly draws clear connections between physical, material practices and digital organizing. Nitsche analyzes two projects that demonstrate how folk practices can also find digital support and thereby new communities and impacts. Quilts are often a paradigmatic example of folk art, and the Nike Blanket Petition project (2003-8) productively used both social media and material quilting practices to protest working conditions in sweatshops. Similarly, You Are So Very Beautiful (2015-) involves both cross-stitching and a Twitter (now X) hashtag. These projects reveal surprising patterns of community formation between the in-person, community-based practices traditionally associated with folk and folk’s digital equivalents on the internet today in which practices might be remote but nonetheless community-based.

At the outset of his book, Nitsche writes that “the focus remains on the individual’s encounters with the material to provide media designers with examples, qualities, questions, and ideas for their own practices” (p. 9). Throughout, his interrogation of theoretical work, thoughtful analysis of often-surprising projects, and presentation of provocative questions satisfy this goal. Designers working in a range of media can read this book to discover projects that activate a variety of physical and community interventions. For STS, Nitsche’s second chapter, “Mapping Vital Media,” could be a particularly useful graduate teaching tool since it offers a summary of key thinkers of agency across technology studies, intellectual history, and media theory. Furthermore, his careful attention to artists and designers would be of interest to art historians and media historians working on contemporary art, helping to ground new materialist ideas and media concepts in tangible—and thereby teachable—art projects. Speaking to a range of audiences, Vital Media is a wonderful provocation about the future of design for the twenty-first century, helping attune readers (especially designers) to other people, places, and non-human matter.
If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at https://networks.h-net.org/h-sci-med-tech


**URL:** https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=59561

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.