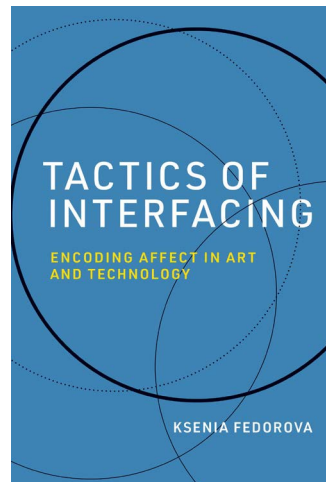# REVIEW: FROM STRATEGIC EFFECTS TO TACTICAL AFFECTS

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ABSTRACT

When it comes to strategies governing contemporary technological culture, the Human-Computer Interaction (HCI) paradigm is as pervasive and *automatic* as technology itself. Taking from Michel de Certeau's distinction between the concepts of *strategy* and *tactics*, Ksenia Fedorova analyses a series of transdisciplinary artworks in which computerized operations affecting and transforming human experience are tactically disrupted in order to question technological interfaces mediating HCI. Exposing crossdisciplinary experiments in which affects and deffects are part of the algorithm, *Tactics of Interfacing* shows precisely in what measure and weight art and technology may contemplate natural and artificial glitches of both human nature and machinic code.

Keywords: Transdisciplinarity; Interfaces; Disruptive arts; Human-Computer interaction; Affect.

Different from being strategic, *Tactics of Interfacing* is a book on disruptive tactics in art and technology as much as it is a tactical book in itself. Being tactical often means to prioritize actions taken during a given path and not so much the path chosen. Starting with its (sub)title, from "interfacing" and "encoding" to "tactics" and "affect", including the pairing of "art and technology," these *connectors* already presuppose a logic of tension, of in-between states. Much like circles intersecting in the book's cover, as "spaces of negotiation" they evince a symbiotic, correlational and non-causal understanding of the human-computer relationship(s). In addition, not only all four chapters address different tactics of interfacing that explore "how new digital technologies affect the way we conceive of a human 'self' and its relations to the world," (Fedorova, 2020, p. 2) they also seem to be built after the image of a *cybrid body*, in its proximal and distal perspectives (body as an interface).

Following the same logic of relationality applied by the author in her understanding of tactics of interfacing – the interface as a condition, rather than a technology –, the book's structure, then, seems to work as a sequence of interfaces "establishing a feedback relation (...) of mutual encoding" (Fedorova, 2020, pp. 15-16). Borrowed by Fedorova from system theory, a key concept to a better understanding of her tactics is the one of *metastability*, "literally the potential energy needed to balance the excess or lack of other parameters" (Fedorova, 2020, p. 11). In reading *Tactics of Interfacing*, one gets the feeling that the whole book is based on the idea of the metastable. Much like the artworks discussed, from chapter to chapter, the reader is placed "in the midst of such a state, where responses are continuously (and potentially, endlessly) built upon responses" – inasmuch as these chapters' borders can be understood as "individual entities (...) put in flux" (Fedorova, 2020, p. 11).

Starting with Chapter 1, "Face to Interface," it considers the notion of interfaciality in computerized operations affecting and transforming "the human experience of a face and facial communication" (Fedorova, 2020, p. 24). Analysing the face's shift from image to medium, the whole chapter is based on the idea of *transition*. From face to interface, artificial to *artifacial*, its theoretical framework is built through a process of addition, each new subchapter adding new information, in order to present an argument on shared expressiveness between human and machine.

As the same applies to each chapter, it quickly becomes apparent how Chapter 2 continues to explore "spaces of negotiation," namely through its title's double oxymoron (and chiasmus): "Body Image and the Algorithmic Organic." Drawing from a definition of body (and the bodily) that expands from its (post)cartesian opposition to "the cognitive level," Fedorova works upon seminal (post)phenomenological philosophers of the self, such as Merleau-Ponty and Don Ihde (Fedorova, 2020, p. 74), to present the idea of "*body-data-image*." Understood as "an image generated through the processing of the data produced by the body", *body-data-image*" is a "relational phenomenon" (Fedorova, 2020, p. 131) as it is an expansion of the self's boundaries and its understanding through tecnological mediation of embodiment. Analysing a series of

motion capture and biofeedback-based artworks as tactics of interfacing, Fedorova's selection of case studies is not limited, however, to the idea of bodies as interfaces. On the contrary, her expansion on the concept of interfaciality includes the corporeal and the material (the body as a medium) as well as signification (body as code and text) (Fedorova, 2020, pp. 99-100). A good example would be the analysis of *Bodytext* by Simon Biggs, Sue Hawksley, and Garth Paine; 2010), a kinaesthetic performance dealing with the concepts of memory, agency and language, here used by Fedorova to further develop the notions of *encoding* and *translation* in the context of human-computer correlations. And, while some descriptions of technologies might suggest a potentially biased tendency towards institutions, not only the author's selection of artworks/ artists is crossdisciplinary, it is also representative, equitable, and inclusive (particularly those questioning the concept of body by making use of motion capture and biofeedback technologies, such as *The Black Movement Project*, 2019, by Lajuné McMillian).

Moving from the "actual physical reality, in which the body is present," to a "reality of the 'disembodied' self" (Fedorova, 2020, p. 143), Chapter 3 centers the critique on "mixed reality interfaces" creating "models of self," while arguing that, due to their "rational organization," these technologies reproduce the "Eliza effect," a "human tendency to project a humanlike behavior, intelligence, and type of causality onto a computer" (Fedorova, 2020, p. 153). Continuing the logic of previous chapters, Fedorova reflects on artistic proposals disruptively exploring the process of raising awareness by turning these technologies' *strategic effects* into *tactical affects* (see her critique of Karen, from 2015, by interactive media artist group Blast Theory).

Keeping in view the book's tactical status – largely inspired by Michel de Certeau's distinction between the concepts of *strategy* and *tactics* – as a means of "diverting and 'tricking' the 'dominant system" (Fedorova, 2020, p. 9), most of the artworks analysed are of a transdisciplinary nature and almost indistinguishable from scientific research experiments. Indicative of an in-between state, in the sense of going beyond, across, or through something, the prefix trans is connected to the idea of encoded affect in human-computer interfacing, particularly since the fact of going beyond its nature does not mean the loss of its being. As such, regardless of its *transitions*, *transgressions*, *transductions*, or even *transcoding* processes, art is distinctly suited to "bring to light the various 'gray' zones of technological culture" (Fedorova, 2020, p. 8), namely in its exploring of the "impact of ever-increasing digital interventions on our self-perception," while offering a "space from which we can reflect on and expand the conceptual dimensions of the kinds of experience and knowledge received in the form of biometric and other types of sensing data" (Fedorova, 2020, pp. 4-5). Ranging from responsive environments to artificial intelligence conversational agents, transdisciplinary art seems to present a "safer," "speculative and experimental status" (Fedorova, 2020, p. 5), a temporary condition allowing for tactical disruption, which, due to the "open-ended nature of its inquiries," (Fedorova, 2020, p. 21) may not

necessarily respond to the same criteria (codes of conduct and ethics, for instance) as a scientific/technological research experiment alone would require. Nonetheless, regardless of all the subjectivity, individuality, and *experimentality*, the analysis of art with a certain propensity for transdisciplinarity requires a discourse in accordance. Diving deep into the description of participants' reactions to artwork installations, particularly since they "feed into contemporary sensibilities that have already been affected by technologies" (Fedorova, 2020, p. 7), the participants are understood here as subjects of an experiment. This tactic becomes even more apparent in the author's use of vocabulary, intermingling between scientific and artistic jargon.

Yet, as much as these crossovers and transverses may risk becoming too academic and scientific, Fedorova avoids being locked in a feedback loop, essentially by giving voice to "interventionist approaches" that are part of a long tradition of disruptive tactics by artists that choose to intervene in a "dominant context from within, using the same media and vocabulary of justification, but with a twist" (Fedorova, 2020, p. 7). For that purpose, she traces antecedents, although, in this particular aspect, one gets the feeling of being limited to the scope of *media archaeology*, a choice that might be seen as too narrow when it comes to a longstanding tradition of disruptive strategies by artists at the interstices of societies' demand for order, control and functionalism. And the same goes for a potential disregard of crosscultural artifacts whose mechanical logic and conceptual signs are in direct contact with the theme of interfacility and alike (an evident case of this somewhat generalization is that which is made of the Tarot and the I Ching, on pages pp. 160-161).

Potentially revealing the author's acquaintance with scientific methods, these small details do not invalidate, however, her choice of seeing disruption through art as an equilibrium, in face of the commercial, political, ideological, and/or industrial sidebacks of science and technology. That much is shown in the final chapter of the book, "Interfaces of Spatial Relationality," in which Fedorova concludes with a critique of locative media interfaces that augment and alter spatial perception, such as geotagging, biomapping, augmented reality and distributed intelligence. Being the chapter that presents a greater propensity for popularity, namely due to the ubiquitous nature of these technologies' interfaces (installed in each one of our prosthetic cellphones and tablets), both in private and public spaces, these are also the kind of interfaces through which digital technology industry ceaselesssly seeks to emulate tactile/haptic perception. In order to find the proper balance, Fedorova becomes even more incisive in her choice of artworks, both in their disruptiveness and countercultural aesthetics. Consequently, by putting people and places over technology, affects over effects, in these artworks, the "randomness of chance" that governs our everyday life is inserted into the grid that acts upon the "randomness of software performance" (Fedorova, 2020, p. 209), hence "emphasizing the 'noisiness' and 'messiness' of the data – their fluid, highly individual and idiosyncratic character" (Fedorova, 2020, p. 214).

When it comes to strategies governing contemporary technological culture, the Human-Computer Interaction (HCI) paradigm is as pervasive and *automatic* as technology itself. Despite feeding from it, in a sequence of feedback loops, art, on the other hand, is open to imperfections, errors, subjectivity and experimentalism. By exposing encoded affects (and deffects) that the algorithm, only apparently, does not allow, *Tactics of Interfacing* shows precisely in what measure and weight art and technology may contemplate natural and artificial glitches of both human nature and machinic code.