

Changing Technologies of Politics

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Proposal

I am writing to propose a faculty seminar for the Humanities Center tentatively entitled Changing Technologies of Politics. I would prefer to offer this seminar in 2011-12 though it could be pushed to 2012-13. I am interested in how new digital technologies shape the ways states and corporations re-shape the demands of citizenship and consumption. As large institutions struggle to harness new technologies to channel the flows of money and ideas through their corridors, artists, hackers, and media dissenters try to harness technology to elude large forms of power. Expressive cultural forms take advantage of digital media to invoke new counter-publics and alternative forms of collectivity. Over the past 30 years, even after the recent financial crisis, ideologies of the free market continue to dominate how governments and aid agencies posit global progress. Digital technology facilitates the domination of the ideal figure of the entrepreneur. For the state the entrepreneur is the ideal citizen in demanding less resources and making financial contributions and building privatized infrastructure. For artists and alternative communities rebellion and dissent is equally formulated in relation to entrepreneurship and economic independence. We will explore the relationship between new mobile digital technologies and changing global financial structures.

For me this seminar will be a way to explore my research on technology in Africa, by looking at the growing literature in recent years on media and technology across disciplines including economics, philosophy, history, anthropology, literature, and computer science. It will be important to engage with historians' work on technological change and the changing nature of financial accumulation at other historical moments. This seminar will benefit my interdisciplinary teaching on Africa and Diaspora. It will also specifically further my new research project on mobile phones in Africa and my continuing research on African music videos. I am co-curating a major exhibit of African digital video art at the New York Museum of African art slated for display in 2012 which will also fit well with this seminar. This seminar engage my work by exploring how artists and corporations are using new electronic media to engage with political issues and aesthetic sensibility across Africa and for Africans in the US and Europe. For example, mobile phone companies in Africa are in the process of introducing phones and networks that allow consumers to "bank" money on their phone accounts. Even as huge segments of African populations have increasing trouble accessing water and electricity due to the privatization of these resources, individuals living in urban poverty have "smartphones" that can store and electronically transfer (Bluetooth) hundreds of songs and call internationally at cheap rates. Popular music has often been at the epicenter of African political critique and the formation of alternative publics. With the ubiquity of mobile phones artists struggle to make a living as album sales have dropping. At the same time dispersed digital communities form around music in new ways. These issues link up with growing faculty interest in technology and the built environment, historical transformations of politics and sociality through changing technologies, the link between rights and space/environment philosophies of mediation and race. This seminar will be a good way to bring new media artists to campus.

Updated Summary

This seminar examines how digital technologies and electronic media shape the ways that states, corporations, and international organizations make new demands of citizens, workers, and

consumers and how these people creatively use electronica for their own purposes. As large institutions struggle to harness new technologies and channel the flows of money, bodies, and ideas through their corridors, artists, hackers, and dissident entrepreneurs re-imagine digital media to elude and compete with top-down organizations and invoke alternative forms of collectivity. But counter-cultural movements in the age of dispersed digital circulation cannot easily be understood using older theories of resistance or opposition politics. With the end of the cold war and the triumph over apartheid, opposition politics and cultural movements are increasingly focused on notions of individual access to free and open markets for producers and consumers. Over the past 30 years ideologies of free market entrepreneurship have come to dominate how governments, international NGOs, and corporations posit their success as well as how counter movements make claims on progress. Digital technologies shape the domination of the figure of the entrepreneur in the 21st century.

For the state, the entrepreneur becomes the ideal citizen, demanding few resources and contributing to financial stability as a self-motivated producer and consumer. For artists and alternative communities across the globe, rebellion and dissent are equally formulated in relation to entrepreneurship as freedom. We will explore the relationship between new mobile digital technologies, changing global political-financial structures, and creative potentials. This seminar links with growing faculty interest in technology and the built environment, historical transformations of political technologies, rights, justice, and space, and philosophies of the aesthetic mediation of gender and race.