

Anne Sofia Karhio**Christian Ulrik Andersen and Søren Bro Pold:
The Metainterface: The Art of Platforms, Cities and Clouds.
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A rapidly increasing body of scholarship addresses the design and aesthetic manifestations of different digital interfaces, of screen environments, and of various examples of mobile and ubiquitous computing. What characterises much of this work is how it redraws established disciplinary boundaries between literary studies, media studies, visual arts, and cultural studies in a manner that goes beyond the now ubiquitous calls for “interdisciplinary” research. This is a situation where existing and familiar concepts, categories and scientific premises no longer hold. One of the primary concerns underpinning much of this work is a growing sense of unease when it comes to the relationship between the visual or otherwise perceptible (audiovisual, sonic, or haptic) digital interface, and the processes, networks, and socioeconomic or political structures that remain invisible in our routine encounters with present-day media environments. Christian Ulrik Andersen and Søren Bro Pold’s *The Metainterface: The Art of Platforms, Cities and Clouds* is an excellent example of what such disciplinary irreverence in scholarship can offer, and of its social and cultural importance, and the variety of audiences it can serve. On its website the publisher MIT Press categorises the volume as “Art History”, but it could just as well be “media studies”, “digital culture”, “literary studies”, or some other field in the humanities and social sciences.

The Metainterface addresses, as the authors phrase it, “a situation where the computer’s interface seemingly becomes omnipresent and invisible, and where it at once is embedded in everyday objects and characterised by hidden exchanges of information

between objects or what it conceptualises as a metainterface” (p. 5). In other words, the interface is no longer restricted to the computer screen, but is now embedded in the products and spaces of networked smart technology in our entire life environment. To address this situation, the volume also responds to a need to establish a vocabulary and a critical framework suited to the current media environment and its wider sociopolitical contexts, one that goes beyond the aesthetics of the surface interfaces of computers and mobile screens. This is a study that also practices what it preaches.

What the authors repeatedly demonstrate is that *all* of our current sociocultural sphere has now become a media environment, and the more the infrastructure that sustains this media environment disappears from view, the more vigorously we should seek to bring it under scrutiny. It is in creative arts and through critical, tactical and experimental art practices where much of this work is being done, and the volume competently examines the complex relationships between users, designers, corporate interests, and technological infrastructure, through a series of art works and creative projects that take us beyond habitual engagement with the tools and devices that surround us. Andersen and Pold’s close analysis of specific art works and projects is prefaced by a discussion on interface criticism as a scholarly approach. This responds to the need for a revised framework with which to scrutinise encounters in which the distinct critical tools adopted for specific art forms or technologies – literary analysis, game studies, or human-computer interaction – are increasingly insufficient for tackling the challenges particular to the twenty-first-century information society (although they may continue to serve work undertaken in their respective fields).

In the chapters following the introduction, “The Metainterface Industry”, “The Urban Metainterface”, and “The Cloud Interface”, wider themes are explored through specific works and interventions, including the Austrian media artist and author Jörg Piringer’s iOS app *RealBeat*; the runme.org sharing platform; *Phone Story*, a game highlighting the dark side of the mobile phone industry; *The Project Formerly Known as Kindle Forkbomb* developed as a critique of the corporate model of the Amazon bookstore; and other similar projects. The final chapter, “Interface Criticism by Design”, moves from an analytical approach towards envisioning a politically and socially engaged criticism, in the form of creative projects by the authors themselves: *The Poetry Machine*, which interrogates the digitisation processes and practices of libraries and literary production, and *A Peer Reviewed Journal About*, which focuses on present-day forms of scholarly research and publication, and the problematic institutional politics of academic publishing.

Perhaps the most important contribution of *Metainterface* to current discussions on media, technology, and society is that it demonstrates the social and political power of art (encompassing literature as well as visual, audiovisual, performance, and other areas of cultural production) as tactical, critical, and creative practice at a time when our media environment is transforming faster than the language we use to engage with it, often leaving us poorly equipped to grasp and communicate the deeper ramifications and

consequences of new platforms and applications to privacy, citizen agency, and social responsibility. It is in many ways an openly political and even angry book, as it seeks to make visible various aspects of the interface that have disappeared from view, but are at the same time omnipresent, in “the ever-present media devices and apps, and displaced networks of clouds and data streams”, where “[the] promise to deliver interaction spaces where apps, smart objects, and mobile computers blend flawlessly into the environment is a promise to deliver smart, networked, participatory and open future” (p. 10). Despite its openly critical and occasionally dystopian tone, however, *Metainterface* does not resort to cynical nihilism. Instead, it encourages its readers, whether scholars, artists, or average citizens, to rethink their role as mere users and consumers of media design, and to consider the potential of informed, creative dissent.

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