Collaborators in Art and Technology – The Case of Billy Klüver

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Abstract

The encounter between aesthetic practice and technology was an integral aspect of the expanded field of art during the 1960s, and one of the key figures here was Swedish Bell Labs engineer Billy Klüver, who worked together with John Cage, Öyvind Fahlström, Robert Rauschenberg and several others, and who founded the organisation Experiments in Art and Technology (E.A.T.) in 1966. This essay traces the work of Klüver during the 1960s and outlines some of the crucial features of this collaborative endeavour.

In February 1960 a strange construction site was established in the garden of the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), in New York. Pieces of discarded objects from skips, junkyards and second-hand shops were collected and combined into a perplexing and complex structure – which on 17 March was set to work. The work that this assortment of bicycle wheels, oil drums, a radio, a piano, a bath tub and so on was to perform did not, however, result in any tangible product – apart, of course, from its own partial self-destruction.

The French artist Jean Tinguely’s Homage to New York was built in collaboration with the Swedish engineer Billy Klüver, who was a researcher at Bell Laboratories in New Jersey. Since his youth, and in parallel with his engineering studies, Klüver had taken an interest in film and art, and he was a good friend of Pontus Hultén, who was to be the first director of the Moderna Museet in Stockholm. Hultén had also played a role in Klüver’s introduction to the art world, and to artists who wanted to explore the potentials and pitfalls of technology in their work. Klüver later recalled his first meeting with Tinguely: “He wanted me to find a theatre where he could build a machine and he waved his arms to show how it would explode and eventually self-destruct in front of the eyes of the audience [...]” (Klüver 2007: 19).1

1 “The Garden Party” was first published in the magazine ZERO 1, 1961, and reprinted in the MoMA catalogue, The Machine as Seen at the End of the Mechanical Age (New York: MoMA, 1968). I quote here from the collection Teknologi för livet. Om Experiments in Art and...
Even though Tingueley's piece is a *homage* to the urban machine that is New York City, it could prompt interpretations of a more Luddite nature. But that was not how Klüver understood the work. "I don't interpret the self-destruction of Jean's machine as an act of protest or as an expression of nihilism or despair", he wrote in his 1961 essay “The Garden Party” (Klüver 1961: 27). Rather, he saw its exploration of ephemerality and transience as an attempt to leave the dusty museum and put art into contact with present reality, thus forging a link “between the artist’s creative act and the reception of the audience, between creation and destruction” (Klüver 1961: 28). In other words, this collaborative piece of machine art could pave the way for an aesthetics that encouraged participation – for an art closer to life.

The idea of collaborative work and participatory art would, during the post-war decades, often coalesce with an interest in the aesthetic potential of technology and new media, thus attesting to an observation already made by Walter Benjamin in the 1930s. As John Cage suggested, “we have another way of making art that is less individual and more social […] Art instead of being an object made by one person becomes a process set in motion by a group of people, in this case artists and engineers” (Dyson 2009b: 71). Cage’s view is close to the one that Billy Klüver worked out during the 1960s, as he began to collaborate more frequently with artists, but it was not fully articulated from the start. After the experience at MoMA in 1960, Klüver made a series of interventions into the arts scene in New York. He participated in happenings by Claes Oldenburg and others, and he recorded interviews with pop artists such as Jasper Johns, Jim Dine, Roy Lichtenstein and Andy Warhol, which he put out as a record in 1963. Most notably, perhaps, Klüver played an integral part in the famous exhibition *Rörelse i konsten* (Movement in Art) in 1961, which opened first at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam and was then shown at Moderna Museet in Stockholm in the spring of 1961, and, eventually, at the Louisiana Museum in Denmark.

Another project that he embarked on during the first half of the 1960s was the building of Robert Rauschenberg’s sound sculpture *Oracle*, mostly assembled from found material and supplied with a newly constructed sound system. In his essay “Technology for Life”, from 1966, Klüver describes the arduous

_Technology_ (2007), which includes several of Klüver’s essays and key statements on his work as well as other texts about his work. All quotations from this collection are translated from the Swedish by me.

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2 For example, in Benjamin’s well-known essay “The Author as Producer” (1934), published in English many times, most recently in Benjamin 2008, which also includes other essays on the same topic.