Call for Papers

The Berkeley Conference on Precarious Aesthetics

UC Berkeley, October 15-17, 2015

The conference will be hosted by Berkeley Center for New Media in collaboration with the Department of Film & Media at UC Berkeley and the research project The Power of the Precarious Aesthetic at The Department of Media, Cognition and Communication, University of Copenhagen.

Submission Deadline: May 1, 2015. See details below.

Confirmed speakers include:

Tom Gunning, University of Chicago
Christine Ross, McGill University
Abigail De Kosnik, UC Berkeley
Jeffrey Skoller, UC Berkeley
Jacob Gaboury, Stony Brook University
W. J. T. Mitchell, University of Chicago

Is it … always an advantage to replace an indistinct picture by a sharp one? Isn't the indistinct one often exactly what we need? (Ludwig Wittgenstein, Philosophical Investigations, §71)

In spite of technological advances striving for greater clarity and resolution, visuals that counteract such perfection may never have been more appreciated. Feature films, photography, documentaries,
televisual images, music videos, video games, artists’ films and new digital media are currently saturated with images that, in various ways, are blurred, noisy and non-transparent. They invite us to see the world, yet at the same time, they obstruct our view, often to dazzling effect. By operating at the mercy of bodies and/or technologies that are unstable and liable to fail, mediation is here rendered precarious. Such cases raise a host of distinct but related questions such as:

• How can it be that the blurry image is often preferred over the sharp one? Why is the indistinct image, as suggested by Wittgenstein, “often exactly what we need”? What might we need such images for? How do they operate in various domains, media and genres? How can precarious mediation be deployed to rhetorical, aesthetic and political effect? How does it potentially inscribe forms of precarious existence – precarious life?

• How do the transformative repercussions of a digitalized media culture intersect with the present surge in precarious mediation? How do analogue and digital media materialities come forth in such cases, and how are relations between authenticity, simulation and fakery played out?

• How is the presence of the camera itself inscribed through traces that point back to its alleged mode of production and the circumstances of recording? How might the embodied camera inscribe an ethics of the gaze, or trace attitudes toward danger and risk for the filming subject and those being filmed? Can the camera take on a life of its own, be subject to terror, fear or death?

• How does the present surge in precarious mediation relate to more lasting negotiations of blindness and insight, opacity and transparency, vagueness and clarity, tactility and opticality, the visible and the invisible? How does it relate to tensions between embodied and disembodied modes of perception, suspensions and prolongations of perception, to doubt, to concealment and to iconoclasm? If pictures want something, do they now want to hurt themselves, to stage the life and death of their media materialities, to boost the lure of their ruinous decay?

The challenge for the delineation of a precarious aesthetics is to understand the operational logics of precarious mediation, which is why we need to interrogate this mediation historically, theoretically and philosophically.
We invite explorations of the questions above. These explorations may also involve issues such as:

- Precarious art and the notion of precarious life
- Intersections of past and present
- Mediated memories and nostalgia
- Mourning and melancholia
- The medium as message
- Hot and cool media
- The attraction of ruinous media
- Perfect imperfection
- Poetic precision
- The enigmatic
- The sublime
- Medial and human error, finitude
- The dynamics between perfection and imperfection
- Contingency and chance
- Bootleg aesthetics
- “Poor images” and the tension between high and low resolution
- Medium-specific noise
- Noise in image and sound, glitch
- Intermedial tensions
- Temporal versus spatial disruptions of mediation
- An erotics of concealment and revelation, in image, sound, narrative
- The dynamic between transparency and opacity
- The dynamic between the disembodied and embodied camera gaze
- The dynamic between the omniscient and the situated camera gaze
- Uses of extra-diegetic versus diegetic cameras
- The camera as an actor that can live and die
- The appeal of chaos
- Epistemological and poetic vagueness
- Finitude, obsolescence
Beyond the conference in October, selected papers will be invited to be taken under consideration for inclusion in a special issue of *Journal of Visual Culture* as well as in an edited book.

Proposals should include a title, an abstract of 350 words, 3-5 bibliographic sources and an author bio no longer than 100 words. Proposals must be submitted no later than May 1, 2015. Notification will follow within two weeks. Send to precariousaestheticsconf@gmail.com

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