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Introduction to *No Template: Art and the Technologies of Race*

MEGAN DRISCOLL
Assistant Professor of Art History, University of Richmond

No template: a condition that suggests a lack, but also a promise. This special issue of *Media-N* was named for a digital avatar's declaration that there was "no accessible preexisting template" for animating their artist-creator Sondra Perry's self-described "fat, Black body."[1] Such insufficiencies arise throughout Perry's practice, representing both the ways that technologies of representation fail the racialized body and the possibility that, in those failures, we might find something that technologies of power cannot wholly instrumentalize or contain. Race itself, Perry's work suggests, operates as a technology.

Perry is one of many artists whose work enters and complicates recent discourses on the relationship between race and the technological. In the past few years, the once stubborn myth that race is irrelevant in digital ecologies has given way to a growing awareness of how racialized systems of power are implicated in and by technology—particularly the technologies with which we see and know the world. Consider, for example, the sudden attention to film chemistry's historical inability to properly render dark skin after the technical triumphs of Steve McQueen's *12 Years a Slave* (2013); the success of Joy Buolamwini's documentary, *Coded Bias* (2020), on the replication of these failures in facial recognition algorithms; or the 2021 advertising campaign promising that a new, skin-tone-sensitive mobile phone camera will be able to "see everyone equally." These discussions draw important attention to how endemic racial bias in technology affects people's lives. At the same time, they replicate the tendency to position race and technology on opposing, contested poles, leaving sociocorporeal constructions like blackness fixed across what is looking less like a divide and more like a digital chasm. There has been, however, a concurrent rise in scholarship on the technicity of race itself and the epistemological entanglement of the concept of race with how we conceive of the technological. Addressing the breadth of technologies from slavery-era surveillance methods to contemporary computer networks, these studies address how the long historical arc of technē has shaped what we experience as race. Just a few of the touchstones in the field are Simone Browne's *Dark Matters* (2015), Safiya Noble's *Algorithms of Oppression* (2018), Ruha Benjamin's *Race After Technology* (2019), Kara Keeling's *Queer Times, Black Futures* (2019), and recent essays by critical theorist Aria Dean.[2] Readers can continue to follow the rich, ongoing development of this area of inquiry through the remarkable range of texts and exhibitions under review in this issue, which include new writings by Delinda Collier, Legacy Russell, and Neda Atanasoski and Kalindi Vora; Rhizome's *Forking PiraGene* project; and creative works by Astria Suparak and Ho Tzu Nyen.

This newer body of artistic and scholarly research builds on a foundation of theorists who insisted on the relevance of race to technology even when the "race blind" model remained fashionable. Contributors to this early discourse include Alondra Nelson, Lisa Nakamura, Wendy Hui Kyong

Chun, Beth Coleman, Jennifer Gonzalez, Tara McPherson, and Richard Dyer. Out of this essential work, the current issue of *Media-N* was most strongly shaped by one set of texts: Beth Coleman and Wendy Hui Kyong Chun's theorization of race and/as technology, developed in a pair of essays first published in 2009.[3] Turning to Heidegger's notion of technē as prosthesis or skill, Coleman and Chun imagine race as a technology that can be leveraged, a tool for operating within systems of power. This formulation distances race from its biological fictions, creating a critical framework that aims to return historical agency to the individual and to better understand how race functions in the world—how, in Chun's words, we *do* things to (or with) race. This issue of *Media-N* began ten years after the release of Coleman and Chun's essays, a moment when the texts were receiving a surge of cross-disciplinary attention amidst the aforementioned growth in new scholarship. *No Template: Art and the Technologies of Race* was animated by a desire to revisit the notion of race and/as technology within the specific context of art and visual culture. How could artistic practice, with its unique modes of inquiry, better elucidate the racialization of technology and the technologization of race?

It is perhaps unsurprising that the answers offered by our authors begin with visuality, a domain with a deep and often fraught relationship to art and aesthetics. Today we understand race to be inherently visually knowable, an idea that is reinforced by the popular understanding of race as a representational problem within technology. But as Sue Shon reminds us, race has not always been something we could so clearly see. In a study of the textual portraits created by runaway slave advertisements, Shon identifies a moment in the early nineteenth century when descriptive language began to shift away from characteristics like clothing and focus increasingly on skin color and its association with social categories of race. Although complexion had been included in earlier advertisements for both Black and white slaves, it was only in this period—and only in advertisements for self-emancipated Black individuals—that appearance became a metonym for racial difference, "visual signs of unfreedom…materializ[ing] on the surface—the skin—of a body." The advertisements thus associated what could be seen with what was already considered common knowledge about the sociobehavioral characteristics of race, producing a public visual experience that Shon defines as "racial sense." As Shon emphasizes, it is important to remember the instability of such visual truths as we seek solutions to racial inequity in visual technologies. Can better machine vision algorithms really solve racialized dataveillance? Can cameras truly yield a transparent image of justice for victims of racial violence?

Shon's argument lays the groundwork for a better understanding of the history of race and/as technology through and within artistic practice. Huan He brings us into the twentieth century, turning to the work of Nam June Paik to interrogate the Asian/American racialization of computation in the 1960s and 1970s. He traces that process through the co-development of the graphical user interface and concept of the Asian/American as model minority. Rising together in the period of "yellow peril," these sociotechnological structures became intertwined as a pair of solutions to the perceived dual threats of the digital and the Asian. The computational logic of the interface thus emerges as an inherently racial logic, presenting a form of technical "minority modeling" that is bound up in American myths of individualism and assimilation. Paik's practice, however, troubles this logic. Focusing on a pair of lesser-known works in drawing and code, He identifies in Paik an ambivalence toward the model technicity of the Asian/American subject. This "aesthetic of indeterminacy," He argues, undermines the fluid assignation of Asian/Americanness onto the racial interface.

The 1960s and 1970s also saw the rise of feminist art and politics in the United States. Megan Hines homes in on technofeminist discourses from this period and their fascination with real and imagined reproductive technologies such as cloning, which played an important role in technofeminist visual culture. Within these dialogues Hines identifies a "feminist biotechnological imaginary" in which the technological becomes a path out of biologically determined essentialism. This mode of thinking, Hines argues, shaped the work of feminist artists who were engaging with gender and/as technology. But the emancipatory aspirations of such practices faltered when white artists attempted to apply the same biotechnological imaginary to race. Hines explores these failures in feminist series produced in the 1960s and 1970s by Lynn Hershman Leeson, Cindy Sherman, and Eleanor Antin, all of which incorporate elements of blackface. Situating these works in the historical contexts of technofeminism and incidents of blackface scattered throughout then-contemporary American counterculture, Hines demonstrates how technology-informed strategies used to undermine gendered systems of power ultimately served to reinforce the systems of power built around race.

In fact, as John Landreville points out, the very idea that becoming technological could emancipate the racialized subject fails to account for how Black bodies have been violently technologized as instruments for the construction and maintenance of systems of white hegemony. Although Coleman does address this problem in her defining essay on race as technology, Landreville argues that the solution Coleman identifies—the speed of black cultural signification, which allows the Black subject to operate always ahead of racist violence—too smoothly elides how blackness circulates through the virtual and apart from the individual. Working against this elision, Landreville explores how the "black virtual … contest[s] and complicate[s] technical agency" in Terence Nance's televised series, *Random Acts of Flyness*, which first aired in 2018. Connecting the show's tendency to float across and between (re)circulated images of black visual culture to Aria Dean's argument that the circulatory nature of images and blackness are one and the same, Landreville finds that blackness in *Random Acts* takes on an additive, capacious quality that destabilizes any ground to which we might anchor the technicity of the individual subject. The role of artistic practice for Landreville is thus similar to its role for He—we encounter once again an "aesthetic [of] indeterminacy" that challenges any equivalences produced by the intimacy of technology and race. In Nance, Landreville argues, indeterminacy opens instead onto the boundless "field of energies" produced by black images, a boundlessness that models an ethical practice of care in its generous capacity for "other possibilities for black livingness in the 'afterlife of slavery.'"

An ethics of care also shapes Lois Klassen and Gabriela Aceves Sepúlveda's approach to the work of Fiamma Montezemolo and Stephanie Dinkins. Klassen and Sepúlveda introduce amplified listening as a mode of thoughtful reception invited by Montezemolo's *Echo* (2014) and Dinkins's *Not the Only One (N'too)* (2018–ongoing). In very different ways, each artist pulls gendered and racialized voices across past and future archives to critically intervene in technologized narratives: the history of geopolitical borders in Montezemolo, the overdetermination of Black feminine subjecthood in Dinkins. From international trade agreements to biased AI datasets, these voices ask us to consider technicity as a function of power—as well as, when we listen closely, a function of how individuals maneuver through power. Modeling the care they ask of their readers, Klassen and Sepúlveda also deploy amplified listening as a research framework for their study of *Echo* and *N'too*. The Canada-based scholars borrow the methodology from activist praxis developed in Canadian discourses on decolonization, offering it to us as a way to rethink the ethics of aesthetic and political response.

Finally, Charu Maithani returns the issue to the complex relationship between blackness and technical agency in her analysis of artistic interventions into chroma keying, the blue and green screens used in video, film, and digital post-production to manipulate image composition. Maithani focuses primarily on the appearance of the chroma screen in Sondra Perry's *Graft and Ash for a Three-Monitor Workstation* (2016), wherein the artist deploys chroma blue not as a hidden technical tool but as a visible and thus potentially performative representational field. Maithani argues that in Perry, as in the work of other artists such as Sandra Mujinga who incorporate chroma screens, the apparent imageless-ness of the screen becomes a ground for the enactment of racialized media practices, revealing how such practices have constructed—and been constructed by—blackness as cultural and sociotechnological form. Maithani describes this "entanglement of the blankness of chroma screen with blackness" as a "blan/ckness" that allows artists like Perry and Mujinga to "recognize and animate [blackness] in constructive ways."

Foregrounding the critical role of artistic research and practice, the essays and reviews in *No Template* offer an essential contribution to the growing field of study on the relationship between race and technology.

ENDNOTES

[1] The observation that there was "no accessible preexisting template" for animating Sondra Perry's body is made by a digital avatar narrating the video component of Perry's *Graft and Ash for a Three-Monitor Workstation* (2016). *Graft and Ash* is addressed in more detail in this issue in Charu Maithani's "Blan/ck Screens: Chroma Screens Performing Race." I have written further on the relationship between race and technology in Perry's practice in Megan Driscoll, "The Technicity of Blackness: On Failures and Fissures in the Art of Sondra Perry," *Art Journal* 80, no. 4 (Winter 2021): 8–23, https://doi.org/10.1080/00043249.2021.1947700. A note on capitalization: I use Black in this intro in reference to either individuals or human beings in the collective. I use black (or blackness) in reference to cultural constructs. This is a deliberate choice to acknowledge both the political importance of Black regarding the empowerment of individuals and the critical-theoretical importance of black regarding the social construction of the concept of blackness. It is also the capitalization scheme for Black/blackness that guides the whole issue.
[2] Aria Dean's contributions to recent discourses on race and technology include, but are not limited to, "Poor Meme, Rich Meme," *Real Life*, July 25, 2016, https://reallifemag.com/poor-meme-rich-meme/; and "Notes on Blacceleration," *E-Flux*, December 2017, https://www.e-flux.com/journal/87/169402/notes-on-blacceleration/.
[3] Beth Coleman first articulated the now widely cited concept of race as technology in Beth Coleman, "Race as Technology," *Camera Obscura: Feminism, Culture, and Media Studies* 24, no. 1 (70) (May 1, 2009): 176–207. Wendy Hui Kyong Chun elaborated on Coleman's theory in her introduction to the same issue of *Camera Obscura*, then extended these observations in Wendy Hui Kyong Chun, "Race and/as Technology, or How to Do Things to Race," in *Race After the Internet*, eds. Lisa Nakamura, Peter Chow-White, and Alondra Nelson (New York: Routledge, 2012), 38–60.

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AUTHOR BIO

Megan Driscoll is Assistant Professor of Modern and Contemporary Art History at the University of Richmond. Her research explores the intersections of critical race theory and contemporary photographic, time-based, and networked media. Recent publications can be found in *Art Journal* and Rhizome's *The Art Happens Here: Net Art Anthology* (2019).