

BOOK REVIEW

Philip Glahn and Cary Levine, *The Future Is Present: Art, Technology, and the Work of Mobile Image*

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In the mid-1960s, a colourful palette of art-and-technology projects burst forth from corporate laboratories, artists' lofts and museum galleries. This aesthetic explosion was catalysed by money, media exposure and the creative energies of engineers and artists alike. For some participants, it was a short, tumultuous affair. For others, these interactions left indelible marks on their professional lives.

Then, after less than a decade of highly visible and expensive efforts, this wave of art-and-technology activity appeared to retreat. Critics attacked interdisciplinary partnerships as an aesthetic disappointment that had somehow sullied the art world. A related gripe was ontological – what exactly were these partnerships producing? Sure, it was interesting, but was it really art? (Such debates persist today around artworks produced via artificial intelligence.) Finally, and perhaps most damning, critics attacked artists for compromising themselves ethically by collaborating with engineers, using military-derived technology and accepting corporate patronage. By the mid-1970s, the art-and-technology movement appeared as out of fashion as moon landings and other techno-utopian projects launched in the mid-1960s.

This abeyance proved temporary, however. This is where Philip Glahn and Cary Levine, two professors of art history/theory, pick up the story. *The Future Is Present* examines the activities of Mobile Image, a two-person art collective founded in 1977. More specifically, Glahn and Levine focus on three works made by Mobile Image's two members, Kit Galloway (b. 1948) and Sherrie Rabinowitz (1950–2013). *Satellite Arts (The Image as Place)* was made in 1977 in collaboration with the National Aeronautical and Space Administration (NASA). It featured a 'bidirectional link' enabled by a communications satellite which fostered artistic experimentation 'between two groups of dancers and technicians' (p. 45) separated by thousands of miles. Three years later, Mobile Image unveiled *Hole in Space (A Public Communication Sculpture)* where two large screens in New York City and Los Angeles, linked by satellite, enabled members of the public to see and interact with another as part of a 'globally distributed electronic commons' (p. 119). Finally, in 1984, *Electronic Café* linked members of the public across several different neighborhoods in Los Angeles to form a 'telecollaborative network'.

Glahn and Levine describe their book as a 'critical history' of Mobile Image, using the three aforementioned works to make 'an argument for the historical importance' of the art collective (pp. 1, 3). Despite these claims, their book works better when seen as a close reading, grounded in art criticism, of these three particular instantiations of new-media artworks. The authors frame their book as about 'art and technology' as well as 'art as

technology' (their emphasis). By analysing Mobile Image, they seek to 'examine, reimagine, and functionally reorganize existing relations between people, objects, and environments' (p. 1). This narrative obliquely intersects with histories of technology and science because of Mobile Image's reliance on state-of-the-art communications tools as well as the artists' interest in the nature of collaborative research and experimentation.

In terms of the former, the work by Mobile Image occurred at a key moment in the development of computing and communications technology (the first ready-to-use personal computers appeared, for example, in 1977). So far as the latter, the authors claim they are interested not just in what Mobile Image did in terms of artistic products, but also in the processes that enabled their creation in the first place. They describe, for example, how Mobile Image conceived *Hole in Space* as a 'laboratory in which participants could playfully test out reconfigured telecommunications technology' (p. 49). It is in the use of terms like 'laboratory' and 'experiment' that we may think about Mobile Image as pursuing forms of knowledge different from what a bench scientist might be interested in.

That said, I found the book's organization eccentric: a lengthy introduction followed by three chapters, accompanied with ample illustrations, but no formal conclusion. Moreover, the reader is obliged to search for historical narrative. One does not learn how Galloway and Rabinowitz first met one another until page 237. Those looking for more information on the workings of their collaboration will be similarly challenged. Likewise, readily located biographical information about the artists is slim.

The book also replicates a problem often found in works exploring the activities of artists who engage with the materiality of modern technoscience. Mobile Image's two members imagined their work as an 'aesthetic research center' where engineers, scientists and sponsors were 'forged into a constellation of an anti-capitalist economic model' (pp. 39–40). But the book's focus is almost entirely given to an analysis of the artistic works produced. There are ample references to Bertolt Brecht and Walter Benjamin, whose musings pre-date Mobile Image by decades. I would have appreciated more attention to the actual collaborations that made Mobile Image's work possible. We meet none of the engineers, scientists or technicians at NASA, for instance, who helped make *Satellite Arts* possible. Who brokered this collaboration? How much did it cost? Why did NASA do it? Unfortunately, the constellation of the technical experts who helped make Mobile Image's creations possible is eclipsed by the critical analyses of aesthetics and media.

Perhaps one should accept the authors' claim that their book is 'decidedly not a traditional monograph' but rather one that deploys Mobile Image 'as a model, as a frame and lens' to 'ponder profound questions regarding both art and technology' (p. 39). That said, the book presents Mobile Image as a vital link between the supposedly unsuccessful art-and-technology collaborations of the long 1960s and the more corporate-inflected activities of well-funded and highly hyped operations like MIT's Media Lab which took hold in the mid-1980s. We can see Mobile Image's creations not just as interventions in and interferences with the public's conception of media technologies, but also as statements, even if they were not directly articulated, about the political economies that made such media possible.