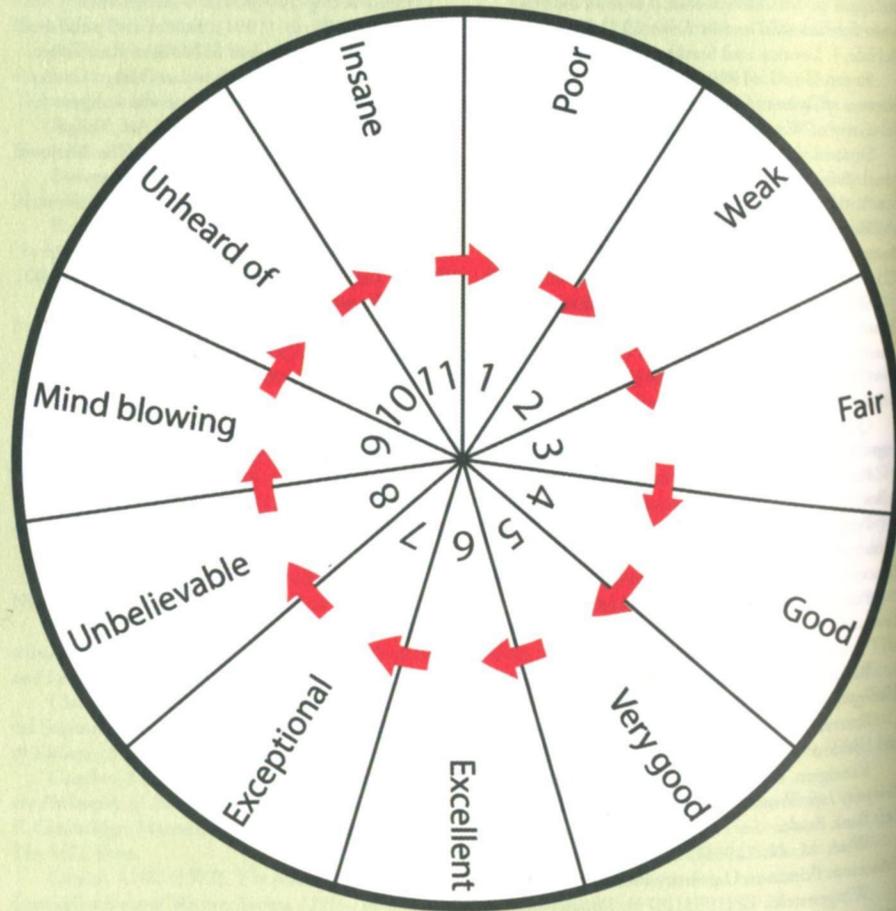


Symbolic Engineering: Measurement, Aesthetics, and the Rules for Art

A Conversation with Helmut Draxler



"Modified grading scale for the evaluation of research proposal", from the conversation with Helmut Draxler on 14 July 2015

Helmut Draxler: For a long time, art has been regarded as being beyond measurement, through defining precisely what cannot be measured. But, obviously, a lot in art is based on measurement: proportion, harmony, composition. Traditionally, aesthetics were even understood as a set of rules. And, within modernism, there have been plenty of attempts to regain ground against the hegemony of subjective aesthetics. How would you situate contemporary art within these coordinates?

Miya Yoshida: What I find interesting in contemporary art is the embracing of a paradox of subjective aesthetics. Many conceptual artists attempt to rid their artworks of subjective aesthetics. To develop their ideas, they adopt diverse artistic strategies: chance, discipline, readymades, mathematic axioms, numbers, acts of counting, short written instructions or texts, or simply the displacement of objects, even disappearing artworks, et cetera in the process as well as in the production of art. At the same time, such works, on the other hand, become very personal and result in extremely subjective aesthetics. A paradox is thus inherent in artistic abstraction. When it comes into play in measurement, the scientific logic of measurement therefore does not necessarily function anymore. Such aesthetics succeed in presenting different levels of accuracy in the concrete forms of artworks, which I find fascinating. In the past two centuries, quantitative accuracy was recognised as central issue in science. The accuracy that is sought by means of mathematical measurement is one thing, but measurement also depends on criteria and norms. The sociologist Theodor Porter says: "More than one solution is possible, because more than one measurement regime is possible, and that means that there is a range of potentially valid measures."

IS ACCURACY ALWAYS TIED TO MEASUREMENT?
→ WHERE DO WE DRAW THE LINE BETWEEN ACCURACY & AN ART DESCRIPTION?

According to his view of the validity of multiple potential measurements, it can be said that, in modernism, art problematizes classical aesthetics, norms, or the geometrically imaginary in mathematics. Referring to works by representative conceptual and post-conceptual artists such as Mel Bochner, Stanley Brouwn, Roman Ondák, the art historian, Elise Noyez has come up with the analysis that measurement is also employed as an artistic strategy to replace objects of spatial and perceptual experience. Following the line of thought of modernist art, I see that contemporary artists, including those mentioned above, attempt to explore the concept of accuracy in measurement by shifting the location from mathematical perspectives to specific situations, movements, and relationships, or by thinking around the topic of measurement through including the process and the act of measuring. How would you situate contemporary art, when you pro- pound that art is all about measurement?

HD: For me the interesting point is to see how paradox works. Purely subjective and purely objective arguments are typical attempts in modernism to solve a problem through quite radically honing the argument in one direction. The problem seems to be solved, but it obviously quickly reappears. That's why it seems time to consider the problem more thoroughly, in the sense that there is definitely a tendency toward increasing accuracy in technical, economic, and administrative terms based on numeric methodologies, but also a tendency towards the opposite, toward the subjective, affective, or situative within different sorts of cultures. For me it seems quite obvious that there is a split within the symbolic, thus arranging two kinds of "culture" in a complementary way. The severity of this split even affects the tendencies toward overcoming it. Instead of trying to overcome this split again and again, it seems more fruitful to attempt to understand its logics and historical dynamics, and contemporary practices seem more interesting when they try to explore the subjective within the objective, and the objective within the subjective, without pretending to be able to overcome that polarity. Compared to pre-modern forms of measurement, contemporary forms can, therefore, only be discussed through recognising that split, as well as the tension it implies for any cultural, artistic, or political self-conception.

But maybe we can ground the problem in an even more general way. Because the romantic stance against measurement was essentially based on understanding life as something that largely transcends any confinement.

Life in the age of genetic engineering, however, seems to be based on measurement in many ways. How would you then reconsider the avant-garde tradition with respect to this problem, since its basic aspiration has been to reconcile art and life?

MY: The challenge for artists is how to deal with the invisibly calculated aesthetics produced by algorithms in approaching art and life. The algorithmic society increasingly calculates and observes reality from the viewpoint of the virtual, rather than the real. At the end of "Aesthetics of Measurement in Dialogue between an Artist and a Scientist", Patricia T. Clough emphasises the speed of digital technology, which "allows us to experience things that we could never experience ourselves directly, and never will". She also refers to her vision of a machine that realises non-conscious capacities of human beings in a networked entity. Such an algorithmic mode of thinking affects the understanding of the banal experience of everyday life. Everything becomes virtual, and what we think is "discursive" might only be a result of algorithmic calculations. In this sense, artists confront the situation in order to carefully rethink notions such as banality, the real and the virtual, the experience of everyday life, or even life itself. When notions of life, of experience change, artistic strategies for *art and life* must also undergo a transformation. How do artists tackle a new interpretation of art and life? Artists are always sensitive to the transformation of the social sphere. They actively respond it by crossing existing boundaries in norms, social structures, professional categorisations, et cetera. For example, phrases such as artist as writers in the 1960s, then, with the emergence of art in context, ethnographers in the 1980s and 90s, media architects around the new millenium, curators in the age of global mobility and networks, or researchers based on the new vision of artistic research in higher education. At the same time, artists are actually none of these either. They borrow vocabularies as well as actions from other fields, but artists are not socialists, political scientists, media theorists, neuroscientists, or physicists. Artistic strategies for art and life therefore continue to be crucial. However, in what way will standpoints in art and life still be relevant if how these notions are conceptualised changes? I don't know...

HD: I think it would again be helpful to distinguish the symbolic layers of art, technology, and life. What becomes intersected in "reality" still remains separated symbolically in many ways, and it might therefore be important

to reckon with the insistence of symbolic layers. Technological utilitarianism and avant-garde emphasis correspond with each other in that both try to overcome the symbolic, although it is obvious that all they can achieve is a certain performance of the symbolic. The really interesting challenge would be to work on possible connections between "material" technological change and the symbolic arrangement of categories, or on what sediments from the symbolic into the layers of the material. Hence, what still seems interesting to me with respect to the avant-garde is not its ideology, but its vast array of methodologies, which might be read not as an achievement of a reconciliation of some sort, but as an exploration of on-going interactions between three of the most important symbolic registers of modernity: art, life, and politics. The political becomes visible here not just as a certain means towards a good end, but also as something that produces its own symbolic possibilities and obstacles, as well as its own materialities, meaning measurements working inside politics. This seems to be important precisely because, within political philosophy, measurements of time and space in particular have become objects of substantial critique, thus indicating a utility of the categorical dimensions of being for the capitalist alienation and exploitation of life. Does spontaneity still help counter measurement?

MY: Do you mean whether intervention or rapture causes friction against an endless flow of neoliberal capitalism? Instead of spontaneity, some people refer to slowness as a way to counter the accelerated speed. Might art therefore be a way to do so?

Worship of quantification as a social technology and the pursuit of efficiency have changed priorities, the order of things, in society. I am not sure if spontaneity is capable of being powerful enough to change the norm or the order of things. I see strategic potentials rather in countering segmentation, in employing different norms and orders of things to criticise measurement. From a quantitative viewpoint, mathematical aesthetics with big data, algorithms, computer calculations, and so on produce a shift from viewing a single piece of data as an object to the relational object. What might, therefore, help is creating and practicing a different relationship to measurements, without segmenting them. According to the logic of French Oulipianism (Oulipo), which criticises the rational not by means of the irrational – as the Surrealists attempted – but by means of the super-rational, i.e. measurement against measurement as a means to critique measurement. Do you see any potential in spontaneity? Does it help mitigate the power of validity in quantification through measurement?

This is where I see an overlap with the issue of artistic research. Would you take a position to change the rigour of art and research from inside the form of artistic research, or would you deny the form and be against critique and change from the outside...?

HD: First of all, I would say that I like the term super-rational, if we understand it less as a science fiction phantasy of a superior intelligence, and more as one of many layers of rationality, while including irrationality, or myth, or ideology, or symptom as different sorts of rationality. A purely rational rationality is probably not very rational, just as supercomputers are not necessarily really smart. That means that the rational and the spontaneous are not strict antagonists. Spontaneity depends on certain structural givens or it could not appear as such; and, vice versa, every planned rational structure needs subjective, even spontaneous elements to be able to gain momentum. This relationality cannot be suspended, but it can be addressed, and perhaps can be worked through from a psychoanalytical perspective. This could also include a tip for artistic research. It can only be taken seriously if it avoids rotten compromises. There is no reconciliation of art and research, except in bad art or bad research, and a triumph of bureaucracy. Artistic research therefore has to strive for the impossible, to be good art and good research. But how might we measure its achievements and failures?

MY: I agree that the two cannot be reconciled. Do you remember that we once joked around about the grading scale for the evaluation of my (failed) research proposal? We transformed the five hierarchical categories (1: Weak, 2: Fair, 3: Good, 4: Very Good, 5: Excellent) by adding more categories to expand them into a circle (6: Exceptional, 7: Unbelievable, 8: Mind-blowing, 9: Never heard of, and 10: Do not know what to do!, which lies next to 1: Weak)

Inventing diverse methodologies in art practices can open up not only different forms and processes, but also different orders of thinking in research, as well as different attitudes towards research itself. I once heard an artist say, "All I know is how to start the project. So, please do not ask me how to proceed with it!" – a question that is always asked in the research proposal in connection with getting the project started.

HD: The main allegations against measurement, even on the part of bourgeois critics, concern the rationalisation and bureaucratisation of life.

Do you see anything to defend in rationalisation and bureaucratisation, or could you envision a perspective on measurement that does not necessarily encompass rationalisation and bureaucratisation?

MY: The standardisation of measurement was born with the aspiration of universalism and developed alongside the ideology of equality in democracy in 19th-century France. Regarded as a type of standardisation, bureaucratisation is the birth of professionalism. Bureaucracy requires legitimization in numbers. It is thereby possible to see the nature of bureaucratisation as serving to expand the category of applied fields and studies – applied mathematics, applied physics, and although it may not be exactly the same, but nonetheless, to a certain degree, applied forms of art and art history such as curatorial and mediation studies, business and administration studies, et cetera. (It might be said that artistic research is mistakenly framed as an applied form of research.) It's not about either good or bad. Applied mathematics is different than standard mathematics. I see the current hype and proliferation of various applied fields as a particular development along the lines of rationalisation and bureaucratisation. The rationalisation and bureaucratisation of education reflects and corresponds to the development of putting more emphasis on applied studies.

What exactly do you find lacking in such a rationalisation and bureaucratisation of life?

HD: I think you're right. Everything today seems to have become "applied", and therefore generates specifically bureaucratic forms of performance, between politics, administration, education, science, and art. There is a lack of responsibility that might be addressed by means of such procedures – in vain, however. And seemingly measurable means inherently become increasingly independent, thus fostering auxiliary sciences, encyclopaedic forms of knowledge, and controllable standards in thinking, politics, and art. I would not discredit these tendencies altogether: Although they are meaningful as a reaction to purely subjective, competitive claims and corruption, they simultaneously dominate any kind of expression much too strongly through establishing themselves as a new and completely unmediated form of mediation. That's why I think it becomes really important to reflect on practices of measurement from an historical perspective. Measurement today seems to be a fundamental principle in production and control. Do digital cultures in this respect just continue the logics of mechanisation and industrial capitalism, or do you see a different logic at play here?

MY: What exactly do you mean with "digital culture"?

HD: Well, in the early 2000s, "digital cultures" became a buzzword to replace something like "new media". But because everything has become digital in the meantime, the term seems to have lost its meaning ...

MY: Yes, I see it as a very ambiguous notion and almost empty signifier today. As you point out, it's important to contemplate measurement as a problem of politics, rather than of science. At the same time, digital technologies also require us to reconsider measurement more politically than culturally. The birth and development of new technologies have never been neutral. In considering its origin and subsequent development, the Japanese social economist Hikotaro Tonoue contemplates that technology never directs itself against the logic of capitalism. That is the fundamental nature of technology. Digital technologies are more than ever so, from infrastructures – energy supplies, network connections, platforms, systems – to interfaces, both software and hardware. My observation, however, is that digital technologies do not refer to their infrastructures on a content level; they instead generate an aesthetics of *symbolicism*: a symbolising attitude, appearance, emotion, preference, attention, et cetera – as an action of clicking "friend", "like", "link", "go", and then counting them as a "symbolic" number. *Symbolic* quantity plays an a priori role in determining relationships. Such a symbolic mode of thinking fabricates symbolic desire and takes away and directs attention to a narrow and limited focus, and I assume that it contributes greatly to the current tendency toward populism in politics. *Symbolicism* goes together with the mechanism of measurement quite well. But things that are not symbolised are outside the frame of society, as if they don't exist. Does that make sense to you?

HD: Oh yes. Symbolic quantities seem to pose a real challenge to reflection. In a certain way, I think they've always existed as an imaginary element within every form of cultural articulation that is addressed to an audience. But, nowadays, in consumer profiles, online dating, and the like, symbolic quantity has become independent of any producer. It seems to signal the triumph of the "death of the author", the death of purely "readerly" texts. There are, however, limits to these procedures, not only internally; there's still a need for some sort of production or valued information, but essentially from the outside. Annoyance creates subcultures outside of symbolic quantities ...

MY: I would like to refer to two examples pertaining to the absurdity of measurement based on *symbolicism*. The first is current historical studies revealing why the Japanese military never managed to develop any supply network for its own troops outside the country during World War II. One striking reason is that the planning and execution of supply chains were never considered to be factors that might result in promotion in the military, which means that hardly any generals took the issue seriously enough, despite the fact that it was a crucial factor in the war. The other example is a current article in the Danish newspaper *Politiken* about the system for evaluating the police in Denmark. The article reports that most policemen in the country, also those with other duties such as detectives, were temporarily deployed on highways towards the end of year to check traffic speed limits, so as to reach the goal of evaluation points. The latter is a banal example, but does do a good job of capturing and reflecting how measurement-based systems operate in detail in society. These examples tell us that *symbolicism* directs attentions away from things that are central to a process, produces symbolic numbers, and makes us think and behave irrationally for the sake of a rationality of measurement. Similar examples can readily be found everywhere in contemporary society, and are recognised as being absurd. However, once *symbolicism* gets rolling, it seems unstoppable. If it this is the case, how can it be redirected in another way?

HD: I agree. Irrationality is an intrinsic element in every sort of rationality. Adorno and Horkheimer made this point in what they called "instrumental reason". They were, however, maybe all too consistent in their argument, thus only leaving space for some kind of weird art that was not considered spoiled by that sort of reason. Wouldn't it be more interesting not to see measurement as pure limitation, but also as a means of enabling cultural production and critique?

MY: I think it was John Cage who said that there are a hundred types of genders in mushrooms. I found this statement an amusing approach to introducing a playful mind-set for deconstructing the politics of gender from the inside. It situates gender politics in a completely different realm of imagination. To give another example: There is an idea in ancient Japanese mythology that there are eight million god/desses. Eight million does not refer to the actual number, but is instead a metaphorical way of expressing the countless number of god/desses in animism. God/desses can exist anywhere, in any form. However, one can also regard this number as a playful way of saying: "If one god hates you, there are still 7,999,999 god/desses left, one of whom may possibly like you!" This imaginative understanding of numbers, rather

than being rigid, indicates the possibility to shift their power of validity in another direction. Juxtaposing plural measurements may, therefore, work in a way similar to shifting measurement from the terrain of mathematics to that of poetry. This has the potential to critique the articulation of accuracy through playing with the meaning and unmeaning of measurement. But we need a diversity of measurements here; otherwise it becomes nothing but a horror! Just like having eight million god/desses hating you!

HD: Is diversity essential for the aesthetics of measurement, or could you imagine other ways or strategies of using measurement within the rationalisation of production and control?

MY: To continue my previous response: Aesthetics of measurement may be able to shift a focus of attention that has already come to be steered by a symbolic mode of thinking, and diversify it with a logic of "pataphysics". Artistic practices comprise different directions or modes of thinking and a different process of abstraction from those employed in disciplinary fields in the sciences, including the humanities. They might sometimes be misunderstood as being irrelevant, minor, subjective, or self-centred. At the same time, subjective and illogical thinking is not necessarily always unscientific; it has long been discussed as a liminal space that allows for a critique of the all-inclusive character of scientific systems. Processing information in the world opens up different modes and constellations of knowledge, while simultaneously processing words/numbers back opens different paths and nodal points of information that are not pre-designed according to criteria, structures, or systems. In this sense, the suspended nature of artistic practices, or the curatorial ability to capacitate has the strategic potential to contribute to reflecting and rearticulating the notion of measurements in the rationalisation of control. Or, is my belief in art too optimistic?

HD: Never ever. But art is surely not the solution; it only signifies one symbolic register within which modern "regimes" of measurement can be reflected. Like the humanities, art is not a neutral player in the field; it profits enormously from scientific, technological, administrative, economic, and political measurements. Its very prestige is perhaps based on the thoroughly measured space within modern societies. As such, it first of all requires internal forms of critique that refer to the delegating of symbolic terrains and the transfers of reason and affect that they involve.

MY: In the discussion of sociology and media studies, considering the endless process and feedback system involved in measurement calls attention

to affects. In these fields of studies, it is affect that matters, and no longer epistemology. Do you see a limitation of epistemology in the regime of so-called “digital cultures”?

HD: Not in general, “digital cultures”, if we continue to call them that, are still highly unstable symbolically. So, it will definitely take a bit of time to understand their specific rationalities. I’m just a bit sceptical of worldviews that claim that everything is getting more and more affective, except for the speaking position raising this claim. It’s not possible to be exempted from affect. That’s the essential lesson of psychoanalysis. The more you try to focus on the rational, the more affective the attempt will become. Let’s simply relax for the moment.

MY: An increasing tendency towards a segmentation of life is another crucial issue in contemporary life within the neoliberal capitalist system, while “practicality” or “convenience” are emphasised as values that lead us to participate voluntarily in segmenting life on our own as well. For example, the emergence of car-sharing options such as Drive Now, Car to Go, and so on is a good example for thinking about an intriguing complexity in economic relationships. It accelerates the segmentation of time from car rental per a day or per week to car rental per minute, with an increase in convenience resulting from being able to leave a car anywhere and to grab another that is nearest to you at a later point in time. It’s very practical and also inexpensive for short-term use. Some say that it’s also ecological as a result of “sharing” a resource. Here, the notion of “common” is integrated into the segmentation of neoliberal capitalism and even transformed into the mind-set of ecology in a tricky way – tricky, because it is now shifted to a capitalistic strategy. Do you see any possibility of segmentation opening up a new model of the “common” in the economy, instead of taking the accumulation of capital away from the individual and shifting it to the system?

HD: Oh, car-sharing is great, but, of course, it doesn’t help overcome capitalism. It is indeed capitalism itself. How we might share things in another way that could not be recouped by capitalism is difficult for me to imagine. Maybe we first of all have to share an idea of capitalism, an idea of how the rational and the affective work within its scope, what kind of symbolic formation it provides, and how this symbolic formation interacts with other symbolic formations such as those of politics, technology, media, culture, or art. My fear is that, despite Marx, we are still far from understanding these interactions, and we tend to use the very term capitalism in a quite solutionist way, whereas it might instead be essential to measure its historic scope.

Dialogues between an Artist and a Scientist