Questioning Digital Aesthetics

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Abstract

Interactive multimedia art does indeed sets new standards as regard considerations of form, fabric, and interpretation. It seems as if our traditional idea of the work of art as a more or less fixed temporal and spatial entity interferes with the floating structure of the cyber-artwork. When does a piece of art or a multimedia installation seize to be *that* particular work or installation, and instead becomes an altogether different one? Digital art moves in areas of deliberate hybrid constellations wherein specific artistic knowledge and instruments of meaning reveal innovative, generic de-placements and infinite input-output-architectures.

In light of these new conditions and possibilities, I set out to explore how we are to unite existing interactive computer art with a speculative, philosophical aesthetic. In the age of digital simulacra, a work of art is never safe, never to be trusted, never to be invested, since a digital piece is always already in the hands of a consumer who is both interpreter and creator. Guided by, respectively, Immanuel Kant, Niklas Luhmann, and Lars Qvortrup, a distinction between structural transcendentalism (Kant) and aposterioric functionalism (Luhmann, Qvortrup) is drawn in order to locate the specific field in which digital art operates. Kant says that true beauty is placed in the f*orm* attributed to the transcendental subject; and this form acts as a prism through which the art-thing is experienced. Luhmann, on the other hand, suggests that art, in its emancipation from religious, metaphysical, or edifying motives, none the less 'obliges' itself to *difference*. Modern art must be conceived as a difference which is propelled forward when man, in the absence of a 'clean' code of communication, embarks upon an artform which, paradoxically, tries to articulate the very un-explicable or un-articulated fabric of true expression.

Luhmann's perspective seems to answer well to the praxis of digital artforms. Here the *raison d'être* of art is to put elements and viewpoints within the world *at stake* and *at stage* - to open up the level between the artist's form-*decision* and the art-spectator's fluctuating and unpredictable form-*realisation*. However, this new relation between artist, work of art, and public sphere is by far an unreflected aftermath of multiple social constructivist theses. Even though we may acknowledge the turn in the philosophy of art towards a polycentric system in which many different social codes are manifested, we must also maintain that the artist can be depicted as a unique 'point' in the ecology of art-structure from where the initial (and hence original) form-condition and -decision are extracted. Thus we have

an 'artist of the first degree' who happens to press the button right before the work of art takes on its infinite journey towards change in character, form, and originality. But, however, all that which we used to call interpretation now reach into materialised expression; a fact that, negatively speaking, also means that the art-market is overflowed by products that are 'merely' spiralling reproductions of the original content. Mona Lisa with a beard and sunglasses may be performance art on Louisiana, but it is a crime on Louvre.

Thesis

How are we to unite existing interactive computer art with a speculative, philosophical aesthetic? In the age of digital simulacra, a work of art is never safe, never to be trusted, never to be invested, read the new headlines, since a digital piece is always already in the hands of a consumer who is both interpreter and creator. Or should I say re-creator? The original is also a copy, a representation of something that may have never been there. The work of art can be distributed; like airport terminals residing in the no-man's-land between Heimat and foreign matter, digital art is transitional and stochastic in its vigorous and immerse design. It is always in the process of becoming something else - or becoming someone else's. What is the object of digital aesthetics?[1]

Let me for a moment narrow the current theme of inquiry and propose that there is no such thing as a digital aesthetic. It should be clear, however, in the course of this paper, that I do not necessarily affirm this peculiar thesis; but, still, there can be good reasons for presenting it. Hence, if the subject of digital aesthetics - the digitally rendered and interactively applied work of multimedia art - is precisely defined negatively, because it cannot be fixated in robust, formal parameters, and because it cannot be locked up in one structure of meaning; does, then, digital aesthetic have an object? In the absence of the possibility of 'stopping' emerging, digital creativity and productivity, the banal question becomes more and more urgent: what is the object of digital aesthetics?

But the thesis is wrong or even false in its very foundation. What is crucial about a (philosophical) aesthetic is not the diverse works of art - be they analogue or digital - that can be gazed at and analysed around the world, but, distinctively different, the rational prism through which we in the first place become spectators of the essence and epistemology of art. The problem is that this prism between art consideration and art production does not exist in itself (one can not, for instance, install it on the walls of Guggenheim Downtown). Instead, this prism provides for the transcendental conditionals that are necessary elements within and therefore the underlying ratio upon which we are able to discuss art, values, taste, and

significance. In respect of ontology the aesthetic discipline thus reaches deeper than poetic or historiographic theories, since the latter ones precisely assume that there is art around, and that we all somehow know when it is there, and when it is not there (and then we can go and have a look at it in our favourite museum).

To Interact

The American computer scientist Janet Murray believes that there are three basic features which characterise the sense of digital media: *Immersion*, which signifies the feeling of being transported to another (kind of) reality; *rapture*, the enchanting encounter with objects in virtual reality; and, finally, *agency* which deals with the user's delight in having a direct impact on the electronically rendered space (Platt, 1995).

The notion of 'being there', or 'to be taken in', seems to be closely connected with interactivity. Nowadays, there is a consensus in applying information science's concept of interaction, especially when it comes to understandings of man-machine-interaction (MMI), human-computer-interaction (HCI), or, as it were, natural interactive systems (NIS). Historically the development of this terminology is closely tied to the progression from batch-drive (where vast amounts of data and applications are synthesized prior to the actual processing) to 'dialogue'-functionality with which it becomes possible for the user to register in-progress-results via option-menus and dialogue-boxes, and hereby continuously influence the interactive batch through new scripted inputs in a 'dialogue-traffic' or interactive modality (Goertz, 1995; Jensen, 2000).

Popular computer games like *Quake 3: The Arena* or the celebrated *Doom 2* emulate virtual and variable scenario-plots for automated, cybernetic responses. The easy-going motto is 'kill everything that moves!'; 'think fast! Or, even better, do not think at all!'. Serious gamers and male cyber geeks already know the sentiments by heart; on-line-gaming-environments are state-of-the-art as regards Murray's three key concepts (Walther, 2000 a, b). Eye-hand-movements and near-synchrony experiences of shock could well be cyberculture's ultimate technological consequence of the fragmented realities once described by the early modernists. Thus Walter Benjamin, in 1936, promoted the idea that the montage technique in modern film art pawed the way for the mass audience's identification with violent changes in mundane, industrialised life (Benjamin, 1982; compare Nichols, 1996 and Pold, 1999). Today, computer games are not merely mind-numbed simulacra aimed at greasy youngsters, but also a rich, cultural context frame, which resonates literary in novels such as Alex Garland's *The Beach and Tesseract*. And now back in history.

Closure and System

What is significantly new about Immanuel Kant's theories of the structure of aesthetic judgement is his emancipation of 'the beautiful' [*das Schöne*] from a property within the thing itself to a property in the viewing [*Anschauung*] of the thing.[2] In *Kritik der Urteilskraft* (1790) he claims that the centre of taste and judgement must be located in "subjective commonness" [*das subjective Allgemeine*], which, in turn, corresponds to the common beautiful. A certain piece of art may evoke a specific joy [*Wohlgefallen*] in us; and hence it would seem that the work itself possessed beauty's source through immanent correspondences - such as the Renaissance art theoreticians believed. But this is an illusion, according to Kant. True beauty is placed in the *form* attributed to the transcendental subject; and this form acts as a prism through which the art-thing is experienced (see especially paragraph 6 in *Kritik der Urteilskraft* (Kant, 1971)).

Thus Kant has not only liberated the art discussion from the Rationalistic position, where beauty is a readable entity assigned to the object in itself (in the guise of substance); he has further accentuated the ongoing secularisation of art. As the Danish media researcher Lars Qvortrup notes in an article on interactive multimedia art, Kant's critique expresses the idea that beauty in art signals human beauty (Qvortrup, 2000). And hereby the differentiation from a religiously oriented hierarchy of judgement (that is, a deocentrism) to a rationalistic form of articulation is brought to an end. Art in Kant's anthropomorphic theory is not entirely de-conditionalized, since the essential criteria for art's transcendentalism are precisely guaranteed by what is believed to be shared human faculties.

One may say that Kant closes the philosophy of art by ascribing the aesthetic judgement to mere questions of the transcendental perspective of viewing's aprioric status. But that does not imply, however, that Kant banishes the experience of art to a hysterical assembly where everybody reveal their less than adequate opinion on art. The very forms of viewing and the categories of reason that carry the aposterioric delight in art experience are not simply subjective interiors, but rather *inter-subjective premises* for apt communication concerning the structure of aesthetic laws. The common conditions of art allow us to discuss the transcendental bios of taste and experience - for this very bios is a concept deployed by philosophy.

By contrast one could claim that Niklas Luhmann in his systemic definition of art as a symbolic, generalising medium *opens* up art thinking, not least because he seems to dismiss 20. Century's congenial prioritising of art as a pivotal and utopic placeholder for otherwise unacknowledged metaphysical experiences. Like economy, love, society, and religion, art is a bundle of contingent relations, which account for modern man's testing of self-experience and self-reflection.

To Kant the forms of viewing condition art's reason. In Luhmann's perspective the domain of art is a general sphere or form within the world-structure where different kinds of viewing and viewing mechanisms are *staged*. There has been a tendency in post-Kantian art philosophy to regard the aesthetic judgement of taste as a temporary result of the development of a more general art system, and not, as Kant would claim, as a transcendental, a-temporal apperception. Luhmann builds heavily upon this critique. In *Die Ausdifferenzierung des Kunstsystems* (1994) and *Die Kunst der Gesellschaft* (1995) he suggests that art, in its emancipation from religious, metaphysical, or edifying motives, none the less 'obliges' itself to *difference*. Modern art must be conceived as a difference which is propelled forward when man, in the absence of a 'clean' code of communication, embarks upon an artform which, paradoxically, tries to articulate the very un-explicable or un-articulated fabric of true expression. This vision of art - which furthermore is normative, since it puts art on a special mission within society and history - we can also find in the writings of Adorno and Lyotard. According to them, the language of art is *non-identity*, that is, a difference that cannot be mediated; or it is *différence*, as in Lyotard and his concept of the sublime.

The shift from Kant to Luhmann can be described as a movement from a metaphysically grounded understanding of art to an *interferentially* based art form. Kant may withdraw from the orthodox idea of both God and the thing "in itself" [*an sich*], but still he builds his critique on an order that exists prior to sensual experience and physical touch. This order is the human concept of beauty, the optics through which we regard and judge upon art. The interferential aesthetic, on the contrary, creates works and theories of art that are more likely *consequences* of the world. That is also why I pushed forward the hypothesis that Luhmann widens the field of art critique, precisely because he transforms the system of art into a (by-) product of a world-movement - as it were, a movement towards form (Compare Brown, 1971).

Fluxus Movement?

So, what does Luhmann's interferential aesthetic mean in light of art in the age of digital reproduction? - Is there a digital aesthetic? - Or is there not? Without further ado, one can state that Luhmann's perspective seems to answer well to the praxis of digital artforms. Here the *raison d'être* of art is to put elements and viewpoints within the world *at stake* and *at stage* - to open up the level between the artist's form-decision and the art-spectator's fluctuating and unpredictable form-*realisation*. This new relation between artist, work of art, and public sphere is by far an unreflected aftermath of multiple social constructivist theses about a certain

artworld, in which art as form, praxis, and institution is solely produced via the *naming procedure* in itself (today, in the act of naming, I turn my dog into a piece of art; tomorrow I shall make the whole world a work of art, etc. etc.). Even though we may acknowledge the turn in the philosophy of art towards a polycentric system in which many different social codes are manifested, we must also maintain that the artist can be depicted as a unique 'point' in the ecology of art-structure from where the initial (and hence original) form-condition and -decision are extracted. To put it harshly: art is freed from the vague democratisation of participatory culture where anybody is an artist in his or hers own right. Thus we have an 'artist of the first degree' who happens to press the button right before the work of art takes on its infinite journey towards change in character, form, and originality. But, however, all that which we used to call interpretation now reach into materialised expression; a fact that, negatively speaking, also means that the art-market is overflowed by products that are 'merely' spiralling reproductions of the original content. Mona Lisa with a beard and sunglasses may be performance art on Louisiana, but it is a crime on Louvre.

Let's step back to the bizarre thesis: We can answer by negatively affirming that there *is* such a thing as a digital, aesthetic viewpoint, namely the viewpoint that can be reflected in the initial form-decision made by the multimedia artist. This viewpoint is closely tied to the fragile centre of departure and growth, which is the tiny 'spot' right before hell breaks loose and everything becomes - art. As a way of looking at the world, art is still conditioned, though, because it is a formalised manifestation of social and epistemological codes, which together make up our complex reality as an unforeseeable riverbed of (sub-) systems. But the rationale of art is no longer *privileged*, because it is also a historical product of man's self-reflection, that is, a product of deciding 'form through form'. And so we seem to employ a double view: digital aesthetics foregrounds with the advent of artistic, initial form-decision. Following upon this affirmation, we can reflect the conditions of art production independently from the actually existing works of art. And if this is so, we also have a strong case for a philosophy that deals with the transcendental possibilities of art. This is a *temporal* argument: *first* there is the artist; *then* there is the spectator - which is, if I may say so, fifty percent Kant. But we can also state the opposite, namely that the work of art is the result of a contract made between the viewing operations of, respectively, the artist and the spectator - which seems to be half a Luhmann.

Interactive multimedia art does indeed sets new standards as regard considerations of form, fabric, and interpretation. It seems as if our traditional idea of the work of art as a more or less fixed temporal and spatial entity interferes with the floating structure of the cyber-artwork. When does a piece of art or a multimedia installation seize to be *that* particular work or installation, and instead becomes an altogether different one? Digital art moves in areas of deliberate hybrid

constellations wherein specific artistic knowledge and instruments of meaning reveal innovative, generic de-placements and infinite input-output-architectures. We witness a cascade of conceptual dissimulations: from work of art to art-*event*, from reproduction to *simulation*, from mimesis to *virtuality*, from interpretation to *interactivity*, from image to *interface*, and from system to *rhizome* (Deleuze and Guattari, 1980). All this is, assumingly, also part of a digital realisation of the media contextualism of Avant-Pop (Walther, 2000 c).

The concept of *generative art* surfaces here. The question is how the promotion of new ways of expression can be supplied with the computer's automated processes. Part of the hype surrounding this endeavour gathers around the notion of *variability* (Weibel 1996). Normally it is used of complex systems that change behaviour and dynamic state due to pre-programmed stimuli as well as to exterior (variable) perturbations ('noise'). The future within digital art - on the Net, in the museums, and in the art galleries - is complex: the work of art will not only be capable of altering its own, autonomous parameters; it will further react 'intelligent' due to context-dependent adjustments.[3] And hence the sharp division between autonomy and heteronomy, which has been a central element in art thinking, becomes almost impossible to uphold. Rather than clinging to the a priori shape and structure of the work, we must operate with *sequences* of events whose internal relations cannot be rooted in a single sense or a single pattern of significance (compare Elsaesser, 1998). The tough challenge, especially to art-historians, is probably to prophesise if we will ever come to see the aposterioric qualities of digital art-events as 'a priori' essentials - or whether we will be blocked by our traditional, transcendental prejudices.

Digitally rendered art strongly challenges time, space, and place, not least because it seems to abolish classical time-processes and hereby emancipates from the affinity to materiality and spatiality. The German film scientist Edgar Reitz phrases the positive aspects of new digital narratives and images, since they both uniquely parallel the non-linear dynamics of human consciousness and the biological body. Even more feverish, Reitz views digital media as a case for Henri Bergson's qualitative time - *durée* (Reitz, 1995). In this culturally optimistic agenda, the computer becomes a strange mixture of informational codebreaker and communication tool. The tendency one can trace, is an ideologisation of digitality that leads to new visions of the creation of meaning, bodily presence and 'true' conscience; the idea of the computer as a hardware-box with appropriate software is tossed aside.

Endings

In my view the hype surrounding interactive multimedia art and new artforms stems (partly) from an unreflected distinction between *structure* and *function*. Kant's idea of art's transcendental optic that rests in shared human faculties may not endure scientific attacks anymore, because key elements in Kant's critique, such as time, space, and causality, in the course of micro-physics and quantum mechanics have showed themselves to be far less than obvious categories. But to our discussion, this is not essential. Rather, it is the Kantian *project* that leaves an impact, because it tries to capture the structure within the process of artistic modelling and thereby contributes to a levelling of the viewed object, viewing itself, and the place of viewing. In post-Kantian era Luhmann has put the metaphysical, apriorical project in parenthesis, and instead he focuses on the *functionality* of aesthetic operations within society, sociality, and knowledge. But the one-dimensionality that risks being the outcome of such a concentration on art's functional practises in the digital *oeuvre* also transforms computer-mediated ways of expression and processes into pure miracles which elegantly surpass classical art theories and their 'snobbish' insistence of oil and canvas, solidity and correspondence.

A digital aesthetic must therefore first and foremost be founded in a structural understanding of what goes on between the ontology of work and viewing. The Kantian project is still sober because it maintains that art is located in a specific consideration of *form through form*. Only when we 'have' form at our disposal (that is, within reason's faculties) we can 'see' form. But a digital aesthetic must also reflect the particular changes which the computer-generated modalities stage. Right now, in the year 2000, there are still art and artists around; there are still privileged platforms for suspicious and ingenious experiments with material, viewpoints, and communication. John Doe does not become an artist by blurring a few *PhotoShop*-samples into delightful dissemblance. And it is one-sided to call oneself creative artist if what one is really doing in the virtual museum is to participate in the multi-facetted articulation of art's viewing-mechanisms.

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Notes

1. I would like also to thank Lars Qvortrup for kindly forcing me to consider this thesis - and especially to refute it!

2. How to translate Anschauung? Comprehension, or envisioing? I have deliberately chosen viewing here, primarily to emphasise the strong allusions to the gaze and the eye in the German philsopheme.

3. Compare the concept of *cybertext* as formulated by Espen Aarseth: "A cybertext is a machine for the production of a variety of expression". It "focuses on the mechanical organisation of the text, by positing the intricacies of the literary exchange" (Aarseth, 1997, 1, 18). Further: Cameron, 1998. A fine, contemporary example of an art-form that disputes the extent of interactivity as well as the place of the interface is *Fibre Wave II*, a work by the Japanese artist Mahato Sei Watanabe that was exhibited at Inter Communication Centre in Opera City Tower, Tokyo 1999. The centre of the installation was a computer that kept registering force and direction of the wind in cities such as Paris, Buffalo, and Moscow and on Jupiter, and Mars. Not only were the wind-conditions depicted on large displays in the installation's venue depending on what locality the audience chose to zero in on at the computer screen. The computer also transmitted the wind-information onto two huge jet engines placed on each separate wall in the exhibition room. From here a Mars-storm or a Moscow-breeze were dispatched to a field of three metre high transparent glass-fibre sticks that led like fluorescence whenever they moved. The audience would stroll around in a field of glass-fibres that gently waved beneath the world-wind (Qvortrup, 2000). See also Lunenfeld, 1997 and Mitchell, 1995.