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On Analytic Method in the Digital Reading

By Francisco Ricardo and Roberto Simanowski

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Abstract

Presented with the modality of the new work of art, which, being interactive, sculptural, filmic, or ludic, is in nature and structure so different from prior aesthetic production, literary critic and historian of art alike are now confronted with questions as to preferable modes of reading new media art that can do justice to its unique ontologies. In this conversation (from the book *Literary Art in Digital Performance: Case Studies and Critical Positions*) with Francisco J. Ricardo, Roberto Simanowski lays out a phenomenology that goes beyond the formalism of the work and opens to a critical reading while, in harmony with the thinking of Lyotard, viewing the encounter of the work as possessing greater importance than specific commitments to interpretation, that is, of experiencing “not what happens but that something happens”.

Francisco J. Ricardo: A crucial feature of digital work is the distance between design and use, or structure and performance. A digital poem is structured as program, as code, as a fixed sequence of algorithms, yet performs as a work of indeterminate direction in the sense of its variety across invocations. This incongruity calls into question the choice of a suitable method for analysis of such works. On one hand it seems appropriate to expose the anatomic logic and mechanism of a digital work as the ideal means of analysis. After all, this demonstrates most clearly how the piece works. But while not inappropriate, this approach seems insufficient to capture the expressive breadth of the digital work. No dissection of a literary or visual work's functionality will demonstrate what makes it distinct from any non-aesthetic object, such as the proverbial, utilitarian computer program. Since the creative function of an aesthetic work operates in a way that exceeds the components of its apparatus, we must accept that beyond functional analysis, it is necessary to interrogate what, as an aesthetic expression, makes the work transcend its own medium and mechanism. This naturally implies the connection of analysis to a theory of analysis, whether semiotic, hermeneutic, historical, critical,

or formalist. Your approach specifically favors the close reading. Can you elaborate on the reasons for this?

Roberto Simanowski: There are several reasons. The first purpose that a digital work serves is as an act of creative expression, not as an object of technology. A close reading, as the term implies, stays close to the expressive action, rather than the algorithmic organization. And because a digital work is fundamentally different from and more complex than a material or printed work, it for me deserves a broad, extratextual reading of its creative context, so it makes sense to effect a close reading as in the tradition of New Criticism and also so as to extend it beyond the text of work to include external elements. So, “extratextual” here includes even what the author says about the work.

Let me give an example. In an interview, David Rokeby addresses the fetishization of control that the computer brings with it and asserts that he intends to undermine this through “systems of inexact control”. With this background information, he informs us that his *Very Nervous System*, in which we indeed cannot reach a point of satisfactory control, has to be read within a pedagogical and even political agenda, and that the lack of satisfactory control felt by the user is not the result of flawed programming but of an intentional reaction against this fetishism. We are therefore required, in situating that effort in something broader than the work itself, to move beyond formalism up into a critical reading.

And in this analytical responsibility, I will develop a sense of context from the artist or even deduce it myself; the end point is a critical reading. Consider mapping art. In such a work, we in effect have data in the age after grand narratives. This data is linked either to works that present it as is, a mode that I call mimetic and naturalistic and which exists without adding new information to the work’s data map. One example of this is Legrady’s *Making Visible the Invisible*, a work which aacks any poetic metaphor and presents its data with statistical precision and informational value. This contrasts with Mark Napier’s *Black and White*, which takes CNN data and translates it into dots on screen – a pattern translation that we can interpret as more than a mere translation of the data, it adds up to a new creation by the artist. Legrady echoes the data, while Napier presents it within a specific perspective and thereby substitutes its messages with his own.

The contrast between these two works is what I call mimetic-naturalistic versus the poetic-metaphorical. Again, we might ask what, after grand narratives, do we do with poetic expression? Nothing: we just show the data.

FJR: How does this kind of analysis acquire the characteristic of a critical reading?

RS: I connect the phenomenon of mapping to the culture of presence and meaning. While Napier’s obfuscating transformation of the data calls for interpretation, Legrady’s piece presents the data for their own sake. To put it another way:

Legrady's work embraces the data in their pure existence or presence; Napier's gives them meaning through their presentation in a seemingly meaningless way. The former I read as fascination with information as such or respectively as the embodiment of the lack of a privileged artistic perspective after the postmodern end of grand narratives (the narrative is basically reduced to reality as is). The latter, however, can be read in terms of Alan Liu's *Laws of Cool*, in his book on knowledge work and the culture of information. According to Liu cool is a way of looking at information in a non utilitarian way, it is a way of living in the information age that resists and undermines the fetishism of information. If we agree with Liu that formalism is a necessary approach to information cool, it becomes clear that formalism (for example in mapping art) itself is a culture-critical statement (as it was a century ago with respect to classical avant-garde)

Another example: imagine yourself in an interactive installation. Its expressive power is led by your physical actions. If you just engage and do not interpret, this mode of activity directs your attention to the intensity of the moment and favors the materiality of the work. For Lyotard, Barnett Newman's *Who's Afraid of Red, Yellow and Blue* shows the importance not of what happens but that something happens. This connects directly to Gumbrecht's *Fairwell to Interpretation* in the book *Materialities of Communication of 1994* (German 1988). Gumbrecht argues against Derrida, welcoming at first his critique of phono- and logocentrism and his embrace of materiality but rejecting where Derrida takes this. Gumbrecht prefers that Derrida focus completely on the material sign of the signifier in the same manner as Lyotard, in his analysis of Barnett Newman and the sublime, claims that we should focus on the material and the intensity of the event rather than assigning meaning to it. For his part, Lyotard favors this because for him, the essence of an artifact is about its presence, not what it represents.

FJR: Yet, how is it possible to focus on the material and intensity of the event distinct without assigning meaning to it? Is that possible without reverting to a empty conceptual distinction? What new media work would have us experience one without the other, and how would such a distinction even be enforced in a material or even conceptual way?

RS: In *Production of Presence. What Meaning Cannot Convey* (2004) Gumbrecht demands that we not look at any meaning at all, advocating for a culture of presence over a culture of meaning. Whereas the latter wants to know so as to change things, the culture of presence would embrace things as they are, to appreciate something without "taming" it, to use Sontag's term in *Against Interpretation*, through interpretation and rationalization.

I argue for Derrida, and thus view how the interactive installation can seduce us into the paradigm of the culture of presence and how, while it allows us to do something with intensity and to experience ourselves as a body without thinking. As they

promote this, the physical overrides the cognitive. Thus I enjoy an experience but do not ask for a deeper meaning. It is thus problematic how the interactive in this mode of embodiment places us within the mode of culture industry, a position that is marked not only by the question whether we are passive or active but whether we think. Interactive art like this would collude with the realm of culture industry.

Gumbrecht adopts the romanticism of an almost religious feeling, but we need to construct different signification, we should be within the experience of trying to make sense of something by accepting that we don't possess certainty, and thus use one meaning to undermine another meaning. This is in accordance with the notions that in the aesthetic experience the context of an utterance is not as settled as in the social context of normal discourse that acquires a regular automatism and predictability. Most transactions in the world are structured within conventional forms of interaction. But with art, the situation is different, as we realize there are so many ways to read a work in an attempt to make sense of it. This practice is exactly what we need, especially in a multicultural world. If we embrace presence unproblematically, we don't learn to deal with the conflict. Within this larger critical context, close reading is better than huge mega-theories of code; the work of interpretation of artwork is what I am interested in, over the formulation of any single universal model that in effect restricts interpretation.

FJR: Contemporary art criticism accepts installation art as one expressive genre among several. The idea that installations are themselves sites of interpretive tension, seen as belonging either to a culture of presence or a culture of meaning, strikes me as innovative. In new media art, the installation is distinct from its predecessor: it now induces interaction explicitly, a move that is at the heart of the incongruity you describe. Thus the interactive installation, unlike its nonresponsive genus in contemporary art, makes explicit and forces open the question of one's consciousness and participation in the dialogue with the work of art. How we decide when confronted by prompts for participation – whether for uncritical immersion or reflective distance – turns on your distinction between the culture of presence versus the culture of meaning.

RS: Yes, but in contrast to mapping art or other screen-based genres of digital art, the interactive installation still has something for us, even if we are not situated in a paradigm of meaning. Installation art induces the compelling feeling of physical engagement with the art. However, while it can occur in the culture of presence, and is in the moment, as in playing with the letters in *Text Rain* or producing a shadow in *Deep Walls*, this is only one moment. Only when you step out of the interaction and revert to the role of spectator can you ask yourself reflectively, what does the interaction the artist wanted me to engage in mean? Now you have to interpret the applied symbolic and grammar of the interaction, such as in *Deep Walls*, the gradual erasure of the oldest image as a new one appears.

FJR: It bears mentioning that Kaprow's aim with the happening was social engagement through confrontation in circumstances of intersubjectivity.

RS: Finding meaning can also emerge in situation where you are required to do something that you don't do in everyday life – it is a kind of alienation or intimidation. Take *Deep Walls* which tells you to do something but doesn't say what that is. You can dance for *Deep Walls*, would you do it if people were around? Maybe people just walk left to right to test the system. It wants you to get out of the box of being rather than of thinking. Whatever you do, you will learn something about yourself, about your own limits. Here the art tells me something about me, independent of the level of meaning. A different example is *Exchange Fields* by Bill Seaman where I put my limbs in specific places in furniture and video is triggered where the specific body part is featured. This grammar of interaction doesn't require you to do anything funny, to dance, or express yourself. It is interactive in a way that doesn't hurt or demand something from you and thus doesn't reveal your timidity in case you prefer walking left to right over dancing. To that extent, that piece does not work if you don't think, so there is no surplus outside of thinking. People think they've engaged in the work if they've done something with it. Some people think they can fool the system, "check it out", trick it, putting a foot in the place for the head. What has been achieved? Of course, nothing. But now, if you think about what you have to do, You have to immobilize your body in order to trigger a projected dance sequence. You basically trade your own outworn body for the idealized beautiful body on the screen. Isn't that what goes on in our culture, in your TV, in cinema, and the fashion magazine – a trade of your body with their ideal body, with the practical result of dissatisfaction and cosmetic surgery. Such insight is only possible if you think, if you look for the meaning of this grammar of interaction. If you only engage in presence, you will not get anything. In *Deep Walls*, you at least learn about your body's timidity or daring. Even more so with Rokeby's *Very Nervous System*, which is at the other end, for it indicates nothing of what you should do.

FJR: This mutual cancellation is not present in non-interactive installations. Your argument makes evident that interactivity is the central possibility around which the crucial decision of participating, of aligning within a culture of presence or one of meaning seems to revolve.