A Transformational Object: Artistic Authorship and the Phenomenal Aesthetics of New Media

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If there is any metaphor that has come to act as a signpost of current developments in the realm of digital art and design, it is the blur. We have seen the blur as a building, the blur as the theme at conferences, and the blur as a means to describe the totality of the overlapping processes and intentions that all converge in what can be called interactive experiences. For shorthand, we call this convergence new media. Given the various aims and contexts from which the larger category of art objects arrives, the blur seems to best approximate a still undistinguished body of work and its cultural momentum.

While creating hard definitions and fixed categories of work made using technology may limit the emergence of a new art form, not identifying the points where it overlaps and samples from existing disciplines might likewise suppress the emergence of a new aesthetic language parallel to that overlap. The blur, in this regard, legitimizes the idea of a mass without boundaries, a suspension of the sensible and cognitive precision that we have come to expect from an object of art. It is a kind of mass experience of a totality that Merleau-Ponty describes as revealing "another modality which is neither the ideal and necessary being of geometry nor the simple sensory event."[1] The blur is an object we can recognize as form without committing to any particular shape.

With the introduction of the viewer as participant and part collaborator in the work of art, the expectation that art is a single object of representation has changed. Yet despite the lack of representational meaning, there is a general sense that art made using the processes and methods of digital computation, communication technologies, and information networks is nonetheless carving out a new territory where the possibility for action has its own kind of precision. It is this fluctuation between precision and openness, visual style and usability, poetics and science that introduces an idea of art as an existential object whose resonance and power comes from its use rather than its creation.

In the context of new media art, we have come to expect responsive interfaces, immersive environments, even new perspectives on social organization. The openness of the current sensibility has been described in critical writing as non-linear, uncertain, layered, in flux, flexible, discontinuous, plural, relative, and distributed. A project in new media is somehow simultaneously an object and not an object. New media emerges, therefore, from the complex mass of influences, contradictions, and objectives that act to suspend the object

more than define it. The challenge for both educators and practitioners of emerging forms of media art lies in how to structure and identify this suspension as a mode of authorship.

In relating new media production to the history of making objects, and observing the influence of the mechanics of computation on the creative process, this essay suggests that the interdisciplinary mode of thinking represented by computational art, in particular work made using networks, is framing a new object.

Anticipatory Space: Authoring Suspension

Given the open nature of a medium that finds itself suspended between disciplines, or is considered not-quite-a-discipline, what does the author of new media work with? What is the tool set, framework, or criteria with which the author works if the outcome is in some way more a process than an object? While a development process in computational media is often directly related to the outcome (a web site, for instance, will adhere to the procedure of design, coding and implementation), the outcome has not traditionally been so dependent on the process. But despite the greater influence of methodology on the new-media object, the basic nature of the creative process itself has not changed.

Traditionally, there are three components or aspects to any creative endeavor: the idea (content), the medium (form), and the intention (context). The history of Western visual culture can be understood as the way in which artists and their cultural contemporaries have prioritized these three elements. In pre-modern sensibility, representation was bound to the context of religious or mythological values that determined both the idea and the medium. The symbolic correctness of the color and position of the Madonna's hands, for instance, dictated the order of the labor and processes involved in her creation.

With the advent of photography and the interest in mechanically fixing the image, the importance of the intention of a work gave way to a preoccupation with the idea. From Kandinsky to Duchamp, idea becomes the primary consideration over an interest in formal exploration or concern for the social role of art. In our time, the ubiquity of telecommunications technologies has proven McCluhan's insight to be correct. The medium is the not only the message,[2] but it has also become the sole priority, collapsing all distinction between idea and medium, medium and context.

Blurring idea, medium and intention, new media engenders a self-reflexivity that challenges the notion of authorship as a "creative" act. The author becomes someone who reveals or transforms. Most network-based telepresence, database, and visualization projects can

be said not to create something as much as to establish a device through which content or data are made apparent. What arises as a consequence is an object "pregnant with form"[3] rather than form in itself. From a practical perspective, seeing one's creative decision making as separate from or as a mere pretext for the actual form is directly influenced by the level of abstraction inherent in programming languages and the modularity of coding. There is a metaphorical relationship between code and image that can cause confusion about where artistic subjectivity resides. Is the artist the author of devices or the author of the resulting effect of the device? Either way, there is a sense that as a creator, the artist raises functionality to the level of expression. The artist is the producer of an anticipatory space or field of action whose creativity is actualized only in the aftermath of the object's use or implementation.

The non-discriminatory treatment of content in computation can lead to the conception of a neutral object that accommodates alternate or variable content. Neutrality is aestheticized by seeing computation itself as content worth contemplating. With the idea of a neutral object, an artist can focus on developing a device through which meaning can be deciphered, giving wholeness to an otherwise intimidating, unformed sea of information. That we are fascinated with the mechanics of computation (elevated by new aesthetic categories like software art, algorithmic art, generative art) is not evidence of artistic enchantment with a new medium of expression, but rather evidence of a new awareness that the structure of a medium can express itself.

Technology has always influenced the scope and potential of art, from the subtle impact of tube oil paint on the range of subject matter available to painting to the total re-evaluation of art that came with the advent of mechanical reproduction. But the relationship between content and form is significantly altered when what is done is synonymous with how it is done. Once "what" and "how" are the same, the only creative space open to an artist is the space to identify or fabricate another medium, a super medium whose specific method of interaction or particular quality of change is equivalent to its content.

Revealing Systems

There are certain types of new media art that catalyze meaning by establishing a functional framework through which we can witness existing social, economic, or political structures of communication. Carnivore (2002) by the Radical Software Group (RSG) in New York,[4] for example, uses an existing method, in this case "packet sniffing" or programmed FBI surveillance of the contents of email communication and individual web use, as the content itself. By appropriating the FBI software for use in an artistic context, RSG was able to convert the invisibility of the surveillance practice to a visible form of intervention. The visibility of surveillance is possible because the way it is used by artists is extremely varied. The common denominator among all variations is data surveillance, and as a result, the system of surveillance is legible. The poetics of the work lies in our "seeing" the mechanics of the sniffing operation and the way that it functions. Aesthetic value is therefore not created by RSG as much as it is a result of RSG's ability to frame the FBI practice. In revealing FBI activity, RSG shows how the neutrality of computation can be employed as a kind of empty machine that, when used, has the capacity to give shape to the restrictions and protocols to which it must also subscribe.

In an artistic context, data visualizations and algorithmic code structures show that in many cases scale plays a large role in creating the revealing experience. For instance, TextArc (2002) by Brad Paley[5] and Secret Lives of Numbers (2003) by Golan Levin[6] both use a Java algorithm to bring a range and scope of information into one visible interface. Without this visible interface, such information would be unavailable to normal human perception. In computer or medical science, algorithms can bring understanding and insight to a problem obscured by the details of everyday life. In art, such scaled visualizations reveal the contours of our social and cultural life that can be used for the forms they suggest. Much of computational art's creativity and meaning are not predetermined by the artist but are revealed on a scale that transcends the individual subjectivity that constitutes the style or signature of art. In this sense, the number of urban wireless projects developed to allow personalized tours through the city or as a way to map local histories are more likely to reveal the structure of wireless networks than they are to offer any subjective aesthetic experience.

Under the ever-increasing deluge of information, artistic survival is ensured not by generating more cultural clutter but in parsing the image stream to discover and nurture what is real, tangible, influential, and consequential. Net practices like culture jamming, hacktivism, and social mapping show how artists already do this. Their focus on the process of revealing, like others who act on already existing content, point to a new metaphysical interest in creating an empty machine or instrument. When the creative process is centered on anticipation of action or on how to best identify existing patterns, form no longer follows function but becomes function itself. Empty machines have artistic value only in their capacity to make something else accessible, available, closer, faster, or possible. But one has to wonder if making an instrument is equivalent to making music. How is it different? If we can allow that making an instrument or empty machine is the same as making music then we have arrived at an expanded sense of artistic authorship.

Transformational Objects

This expanded sense of authorship, of someone who creates conditions rather than content or form, is what Martin Heidegger in his essay The Question Concerning Technology sees as the role of technology itself. In defining the essence of technology, Heidegger refers to this role as its Ge-Stell meaning "Enframing." For him, Enframing is a concept of gathering together, a mode of ordering so that what is evident is a "standing-reserve" or space of waiting for actions to take place.[7] The new media artist is author of this standing-reserve or Enframing. Artistic expression lies in the ability to determine a set of functions, features, and conditions rather than in the ability to represent. Enframing (or simply framing) in turn is the act of using a created set of functions, features, and conditions to reveal or extend the same set of functions, features, and conditions through change or use. Change or use makes conditions apparent. Software projects like Data Diaries (2003) by Cory Archangel[8] or Digital Landfill (2000) by Mark Napier[9] show this by establishing a window through which we experience the processing of computer or net functions as continuous or unfolding form. Sometimes just the witnessing of a process is aestheticized as an object. For example, here is the artist's description of a recent project by Victor Liu posted on Artport, The Whitney Museum of American Art's web site for showcasing net art:

The life of American machines_

This is pris. I put her to the task of eternal rebuild. The window above shows a live stream of her going about this task. It shows the commands she is running, followed by the output of the commands.

She is rebuilding herself from metal. This is an arduous and time-consuming process, especially for an older machine like pris. The rebuild process consists of downloading her source code, freely-available from various sites on the Net, and compiling the source code into her operating system and programs. The source code she downloads is simply a set of text instructions for how to build her programming, and in computer parlance, this process of building binary programs from source code is called compiling.

A small blue window of self-updating code constitutes our experience of the work of art. We watch the symbols that can be interpreted as the exact code necessary to the reconstruction of the artist's computer as an object, although the object itself, pris, is nowhere in view. By prioritizing process as an object, new media is ostensibly a meta-process, a practice of transferring the responsibility of meaning subject to object.

In my own seminar class at Parsons called Signs of Life: The Aesthetics of Reality in Digital Culture, we discuss how to re-insert the subjectivity of the author in both the process and outcome of projects by comparing the natural and computational worlds. Networks, being attached in some way to the real world, are discussed as playing a role in opening up the metaphysical cul-de-sac that often limits computational art. Natural phenomena such as light, wind, breathing, smog, etc. and fabricated phenomena like flash mobs, generative algorithms, and online communities have an essence and can be recognized even when experienced in different forms. Anyone, for example, can picture the phenomenon of rain, although in reality it take on many different forms and characteristics. Similarly, creation of an organic interface like Ben Fry's "Anemone" applet[10] starts assigning value to a set of elemental principles such as scale, e, and frequency of change, which will in use transform the look of the original design. As a consequence, the form is one that will never have the same appearance twice, manifesting an infinite number of variations identifiable as the same form.

I have found that in their careful observation of what is constant and what is variable in the forms that change, students in my seminar have a better understanding of their role in relation to the variable object they are making. The growing interest in bio-morphic metaphors real-time dynamics supports the idea that the ubiquity and volatility of networks has emerged as a phenomenal form, particularly when directly connected to human activity and presence. While many art movements from Realism to the Situationists to Fluxus have reacted against the objectness of art, the new media artist does not reject the object as much as support the radical idea of the object as something perceivable only as a disruption or transformation. Without constant change in the amount of information passing through the network, the dangling wire used in LiveWire, [11] an art project by Natalie Jeremijenko, would be of no formal interest. It is only in its wiggling or spasms that the work becomes available as a comment the pervasive nature of technology. It is not its form (materials of ethernet wire, wall, installation) per se that causes us to enjoy this work. The set-up makes a perceivable object out of the process of information parsing, which is what gives us pleasure in it as art.

It is the nature of transformational works to keep continuity and change in balance. Listening Post[12] by Mark Hansen and Ben Rubin, exhibited at the Whitney in 2002, for example, gives us access to the scale and volume of text-based communication in a way that we can appreciate it as more than simply quantifiable information. The installation fascinates by being both a beautiful grid of LCD screens and a platform for witnessing the visual and aural summary of chat-room content across the net. As an object, it is simultaneously fluid and fixed in a way that transcends the self-reflexivity of computation and anchors our attention in the human and social forces that fuel its transformation.

The transformational object is a crossroad between subject and object where each makes the other visible. In his writing on the psychoanalytical meaning of the transformational object, British psychologist Christopher Bollas discusses the enviro-somatic condition that gives rise to the identification of an object as process. In identifying this object, he describes it as something more ephemeral than fixed, where the object "is 'known' not by cognizing it into an object representation, but known as a recurrent experience of being – a kind of existential, as opposed to representational, knowing."[13] It is the active mode of deciphering that is both more and less than a representation that makes transformation a form that is both known and unknown. It is this edge where new media finds its poetry.

As artists continue to create processes and instruments that reveal other processes and instruments, it is apparent that representation as a method of artistic communication and authorship has given way to manifestation – a hybrid intentionality where meaning is a product of a shift in perspective. By merging the concept of the object with the concept of transformation, artists show a post-representational commitment to the legibility and significance of process as an anti-commercial, anti-product, anti-historical blur that leaves the mechanisms of aesthetics bare.

Notes

1. Discussed in M. Merleau-Ponty's *The Phenomenology of Perception and its Philosophical Consequences*, Northwestern University Press, 1964.
2. Appears in The Medium Is The Message, from *Understanding Media*, by Marshall McLuhan, MIT Press 1994.
3. M. Merleau-Ponty's *The Phenomenology of Perception and its Philosophical Consequences*, Northwestern University Press, 1964.
4. www.rhizome.org/carnivore/
5. www.textarc.org
6. www.turbulence.org/Works/nums/
7. Discussion of Ge-stell (Enframing) from The Question Concerning Technology, from *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays,* by Martin Heidegger,(Harper & Row, 1977.
8. www.turbulence.org/Works/arcangel/
9. potatoland.com/landfill/
10. acg.media.mit.edu/people/fry/anemone/
11. cat.nyu.edu/natalie/projectdatabase/
12. www.earstudio.com/projects/listeningpost.html?middle=listening_statement.html
13. The Transformational Object, by Christopher Bollas, International Journal of Psycho-Analysis, (60), 1978.