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**WHO'S AFRAID OF THE  
AUDIENCE? DIGITAL AND  
POST-DIGITAL PERSPECTIVES  
ON AESTHETICS**

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This article analyses how works of art that make use of or refer to digital technology can be approached, analysed, and understood aesthetically from two different perspectives. One perspective, which I shall term a 'digital' perspective, mainly focuses on poetics (or production) and technology when approaching the works, whereas the other, which I shall term a 'post-digital' perspective, focuses on aesthetic experience (or reception) when approaching the works. What I tentatively and for the purpose of practical analysis term the 'digital' and the 'post-digital' perspectives do not designate two different sets of concrete works of art or artistic practice and neither do they describe different periods.[1] Instead, the two perspectives co-exist as different discursive positions that are concretely expressed in the way we talk about aesthetics in relation to art that makes use of and/or refers to digital technology. In short: When I choose here to talk about a digital and a post-digital perspective, I talk about two fundamentally different ways of ascribing aesthetic meaning to (the same) concrete works of art. By drawing on the ideas of especially Immanuel Kant and Dominic McIver Lopes, it is the overall purposes of this article to analyse and compare how the two perspectives understand the concept of aesthetics and to discuss some of the implications following from these understandings. As it turns out, one of the most significant implications is the role of the audience.

## Why aesthetics?

Why focus on aesthetics in the first place? Why not just investigate and interpret the concrete works of art? The radical answer to that question is: Because a work of art does not exist in itself. By this I mean that whenever we assume that we talk about a specific

work of art, we really talk about a number of different, culturally constructed phenomena depending on who 'we' are. Whether we take as an example a piece of net art or a marble sculpture it can be considered, for instance, as pure conceptualization on the side of the artist (Kosuth), as significant form (Bell), as good or poor social/cultural critique (Adorno), as that which is accepted by the art institution (Bourdieu) etc.

Therefore, it is impossible to essentially pin down a specific work of art as something that exists as one clear-cut object/phenomenon/process/action/relation ready for 'pure' interpretation and analyses. In other words, all discussions on concrete works of art are based (sometimes unknowingly) on certain theoretical points of departure – even if the focus of the discussions themselves are down to earth and do not seemingly involve theory. Hence, I insist on focusing on aesthetics in the following comparative analysis of the digital and the post-digital perspective, not because it is the right way to consider works of art, but because it is — as the article shall demonstrate — a relevant issue that the digital and the post-digital perspectives approach fundamentally differently.

A brief note of clarification: The article distinguishes between 'aesthetics' (aesthetic theory in general) and its subcategories 'poetics' (relates to the practice of creating works of art and, hence, an aesthetics of production) and 'aesthetic experience' (relates to a concrete experience governed by judgement of taste, and, hence an aesthetics of reception).

## A digital perspective on aesthetics

Three aspects characterize the digital perspective's notion of aesthetics: cross-disciplinarity, technological essentialism, and artistic creation.

### *Cross-disciplinarity*

A digital perspective challenges the borders between traditional institutions and disciplines, and, hence, does not seem to distinguish between, for instance, 'art' in a strictly institutional sense, 'aesthetic artefacts' in a broader sense, and 'cultural artefacts' insofar as, overall, these terms are used more or less synonymously to describe new experiments or practices that make use of digital technology. As an example of this characteristic Stephen Wilson's book *Information Arts* carries the subtitle: Intersections of art, science, and technology. Wilson states that 'Information Arts can be seen as an investigation of these moving boundaries [between art and techno-scientific inquiry] and the cultural significance of including techno-scientific research in a definition of art' (18).

A significant advantage of a digital perspective's ability to transgress disciplinary borders is that the perspective looks beyond the narrow institutional confinements of Art with a capital A when focusing on aesthetics — thus, it is possible to consider themes like, for instance, 'surveillance', 'gaming' or 'artificial life' in manners that cut across different disciplines (like social science, engineering, art etc.)

### *Technological essentialism*

Perhaps as a result of the refreshingly unorthodox cross-disciplinarity, the second characteristic of the digital perspective is that

digital technology in itself is placed at the centre of attention. This means that digital technology and media are the elements that fixate the meaning of a digital perspective — or constitute it — whereas art and aesthetics do not play central roles. Therefore, when art or aesthetics are considered from a digital perspective these concepts are subsumed — along with other cultural/social/political modes of expression — under the primacy of digital technology and not as governing concepts in themselves. For example, the majority of survey books on new media art or digital art are organised either as descriptions/analysis of individual artists or works or according to technological subgenres like 'video art', 'network art', 'interactive art', 'telepresence' etc. (see, for instance Rush; Giannetti; Tribe and Jana; Paul; Shanken; Wilson, *Art + Science Now*). Consequentially, considered from a digital perspective, analyses and debates on the role of new technology in art have an overall techno-essentialist character in the sense that questions asked basically centre around: What is "interactive", or "networked", or "digital" (etc.) art?

Though the above questions are good and relevant, they lack one important component that it is highly appropriate to investigate, that is: According to whom? Or in other words: From which specific subject position are such questions asked? From the position of the artist, the curator/critic, the user, the implied audience or the actual audience? By not explicating which subject positions are addressed when carrying out analyses of new art forms, the results of those analyses are staged as virgin born truths radiating from the works of art. As a result, attempts to critically investigate tendencies across different works of art do not distinguish between the specific technical features applied in a work of art and what is actually encountered by the average member of the audience.

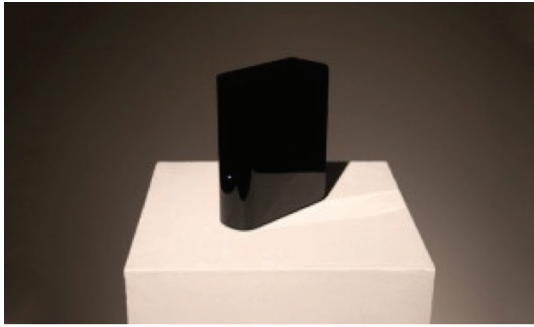


Figure 1: Art404, *5 Million Dollars, 1 Terabyte*.

Consider, for instance, the work *5 Million Dollars, 1 Terabyte* by Art404, which consists of a black terabyte hard drive exhibited in a vitrine. No matter how hard we look, smell, taste, listen or touch the hard drive, we will never be able to extract the most important feature about this work of art — the decisive factor that transforms the terabyte from a dull object of everyday life and that potentially gives rise to aesthetic experience for the audience: The fact that this particular hard drive contains illegally downloaded material worth five million dollars. The only way of becoming aware of this crucial piece of information is by reading the catalogue text or visiting Art404's website. Thus, in reality there is a gap between the experience gained from actually encountering the work in the gallery and from reading about it. This gap is not really addressed when applying a digital perspective on aesthetic research, since such a perspective interprets the works of art according to technological features and does not pay attention to the different subject positions of the artist (who knows what the technical properties of the work) and the audience (whose knowledge about the technical properties sometimes — like in the case of *5 Million Dollars, 1 Terabyte* — stems from para-texts rather than from first-hand encounters with the work).

Especially the subject position of the audience seems to be neglected in the digital research discourse insofar as audience

experiences are assumed in aesthetic analyses to be identical to the artist's intention, curatorial/critical framing, or theoretical accounts of technical characteristics and potentials of new art types. Considered from the digital perspective, if the use of a specific technology in a work of art is considered to have interactive, or critical, or alienating potentials it is more or less automatically assumed that the audience/users' experiences correspond to those potentials without paying much attention to the fact that different contexts and subject positions invite different aesthetic considerations.

### *Artistic creation*

Whereas a digital perspective does not focus on the audience when considering the aesthetics dimensions of a work, it pays significant attentions to the subject position of the creator (and this is the third characteristic of the digital discourse). Thus, the focus of attention is the very important work done by artists who explore new media and technology in line with an avant-garde tradition. As Morten Breinbjerg states in relation to the practice of live-coding artists using ixi software: '[They see] new technology as a way of subverting, or at least getting around, the historical understanding of music, as well as the constraining practices of music composition and production present in commercial music software' (164). As such the process of artistic experiment and creation can be said to serve an aesthetic and/or cultural purpose instead of a functional one. A similar focus on the process of artistic creation is detectable in Ian Bogost's notion of 'carpentry', which describes craftsmanship as a way of alternative thinking or a philosophical practice (see Andersen, Pold, and Riis in this volume).

The focus on poetics — what the artists actually do, what programmes are written, what hacks are carried out, which

components are combined in a specific design? — is of importance because this is what physically creates the work. Without the craftsmanship of the artist there would be no work. But this applies to all works and not exclusively to works that make use of and/or refer to new media or technology. The question is if what the artists do in a process of creation automatically equals aesthetic experience of an audience? This is where a digital perspective on aesthetics lacks an important dimension. The tendency to consider poetics as synonymous to aesthetic experience means that if an audience is to gain any aesthetic experience by encountering the work this is automatically assumed to happen only insofar as the audience is able to place him- or herself in the subject position of the creator and to understand what the creator actually does, or did, during the creation of the work.

As insightfully accounted for by Florian Cramer, two overall practices of aesthetics are at work in relation to new media art: One is in accordance with aesthetic theory as formulated by Burke and Lyotard (and Kant one may add) and includes “hacks” and intentional crudeness of software and hardware design’ whereas the other is governed by ‘neo-pythagorean beauty ideals, [...] white-hat hacker culture, [and] human/computer interface designs of mainstream, high-tech media lab arts’ (Cramer, 122). A digital perspective, as well as a post-digital one, both relate to the former understanding of aesthetics. But as suggested, a digital perspective does so from the point of view of a poetics of technology more than from a point of view of aesthetic experience in a Kantian sense.

Cramer (with reference to Burke) mentions as cases of sublime aesthetic ‘pleasure and pain of hardware and software interfaces, terror of the desktop, obscurity of the API, and suddenness of operating system

crashes’ (122), which, in my opinion, are all excellent examples of possible aesthetic experiences because they can be related to an act of reception, and as such represent what I term a post-digital perspective. But when Cramer continues by describing the practices involved in such effects as ‘technological and media aesthetics’ (123), the perspective changes. By talking of ‘technological and media aesthetics’ — admittedly, the devil lies in the detail — Cramer implicitly draws the contours of an aesthetics that is defined by technology and media. I would argue that Cramer is here dealing with poetics (if specific kinds of artistic creation are considered crucial) or art forms/genres (if specific characteristics defining for instance ‘hacker art’ are considered to be crucial), but not with aesthetic experience.

The tendency to understand aesthetics in a technologically pre-fixed manner is commented on by Carsten Strathausen:

*The nascent aesthetics of new media is variously named “rational aesthetics”, (Claudia Gianetti) or “info-aesthetics” as well as “post-media aesthetics” (Lev Manovich) or “techno-aesthetics” (Peter Weibel) [...] “Rational,” “info-,” or “techno-“ aesthetics is thus informed by the history of science and engineering rather than that of philosophy and politics. Its heroes are Boscovich, Boole, Turing, and Bense instead of Aristotle, Kant, Hegel, or Adorno. (Strathausen, 59)*

In his article, Strathausen points to and criticizes a tendency to replace one discourse of aesthetics (the classic) with another, new discourse which is closely tied to the subject matter of digital technology. The problem with this replacement is that aesthetics, then, becomes certain properties of a work instead of being a philosophical perspective applied

to a work (and its technical properties). In this sense, aesthetic research within a digital perspective is governed by techno-essentialist focus, which is both unavoidable and important when exploring the poetics of new digital technologies or media in their emergence. It is, however, important to acknowledge that this is a matter of poetics, which limits aesthetics experience to the subject position of the creator and leaves out an audience.

## A post-digital perspective on aesthetics

If a digital perspective on aesthetics takes as its point of departure technological poetics, a post-digital perspective takes a post-technological and post-media point of departure. The post-digital perspective is not anti-technological or pre-digital, since it does not seek a romantic return to a stage before new technologies and media entered the realm of art. On the contrary, a post-digital perspective on art can be considered a sub-category of a more general post-media discourse (see Quaranta) in the sense that it fully acknowledges the ubiquitous presence of digital technology in art and the fact that new media and technology may facilitate or prompt aesthetics experience.

A significant potential of applying a post-digital perspective on works of art, as well as on other objects or phenomena, is that it considers the aesthetic potentials of works that make use of new media and technology without automatically subjecting aesthetics experience to technology or equating it with poetics. Hence, within a post-digital perspective we may ask the 'naïve' questions to the field of contemporary art, such as: Are new media or technologies of aesthetic relevance in a work if they go unnoticed by

the audience? And vice versa: What are the aesthetic potentials of para-textually fictional stories about the presence of digital media/technology in a work? In short: Does it make any difference in terms of aesthetics experience (not poetics) whether the terabyte in *5 Million Dollars, 1 Terabyte* actually includes the illegal files or not (as long as we believe the story)? And how do we elaborate on the fact that the same work of art potentially gives rise to different kinds of aesthetics experiences depending on which subject positions (artist, curator/critic, user, audience) engage with the work and in what manners (as intended by someone else or not)?

### *Kantian distinctions*

In order to investigate such aesthetics questions thoroughly it is necessary to insist on upholding Immanuel Kant's significant distinction between the subject positions of the creator and that of an audience (Kant §48): First, Kant describes how aesthetics taste is at work on the side of the creator when the artist creates his work insofar as he 'checks his work [against manifold examples from art or nature]; and after many, often toilsome, attempts to content taste he finds the form which satisfies him.' Kant then crucially states: 'But taste is merely a judging and not a productive faculty'. In other words: Even when the artist judges his own work during its production, he does so by stepping back from the work, 'after he has exercised and corrected it', in order to create the distance necessary for passing an aesthetics judgement of taste, before stepping towards the work to once again correct it. Kant, thus, distinguishes between two different subject positions, between which the artist oscillates: That of the immediate creator and that of the contemplative judge, of which only the latter, according to Kant, is able to pass an aesthetics judgement of taste on the work. Hence,



in Kant, aesthetic experience is always implicitly an act of reception – even when it is part of an overall production process.

Now, the fact that Kant defined aesthetic experience as a matter of reception in 1790 does not automatically render it relevant today. After all, why should we still insist on a separation between the creating artist and the audience when, for instance, the fields of new media art and relational aesthetics in many cases are characterised by participation and interactivity that result in extensive co-creation? For instance, the Ars Electronica Prix category of ‘Digital Communities’ consists of works in which such a distinction between artist and audience may seem absurd, since the digital communities function collectively in the participants’ everyday life.

One example could be the 2013 Golden Nica winner El Campo de Cebada, the name of an enclosed city square in Madrid, where residents and the council work together — in the physical place and via online social media — to define the use of the square (Leopoldseder et al. 200-203). No artist or artist group is credited for this genuinely collective project. Now, participating in El Campo de Cebada may (or may not) result in aesthetic reflective judgements among the individuals who engage in the project on an everyday basis in Madrid, as accounted for above with reference to Kant, but the moment the project is framed by Ars Electronica as an outstanding work a non-creating audience is created for the project and it becomes an object for potential aesthetic experience to that audience too.

In fact, the very act of presenting or exhibiting the project within an art (or at least cultural) institutional framework, like Ars Electronica, renders the prime purpose of El Campo de Cebada one of prompting aesthetic experience rather than immediate function — even if it is the functional dimensions that,

contemplated from the point of view of an audience subject position, prompt aesthetic experience. Whereas in Madrid the square is inhabited, in the context of Ars Electronica it is ‘exhibited’, and this sole act of exhibiting automatically installs El Campo de Cebada as an object for potential reflective aesthetic judgement of taste by subject positions that differ from the work’s immediate producers. Hence, at least three different subject positions are at work in the case of El Campo de Cebada: The active participants that create the phenomenon, the active participants that step back to contemplate the phenomenon (who in flesh and blood are identical to the first position), and the audience at Ars Electronica who contemplates the project that is presented to them. The ability to distinguish between these subject positions, and between poetics and aesthetic judgement of taste, when analysing the aesthetic potentials of phenomena like El Campo de Cebada is one important reason why Kantian aesthetics is highly relevant today.

### *The split of the audience: user and audience*

Another reason is that, especially in the realm of so-called interactive art, the overall audience subject position is often divided in two, since — as lucidly accounted for by Dominic Lopes — in interactive art we may distinguish between the ‘user’ (who explores a work by generating displays in a prescribed manner) and the ‘audience’ (who explore a work by watching users generate displays by interacting with a work). Similar distinctions have been made between ‘visitors’ and ‘shy visitors’ to exhibitions of interactive art (Scott et al.), and audience members acting as ‘object signs’ and ‘meta signs’ respectively when experiencing digital art (Qvortrup). Thus, in many cases we may add yet another subject position to the three detected above in relation to El Campo de Cebada, because



Figure 2: *OCTO P7C-1* at Transmediale 2013.

the overall category of audience is often split into (at least) two different subject positions.

The difference between Lopes' two different subject positions of user and audience can be illustrated with reference to the work *OCTO P7C-1* (exhibited at Transmediale 2013). The work (produced by the Telekommunisten group) consisted of a spectacular, seemingly chaotic, network of yellow plastic tubes that criss-crossed the entire main venue of the Transmediale Festival, and worked as an 'Intertubular Pneumatic Packet Distribution System', that enabled visitors to communicate between different locations on the festival by way of sending written notes or small objects through the tube system.

In the exhibition, Lopes' term 'users' describes those visitors who engaged actively with *OCTO P7C-1* by, for instance, writing/drawing/crafting messages for the postal tubes or sending/receiving such messages by communicating commands to the OCTO-staff working the distribution centre. The distinctive sound accompanying each packet's travel through the tube system, the messages, the conversations between users and OCTO-workers etc. are all different kinds of audible, visual and sensual displays generated by the user and enabling him/her to gradually explore physical and semiotic dimensions of the work (and potentially gain aesthetic experience from it).

In addition to the user who acts in accordance with a prescribed manner staged by the creators of the work, the subject position of what Lopes terms 'audience' is of relevance when investigating aesthetic implications of a work like *OCTO P7C-1*. The audience do not engage directly with the work like the users do, but they watch how users interact with *OCTO P7C-1* and they observe how users' interaction with the work generates displays. As such, the audience explores the work, too, albeit in a different manner than users (and may gain aesthetic experience from the work). Exploring a work, one physical person may (at different times) hold the different subject positions of both user and audience.

One reason that a digital perspective leaves out the equation the subject position that Lopes calls 'audience', is that the potential aesthetic reflective judgement with this subject position does not fit a techno-essentialist view on new media art. Another reason could be that the subject position of the audience is sometimes (falsely) considered to be passive and uncritical (Philipsen). The fact remains, however, that an audience may experience what might be intended by the artist or described by a curator as an 'interactive, networked installation' in a very non-interactive, non-networked manner. And even 'users', who do interact actively with a work, may have aesthetic experiences that differ from the technologically defined ones at work in the poetics of a digital perspective. While we may think that such misinterpretations present a problem, in the sense that something has gone wrong in the course of communicating fully the essence of the work to the audience, this article will conclude by pointing out why such 'glitches' in aesthetic experience are valuable and why a digital perspective on art to a large extent ought to support it.



## Conclusion: two paradoxes

First of all, to challenge the close interpretative connection between creator, technical properties of the work, and audience that governs a digitally oriented discourse is in perfect accord with Roland Barthes' account of the birth of the reader and "The Death of the Author" and with Michel Foucault's subsequent distinction between author — in flesh and blood — and author function — as an important, yet virtual, character. When Barthes and Foucault articulated the radical break between artist and audience, the work was simultaneously transformed to text. This transformation — from work to text — actually fits very well with a digital perspective, since it is the very same kind of transformation strategy that the digital perspective focus on when it pays attention to the poetics of creative hacks on phenomena and artefacts that, according to a more traditional point of view, belong to established domains of — for instance — engineering, art, politics, science, etc. And this is why it is a strange paradox that the digital perspective does not seem to allow the same post-structural practice of active reading to unfold with regard to the works of art that it, so to speak, adopts (or monopolizes) as the digital perspective's own by incorporating them in books and exhibitions on 'digital art' or 'new media art'.

Apart from the theoretical critique of a digital perspective or digital discourse on art — that it does not do justice to the post-structural ideas of separating and acknowledging the functions of different subject positions — another paradox related to the concrete artistic practices is at work in the digital discourse. Namely that especially when it comes to works of art that make use of new media and technologies, it seems obvious that the cultural and institutional uncertainties surrounding the works may in fact boost

the potentials of 'readers' gaining aesthetic experiences from encountering such works, due to the lack of an overall concept by which the works might be comprehended rationally. A comparison will elaborate on the matter: Oil paintings are conventionally framed and pinned down as 'works of art' that we are meant to appreciate as such. Due to traditional institutional framings of those concrete works of art, they have been categorized as an established art form, 'fine art painting', which makes it harder to read them freely as texts. Kantian aesthetics insists that the subject's aesthetic judgement of taste is governed by reflective rather than determined relation to the object encountered (Kant §4), but this principle may be compromised when the object is fixed by one specific institutional framing established over a long period.

In contrast to paintings or sculptures, many of the objects, designs, events, phenomena, hacks, etc. considered in a digital perspective have tremendous potential for prompting aesthetic experience due to the institutional and cultural ambiguity they (still) possess. It seems, therefore, paradoxical when survey books, analyses, critics or curators account for the aesthetic characteristics of such works by subsuming them under determined technological categories and reducing them to a specific poetic matter.

Thus, one significant advantage of applying a post-digital perspective on works — including works that happen to make use of or refer to digital technology — is that it enables us to approach works as texts; that is, in a more open and critical manner 'from the outside' than if approached from a digital perspective, whose strength lies in analysing matters of poetics and technology 'from the inside'. Specifically, a post-digital perspective allows us to acknowledge the subject positions of an audience when we conduct aesthetic research and analysis.

## Notes

[1] Hence, my notion of a post-digital perspective bears no resemblance with Kim Cascone's use of the term 'post-digital' as synonymously to glitch in computer music. In fact, Cascone's approach belongs to what this article terms a digital perspective insofar as Cascone considers contemporary music practice from the point of view of artistic creation in which digital computer technology plays a crucial role.

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