

The Work of Art in the Digital Age

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Today all communication, design and art forms face a challenge in their encounter with the advance of digital technologies. Traditional media and their established institutional structures (media industries, education programs, museums and galleries) try to incorporate and adapt to these new technologies.

The huge body of the diverse directions of experimentation in this ongoing transformation process is being documented and discussed by many scholars in a basically empiricist and piecemeal approach. The importance and popularity of the few writers like Lev Manovich, on the other hand, depends on their recognition of the dialectics between technology and artistic language in the newly developing modes of expression and communication. Such theoretical enquiry will be a leading resource and inspiration for changing the paradigms of practice and research in various media in the near future.

In this paper we reflect upon Walter Benjamin's well-known essay, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," and attempt to summarize some basic observations related to the emerging role of digital technologies in contemporary artistic practices.

The crucial emphasis in Benjamin's approach is a "critical interpretation" of the impact of new technologies in shaping the social and political role of art. "Theses about the developmental tendencies of art under present conditions of production" constitute his main concern: "Their dialectic is no less noticeable in the superstructure than in the economy. It would therefore be wrong to underestimate the value of such theses as a weapon. They brush aside a number of outmoded concepts, such as creativity and genius, eternal value and mystery..."

It was 1936; and Benjamin was amazed by the potential of photography and cinema as the new art forms that were mechanically reproduced. But Benjamin's vision eventually comes true in the digital age: the prevalent practices of art in the digital age remarkably challenge established values and conceptions about art.

Devaluation and Democratization of Art

On the internet, the ultimate global network, we witness today a superabundant distribution of commonplace art. The notion of the artistic genius evaporates in the

mechanistic creativity of the multitude. When you visit some popular websites about Digital Arts you see that there are thousands of artists posting their works. Actually the main impetus for an artist is the recognition of her work or the criticism she receives. The internet provides a channel for publication which offers principally unlimited space when compared to printed media. This potential encourages the appearance of every amateur or beginner on the international stage.

The consequence is that quantity blurs quality; and we do not have famous masters in the modern sense anymore. There are no more myths about individual artists; on the contrary, digital objects usually become anonymous during copying. This is so widespread a practice that most designs are ad hoc making use of found objects. And it is often the case that the artist prefers to remain anonymous and uses a nickname.

Actually we observe a general disinterest in copyrights, which can also be the result of the ease of designing in the digital medium.

Since art is digitally distributed now, even the best examples of art are consumed at a quick glance especially when surfing on the web. The aura is completely lost in the virtual space: The screen image is definitely transitory; and if you really like some digital object, you immediately download it into some folder in your hard disk to look at it later. Contemplation, which defines the appreciation of art in the traditional sense, is always postponed into an indefinite future.

At this point we can diagnose these symptoms either as the death of art, or as a substantial change in the established paradigm of art production and consumption. Principally we can say that design has taken over the role of art and its prospect is to aestheticize the whole environment. The ultimate utopia is that everyone can practice art and the recent interest in “creative industries” as an important sector in the national economy reflects this development.

Benjamin’s text appears to be prophetic again: “For centuries a small number of writers were confronted by many thousands of readers. This changed toward the end of the last century.” he says. And today there is hardly a gainfully employed European who could not, in principle, find an opportunity to publish somewhere...”

What Benjamin observed in relation to writing also applies today to photography, film, and all the so-called digital arts. Today, anyone, not necessarily a European, can use a digital camera, edit and manipulate the shots in a popular program and publish it on the web easily reaching a worldwide audience.

What distinguishes the Internet is that it is the '*many-to-many*' medium whereas mass media can be referred to as the '*some-to-many*' media. Benjamin referred to mass media opening its pages to the readers, but now we have available the internet where everyone can easily publish his/her creations. To discuss this situation we will look at interactivity now with a critical approach and suggest some new definitions.

Interactivity and Automation in Computer-Aided-Art

In an earlier article, dated 1996, Manovich labeled the simple forms of interactivity as totalitarian: “we are asked to follow pre-programmed, objectively existing associations. we are asked to mistake the structure of somebody else's mind for our own.” he says.

Interactive works of art may be said to democratize the art experience by asking the observer to become more active and get involved in exploring their hidden content. But actually this is nothing more than the artist’s creations dispersed on a network in virtual space.

In this sense, the whole web today can be considered as the ultimate artwork of the digital age collectively created. The interactive experience of surfing freely on the World Wide Web is like visiting the largest museum, gallery and library complex of mankind.

On the other hand, if we should define true interactivity in an artwork as a feature that encourages the observer to become creative and actively contribute to its content, then all Graphic editing programs or CAD programs themselves can be considered as works in Interactive Art, the true masterpieces of our digital age.

Another basic characteristic of digital design that we should discuss in relation to artistic creativity in our age is “Automation”.

Like in the simple forms of interactivity, when creating or designing in computer programs, there is basically a limited repertoire of fashionable styles to choose from. It is usually the case that the designers are conditioned by the stylistic categories that we come across in every gallery of Digital Art. But these are also implemented by the preprogrammed features or commands utilized in designing.

Digital technology is characterized by these automated processes that can easily be handled to create or manipulate images or 3D objects. As Manovich mentions, “Image editing programs such as Photoshop ...come with filters which can automatically modify an image, from creating simple variations of color to changing the whole image as though it was painted by Van Gogh, Seurat or other brand-name artist.”

In a very general sense, the potential of a medium is immanent in the tools and techniques embedded in it. All media imprison creativity with their inbuilt algorithms available for performance. And Digital Arts can be said to be still at their infancy in this respect.

Although computer-mediation in art creation can be considered as a drawback for the free expression in the mastery of the medium, it is a great opportunity for the multitude at last to engage themselves in self-expression.

Hyperreal and Supernatural in Digital Creation

We can say that the challenge facing the digital sculptor today is to incorporate life into these virtual creations. Digital production entails a return to the eternal problem of realistic representation in painting and sculpture.

Present achievements in digital 3D modeling somehow remind us of the superficiality of Egyptian or Grecian archaic sculptures. Representing life in hewn stone required many centuries and successive generations of experimentation. A similar evolution can be traced in the history of painting arriving finally in Impressionist techniques developed synchronously with the advance of photography.

Photography was revolutionary as an alternative to painting. It captures life with all its impurity, casualness, irregularity, pathology and ugliness. Imagine a close-up of human skin in macro-photography and compare it with the most successful of artificially created digital textures. Benjamin recognized this revolutionary potential of photography and film for recording life as it has never been possible by the perception of the naked eye and by manual techniques of visual representation.

And now, Digital arts can easily appropriate digital copies from nature. These can be used in creating and editing virtual objects. But, whether the end product can really represent or reflect life is still a very different matter: this is effected by endless criteria ranging from composition to final articulation.

On the contrary, it seems that those who practice digital modeling easily proceed from photorealism to supernaturalism as a dominant inclination. The genres exhibited in the related websites are described by concepts such as fantasy, science-fiction, humanoid creatures, fairies, Gothic dungeons, etc. However weird this phenomenon may seem, it is also a fact that the most realistic creations in virtual space still have a flair for appearing supernatural: this characteristic of virtual reality has still to be deciphered.

Digital production cannot be realist actually. Realism requires a critical distance towards the cultural codes of representation, the stereotypes of perception.

Photography and cinema were critical as new technologies in mediating reality. Their most remarkable feature was in bypassing the cultural codes of the human observer.

Digital media, on the other hand, are best at reproducing and aestheticizing already fabricated representations of reality.

In practice, the incorporation of recordings from real life into virtual creations is realized through “Modularity”, another basic characteristic of New Media. We can consider this feature as a reflection of the nature of our contemporary discourse marked by postmodernity.

Modularity and Postmodernity

In the words of Manovich, the principle of Modularity implies that, “elements are assembled into larger-scale objects but they continue to maintain their separate

identity. The objects themselves can be combined into even larger objects -- again, without losing their independence.”

But we can here mention a much more common practice as an example of Modularity: the operation of Copy/Paste that we use when constructing a text. The academic convention of quoting has become so easy that each paper or thesis tends to become a collage of resources that are digitally available.

All of these practices actually reflect our contemporary mode of constructing reality. The postmodern world is characterized by the plurality and relativity of discursive fragments which you may combine as you wish, or rather, as it fits the present conjuncture or context in accord with contemporary pragmatism.

Since the metanarratives of the modern world have lost their authority, we are left with the authority of partial, historical and subjective utterances. They are self-referential in the sense that their legitimation depends on their common technique of construction, borrowing from each other and juxtaposing these fragments in different combinations. Hence Baudrillard recognizes the reign of simulacra, and the absence of reality as the distinguishing characteristic of our postmodern age.

In human memory, the temporal sequence of events is basically lost. Only if we translate history into a timeline as a spatial representation can we conceive who the forerunner or the follower are.

Digital arts try to incorporate life by borrowing representative fragments from nature. But once detached from the time-space continuum to which they belong, these fragments lose their representative status and become part of the simulation they are merged into.

What we have called Modularity of digital media actually reflects a much wider cultural phenomenon. We can even say that new technologies arise from what happens in the cultural sphere. Digital technologies are a product of our Postmodern culture that produces styles automatically and juxtaposes most diverse fragments in its creations.

This is also why today’s artistic production cannot develop utopian conjectures. The Modernist Utopia since the Renaissance would be construed from scrap as a radical alternative to reality, intentionally progressive in essence. A collage of past creations, on the other hand, will apparently be supernatural, but definitely not utopian.

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