## Introduction

The increasing digitalization of our everyday lives has been marked by the appearances of new forms of visual manifestations that do more than simply provide information but have become autonomous objects that transform how we live. In a pervasive fashion, such phenomena – whether they appear on our smartphone, our computers, our enhanced televisions, billboards and advertisements and a myriad of other forms – have taken on their own lives becoming seemingly autonomous and out of our control. What is intriguing and, for some, troubling about these new digital objects is not just that they exist and function without human intervention and input but that we readily accept their presence in our lives. Cutting edge technologies and trends such as machine learning, adaptive algorithms, big data and Internet of Things rapidly foster emergence of stand-alone computational ecosystems and entities. Although they are of human design, most of their everyday interactions are not directly human-centered; therefore, while purportedly enriching our experiences the programs we use on our smartphones and other devices have begun to have lives outside of our control, acting for us without our knowledge; retaining information about our lives, our interactions with software today generates and constitutes the existence of the digital phenomena that start to take on lives of their own. Smartphones are the easiest example to use because the choices we make about what we want to know about the world through them and the choices we make when we act in the world are then stored, redefined, altered and represented to us in a manner which is seemingly natural and tailored to our own choices but which is also artificially created and manipulative. To put it another way, digital phenomena have become entities in their own right, functioning in a way that allows us to believe we are in control of our world when, in fact, the exact opposite is taking place as we respond to these entities. On an everyday basis, most of us are screen essentialists as the field of our human-machine interaction is limited to the information displayed on the screen. And what makes these entities even more difficult to comprehend is not so much the control they have over our lives but their independence from their original sources; interactive software very quickly takes on a life of its own far beyond its programmers’ intentions when acquiring more data and allowing its algorithms to respond and reprogram itself in response to that data. Jean Baudrillard’s notion of the simulacrum was insufficient; the world hasn’t become a simulation of our own making but a simulation of our simulations’ making, as we are increasingly living in their world not our own. Contemporary society and culture have become effectively data feed.

The New Aesthetic has been described as ‘an attitude, a feeling, *a sensibility*’. In part a reflection of the expanding use of digital technology, it has increasingly become an indication at almost an essentialist level of specific artistic and design tendencies and practices. The concept of the New Aesthetic was initiated by James Bridle on his blog in 2011 where he started to gather images and things that seemed to identify a new aesthetic of the future. The term is used to describe the increasing presence in the physical world of such visual phenomena rooted in digital technology and the internet, in an effort to describe the increasing proliferation of visual languages dependent on self-generative computational structures rather than on natural language. Bridle’s Tumblr blog was instrumental in curating New Aesthetic objects but others have added to the theorization of the idea. Science fiction writer and futurist Bruce Sterling has developed a response that articulates its impact in social, political, cultural and artistic terms. Describing a set of artifacts that he believes represents a conflation of the digital and the real, Sterling has said of the New Aesthetic:

[It] is a native product of modern network culture. It’s from London, but it was born digital, on the Internet. The New Aesthetic is a “theory object” and a “shareable concept.” The New Aesthetic is “collectively intelligent.” It’s diffuse, crowdsourcing, and made of many small pieces loosely joined. It is rhizomatic, as the people at Rhizome would likely tell you. It’s open-sourced, and triumph-of-amateurs. It’s like its logo, a bright cluster of balloons tied to some huge, dark and lethal weight.[[1]](#footnote-2)

Sterling’s comment that New Aesthetic objects are rhizomatic is, unknowingly perhaps, derived from Gilles Deleuze’s and Félix Guattari’s notion of the rhizome as a metaphor for multiple entry points and representations of information into life, but he goes beyond their concept by asserting the phenomenological independence of New Aesthetic objects. Everyday interaction between human and consumer technology has been intensifying for the last decade: the internet at its most fundamental level of functionality, portable devices, mobile internet, web 2.0 and, lately, big data (where so much information is collected in large databases that it becomes impossible to access, use or control without adaptive algorithms and machine learning) amongst others have all deeply influenced contemporary civilization. What makes this influence different is how little choice the users have when they are relinquishing control of their existences to these media where the interaction has transformed from being merely intensive to pervasive and unseen.

Obviously, James Bridle and Bruce Sterling were not the first ones to notice what is taking place; Marshall McLuhan set the stage with his theories of communication and media, Lev Manovich’s books *The Language of New Media* and *Software Takes Command* have been instrumental in describing recent changes, and David M. Berry’s notion of computationality in *The Philosophy of Software: Code and Mediation in the Digital Age* and *Critical Theory and The Digital* is an attempt to describe social and cultural changes in the digital era. All have brought insightful and invaluable perspectives to new notions of the document and the role computational devices have in our lives, but Bridle in particular deserves credit for coining the term ‘New Aesthetic’ because it is the first term which articulates these changes at social, cultural and political levels. Others have criticized it: the New Aesthetic has been dismissed and labeled as a superficial identification of artistic practices that have already taken place for some time, and for many critics there is nothing new about New Aesthetic. We do not agree with this because we believe the term takes into account multiple layers and modes of human technology interaction which are mediated by computational media and technological artifacts that need to be understood at an ontological level as a means of redefining what the world is; the New Aesthetic does more than identify a sufficiently distinct category of aesthetic products while challenging many of the normative conventions of aesthetics itself. ‘It posits an aesthetic turn […] brought about itself through a “new nature”’[[2]](#footnote-3) and, in doing so, creates that new nature and a new holistic perspective for describing it. In a way, it signals a sense of hyper-contemporaneity.

To this end, we are taking two positions vis-à-vis New Aesthetic. First, we believe the New Aesthetic should not be considered as a mere theory of beauty or simple theory of beauty for the digital 21st century. In a broader perspective we would consider it as a theoretical approach that would enable taking to the forefront of our perception intertwined layers of algorithms and computation that contemporary civilization is built on. More narrowly, we are focusing on the New Aesthetic as an innovative interdisciplinary approach that is interested in describing specific types of digital imagery. At this level we would analyze it as an ‘aesthetics of computational miscalculation’ and as an ‘aesthetics of digital age’, taking into account: glitches, compression and codec artifacts, satellite images. It is not about aesthetics understood as in art theory or philosophy. The approach embodied by the New Aesthetic strives for ‘seeing the grain of computation’ and ‘an eruption of the digital into the physical’ and ‘emergence of computationality as an onto-theology’. The New Aesthetic has sparked the practical interest of artists, curators and designers and has become a subject of theoretical inquiry for journalists and scholars. From a classic academic perspective it may seem vague, inaccurate and simply not worthy of any attention. However, any scholar interested in contemporary society and culture should take into account such movement.

Secondly, it is impossible to think of the New Aesthetic without thinking of it as an aesthetic system related to artistic productivity. The expanding use of digital technology has been increasingly recognized as worthy of interest in aesthetics and in the art world; from projected cybernetic utopias and virtual realities to global awareness of artistic trends and unique art worlds, from the direct use of digital techniques as both the means of production and as art itself to its use as a means of facilitating new insights into art history, digital technology’s impact has become pervasive and even, perhaps, common. While there have been numerous discussions of the effects of digital technology on artistic production and aesthetic evaluation, until recently there’s been little discussion of the digital as a language that functions independently of our normal concerns. Thinking through this idea we’ve identified two sets of questions. First, how has the digitalization of the world as it appears in a digital format affected our aesthetic perceptions of such appearances? Second, how has the digitalization of the world in the form of the New Aesthetic changed the way art is being produced today? Answering these questions involves more than just describing the stylization of GUIs or the latest updates to the software that runs iPhones but requires both asking questions about the assessment process that users go through when looking at digital manifestations as well as looking at art specifically made in a digital format. Particularly nowadays, when any type of digital imagery, including visual arts, undergoes the same computational processes: quantization and discretization – continuous reality is transformed into set of variables.

The software used in mapping programs transforms the way we interact with and navigate a geographic location but it also has aesthetic qualities itself that work behind the scenes, if you will, and subtly transform and manipulate digitally our actual movement and enjoyment of space; to put it another way, whether we like a restaurant, book shop, art gallery, local neighborhood or even an entire city may be dependent on the way information about all of these is presented to us and, even further, how that information evolves in databases controlled by the software. This could go so far as a software application ‘defining’ an entire country geographically by noting at certain scales the locations of fast food restaurants. With the work of artists who use digital techniques we have an entirely different but related set of issues: are artists utilizing the digital media merely as a means towards an end or is the creative process guided by the software regardless of artists’ intentions? Artists like Mathieu Tremblin, Benjamin Grosser and Aram Bartholl have been creating work that explores the implications not only of the use of digital media but also our ability to control such media.

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What needs to be addressed is how New Aesthetic objects or New Aesthetic art objects – and there absolutely is a difference – necessitate new forms of aesthetic evaluation. It can be argued that advocating an increasing awareness of the inescapabilty of digital manifestations opposes the continuation of aesthetics in the traditional sense as it finds itself practically incapable of accounting for an aesthetic system that is self-substantiating; old ways of looking at art, of describing the beauty of objects, are no longer relevant when the objects themselves respond to our sensibilities and craft themselves towards their understanding of our very intentions of aesthetic judgment. Because manifestations of the New Aesthetic are based in computational language, algorithms and self-replicating systems of code, it is necessary to question whether traditional accounts are viable or whether the very notions of beauty, pleasure, idealism and expressiveness are reducible to mathematical structures or simply incompatible with natural language when assessing New Aesthetic objects.

What is striking about New Aesthetic art objects is not just their origins in digital media but their appearance as natural evolving out of our digital experiences. Nowadays, the landscape of potential ‘artistic images’ is basically endless as images are part of everyday software and information ecosystems and are ‘produced’ thanks to capabilities of other software. It is no longer strange to think of images as ‘photoshopped’ because all normatively perceivable images are assumed to be digitally altered in some fashion. Thus, all contemporary images share the same digital DNA (creative software ecosystems, filers, effects, codecs, color spaces). What is strange, rather, is how natural the assumption itself has become. Of course many artists continue to work in traditional methods and materials, but increasingly digital methods become the foundations or the starting point. It might seem strange to say that we’re going to end up talking about Kant at some point – at first it might seem like Kant would be the last person that has anything to do with the New Aesthetic – but it is by looking at Kant’s little regarded ‘Critique of Teleological Judgment’ in his *Critique of Judgment* that some interesting insights emerge about New Aesthetic objects in general and art specifically.

Where we’ve ended up with these two perspectives – the theoretical, which seeks to understand the metaphysics of New Aesthetic manifestations, and the aesthetic, which seeks to assess the valuative and creative processes involved in the creation of New Aesthetic objects – is not at a pair of incompatible positions but a fluxual dialectic that articulates what we believe is a pervasive and unavoidable development in our world. The New Aesthetic isn’t merely simply a recognition that software is becoming a guiding principle for our experience of the world nor a new form of digital creativity but is a determinative aspect of contemporary existence. Today’s image is often a software product, implemented in and by another software construct, as Lev Manovich argues; we have entered an era when media *are* software. Given that media are software, and given the growing ubiquity of media and its effects on our lives, we believe the New Aesthetic is more than just an attitude but a defining feature of contemporary existence. The New Aesthetic is not without its limitations. It is hardly a firm academic theory or methodology. However, being aware of the limitations behind the idea, we argue that in order to examine a fluxual social and cultural context of the digital age one has to take an equally unconventional and fluxual approach.

1. Bruce Sterling, ‘An Essay on the New Aesthetic’, *Wired.com*, 2 April 2012, http://www.wired.com/2012/04/an-essay-on-the-new-aesthetic/. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. James Bridle, ‘‘Waving at the Machines’, Web Directions South 2011, 5 December 2011,

   Sydney, http://booktwo.org/notebook/waving-at-machines/. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)