## Chapter Two: Manifestations of the New Aesthetic

In 2005, Sandy Island in the Pacific Ocean was undiscovered. {Fig. 7} Sandy Island had been listed as an island on maps and noted in documents perhaps as far back as 1774 when James Cook supposedly discovered it. Additionally, instances of its sighting and its representation on maps continued well into the late 19th century, including notes on an 1895 British Admiralty Map that described its heavy breakers and sandy islets. Despite repeated attempts to find Sandy Island, it was never seen again even though it continued to appear on many maritime charts and maps through the rest of the 20th century. Finally, in 2012, the Australian ship R/V Southern Surveyor conclusively proved that it did not exist and only then was it removed from Google Maps. In many ways, this is simply an example of how large our world remains and how there is still more to explore and explain even in the 21st century. Still, despite the increasing digitalization of the world, the island remained on Google Maps until 2012 and had been utilized in scientific data models since 2005; in short, the non-existence of Sandy Island had maintained a persistent digital autonomy with real world effects that itself has been made real precisely because of the impossibility of its recollection as not having existed.

In many respects, Sandy Island is merely an instance of a cartographic error, but we also believe that it’s a good example of the pervasive datafication of our culture and society, wherein digital authority begins to supersede our senses as one half of the dialectic that articulates a pervasive and unavoidable development in our world. Like many of the examples of New Aesthetic manifestations that we will describe below, the story of Sandy Island illustrates an interesting tendency in our contemporary world which resulted in the necessary emergence of critical approaches. We would call it a pervasive datafication. We are entering the era where the computational, particularly through processes of automation, is granted a significant degree of agency. As a result, tasks such as information management have been delegated mostly to autonomous machines of many kinds. These systems, residing beyond our day-to-day control, may sometimes fail to function properly due to data corruption and flows in code. We are not aware of it, until an unwanted action occurs in the physical reality (a power grid fail or an autonomous car malfunction) or in the digital layer (software glitch, data loss).

However, the Sandy Island case is even more interesting. In this example the digital layer worked perfectly; based on digitalization of human-generated cartographical data, a digital representation of a non-existent terrain was created, establishing the foundations of transmedial aesthetic patterns. A computer does not ask questions about the validity of data it is given, its sole aim is to digitize, process and make available to users, and this condition of passive legitimization further engenders aesthetic validity. The Sandy Island example illustrates how the digital and physical realities have become intertwined, but it also illustrates the fact that even an autonomous computational system should be trusted as long as we are certain that the data it was given is correct. The New Aesthetic approach suggests that even in this ideal situation, which is far from today’s reality, a computer’s agency and ‘power of judgment’ should not be considered as a final instance. This thought will accompany us as we will discuss some New Aesthetic objects in this chapter.

Until now, our focus has been on the theoretical ideas behind the New Aesthetic. This has been a crucial step, if for no other reason than that the New Aesthetic is such a contemporary set of phenomena that its grounding can be traced to recent theoretical ideas in digital culture, philosophical ideas behind computational practices and algorithmic construction, and the remainder of the intersection of these in digital form. James Bridle’s blog set out the pathway of discovery, but it’s been clear that, as the popularity of the New Aesthetic has waned in the common discourse of *Wired* and other magazines, that theoretically mapping the framework and parameters was crucial in order to encapsulate the specific ontological nature of the categories of critical thought and practices. That being said, theory is only as good as its objects. With a partial completion of this effort, we would now like to turn to specific manifestations of New Aesthetic objects and discuss them within this framework.

### Precursors of New Aesthetic Objects

Examples vary widely: from simple HTML code to complex websites, from iOS and Android applications on smartphones and tablets to databases and datafarms, the variety of what might be classified as a New Aesthetic object is almost overwhelming and continually shifting; there are even instances of New Aesthetic objects which seemingly manifest themselves as analog objects, designed or coded digitally but physically analog in their interactivity. What is also clear is that New Aesthetic objects, regardless of the duration of use, are inherently pervasive in their effect.

It’s clear from our research that New Aesthetic objects have been evolving over a longer period than the existence of James Bridle’s blog. The ‘worst video game’ ever made – the commercially unreleased *Desert Bus*, created in 1995 to reproduce the eight-hour drive from Tucson, Arizona to Las Vegas, Nevada with unrelenting and excruciating boredom (you drive the bus in real time, with only the perfectly straight road as a vague distraction, and get one point for each successful run you make there and back) – may be one instance.[[1]](#footnote-2) {Fig. 8} *Desert Bus* is a video game without any goals beyond one, with an almost unceasingly tedious display of just desert and road, but it has attracted a strange, determined cult following among a few gamers who return to it for marathon charity fundraisers. *Desert Bus* also is a mental concession to the virtual of simple programming; while the experience of the game may last eight or more hours (or much, and more likely shorter, since relinquishing any control over the bus causes it to immediately crash, ending the game), and the game play can best be described as mind-numbingly inert at best, certainly the programming itself took little time comparatively, as there would have been no need to map out digitally every stretch of the eight mile run.

Neither the undiscovery of Sandy Island nor *Desert Bus* are really New Aesthetic objects, however. Sandy Island was a mistake with real world consequences; and a mistake that says more about the construction of knowledge systems than about digital artifacts. *Desert Bus* is a video game that has often been described as the worst video game ever, and was created more as a prank than a game, without any expectations that people would play it or get any enjoyment out of it. What they are is historical indicators, even precursors, of the New Aesthetic as a means of categorizing an entirely new set of objects. Thinking about a dynamic conceptual space between the aesthetic experience of both, there is evidently a widening and increasing divergence between expectations and use value while simultaneously a collapsing relationship between the digital artifact and user experience. What the cases of Sandy Island and *Desert Bus* represent in a very nascent stage is a spectrum of New Aesthetic experiences, products and objects. One of the strengths of James Bridle’s blogging efforts is also the biggest hurdle to constructing a viable topology of the New Aesthetic: on the one hand its relatively random approach to curation has allowed a kind of free-wheeling and inclusive investigative strategy; on the other hand such a loose accumulation of manifestations has blurred the differences between different types of experiences and objects with a varyingly commensurate typology of creativity and productivity, to actual objects which are even more fully autonomous digital products such as the results of software glitches or algorithmic juxtaposition and that are more accurately described as New Aesthetic products. Some manifestations are the way they are because they represent a human response or attitude within the New Aesthetic attitude, while others are directly the product of a digital environment independent of human control.

### New Aesthetic Products as Experiences

Certain instances of New Aesthetic objects, like this screen shot from the UK McDonald’s iPhone app, fit easily into our notions of what this attitude entails. {Fig. 9} Here we have a map of all of the locations of the fast food restaurant McDonald’s in the entire country, including Northern Ireland and Jersey. Having scaled back to the appropriate level, the user has created a map of the UK constructed entirely of McDonald’s locations – a dystopian nightmare if there ever was one – that deletes any possible map function and obfuscates actual restaurant locations with an excessive number of overlapping logos. What makes this a New Aesthetic product, the most important aspect of this image, is the manner in which the use of the digital object greatly circumvents the programmer’s intentions. With other images {Fig. 10} we have even more instances of the programming overtaking the programmer’s intentions; facial recognition may be a valuable tool for control of the public, police and intelligence agencies, but its history indicates a shift from practical uses to a more intrusive construction of digital identification. Facial recognition software has a long history, extending back into the 1960s with early work being done by of Woody Bledsoe, Helen Chan and Charles Bisson at Panoramic Research Inc.[[2]](#footnote-3) Originally focused on artificial intelligence, their efforts at creating software based pattern recognition was quickly identified as having a multiplicity of purposes, including reading address labels as well as identifying individuals in photographs. The research’s use of normalized correlation of unprocessed optical data such as the space between the corners of the subject’s eyes, the length of their nose or the width of their mouth started the means whereby catalogs could be generated of individual faces, but a high degree of accuracy was a long way off; by the 1990s, facial recognition software had become so sophisticated that its failure rate was remarkably low, and by 2007 almost non-existent. This has, of course, raised privacy concerns, and a number of efforts have been made to design products that will foil facial recognition algorithms; more importantly, it has become clear, with the introduction of consumer facial recognition, that a major shift in the public consciousness and acceptance has occurred. What is now the case is that a willing public accepts facial recognition as a part of daily life. Given this background, the image cited on James Bridle’s blog is an even more radical instance of a New Aesthetic manifestation. There is no surprise that the faces have been highlighted by the facial recognition software, but what is surprising – while increasingly not being surprising to any user of commercial facial recognition software – is the identification of different colored parts of the background as a face. Why is this radical? It’s more than just the software asking the user to confirm someone’s face (often the case in Apple’s Aperture software, for instance) but a digital prompt necessitating an interaction between a user and the software as autonomous decision processes; the software has decided that there appears to be a face there, and needs human intervention not to identify that face but to confirm its decision; should the user decline or simply avoid correcting that decision, then the software will continue to identify that portion of the digital photograph as a face, as a human being, and even further will utilize its decision to identify similar things in photographs as faces.

Building on a theoretical approach that would enable taking to the forefront of our perception intertwined layers of algorithms and computation that contemporary society and culture is built on, further instances of New Aesthetic objects as experience can be identified at an increasing rate. Another example of a manifestation of a New Aesthetic object is ‘What colour is it?’.[[3]](#footnote-4) {Fig. 11} In many respects, this is merely a webpage displaying the user’s local time, an increasingly common type of application for Chrome and other browsers, but what becomes immediately apparent over a short time is the ever-shifting color of the background. Here we have the emergence of computationality as an onto-theology, wherein the datafication of web colors embeds itself into our temporal sensibilities. With each new second the background corresponds to its HTML color code, e.g. 08:55:59 turns out to be a darkish grey blue. Where the conceit lies is in the expectation that a 24 hour clock will produce a rainbow of colors when, in fact, nothing could be further from the truth; a solely numeric listing of HTML color codes tends towards dark greens and blues, so there’s less variation than might be anticipated. Created by Berlin based artist and designer James E. Murphy, it is part of a series of webpages and coding[[4]](#footnote-5) that challenge users’ preconceived notions of web interactions. It’s difficult to think of ‘What colour is it?’ as an example of art per se (and we will return to Murphy’s work in the next chapter on examples of New Aesthetic art where other work seems more appropriately discussed), since it feels more like a gimmicky trick of web design, but that sense of being unknowingly confounded by the digital coding is itself New Aesthetic in nature; it’s not the gimmick that makes it that but the increasing degree of autonomy and means of confounding the user’s experience.

Chris Foley’s *Glitchtop[[5]](#footnote-6)* {Fig. 12} is a further example of the development of HTML coding producing a specifically New Aesthetic experience. Chris Foley is a web designer whose work is focused on data management, including the innovative browser extension LightboxE for Chrome and Safari that allows users to view and manipulate images found on websites on their own terms without leaving the page. Glitchtop is quite different from other programming efforts by Foley, labeled as ‘an online art generator inspired by glitch art and pixel art’.[[6]](#footnote-7) Users are invited to choose from a range of different sliding parameters – size, hue, saturation, lightness, repeat and speed – which are then used to generate an image of varying colored squares that alternate between the spectrum of those parameters. At first this seems like an interesting visual experience and, in reality, it’s really nothing more than that. Where this is a New Aesthetic experience, though, is in the illusion of control; user input seems to be a contributing factor to the product, but user input is a limiting factor in that the relations between the different colored squares are a result of the digitization of the color spectrum itself. While Foley notes that this is inspired by glitch art, with its dependency on random information and errors, it’s clear that glitches do not make an appearance. Where, indeed, is the art or the New Aesthetic experience in this case? The status of both Murphy’s and Foley’s work as art is debatable – though we would tend to place them into that category – their status as New Aesthetic products is not. The contrast between viewers’ expectations and the resulting visuals generates more than just a flashing sequence of colors; instead, more poignantly, what is created is a remarkably overlooked response of indifference to the digital reality, based on an acceptance of the limited control in contrast to the final product. The response of most users to what is generated is less of a sense of awe and aesthetic excitement and is rather an acceptance that this is what should have been expected, graphically represented in the ubiquity of the poster produced by the Deterritorial Support Group. {Fig. 13} What is revealed isn’t some hypnotic, cathartic or enlivening visually engaging set of patterns but a distancing removal of the user from a critical engagement or an aesthetics of computational miscalculation. In many ways, it’s a safe assumption that most users will respond to these flashing squares of color with ‘so what?’. And it’s in that indifference that the New Aesthetic often operates most effectively, best represented by an apolitical response.

*Glitchtop* is at best a reproduction of the glitch interjecting itself into our experience of the digitization of the world. We will return to glitches as art in the next chapter, but for now we’re focused on glitches as they manifest as part of the digital experience. Perhaps the most famous of this type of image associated with Bridle’s blog and the New Aesthetic is that of an airplane appearing on Google Maps; flying too quickly to be resolved accurately, it appears as four different images of the same plane broken up into a grainy image and three separate RGB shadows. {Fig. 14} This is a true glitch, an error caused by the inability of the software to process real time imagery or an inadequate capacity to recognize and recombine images into a functioning single image, and it is vitally interesting as a New Aesthetic object because of its inherent aesthetic appeal, but it’s become sufficiently commonplace in ‘false glitches’ like those found in satellite imagery that the glitch itself has become readily accepted as part of users’ aesthetic experiences. At first what seems like a data output error, which is indeed actually an error, becomes immediately attractive, absorbing and even engrossing despite itself. The aesthetic appeal of the image, its beauty, rests in the fact that the viewer ignores the glitch and responds on a more intuitive level. What’s even more interesting is how the strangeness of the image disappears into a state of aesthetic ubiquity. Skyler Balbus, a designer interested in branding, interactivity and product design, writing about this image {Fig. 15} and the New Aesthetic generally on a blog for the Hook & Loop design team, notes:

If you’ve ever had an app suddenly deteriorate into pixels, or sent a text message that was autocorrected to the wrong words, or had your Google Maps satellite view obstructed by a low-flying plane, you know that the glitches in our everyday life can be just as surreal as they are maddening. When things don’t behave as we expect them to, and when the logic of interactions isn’t clear to us, we’re left with what can feel like pure absurdity. But these glitches in technology aren’t always just random acts of incoherency; they’re often the product of a breakdown of communication.[[7]](#footnote-8)

Maddening deterioration and surreal autocorrection often are taken as criticisms of aesthetic experiences, especially the former, but they’ve become commonplace experiences as we rely increasingly on smartphones to navigate the world. Balbus isn’t theorizing at a critical level the impact this image has, but it’s clear that she’s embracing the absurdity generated in the glitch as well as the breakdown of communication. Balbus is not the only one to note the connection between New Aesthetic experience and the surreal; in ‘An Essay on the New Aesthetic’ Bruce Sterling wrote:

People have tried such things before. The Surrealists once valorized the “imagination of the unconscious.” But, as the Situationists pointed out, a generation later: the imagination of the unconscious is impoverished.

Valorizing machine-generated imagery is like valorizing the unconscious mind. Like Surrealist imagery, it is cool, weird, provocative, suggestive, otherworldly, but it is also impoverished.[[8]](#footnote-9)

Clearly, though, while the image generated as a result of the glitch isn’t surreal (a word all too often synonymously used in place of ‘weird’ or ‘incomprehensible’) Sterling has a point. The four different and simultaneous images of the plane in the digital artifact may appear as a glitch in the programming, an error showing the inadequacy of the computational device, but at the same our response is to accredit an artistic agency of sorts in the process of the image’s production; like surrealism, with its emphasis on creating a level of connectivity between human beings through suggestive imagery, New Aesthetic images that are the product of glitches are creating a level of connectivity between human perceptual capacity and aesthetic response with autonomously and digitally generating entities, namely software packages that function independently of human intervention. At some level, responding aesthetically to a glitchy image grants a type of aesthetic, even artistic, autonomy to software as part of the increasing computational materiality of our civilization.

The appearance of glitches as a hallmark of the New Aesthetic has become a commonplace paradigm. Images like agricultural fields appearing to be pixelated are glitchy in a way, in that there is the illusion of digital parameters being imposed on the world (an illusion that may be all too real, given the increasing dependency in agricultural production on GPS technology as databases). Other images appear to be glitchy when they are, instead, the product of the visualization of data. {Fig. 16} These images in particular are interesting in that they represent population figures of the contiguous United States at varying levels as part of the Polymers JavaScript library[[9]](#footnote-10) that is designed to create interactive maps for web browsers; giving each pixel the task of representing an area populated by 1000+ people, the programmers still felt the need to make the result more visual appealing, such that:

My team selected the old-school color scheme to maximize contrast whilst maintaining some semblance of readability. According to them, if it dredges up any repressed 8-bit feelings – like the urge to snipe an Atari 2600 off Ebay – that’s not a bug. It’s a feature.[[10]](#footnote-11)

Pixelization has seemingly acquired a value as a tool. Apps like Pixelate Tool {Fig. 17} are advertised as ‘a QUICK and HANDY tool for adding pixelated blur to your photo in seconds’ with one reviewer’s comments being ‘I can get used to it not being super accurate but I hope it doesn’t get removed because as of now it’s the only simple tool that does what it does’ as if the accuracy of the pixelization is ironically important.[[11]](#footnote-12) When we start to look at images or videos, wherein the players of a football game are reduced to pixels equivalent to the information provided by the drone to its operators {Fig. 18}, or in which the photographer noted was referred to by people as the ‘Lego Tornado’ {Fig. 19} but is more appropriately described as a Tornado fight jet covered in a semi-glitchy livery, we start to see a different approach to glitches and pixelization. Other images such as those from the 2015 parade in China marking the 70th anniversary of the end of WWII {Fig. 20} are even more strikingly strange and distanced from a normative human experience; putting aside the political and military themes, with the subtext running through each of the images discussed in this paragraph, it’s evident that the digital style of the camouflage is entirely counterproductive but assumed contradictorily to be effective. {Fig. 21} Consider, for the moment, the purpose of camouflage: it’s designed to obscure the object from sight, specifically human sight. Now consider the bright blues used by the Chinese military on their tanks and missile launchers, and it’s obvious that exactly the opposite effect is intended; these tanks have been designed to be seen more readily rather than less. While there are instances of this pixelization camouflage paint scheme appearing that are apparently an attempt at hiding the military vehicle, such as the image of a Leopard 2 tank photographed outside of Munich, the effectiveness of such a visual scheme has been proven to be quite low, as evidenced by the quick retirement by the United States military of patterns there are entirely fractal or pixel based.[[12]](#footnote-13) {Fig. 22} Thinking about these tanks even further in contrast to the German Tornado it’s also clear that the camouflage scheme was digitally designed in an almost random fashion; rather than having each part of the paint scheme chosen to obscure the appearance of the tank, the color scheme has been generated by digital means with little input from a human designer. Two intertwined conclusions can be drawn from these manifestations. First, the camouflage has probably been utilized to achieve greater visibility in a parade setting rather than during military action; second, the assumption has been made that any camouflage that obscures these vehicles from human eyesight, no matter how effective at that purpose, is useless in a modern battlefield with digital target acquisition. Given this perspective, it doesn’t matter what color the tanks were painted, since the digital environment will trump the human experience of that environment.

The human experience of its localized environment has become so intricately bound up with the digitalization of the world that the interaction itself has become newsworthy, of a sorts, especially when things go wrong. In the middle of the Old Street roundabout in London that is frequently referred to as the ‘Silicon Roundabout’, the outdoor advertising firm JCDecaux constructed the ‘Old Street EC1’ digital billboard system, described thusly:

Old Street EC1 provides a powerful communications channel for brands to engage with the unique and exciting audiences who live, work and socialise in EC1. The newly digitised, iconic advertising architecture in the centre of Silicon Roundabout has become synonymous with the EC1 area, providing unparalleled impact within the vibrant and creative East London community.[[13]](#footnote-14)

Part of the Old Street EC1’s design was the display of Google and YouTube searches in the UK with predictably unruly and offensive results. {Fig. 23} It’s always remarkable that designers and advertisers don’t anticipate unintended effects that spark outcries and offense, but clearly what ended up being on display was beyond what almost anyone could have imagined. Humorous, yes, but, like the camouflage on Chinese tanks, there is evidently a lack of human intervention resulting from a lack of engagement on the part of the programmers who trusted their own interaction with the digital world to be echoed universally. Our theoretical approach enables us to take the position that our perception has become so entangled in the intertwined layers of algorithms and computation that contemporary civilization is built on that a fully effective engagement with that entanglement is no longer possible. It’s not just that programmers are making mistakes or oversights when they don’t anticipate surprising results, nor is it simply that there is an unwarranted and blind faith in the appearance of digital traces in the real world leading to a misplaced sense of an enhanced experience; rather as every point of our interaction with our environments, at an individual level, becomes increasingly guided and then determined by their digitalization, it’s clear that we’re losing our ability to decisively act digitally. It’s at the boundaries of the unintended consequences that the New Aesthetic has emerged, where digital autonomy supersedes human intention and even social structures. Whether it’s an expired QR code on a bottle of Heinz ketchup going terribly wrong, resulting in a link to a pornography website,[[14]](#footnote-15) the use of selfies for live reporting[[15]](#footnote-16) or advertising for Facebook in Yemen,[[16]](#footnote-17) the presence of New Aesthetic digital objects has become so widespread that it’s no longer recognized but simply accepted, an indication that we’ve stopped thinking of the world as digitized and started thinking of the digital as the world.

### New Aesthetic Objects as Products

The examples discussed in this chapter so far are the result of unintended manifestations, a result of what we believe is a metaphysical and ontological shift in the digitization of the world. At the same time, we also believe that a number of New Aesthetic products can be identified specifically as New Aesthetic objects; code, webpages, typography, advertising and a myriad of other forms of human products extending well beyond the digital into physical objects are a result of the attitude that Bridle wrote about. The distinction between products and objects is quite simple: products are objects of experience that are evidently created, authored, programmed and are the result of human activity while objects don’t necessarily appear this way. That being said, thinking about New Aesthetic objects is a little more complicated than at first it might seem because New Aesthetic objects are implicitly understood as products because of their digital nature but aren’t evidently so. Given the examples discussed so far, with the emphasis on the autonomy of the software, the algorithms, and the digital interference into and selective emphasis on human activity, it would be reasonable to assume that mediated New Aesthetic objects are more difficult to identify; our description of their nature has often implied a digital agency separate from human agency, a position we continue to maintain. This is made even more complicated when it quickly becomes clear that many of these objects are political in nature, or at least analogous to the products of a political awareness. What we would also like to note is that we are still not talking about New Aesthetic art, which is its own separate category above and beyond the distinction between products and objects, and which is reserved for the next chapter, though the status of some of this work as art is unquestionable.

One of the most interesting manifestations of the New Aesthetic has been the work produced by the CAVI group based in Aarhus University.[[17]](#footnote-18) With recent contributions from members focused on digital aesthetics, a number of projects by CAVI have explored in great detail the interplay between digitally produced information and human interactivity. In 2006, the group installed the Dynamically Transparent Window[[18]](#footnote-19) {Fig. 24} in the Salling department store in Aarhus; using data generated by tracking the people walking by, exploiting the computational materiality of our everyday activities, the large, glass storefront shifts from opaque to transparent with changes in thin electro-chromatic strips of foil in response to transmedial aesthetic patterns elaborating a dynamic relationship between the storefront as advertising and users’ experience of the storefront, but often with a collapse of the standard enticing or seductive intent of advertising alone. The intent of this installation is to draw people closer to the window, to give them the opportunity to interact with the display in a playful and productive fashion, but it’s equally clear that the design doesn’t actually invite people into the Salling department store but rather invites them to play with the display or simply ignore it. While the commercial intent is self-evident – Salling would not have allowed this display if the management did not foresee it as a marketing tool – its flawed and subverted outcome undermines the display’s manifest purpose to hunt down future customers through the semblance of interactivity.

In 2009, in collaboration with Digital Urban Living at Aarhus University, CAVI installed *Climate on the Wall*,[[19]](#footnote-20) another instance of a seemingly interactive display. {Fig. 25} Tracking people passing by with infrared cameras, thought bubbles with words and thoughts related to environmental awareness would be projected onto the wall above them. Additionally, *Climate on the Wall* has been described as interactive in that different people could collaborate to form sentences and statements about changes in the world’s environment, building a dialogue promoting increased environmental awareness and responsibility. Yet, it too is an instance of the New Aesthetic in that the participants’ autonomy is clearly limited to the digitally projected programming, and certainly glitches and poorly constructed ‘sentences’ would be apparent if not ripe for a type of digital vandalism; *Climate on the Wall* was installed during the ‘Beyond Kyoto’ conference in Aarhus, so that assumption that the programmers designed the system as an assertion of climate protection ideas is a safe one, but it’s an equally safe assumption that the system itself would appear to counteract its intended purpose; the inescapabilty of digital manifestations opposes the continuation of aesthetics that might encourage the growth of an environmentally oriented mindset.

One problem with either instances of work by the CAVI group is that they are not genuinely intrusive in the way that typical examples of New Aesthetic objects are, in part because they clearly are products produced in response to specific needs and conditions. This does not make CAVI’s work any less interesting, in that it seems clear to us that individuals making New Aesthetic products are exhibiting an awareness of the increasingly pervasive effect of the digitalization of the world on our human experience, but we’re still cautious about the work’s status as New Aesthetic objects. If we want a better example of an object that autonomously controls experience then it would be good to start with the app Cloak, available for smartphone. {Fig. 26} Launched in 2014 with a lot of media coverage, Cloak is an app designed to prevent what has become a standard feature of all smartphones: a continual broadcasting of users’ geographical location. Ironically, Cloak almost aspires to functionally imitate the conditions of Sandy Island, creating a digital invisibility for the user as if a digital invisibility is more important than an actual physical invisibility. By linking to Foursquare, Instagram, Facebook and Twitter, Cloak attempts to deny social media applications their default capability of connecting users not just digitally through messages and updates but physically by hiding their presence in the world when their presence if often assumed to be substantiated digitally. Its success has been less than stellar, with many users reporting a failure to obscure them from the prying capability of social networks, but as a response to the ubiquity of social networking’s capabilities it presents an interesting test case of both working within and opposing the intentions of the programmed capabilities of smartphones. Equally, a sense of pervasiveness of the digital experience is at the forefront of the design of Cloak; it’s clear that Cloak has no application in the real world, because the real world no longer exists. It’s even necessary to point out that there is a contradiction involved in the visual design of Cloak itself, in the need for an app that allows the use of social networks while denying a key aspect of sociability, curiously heightened by the glowing green colors reminiscent of old radar devices, but its purpose shows a remarkable degree of perspicuity on the part of the programmers, who have obviously taken note of a dissatisfaction with the pervasive digitization of our world. Apparently, we’ve reached a stage where we want everyone to know where we are but no one actually knows where we are.

The creation of the typeface ZXX[[20]](#footnote-21) also presents a really interesting instance of a New Aesthetic object in a manner similar to Cloak. {Fig. 27} Created specifically in response to the revelations of the American government’s spying program targeting American citizens, ZXX is a typeface that is unreadable by text scanning software.[[21]](#footnote-22) A first response to this might quickly conclude that ZXX is an absurd project – how much disruption can occur as a result of text scanning software that reads hard copies, when so much of the world’s information is digital and, therefore, doesn’t need to be scanned? – and this response would be correct; any effort to defeat optical scanners through a publically available digital typeface is going to fail once that typeface is part of the library of scannable typefaces. It’s clear, however, in the statements of the creator Sang Mun, that he designed ZXX in 2012-13 as a protest against the ease with which the NSA can access information rather than as a practical tool to thwart such information; the title of the typeface itself is used by the Library of Congress to indicate ‘No linguistic content; Not applicable’. Sang Mun is a Korean graphic designer and artist, and ZXX could be thought of as an example of New Aesthetic art, but it’s indicative of something much more. In his statement about the typeface on the website of the Walker Art Center, where Mun was an artist in residence, he quotes both Slavoj Žižek and Julian Assange. Žižek wrote: ‘We feel free because we lack the language to articulate our unfreedom.’[[22]](#footnote-23) Assange stated: ‘What does censorship reveal? It reveals fear.’[[23]](#footnote-24) What’s curious about these statements is how contradictory they are. Žižek’s indicates his position that a state of ignorance and muteness creates the illusion of freedom, while Assange’s implies that the very act of censorship creates the conditions of increased knowledge. It’s clear, within the context of the New Aesthetic, that ZXX is not actually a response to either position, articulating instead a response to the digitized conditions of knowledge. ZXX’s existence doesn’t raise questions about privacy, unlike so many other artworks do, though its presentation in the art world articulates many of those questions, but more poignantly manifests a growing unease on the part of designers that their basic tools like typefaces, created in a digital manner for a digital means of production, quickly slip out of their control and can be used for radically unintended consequences. Mun writes about ZXX as a contribution to those fighting the intrusion by governments into the private lives of their citizens, but to believe that ZXX is effective is naïve. In an update to the Walker Art Center’s blog, Mun acknowledges the discernable naïveté and notes that as a former NSA partner and intelligence agency employee he’s aware of the issues we’re concerned with. For Mun, raising awareness is the sole goal of ZXX; for us, it’s a symptom of the New Aesthetic’s increasingly pervasive intrusion into our lives. Because we are helpless in the face of digital agencies’ capacity to intrude, Mun writes:

Our lives in cyberspace are overloaded with impalpable and extensive personal information that is gathered, intercepted, deciphered, analyzed, and stored. With this information government and corporations can easily create an informational architecture that traps us in the structures of the World Wide Web and social media. Restricting and repressing our communication tools under the name of “homeland security” is only a small step into a totalitarian society. This non-physical-yet-ideological violence is what allows us to lapse into lethargic silence. But really, we shouldn’t be afraid to question the authorities’ continual intrusions.[[24]](#footnote-25)

This is a curious statement. Where’s the violence? In cyberspace, whatever that means today. How is our personal information stored in cyberspace? Through the digital architecture that is increasingly self-determinative. The use of digital information by the NSA and the like is itself governed by this self-determining digital architectonic and, in many respects, they are just as much of a victim of it as private citizens, in that their ideological justifications are created aesthetically for them rather than by them. Why aesthetically? Because the use of ideology must necessarily be seductive. The ideological violence that Mun rightfully identifies as a threat to privacy doesn’t come from human programming as agency but from the increasingly autonomous nature of data storage, tracking and use as an agent in and of itself. In this respect, ZXX is a perfect example of a type of New Aesthetic object, one designed to operate within an almost metaphysical and epistemic shift of the human condition and existence.

Both Cloak and ZXX can be understood in the context of an uneasy relationship with Google’s mapping efforts. Google’s mission statement says that the company’s ultimate goal is to organize the world’s information and make it universally accessible and useful. Almost more than any product by Google, Google Maps directly creates a sense of the computational materiality of our civilization, especially if one considers it simply a search engine for geographical locations. The latest restructuring of the company into Alphabet Inc., a conglomerate of several companies that were owned by or tied to Google, indicates that this strategy is treated very seriously by its managers, especially as it relates to an aggressive monetization of the presentation of information to users through their web searches and use of data such as Google Maps (which is, after all, merely another instance of a web search for location data). If we were to describe all Google operations, they could be narrowed down to two basic infinitively repeated actions. The first process would be an analog to digital conversion of any kind of world-related, textual and geospatial information as well as visual sensations, commonly known as digitalization. The second stage of this action is processing, organizing and sharing all this information with interested parties, from advertisers to common users. From the very beginning of the New Aesthetic, Google Maps aesthetics and its glitches were considered as key examples of the ‘new ways of seeing the world’ and ‘machine ways of seeing’.[[25]](#footnote-26) Google Maps (2005), and particularly Google Street View (2007), which provides 360° panoramic street-level views of various locations, introduced a new worldwide cultural paradigm, a new aesthetics which encapsulates the way we can experience the world beyond our sight. Distorted 360° panoramic street photos combined with searchable, geospatial data became a new paradigm of visual, however mediated, interaction with locations that are beyond our reach – in more than 65 countries, as Google proudly explains. The photograph of an airliner over Hyde Park in Chicago discussed earlier, which due to a processing error has been divided into a phantom plane and three RGB shadows is an example of a ‘new machine vision’, and does more than just embody an aspect of the New Aesthetic but also indicates the intrusive nature of Google Maps; the aerial or satellite cameras are usually designed to capture a picture of a static terrain, rather than a moving object, but here we’re not only given an impractical perspective – does anyone need an image of a plane flying over a park in order to navigate their way to and around that park? – but an assertive image that intrudes into our consciousness of the world, shifting our paradigm from one of being in the world to one of knowing the world. As such, it’s easy to conclude that New Aesthetic products unveil the limitations of computational technologies by focusing on examples that preprogrammed, specific use cases cannot ‘process’ while at the same time redirecting our attention so that we fail to recognize those limitations. This seems especially troublesome with Google’s efforts to digitize as many works of art as possible. The Google Cultural Institute[[26]](#footnote-27) states that its mission is to facilitate the discovery of artworks and collections from around the world by as broad an audience as possible. Our first thought would be to embrace this effort; it’s long been a truism that seeing art in museums around the world is an inherently elitist activity, if for no other reason than the financial resources necessary, and Google’s efforts are obviously couched within a democratizing impetus. At the same time, something else occurs when literally millions of examples of art are made easily available through the most prevalent search engine in the world: the experience of art becomes potentially commonplace. This is not an assertion on our part of Walter Benjamin’s description of the loss of aura in his influential chapter ‘The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction’ – which we are, nevertheless, remarkably sympathetic about, and which has been a major influence on the development of our critical perspective – in that we don’t readily subscribe to the idea that the value of artworks is necessarily lessened by their reproduction. Rather, what troubles us is the opportunity for error that inevitably creeps into such a large-scale effort as Google’s, highlighted and embodied in the images curated by Mario Santamaria in his Tumblr ‘The Camera in the Mirror’. {Fig. 28} Jené Gutierrez writes about these images: ‘In some of the images, the cameras don silvery-white blankets – this effect, combined with our culture’s immersion in selfies, renders these cameras almost familiar and comfortable, but startling in its reflection of itself and selfie culture. These museums and galleries are, for the most part, emptied of people, the camera eerily alone in its self-documentation.’[[27]](#footnote-28) This statement is both strange and stranger still. The very notion of a robotic selfie reflects our tendency as human beings to anthropomorphize activity.[[28]](#footnote-29) Further, the idea that the cameras ‘don’ blankets and actively document themselves is obviously erroneous, in the simple fact that the robots never clothed themselves and are unintentionally documenting their presence and activities. But is Google Art a sufficient art experience? Most people might answer negatively, but given Google’s stated intentions they would then claim that it serves a positive purpose. But does it really? Again, given the metaphysical and epistemic questions involved with the New Aesthetic, we would assert that it does not, that Google Art creates just as false a connection to art as a list of friends on Facebook to friendship.

With Cloak and ZXX, we have objects that accentuate our awareness that the complexity of the world cannot be grasped by single-task software and hardware. This awareness has continued with Google Maps. If computers are multi-role devices then so long as they are pre-programmed to respond to specific use cases and not a single other use they demonstrate a capability of transforming our epistemic position into a position of weakness. This is evident in two recent projects that partake of New Aesthetic ideas while still resisting its transformations of our world: *Report a Problem* (2012) {Fig. 29} by Emilio Vavarella[[29]](#footnote-30) and the efforts of Eduardo Graells-Garrido at the Universitat Pompeu Fabra in Barcelona together with Mounia Lalmas and Daniel Quercia, ironically both at Yahoo Labs, to burst the so-called ‘filter bubble’.[[30]](#footnote-31) *Report a Problem* {Fig. 30} is part of Vavarella’s ‘Google Trilogy’ as an ongoing effort to explore ‘the relationship between humans, power, and technological errors’. Presented as an art project in a number of galleries, it catalogs a series of images in which Google Maps has failed to accurately represent a specific location. The failures range from glitches in the photo file to random appearances of irrelevant information and incorrect views to actual instances of censorship. Most of these errors are caused by problems with the software used by Google in their efforts to photograph all of the locations available in Google Maps, but curiously quite a few of them seem to be simple problems with local conditions; for instance, quite a number of the images seem to have had rain or snow on the camera lens, lens flare or problems with the exposure. It might have seemed more reasonable to include Vavarella’s project in our chapter on art, but we believe that the justification for this project indicates more than just an aesthetic response to glitches; *Report a Problem* is itself dependent on programming software, one that allows users to report errors to Google for correction. What’s inherent to the function of Google’s software is the sense that Google Maps is interactive, when nothing could be further from the truth particularly in light of users’ general reluctance or indifferent attitude to actually report these errors. Vavarella’s project is interesting in an artistic sense, but what makes it even more interesting is that it documents the conditions of use and the acceptance by users of their digital experience.

The project ‘Data Portraits: Connecting People of Opposing Views’ by Graells-Garrido, Lalmas and Quercia is, in many ways, a direct response to the aesthetic peculiarities identified by Vavarella, though it takes the form of a visualization of Twitter responses to a contentious issue rather than glitches and errors in Google Maps. {Fig. 31} In the abstract to their paper presenting the project they write:

Social networks allow people to connect with each other and have conversations on a wide variety of topics. However, users tend to connect with like-minded people and read agreeable information, a behavior that leads to group polarization. Motivated by this scenario, we study how to take advantage of partial homophily to suggest agreeable content to users authored by people with opposite views on sensitive issues. We introduce a paradigm to present a data portrait of users, in which their characterizing topics are visualized and their corresponding tweets are displayed using an organic design. Among their tweets we inject recommended tweets from other people considering their views on sensitive issues in addition to topical relevance, indirectly motivating connections between dissimilar people. To evaluate our approach, we present a case study on Twitter about a sensitive topic in Chile, where we estimate user stances for regular people and find intermediary topics. We then evaluated our design in a user study. We found that recommending topically relevant content from authors with opposite views in a baseline interface had a negative emotional effect. We saw that our organic visualization design reverts that effect. We also observed significant individual differences linked to evaluation of recommendations. Our results suggest that organic visualization may revert the negative effects of providing potentially sensitive content.[[31]](#footnote-32)

This is a remarkably interesting New Aesthetic object not so much for the intended results but in that the visualization of contrasting opinions and the means of facilitating the introduction of opposing perspectives in an organic fashion apparently led the researchers to conclude that ideological opposition is breachable through a digital reformatting of the spectrum of perspectives. Unintentionally, perhaps, Graells-Garrido, Lalmas and Quercia have created a New Aesthetic condition wherein the aesthetic format transforms the degree to which users are receptive to new ideas. In a comment about the project in the *MIT Technology Review*, it’s noted that ‘There is good evidence that users can sometimes become so resistant to change than any form of redesign dramatically reduces the popularity of the service. Giving them a greater range of content could change that.’[[32]](#footnote-33) Or, as it is put it another way, technology bursts the ‘filter bubble’. But let’s be careful here. Technology may be bursting the ‘filter bubble’ by easing the resistance that users have to different ideological perspectives, but the question remains as to whether users’ abilities to be more open to different perspectives are eased through choice or by an external agency; it’s our position that this research identifies an instance where users’ agency, their ability to act and choose, is weakened precisely because of the acceptance of information in a digital format like Twitter. For example, recently a group on Facebook supporting the continued use of the Confederate flag in the United States was ‘hijacked’ by Virgil Texas, a self-described ‘internet user’ whose efforts at subversively undermining ethically questionable activity through humor are becoming well known.[[33]](#footnote-34) {Fig. 32} For a brief period of time, Texas acquired full administrative control of the group, removed other users’ administrative privileges, and transformed the group into ‘LGBT Southerners for Michelle Obama’. In an interview, Texas noted ‘Everyone in Confederate Facebook seems to accept friend requests from strangers, which I guess can be chalked up to Southern hospitality.’[[34]](#footnote-35) From our perspective, as much as we applaud Texas’ efforts and thought they were a hysterically funny sabotage of a self-righteous group’s buffoonery, we disagree with this last remark; the willing acceptance of Texas’ requests for administrative control of the group weren’t facilitated by ‘Southern hospitality’ but by the New Aesthetic conditions that Facebook invariably operates within. In short, the New Aesthetic today erodes users’ capacity to defy an alteration of their agency. While ‘Data Portraits’ – the irony of the title doesn’t escape us here– is well intended and clearly is an effort to establish a paradigm of resistance within the digital framework of experience, it is precisely because of this framework that its aspirations are thwarted. The same is true of the efforts of Texas; it’s not human agency in the form of ‘Southern hospitality’ that allowed the Facebook page to be highjacked but the conditions of Facebook’s objecthood itself in its own programming.

Other instances of this become increasingly visible the more you know where to look. Again and again, the pervasiveness of the New Aesthetic has surprised us, especially when it affects political theory in a cross-pollinating fashion. Google’s recent Constitute project,[[35]](#footnote-36) in partnership with the Comparative Constitutions Project,[[36]](#footnote-37) has the best of intentions – giving access to all of the constitutions of the world to everyone, so that people rewriting constitutions can reference others, search for key words and ideas, and pin specific areas of interest for further legislative use and review – but it’s underlying architecture specifically notes that the data provided is ‘prepared as open-linked data in order to provide for efficient human and machine consumption’ with the clear implication that writing new legislation, often amidst social upheavals, will be reduced to Google searches rather than the product of any genuinely original effort (and its description as machine consumable, while understood in its normal context of database use and cross-referencing, gives us chills). This disconnect in New Aesthetic objects often prompts some opposition.[[37]](#footnote-38) Anna Jobin importantly notes the inherent sexism of Google searches, with a particularly interesting contribution in the coining of the phrase ‘linguistic prosthesis,’ along with her co-author Frederic Kaplan, that identifies the fact that ‘the mediation by autocompletion algorithms acts in a particularly powerful way because it doesn’t correct us afterwards’[[38]](#footnote-39) and asks the absolutely perfect question of ‘Who is in charge when algorithms are in charge?’ With the images produced for UN Women by Memac Ogilvy and Mather Dubai[[39]](#footnote-40) {Fig. 33} it’s clear that search results themselves are offensive. {Fig. 34} It’s not just that the text shows search results that indicate misogynistic viewpoints, condemnable at a fundamental level, but just as important from the perspective of a critical engagement with the New Aesthetic it’s the fact that all human beings themselves are reducible to the products of search engines and autocompletion. {Fig. 35} Yet, even if those search results don’t appear in Google searches in the United States, the results themselves are still there; given the supposed democratic nature of Google searches, there is every possibility of their rise to prominence. Even more troubling, with the emergence of computationality as an onto-theology we all become mere data for search engines. The New Aesthetic increasingly means, in its manifestations, that there’s a lack of resistance to digital objects, a lack of an opportunity to resist the digitalization of the world, as that digitalization process transforms the world and our experiences of it in a way that’s beyond our control.

Representing this perfectly is an image from Bridle’s blog that shows the average appearance of every one of the 535 members of the United States’ Congress. {Fig. 36} A first reaction would be to see this as a humorous representation of the lack of genuine differences amongst American legislators, an unfocused image that is white, dressed in a suit, perhaps slightly balding, and undifferentiated in terms of ideology or propensity for corruption. Perhaps that’s a bit too far or a bit unfair, but this image as a parody of the identities of these politicians also clearly indicates that nothing really makes one different from the rest of their colleagues; the ethnic differences, the fundamental differences in identity are of no consequence for an algorithmically driven form of digital vision. As a object of the New Aesthetic, however, we turn to thinking about what it represents. Politics across the entire world have readily embraced social media such as Facebook and Twitter to the point that it would be absurd or impossible to conceive of a politician not having a website and a social media presence. In doing so, however, haven’t politicians simply homogenized their image? And, if image is the most crucial tool to getting elected, haven’t politicians’ embrace of social media in a New Aesthetic context homogenized their ideological values? Why this image is important, is not so much in its parody value but in the further implications of what it represents: a New Aesthetic politics, just like a New Aesthetic constitution, is always going to be dependent on the digital presentation to the users of an aesthetic condition, and the value of ideas is going to be lost amidst the form of that aesthetic condition. It might seem strange to imagine a New Aesthetic constitution – a legal, governing text that establishes social norms – but when politicians’ messages conform to predetermined stylistic conventions, in the hope that they are effective but driven by the externally influenced belief in a necessary style of the message, then a New Aesthetic constitution is not so far-fetched precisely because it’s the politicians who will be writing that document. In our opinion, anyone who believes that new laws and policies are today conceived and implemented by a traditional sense of politics governed by social power structures such as votes is foolish; policy and law and their intended and actual effects are increasingly a product of a conforming to the drive of the digital.

### The Effects of Instances of the New Aesthetic

In describing these various objects of the New Aesthetic, we should not forget about the other path of reasoning, namely that the New Aesthetic often manifests only as examples of real-time phenomena rather than as a persistent set of objects that can be curated, collected and confined to a museum setting. There is a correlation between presentation, identification and recognition in the New Aesthetic condition; presentation in the experience of New Aesthetic phenomena, identification of New Aesthetic objects as sufficiently distinct from other phenomena, and recognition of the effects of New Aesthetic objects as they alter our understanding of the world. Added to this, though, is the paradoxical temporary nature of the objects, paradoxical in terms of the contrast to their persistent effect. Each of the examples we discuss in this chapter present themselves either as digital products or as the resulting objects of digital processes, and importantly each example is clearly only associated with a New Aesthetic because of its dependency on its digital origins. Each example further distinguishes itself as New Aesthetic from other experiences because its digital origins seemingly have a capacity to be self-sufficient and self-determinative, acting as an autonomous agent in the interplay between itself and the user. And each example, with the recognition of its autonomous character, is then accepted, almost passively, as an agent affecting a shift in the way we understand and interact with the world. Google Maps or any other navigation app on our smartphone is a perfect example of this in the often documented instances of users relying on data rather than their own awareness of their surroundings; when someone drives onto a runway in the path of oncoming aircraft because Google Maps or Apple Maps told them to,[[40]](#footnote-41) they’ve done so less out of stupidity and more because they believed what they were being told and because they assumed the information the app was providing was correct. In fact, the information as far as the app was aware of (and we do attribute a certain digital ‘awareness’ to apps, with the full intentions of ascribing a certain limited sense of consciousness to apps), was correct.

Where the metaphysical change takes place, amidst these effects, is less in the specific examples but in the passive acceptance of temporarily accurate data. Almost all the examples we’ve described, because they are digital products, may paradoxically not exist at the time the reader is reading this book. Certainly it would be a good assumption that many will not exist decades from now, even mere years from now; in some cases, the imagery we’ve used was archived by us and is no longer available through the URL addresses at the time of this publication. Most of these software-based phenomena are just a ‘pull of a plug’ away from oblivion, never to be archived, never to be available again, absolutely temporary. From an aesthetics perspective, there has been a spectrum of responses. Hito Steyerl’s article ‘In Defense of the Poor Image’[[41]](#footnote-42) is an acceptance at an aesthetic level of a range of image quality, particularly poor quality images. Steyerl’s defense centers around the poor quality of images from pirated sources of cinema and video work, an inevitable consequence in the conversion process when shifting content from analog or outdated digital sources to more widely used video formats. Borrowing from Juan García Espinosa’s book *For an* *Imperfect Cinema*, written in Cuba in the late 1960s, Steyerl advocates the notion of an ‘imperfect cinema’ that can be extended to a notion of an ‘imperfect image’. Steyerl writes about the political force that she identifies as an inherent quality of imperfect cinema:

The imperfect cinema is one that strives to overcome the divisions of labor within class society. It merges art with life and science, blurring the distinction between consumer and producer, audience and author. It insists upon its own imperfection, is popular but not consumerist, committed without becoming bureaucratic.[[42]](#footnote-43)

We find ourselves very much in alignment with Steyerl’s position; it has been one of the crucial catalysts of our own thought. At the same time, in the same vein as Steyerl’s assertion that ‘one has to redefine the value of the image, or, more precisely, to create a new perspective for it’, we find her opening paragraph even more interesting in that we see it as an ontology of the digital image diverging from the rest of her article. Steyerl writes:

The poor image is a copy in motion. Its quality is bad, its resolution substandard. As it accelerates, it deteriorates. It is a ghost of an image, a preview, a thumbnail, an errant idea, an itinerant image distributed for free, squeezed through slow digital connections, compressed, reproduced, ripped, remixed, as well as copied and pasted into other channels of distribution.[[43]](#footnote-44)

The poor image, the glitchy and distorted image that is often the product of digital processing, is indeed an image in motion, though perhaps not a copy. Because it is in motion, because it is active in the world, its quality might be ‘bad’, but it is not an errant idea but an inerrant presence that shirks off its connections as it acquires an experiential presence for the user. What makes the New Aesthetic different from Steyerl’s imperfect cinema, or different from the extension of her idea to imperfect image, is that the image no longer manifests as distributed but as present and singular. We can even play a grammatical game here, taking the notion of ‘imperfect’ not only to mean flawed by as a past tense verb form. In Steyerl’s notion of imperfect cinema there is the idea that the reproductions were once perfect but no longer are, and the temporal space between the perfect state of the cinematic example and its current imperfect state is tangible, social, and often politicized. Imperfect images would be the same, their degraded quality (similar to fading in Polaroids and other analog photographs) marking a sense of loss as a tangible manifestation of temporal duration between their original state and their current condition. In contrast, New Aesthetic objects are continually present while being continually deletable.

A good example of New Aesthetic objects as evidence of a metaphysical shift is, again, Stephen von Worley’s efforts at an artistic visualization of data that have produced images of population data that have a visual flair to them. But in his posting ‘My God, It’s Full Of Blocks! Population Density Meets The Tile Space’[[44]](#footnote-45) we see something different. What he describes is a constant shifting of the means of presenting information which itself is prone to shifts, but the title of the posting is telling as an exclamatory passive response to the aesthetic manifestation; the shock is a response to the digitalization of the data, to its presence, but we also believe that there’s an underlying subtext in this shocked response that is equally a response to the potential future changes in the data. Another example is Yarin Gal’s efforts at a machine-learning based implementation of Photoshop’s ‘PatchMatch’ function to ‘extrapolate the scene of a painting to see what the full scenery might have looked like’.[[45]](#footnote-46) {Fig. 37} What Gal displays is a series of images by artists such as van Gogh, Monet, Picasso and Hokusai that have been digitally extended to ‘complete’ the painted scene; in most respects, the final product is excruciatingly terrible on a purely aesthetic level, in clear contrast to the artists’ original intentions (why would someone feel the need to extrapolate additional imagery from finished art unless they felt it was in an incomplete state?), but it signals a willingness to accept both an extension of digital agency as well as an acceptance of the temporary nature of these extrapolations in that there’s no illusion nor expectations that viewers are going to understand these New Aesthetic digital products as separate from the original paintings over any extended period of time. There have been efforts to counter what seems to be this inherent aspect of many instances of these objects, this strange sense of presence that is vividly temporary, but even work such as the 2015 *As Long As Possible* project by Juha van Ingen in collaboration with Janne Särkelä, which consists of a GIF viewable only over a thousand years showing 48,140,288 frames changing every ten minutes, is an artistic work that is clearly unfeasible. {Fig. 38} The New Aesthetic objects often appear to be permanent, but clearly are not. In the context of these manifestations, we wonder if it’s possible to resist the digitizing homogenization and increased acceptance of digital autonomy, to resist this shift in our metaphysics. The New Aesthetic objects that give us a sense of success are few, but products like Mint Digital Products *WhiteAlbum*,[[46]](#footnote-47) a recently developed app for iOS, is in many respects the perfect instance that alters our relationship with photographic objects and that, perhaps, is also a product of efforts resisting the New Aesthetic. {Fig. 39} Released in early 2015, and since discontinued, it was a photographic application for the iPhone that confoundingly did not provide visual feedback nor a digital file to the photographer, making it impossible to correct, edit, save or share the results. *WhiteAlbum*, rather ponderously, mimicked the disposable camera by saving the photographs to a server until 24 shots have been produced, at which point the user was charged $20 for those shots to be printed on high quality paper and to receive them by mail.[[47]](#footnote-48) It’s in the return to the analog, in a return to the actual world, that the paradigmatic and metaphysical shift identifiable as the New Aesthetic loses its dominance. That being said, *WhiteAlbum* was also a little ridiculous, even if we ignore its strange reference to the Beatles album.

We conclude this chapter with what we believe is perhaps the most innocuous and yet increasingly pervasive example of the New Aesthetic’s intruding into our lives: the shift towards vertical photography and video. We hope to have shown that the New Aesthetic does not only address specific visual phenomena or niche artistic practices but is an affective approach transforming the very foundations of human existence in subtle but important ways. As a transition between manifestations and art, between products and objects, we argue that one instance of its inclusiveness and rhizomatic theoretical foundations can be helpfully observed in one of the earliest emergences of this specific new cultural paradigm, namely, the recent trend towards vertical photography and video caused particularly by the mobile revolution. We know what you’re thinking: how could a vertical or horizontal orientation of photography or video change the world? Consider this: according to a study done by eMarketer in 2015, digital device users frequently spend as much as 10 hours daily in front of various screens, and in nearly 30% of that time the screen content was being consumed on mobile ‘vertical’ screens (2010-2015, US). Additionally, in 2015, the overall time of consuming digital media in the western world reached nearly 6 hours on a daily basis, with 51% of that time spent on mobile devices typically in a vertical orientation. The fact that this evolution towards mobile devices is changing the way humans interact with the world is without question, but it’s equally evident that one of the most fundamental formal configurations in the process of presenting information is also changing. The horizontal format has been a fundamental element of the aesthetic canon in a range of different art forms for centuries, dominating image creation and distribution; this is apparent not just in photography and video but in the history of painting. One could even claim that evidence of the horizontal format as fundamental to image production goes all the way back to ancient Greece, with the examples of sculptural friezes on the Parthenon, of ancient Mesopotamia, with architectural decoration and cylinder seals, and even instances of prehistoric art found in cave paintings. The reason for this is simple: our eyes are arranged in a horizontal relationship, and our binocular vision is processed in this fashion. In recent years, however, and most strangely, the horizontal, widescreen frame in photography and video is increasingly becoming extinct, as today the vertical frame begins to dominate contemporary imagery.

There are multiple explanations for this evolution. The simplest or the most obvious would be that mobile devices themselves are equipped with vertical screens because their design is directly linked an ergonomic design impetus observable in the history of the physical form of the telephone, where a handset’s receiver and transmitter needs to be aligned in one hand between the ear and the mouth; various designs of horizontal mobile phones have languished and died in popularity against to the massive dominance of the vertical shape, a clear sign that comfort and usability is part of the drive towards the vertical. In the shift from landline to mobile phones, this design approach resulted in a specific user interface which favors handling the phone with one hand (a manner of speaking on the phone that we’ve all grown accustomed to) which would lead to ‘scrolling’ through a screen in an up and down rather than a horizontal manner. Scrolling through information on a screen then encourages an approach that stacks information rather than encouraging a manner of ‘hyperlink exploring’ as a way for interacting with the content. Multiple windows and hierarchical links, which dominated the web and GUIs in the personal computer era, have lately been replaced by interaction models based on single-window view. Across the world, smartphones and mobile devices are becoming the primary everyday screens to consume and transform not only text-based content but also interactive (apps) and visual content (photography, video), almost to the point that referring to them as ‘phones’ is increasingly becoming inaccurate.

It’s evident that the processes of using mobile phones have dictated the presentation of material, but we assert that this has done far more than just shifting the orientation of information and has, instead, changed the very nature of the information itself. Widescreen and horizontal image aesthetics have dominated theatrical releases and TV broadcast for decades, in part because, as noted above, the natural process of human vision is horizontally oriented through our binocular vision. But once both professional visual content and user-generated photos and videos, often captured vertically, have blended on a single mobile screen, the hegemony of the horizontal has ended. Today the user can access multi-device services such as Netflix and HBO GO which still offer widescreen content, and social media uploads generated on a mobile phone held horizontally or apps like Vine, Snapchat (200 million monthly users) or Periscope (10 millions users and only supporting vertical videos) on the very same mobile device. In 2015 YouTube updated its mobile apps to support full-screen vertical video playback. The disruptive cultural effect of portrait video could not have been ignored even by the largest social media video service, only a decade after the very invention of a modern mobile device. Several media – among them *Mashable* and *The Daily Mail* – have begun experimenting with professional videos shot in portrait mode. At the end of the day, the format of vertical video is just a tool, but we argue that the users who create art, advertisement or entertainment based on that, are introducing fundamental cultural changes for the simple reason that the horizontal orientation of our natural vision processes is forcibly being shifted to accommodate the manner in which the information is received. The vertical video example illustrates that the New Aesthetic can be an interesting approach to grasp and analyze rapid socio-cultural changes triggered by a very fast adoption rate of a particular technology, to the point that we read information in the manner in which it is presented to us – vertically, rather than horizontally – which shifts our critical perspective, even the basic level at which we understand visually presented information, from one that is naturally familiar to one that is artificially familiar. There has been some resistance to this and some lively debates; ‘Vertical Video Syndrome’[[48]](#footnote-49) is neither dangerous nor offensive per se, but it does indicate an unwillingness on the part of the content producer to account for our horizontal panoramic video, and as an example of the New Aesthetic it indicates an unconscious concession to the software paradigm that is itself governed by limitations of the hardware. It’s more than just a sign of amateurism, it’s increasingly becoming the norm as authors like Farhad Manjoo argue: ‘They worry they are on the wrong side of history. The future of video, it turns out, just may be vertical.’[[49]](#footnote-50) Quoted in Manjoo’s article, Jon Steinberg, the chief executive of *The Daily Mail*’s North American operations, states: ‘We find the engagement much higher. Users are more satisfied, and there’s a higher completion rate on them.’[[50]](#footnote-51) But does Steinberg genuinely believe that there is actual engagement, which is highly unlikely, or is this merely indicative of an increased length of time watching the video and the web page, a vital rubric when it comes to advertising fees? A higher completion rate means nothing, we would assert, beyond the presence of a paradigmatic shift of the user’s experiential expectations identifiable as the New Aesthetic; we’ve been conditioned to consume digital content in a certain fashion because of the characteristics of its presentation that were, at first, a result of their limitations, and now it’s been produced at an even higher rate with an assertion that it’s a new, fresher, more exciting way of seeing the world. It’s not because video has become more personal, it’s because the technology behind the video has driven our aesthetic standards away from the human towards the pervasively digital. If our perception of the world is increasingly in a fluxual state of intertwined layers of algorithms and computation that defines contemporary society and culture then it’s increasingly evident that New Aesthetic experiences are becoming a dominant and driving force for that change.

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