## Chapter Five: Letting Go: New Aesthetic Artists and the New Aesthetic Art that Works

Although Walter Benjamin had posited a loss of aura in the reproduction of physical objects in almost apocalyptic terms, couched in his further analysis of the rise of fascism, and Arthur Danto posited the death of art[[1]](#footnote-2) on the basis of art’s capacity to indistinguishably reproduce real objects in a way that parallels Benajmin’s decrying of modernist transformations of art almost to a level of apotheosis (though in a manner later disavowed but still retaining a certain feel of authenticity), it’s clear that auras and life both have remained in art. Benjamin and Danto were expressing the collapse of confidence marking the end of modernism, a shift that was more than just a radical rejection of modernist trends but a wholesale undermining of the conviction that had permeated modern art since the middle of the nineteenth century, a conviction that was driven by an increasingly evident unwillingness to participate in a artificial and false teleology based on a Hegelian notion of historical necessity; it’s not so much that Benjamin and Danto were participating in this endgame, more that they were some of the final pieces on the board as new players chose to move onto other games. Taking the form of postmodernism at first and, when that new but shallow paradigm was shown to still be consistently linked to modernity, developing a sense of the contemporary that shattered any notion that centralized narratives or art worlds still existed, artists have spun themselves away into new games, new sets and subsets of games, so that hyper-individualism has become the new norm. It’s in this context that New Aesthetic art objects have appeared. This chapter is focused on artists whose work are examples of such objects, often exhibiting autonomous elements and aesthetic strategies and results that are markedly a manifestation of the New Aesthetic paradigm: autonomous objects, most often digital or at least digitally formed, that are the results of intentional or unintentional glitches and imperfections which paradoxically give them an aesthetic presence or weight in a fashion that forms an entirely new paradigm. New Aesthetic art is, for us, a presentation of a new type of work as one of many antidotes to the crisis of modernism that both Benjamin’s and Danto’s positions represented, a full participant in this new decentralized art world precisely because each work operates as the embodiment of its own self-sustaining teleological drive.

A transition is necessary, however, and an illustrative work to this end that appears to be New Aesthetic but is decidedly not serves as a good illustration of our point: Liza Lou’s *Color Field* (2015). {Fig. 76} Liza Lou is an American artist whose work has increasingly been recognized and gained respect following the exhibition of *Kitchen* (1991-1996) at the New Museum of Contemporary Art in New York City, a work that recreated a modern kitchen with appliances, counters, various food items and running water in glass beads. Glass beads have since become her signature artistic form, with work like *Backyard* (1999) using thirty million of them, but nothing quite reached the point of the sublime in a manner reminiscent of Abstract Expressionists like Mark Rothko or Barnett Newman than the 2015 installation of *Color Field* in the Neuberger Museum, NY. Consisting of eleven beads of glass on all of 576 blades positioned on 1,196 tiles, its approximately 7.5 million beads are arranged in a color scheme reminiscent of much of the art we’ve discussed that emphasis a pixelated visual structure; opening and closing patterns emerge in this site-specific work, but the grid remains in such a fashion that each tile takes on the approximate appearance of a pixel as if the entire work is a massively expanded close-up of a digital image that is no longer available at a resolvable level. Yet, this isn’t quite correct; as noted in articles,[[2]](#footnote-3) the artist’s website[[3]](#footnote-4) and the curatorial statement of the Neuberger Museum where it’s installed,[[4]](#footnote-5) Lou’s work has increasingly shifted such that ‘I became really interested in seeing what would happen if I took away subject matter and just had it be about process’.[[5]](#footnote-6) For a number of years Lou lived part of the time in the KwaZulu-Natal province in South Africa where she employed a team of local Zulu women to help produce the work; in this case, and in related work, it is precisely the physical activity that changes and enhances the material into its final artistic form.

*Color Field* is most definitely not a work based on digital principles, even if it appears to be that way. The sublimity of this amazing work is present in the material of the work itself rather than the design, in the shared physical activity that’s gone into making the art, in a manner extending beyond the rough, solitary idiosyncratic independence of the abstract expressionists to whom the work is indebted at least in title. So why discuss *Color Field* in the context of the New Aesthetic, and specifically in the context of teleology? Or, rather, as an object that can be teleologically assessed? We will turn to this in more detail in the next chapter but suffice it to say, at this point, that *Color Field* represents the exact opposite of a conceptualization of an autonomous, self-sustaining teleology in a very narrow and peculiar Kantian or biological sense, wherein objects are observed as self-sufficient and independently existing. Don Garrett provides an excellent description of what it means to judge or assess an object teleologically:

a teleological explanation explains why something is so by indicating what its being so is for. Somewhat more precisely, a teleological explanation is one that explains a state of affairs by indicating a likely or presumptive consequence (causal, logical, or conventional) of it that is implicated in the state's origin or etiology. Such consequences often, if not always, take the form of ends, goals, or goods.[[6]](#footnote-7)

The important thing that we add to Garrett’s description is the sense of autonomy, of independence, to the object; it’s not just that there’s an observable set of causal relations but also that those causal relations are fixed in the single object. To make a teleological judgment about an object is to see its purpose, and for us to see its purpose contained within itself without the need for external justification. Precisely because *Color Field* involved so many studio assistants, at all stages of its physical development, its dependence on external input means that it functions as a negative example illustrating the boundaries of the New Aesthetic objects that appear entirely independent even if they actually aren’t. *Color Field* occupies a position of liminality, its digital origins just as clearly evident as its collective construction methods, that allows us to observe the permeation of the digital into *Color Field* to gauge how important its presence is, and how important its negation is sustained through the intense and obvious craft of Lou’s work.

The boundary between artwork that seems to be New Aesthetic and actually is New Aesthetic is very thin, and seemingly permeable, but there are some specific criteria that are involved. Perhaps the most important criterion is not the fact that the work often is digital but that the work is driven by the technology itself amidst a postdigital condition. This has two corollaries. First, the work doesn’t necessarily have to be digital but at least reflect the digital in its manifestation. Second, art of the New Aesthetic must be just as much a product of technology, the digital and/or the postdigital as it is a product of the artist; the technology involved must be more than an opportunity or inspiration to make new art but should be a fundamentally generative component independent from the imaginative capacity and artistic skills of the artist. Benjamin Grosser, an American artist and composer working in new media, is an excellent example of this, especially in his series of art works that are part of the ‘Flexible Pixels’ project. Grosser writes:

The pixel is the fundamental unit of digital imaging, a square representation of a single color. Pixels are always the same size, and always arranged in orderly grids. This project [‘Flexible Pixels’] looks at what happens when you change these universally agreed upon standards. More broadly, I’m interested in how the construction of digital images alters our perceptions of reality. Does computer-mediated vision change how we see without computers?[[7]](#footnote-8)

Grosser’s *Variable Mirror* (2009), {Fig. 77} one of the works that are part of this series, shows how changes can take place in the standard relationship between pixel and image, transforming the normative paradigm that has been in place in the first digital images from the late 1950s into something that is more organic in nature. The result of *Variable Mirror*, *Self-Portrait 1x4x9* (2009) – an oil on canvas representation of the digital art work *Self Portrait (animated)* (2009 – and other works is, as Grosser indicates, that the general nature of our vision changes once pixels become increasingly independent entities. Through his art Grosser asserts that the way we see the world is fundamentally transformed not just when images are pixelated but when the resulting pixelization assumes a natural presence. This is the second most important criterion: the art must achieve a degree of autonomy in appearance and effect. In many ways, this is the perfect starting point to distinguish between artists whose work resembles New Aesthetic objects by being products and artists whose work can be seen as evidence of the presence of the New Aesthetic attitude through a set of productive strategies. What Grosser is proposing is a deconstruction of the pixel as a standard structure of digital perception, but because the pixel remains such a fundamental element the deconstructive process shifts. Deconstruction is a term that’s been misused and poorly applied since Derrida’s *Of Grammatology* (1967), so much so that we’re reluctant to use it, but here it seems appropriate in that the structure being investigated – the fundamental language of digital visual representation – begins to turn back on itself and takes apart its sense of a fixed function; the existence of its idea as an underlying notion embodied in *Variable Mirror* indicates more than just an ‘unpacking’ of the pixel, as a fundamental elementary aspect of the visualization of the digital work, but a relationship of the pixel to itself wherein the repetition reveals that the role of the pixel is no longer just a part of the representation but has an active identity. The perception of the visual presentation of digital information to human experience is revealed at an even more poignant and insightful level when it breaks into the real and achieves in its presentation a state that Manovich refers to as hybridity, where ‘software simulation substitutes a variety of distinct materials and the tools used to inscribe information (i.e., make marks) on these materials with a new hybrid medium defined by a common data structure’.[[8]](#footnote-9)

*Variable Mirror*, and the other examples of work from the ‘Flexible Pixels’ project, is an interactive work, during which the pixels used to represent the viewers as they look at it change dynamically and randomly but it’s clear that its status as an example of New Aesthetic lies in the fact that the pixels are *actively* *representing* the viewers rather than the artist doing the representing. Typically, a viewer’s reaction to a video presentation of themselves looking at the art would take place with the assumption that the fundamental units of the presentation would be fixed; instead, what Grosser’s statement indicates is an artistic positioning and an exploration that creates a heightened awareness of the autonomy of the aesthetic agents involved – namely, the digital object as an autonomously functioning agent in relationship to the viewer – and the subsequent development of the pixel, at a fundamental level, as a continuously mediating and deferring referent that continually challenges any notion of certainty of identity, position and function. To put it another way, Grosser’s *Variable Mirror* is a perfect instance of the effect of the New Aesthetic in art, in that the means of its production are not only an embodied reminder for the viewer of its digital origins and its continuing digital manifestation but also a reminder of the underlying uncertainty in the confrontation with the postdigital that is a growing characteristic of our world as it is driven by the specifics of its digital existence.

Grosser’s work has developed a strong and variable approach to the New Aesthetic as an artistic strategy, representing a move beyond a form of art that participates to one that drives the production of the New Aesthetic by creating art objects that are fully New Aesthetic in their autonomy. One thing that’s important to note about Grosser’s career is that the work he has produced has been remarkably variable; some instances of it are very traditionally ‘art’ (e.g. his work from the late 1990s consists of abstract paintings) while other works break the boundaries of what art is often to the point of potentially, and erroneously, being labeled simply ‘programming’. We will return to Grosser’s oeuvre in the next section, but it’s important to note here that we believe diversity, in all of its myriad connotations, is a key factor in identifying New Aesthetic art. By this we don’t simply mean a diversity of forms but a diversity of references, models and paradigms. In every example of New Aesthetic art that we’ve looked at our first reaction has ranged from immediate and intuitive understanding of the intention and the effect to a deep appreciation of the beauty of the gestures and assertive aesthetic strategies, but all of this has been coupled with a sense of confusion as to how we are supposed to categorize New Aesthetic art. It couldn’t be that we should just call it all ‘New Aesthetic art’ and be done with it, could it? At this stage, that will have to do, but we also want to emphasize that one primary element of all New Aesthetic art is diversity in form, function, intent, interactivity and effect.

Emphasizing that an important part of our consideration of the New Aesthetic is a recognition of the pervasive influence it has across the variety of human experience leads to us to look at different forms of art, which necessitates not only seeing evidence of the New Aesthetic effects in the visual arts but seeing them across a variety of different arts that have fallen outside of the scope of typical studies of art historical investigation. The creative projects of a team of artists working in dance and theatre, the Adrien M/Claire B Company, directed by Adrien Mondot and Claire Bardainne in Lyon, France[[9]](#footnote-10), is one of the best examples of its presence across artistic disciplines. Since 2004, the company has been producing work that ranges across various artistic disciplines, but it would be fair to say that there’s always been a performative, theatrical element driven by a virtual orientation in software or manifested as installation art. What makes the work of the Adrien M/Claire B Company interesting in the context of the New Aesthetic is the direct incorporation of software, designed and customized specifically for them, facilitating the interaction of the artists’ activities with animated lighting and the projection of digitally developed visual textures. Regarding the company’s artistic intentions:

They place the human body at the heart of technological and artistic challenges and adapt today’s technological tools to create a timeless poetry through a visual language based on playing and enjoyment, which breeds imagination.[[10]](#footnote-11)

Different examples of their work reflect this exploration of the conjunction of the human presence and digital constructions in an imaginative fashion. *Convergence 1.0* (2005)[[11]](#footnote-12) is a notable early work, in which a juggler uses virtual balls and interacts with phantasmal figures in ways that seemingly undercut physical laws of time and space. It is an exploration of the human presence of the performer while simultaneously being bound, in a suggestive fashion, by the restriction of the technology. *XYZT, Les paysages abstraits* (2011) {Fig. 78} already indicates in its title a concern for both a Cartesian and a relativistic geography, which the artists describe as follows:

Horizontal X

Vertical Y

Depth Z

Time T

These four letters are used to describe the movements unfolding at one point in space to reveal an imaginary territory. It is an exhibition landscaped by mathematical paradoxes, typographical illusions and metaphors in motion. Strolling through a luxuriant digital space, touching algorithms, sensing matter of light; some of the manifold imaginary fields are to be explored.

A pathway, as if traversing, revisiting nature; a coincidence between geometry and the organic: between real and virtual.[[12]](#footnote-13)

The very idea of digital space as luxuriant is fascinating, as is the notion of ‘touching’ algorithms, and through this conceptualization of a physicality in the digital, the Adrien M/Claire B Company is effectively presenting a notion of the digital as more than just an appearance of data fields but as a manifest presence in our world. This is most effectively realized in two different works: *Hakanaï* (2013) {Fig. 79} and *Le mouvement de l’air* (2015). {Fig. 80} With *Hakanaï*, which means fleeting, ephemeral or transient in Japanese, the ‘performance’s outcome is the revelation of a digital installation to its audience’[[13]](#footnote-14) as the software responds to sounds generated by the dancer as she moves through the space and responds to imagery digitally projected around her by the software. In *Le mouvement de l’air*, three dancers move through an immersive environment of projected images; an important element of this performance is the physical space which is shaped responsively by the software. The designers hope this will be understood as more than just a ‘technical achievement, what matters is the attempt at creating a motion dreamscape by way of images’.[[14]](#footnote-15) This sense of digital presence in a cooperative, responsive partnership makes both *Hakanaï* and *Le mouvement de l’air* particularly strong candidates as examples of New Aesthetic art. *Hakanaï* is, according to the artists, a transposition of a term normally associated with processes in the natural world, but which here reflects the transience of the interactive experience between the human and the digital as separate artistic agents. *Le mouvement de l’air* takes this even further, using aerial dance and other movements in an interactive fashion that is never rehearsed nor previously animated.

This “living light” is produced by video projectors and generated in real time by a set of algorithms […] It is a mix of control room operated human interventions and onstage data sensors that outlines a precise writing of motions and generative behaviors. Thus, the images are never pre-recorded for a rigid show on an imposed rhythm: on the contrary, they breathe and move with the dancers and organize a new space for them to explore.[[15]](#footnote-16)

It’s this notion of a ‘living light’ that breaks the company’s performances out of the normal modes of theater or performance art and makes them examples of the New Aesthetic. The notion that the light and images are released freely to function collaboratively with the performers implies a conceptualization of these effects that originate and manifest themselves in and through the digital, which could be disconcerting but isn’t; given the emphasis in theater and performance art on the human element as the aesthetic agent or vehicle, when the props become actors then something should seem amiss but it isn’t. Adrien Mondot’s and Claire Bardainne’s work is beautiful and also incredibly interesting because it signals a syncretic partnership between two contrasting elements wherein one, the digital, signals its increasing independent presence into the human performative components. Ultimately, the overall effect exhibits many of the characteristics of New Aesthetic art.

An important characteristic of New Aesthetic art is a level of interactivity that is decreasingly seamless and increasingly apparent, contradicting many of the tenets of modernist design. The independence of the digital objects in the work of the Adrien M/Claire B Company exemplifies this. Interactivity has long been an important aspect of digital objects, a paradigm that shifts through different GUIs and appears in various physical forms often accompanied by a great deal of debate as to the level of skeuomorphism necessary to insure an efficient experience. Thinking about the level of interactivity as a part of New Aesthetic art might seem obvious – the whole point of software design is, at times, a facilitation of users’ interaction and manipulation of data, and artists using digital tools have gravitated to interactive art precisely because the technology encourages it – but something different takes place when the digital objects become New Aesthetic digital objects. In terms of an aesthetic evaluation, a duality emerges in postdigital and New Aesthetic objects, so that what we mean by interactive isn’t quite the same anymore; rather, for our purposes, interaction in New Aesthetic art is the seamless integration of digital activity into the artistic process that occurs while simultaneously having the digital aspects be autonomously responsive to the artist’s choices and actions. We’re taking this notion of interaction directly from Lev Manovich, who writes:

After the novel, and subsequently cinema, privileged narrative as the key form of cultural expression of the modern age, the computer age introduces its correlate – the database. Many new media objects do not tell stories; they do not have a beginning or end; in fact, they do not have any development, thematically, formally, or otherwise that would organize their elements into a sequence. Instead, they are collections of individual items, with every item possessing the same significance as any other.[[16]](#footnote-17)

This is a remarkably interesting thing to state. Manovich is strongly asserting that interactivity is increasingly unavailable, that most digital objects are merely means of facilitating access to databases of information, meaning interfaces, or are predetermined in a standardized modularity, meaning that they exist not only as interfaces but also as building blocks, rather than offering genuine forms of interaction with the objects themselves. Furthermore, Manovich’s implication in suggesting the primacy of standardized modularity is the basis for his disavowal of traditional narrative structures that are normally considered an essential aspect of non-digital, traditional art. Manovich’s disavowal of narrative is an exclusionary theoretical strategy favoring an autonomous agency to digital objects that don’t create experiences but shape data sets. Amidst the increasing efforts of governments to control their populations through security devices like facial and pattern recognition, this reduces the participation of citizens to dehumanized and inactivated information references. Movies like *Metropolis* (1927) and *Minority Report* (2002) and television shows like *Person of Interest* (2011-present) may represent a dystopic vision of computer programs (or human ‘programs’) observing our every moment, a prospect most people find a frightening invasion of privacy; far more dehumanizing is the fact that most people are classified as too uninteresting to warrant any extended attention while they are, still, continually subjected to this surveillance. Manovich’s art counters this by mimicking it, trying to make the datafication of our lives in his art the means to understand and respond to its negative effects in our daily lives.

### The Individual Politicalization of New Aesthetic Art

A number of New Aesthetic artistic responses explore this situation and we want to highlight three of them: the work of Adam Harvey, Zach Blas and the collective Metahaven. Symptomatic of this response to the agency of interactivity is the work of Adam Harvey.[[17]](#footnote-18) Harvey’s art has become well known for being at the forefront of the artistic exploration of security and privacy issues, in particular focusing on the imbalance and power asymmetries between surveillance technology and basic human rights. Three recent projects starkly project Harvey’s clear understanding of the insidiousness of surveillance technology and its negative effects: *CV Dazzle* (2010),[[18]](#footnote-19) *Stealth Wear* (2013) and the *Privacy Gift Shop* (2013)[[19]](#footnote-20) that was on display in the New Museum, New York City, in 2016. *CV Dazzle* {Fig. 81} is our primary focus, as it’s clear that the other two projects share their origins and concerns with it; inspired by the camouflage patterns used by British and American navy ships during WWI that were based on modernist art styles of geometric patterns,[[20]](#footnote-21) *CV Dazzle* similarly is an effort to obscure or defeat pattern and facial recognition algorithms used by security services across many levels of contemporary society from national government organizations to local shopping malls; moreover it is a conceptual reaction to OpenCV,[[21]](#footnote-22) an open sourced software used for facial recognition, and a clear response to the Janus program’s efforts to utilize social media to improve facial recognition with algorithmically driven databases.[[22]](#footnote-23) Much of current thought regarding surveillance is extremely pessimistic, rightly so in regards to most concerns, with Metahaven recently noting:

The preemptive electronic surveillance of potentially every global subject can be thought of as a way for governments to weaponize themselves against the capacity of every person or group in society to change spontaneously – expanding the state’s monopoly on violence into precognitive policing of all thought and action […] Today, every person’s capacity to evade surveillance is determined by their position in a feudal matric of technological and institutional dependencies. Almost all antidotes to this patronizing system of global surveillance go under shades of black.[[23]](#footnote-24)

*CV Dazzle* is one of those exemptions, an almost aggressive artistic response to governments’ efforts at creating a self-justifying program of policies and technological tools designed to dismantle individual privacy. Whereas Metahaven is absolutely correct to describe these intrusive efforts as the violent weaponization of surveillance – we’re adding to their description that the process of weaponization itself has been violent, adding to the violence in an exponential fashion, something we believe is not out of line with their thinking – *CV Dazzle* is an effort to weaponize individual appearances in an effort to oppose governmental incursions into privacy. Utilizing makeup, hair styling, clothing and accessories in a manner that parallels high concept fashion, Harvey is addressing the need to avoid not just detection but constant observation: it’s not so much that the average citizen needs to camouflage themselves but that the continual identification, location and tracking of their persons is more than just intrusive in that it establishes a continual condition of suspicion; we are being observed not to protect us from threats but because it is believed any one of us might become a threat. The result, and the artistic value of *CV Dazzle*, is in the active confrontation that the user employs against surveillance; by using makeup, hairstyle and fashion design in a manner that is excessively visible to the ordinary people the ‘dazzled’ individual now hides in plain sight.

This last point is where *CV Dazzle* enters the realm of the New Aesthetic as art, as noted in the curious remark in *dis* magazine that ‘CV Dazzle is an unobvious style of camouflage because its eye-catching patterns and colors draw attention instead of hiding from it’[[24]](#footnote-25) along with the paraphrased instructions, borrowing from Harvey’s own website, that enhancing makeup should be avoided, the nosebridge should be obscured, the area around the eyes needs to appear altered and, perhaps most importantly, ‘Remain inconspicuous […] For camouflage to function, it must not be perceived as a mask or disguise. NB: Wearing masks or disguises can be illegal in some cities, including here in NYC.’[[25]](#footnote-26) What’s curious about these instructions revolves around the contrasting characterization of these strategies to both remain unobvious and to not demand attention, which is almost an impossibility. To put it another way, it’s clear that there’s a difficult balance between not being identified and not being noticed, a difficulty that *CV Dazzle* virtuously fails at and, in a way, it’s precisely at that point of failure that *CV Dazzle* becomes art. This contrast appears also in the article ‘Reverse-engineering Artist Busts Face Detection Tech’ that notes that *CV Dazzle* ‘combines hipster fashion aesthetics with hardcore reverse engineering of face detection software. The goal: to give individuals a low-cost and visually stimulating means to prevent their likenesses from being detected and cataloged by face-recognition monitors.’[[26]](#footnote-27) *CV Dazzle* is dependent on a heightened awareness of being observed with a desire or need to avoid being observed precisely by being almost excessively observable, an attitude based entirely on a heightened awareness that digital surveillance is far more threatening than human surveillance. Our focus on this contrast is based on our own awareness of the conditions that make Harvey’s art possible, equally evident in the work from the series *Stealth Wear* {Fig. 82} that is described thus: ‘Collectively, Stealth Wear is a vision for fashion that addresses the rise of surveillance, the power of those who surveil, and the growing need to exert control over what we are slowly losing, our privacy.’[[27]](#footnote-28) Without the increasingly effective digital technology driving facial recognition, without the generation of ever larger databases, there’s no need for *CV Dazzle* and *Stealth Wear*; it is precisely the conditions they seek to counter that define the validity of its efforts, but it’s also precisely the impossible success of these efforts that define their artistic value. As the description of the Janus program notes: ‘Data volume now becomes an integral part of the solution instead of an oppressive burden.’[[28]](#footnote-29) It’s as if the volume of data has taken on a life of its own, self-determinatively driving initiatives in an autonomous fashion, with *CV Dazzle* reflecting an unconscious concession on the part of its participants that their participation is a foregone conclusion. Not only does this drive *CV Dazzle* and *Stealth Wear* into the category of New Aesthetic art but because the first is itself merely the product of research that consists entirely of a set of programmed instructions interfacing with algorithmically driven surveillance programs, because the second are ‘fashion’ items with a strong political effect, and because both are sets of non-digital products whose effects are entirely digital because the need they address is digital makes them almost gloriously and interdependently substantiated at an artistic level through the repetition of their own aesthetic conditions. Because the artistic material’s subversive effect is dependent on its programmed response to its subject matter, whereby the subject becomes the grounds for the subversion of the subject, *CV Dazzle* and *Stealth Wear* are two of the best examples of New Aesthetic art, as is much of the work of Harvey, because they negotiate the increasingly complex and irresolvable relationships of the digital and the ordinary. Once the repetition is there, once the aesthetic programming takes place self-referentially, an important shift is evident.

In line with Édouard Glissant’s notion of opacity, that focuses on breaking the divisions between hierarchies in the art world through a reconsideration of postcolonialism that emphasizes a lack of transparency against the continual demands of social and cultural structures to account for oneself, Zach Blas’ work addresses many of the same issues as Harvey’s. For one, it also addresses the complex issues of facial recognition as an intrusion into privacy rights, but his *Facial Weaponization Suite* (2013)[[29]](#footnote-30) {Fig. 83} takes a different and more intriguing artistic strategy.[[30]](#footnote-31) As noted by Blas, *Facial Weaponization Suite* was created in part as a response to the New York City Police Department’s invocation of the 1845 law banning two or more people congregating together while wearing masks during the 2011 Occupy Wall Street movement; not only did the NYPD arrest protestors for wearing Guy Fawkes masks, they then subjected them to iris scans for inclusion in a database of offenders as a condition of bail or release. Blas asks:

Why does the masked protestor pose such a great threat to the state, resulting in the police’s willingness to deploy a 168-year-old law originally designed to prevent Hudson Valley tenant farmers from dressing in disguise and rioting over debt and eviction? Why does facelessness fuel the state of New York to surreptitiously construct incentives for protestors to willingly agree to biometric scans?[[31]](#footnote-32)

The answer to that question seems obvious – there isn’t much difference between the aims of 19th century rioters and the Wall Street protestors, especially as both of them had very legitimate grievances and aims – but Blas’ inquiry after the value of facelessness is itself very interesting. Protestors’ identities are clearly valued by those trying to control the apparatus of social structures. {Fig. 84} For Blas ‘the face becomes a site of ever increasing control and governance’ and his *Facial Weaponization Suite* is specifically a means of arming individuals against those efforts at control in a manner similar to Berry’s articulation of ‘obfuscated code’[[32]](#footnote-33) resulting in ‘data exhaustion’.[[33]](#footnote-34) At the same time, *Facial Weaponization Suite* is more than just an experiment but is an elegantly aggressive artistic response to a crucial issue of our contemporary world, like Hito Steyerl notes:

While a lot of contemporary technologically oriented art tries to resuscitate the wreckage of Futurism, or overidentifies with strategies of surgical marketing and apple polishing, Blas’s work insists that one doesn’t need to brand oneself into voluntary servitude or to eagerly identify with the aggressor. It may well suffice to fuck him. Or her. Or it. It’s such a reasonable idea and possibly much more fun too! Fuck military technology. Fuck infrastructure. Fuck drones. Fuck protocol ‘til it hums with pleasure. Throw in glitter and some shiny sensors. And after a few million years, there might be a smashing progeny![[34]](#footnote-35)

In response to Shoshana Amielle Magnet’s argument that biometric recognition is a failure because human identity cannot be reduced to a data set, and working through Agamben’s idea of exposure vis-à-vis Levinas, the *Facial Weaponization Suite* is a set of masks made in community workshops that deny facial recognition software algorithmically applicable data. While functioning as masks, the objects of the *Suite* ‘are weapons of defacement, modes of escaping the recognition-control of the face, a queer illegibility that disallows easy calculations and categorizations of the face’.[[35]](#footnote-36) This makes them dramatically different from Harvey’s work (though both are equivalent aesthetically, in our opinion), not simply because Blas’ work consists of actual objects rather than aesthetic strategies of concealment but also because their overt nature as objects is a demonstrative and declamatory response to the intrusion into privacy; driven by communal production methods that incorporate discussion of the related issues, participants are scanned by a Kinect and a single mask is generated in a non-averaged manner of all of the participants, making the communal statement even more substantial because it is heightened by a public intervention. Where the New Aesthetic comes into the work isn’t simply at the level of the object’s production or its motivation but, similar to Harvey, out of the necessary conditions of the increasingly digitalized nature of the world and our place in it. While Harvey’s work might be unfairly construed as a fashion statement of sorts, and is complicit with the conditions its protesting to a degree, Blas’ *Suite* is about the creation of art as weapons with a singularity to their appearance that is unmistakably one of denying the value of identification even to the point of denying social reciprocity through defacement. As Blas names them: ‘interfaces in other modalities that are not readable to those that aim to control but rather communicates to all those that strive to liberate’.[[36]](#footnote-37) In short, Blas’ *Suite* is an artistic acknowledgement, through rejection, of the existence of the New Aesthetic as a pervasive influence in our lives; it is a rejection of digital modalities as agents that had found their conceptual reification already in the NYPD’s valuation of the protestors’ identities, a condition which most certainly did not originate in the human agents of the police but out of its ever changing nature as an institution.

### The Collective Politicalization of New Aesthetic Art

In a way with which we completely agree, the collective Metahaven[[37]](#footnote-38) has been described as ‘one of the most theoretically informed, strategically adept and articulate groups of thinkers operating in graphic design’.[[38]](#footnote-39) As noted by Sarah Hromack in *Frieze* magazine, Metahaven’s work can be identified as a response to the specific conditions generated by the introduction of web 2.0 around the turn of the millennium, and it’s worthwhile summarizing her position. For Hromack, a major shift starting taking place in the internet in the 1990s – described in two important essays: Michael Rock’s 1996 ‘The Designer as Author’[[39]](#footnote-40) and Ellen Lupton’s 1998 ‘The Designer as Producer’[[40]](#footnote-41) and related to Walter Benjamins’ 1934 essay ‘The Author is Producer’ – that signals not only an increasing level of interactivity through the internet as a medium but also an increasingly fraught level of a politicized driven denial of the central and authoritative voice of the author. Hromack writes:

The fallout from Web 2.0 has been nothing short of astounding. The internet that once seemed open and free has been transformed into a dystopia of double meanings and commercial and political dealings. Ingrained psychological dependencies have developed out of brightly blinking “user friendly” experiences, monitored by businesses and government agencies.[[41]](#footnote-42)

She traces this fallout as a direct catalyst for the formation of Metahaven. Metahaven has been described insufficiently as an international collective of graphic designers, and it might be more accurate to describe them as a group of artists whose work draws from the changing graphic nature of the world in a way that is disruptive and disconcerting, but at its roots it consists of the Amsterdam based artists Vinca Kruk and Daniel van der Velden. Their largest publication to date was *Uncorporate Identity* (2006), a monumental treatment of the relationships between databases, national identity, networks as social objects driving social norms, branding and the very idea of readability about which one Amazon customer wrote:

it is a very bizarre book.  
  
The typography is okay, the printing and binding is good […] but the design is shockingly awful: there are weird effects that you shouldn’t use if you want to communicate trustworthiness and confidence such as amateur effects like drop shadows, hyperactive gradients and also seems to be on trend with this “exposed content style” – I would go so far to say it looks like very bad 90s Flash websites with all these superfluous elements that generate a feeling of schizophrenia and anxiety almost. I read the texts but they don’t really offer any practical advice or useful analysis about branding and corporate identity useful to a branding designer – for example how to deal with the internet and social media, what good form and harmony in application is and so on.[[42]](#footnote-43)

In a way, this review is absolutely telling: the book is bizarre, it does break many of the assumed rules of good design, it eschews trustworthiness and reeks of a bad use of Flash in printed form, and ultimately drives a sense of distrust into a dialogue focused on branding and corporate identity.

Metahaven’s aesthetic impulses are driven by a striking awareness of artists’ complicity in the increasingly overwhelming nature of the digital in the world, and are neatly encapsulated in a statement from the trailer for their film project *The Sprawl* (2015): {Fig. 85} ‘We were very likely spreading fictitious information ourselves, but couldn’t help it.’[[43]](#footnote-44) Metahaven’s work takes exception with the internet’s general status as a neutral medium by challenging our complicity with it. For most users, the internet has not become a medium by which we interact with others nor a generative new field of social discourse but instead has simply become a utility, with the consequences being that we unthinkingly, uncritically accept the parameters of its usage because we’ve become habituated and conditioned to its manipulations. For Metahaven, this situation needs to be transformed, and the best means of doing so is through the use of methods that borrow from the internet’s own means of manipulation, with the aim ‘to explore how fantasy and propaganda have now gained prominence over transparency and accountability […] The relationship between social media and geopolitics is not just about liberal democracy anymore but about the fashion of spectral totalitarianism.’[[44]](#footnote-45) Through a changing membership and a constant shift in the forms of production, the group has taken on ephemera-like visual objects of corporate identity, webpage design, GUI forms, barcodes and URL addresses in a manner which appears directionless at first but, on further examination, quickly is understood as an attenuation to nationalist digital iconographies and their inherent conflict with multinational and even hypernational ones (by which we corporate entities that have assumed the status of international sovereign entities). Metahaven gives more than a simple aesthetic response but rather creates an active aesthetic running counter to prevailing tendencies, distinguished by its incorporation of corporate representational forms that appears to be sustained by the visual link to those corporations while questioning the underlying persuasiveness of the neutrality of those same entities amidst the supposed ‘equality’ available to all entities in the capitalist system. In a manner similar to the Neue Slowenische Kunst group’s appropriation of National Socialist imagery that was mixed with propaganda from the Tito era of Yugoslavia, Metahaven has produced objects whose use-value is both questionable and secure in a self-contradictory dialectic; the scarves and t-shirts sold as part of the *Dark Store* (2012) installation in the Artists Space at the Berlin Contemporary Art Fair were both collectable luxury items and being covered in camouflage and the Wikileaks logo were simultaneously protests against government privacy intrusions.[[45]](#footnote-46) Metahaven’s recent book *Black Transparency: The Right to Know in the Age of Mass Surveillance*(Sternberg Press, 2015) raises similar issues while equally being a confounding text that is far from a traditional book but that functions as a reading experience while at the same time serving as a manual to counter the effects of the digital age. One review captures its intense contradictory effect, a governing feature of Metahaven’s aesthetic strategies:

Part essay, part zine, the Amsterdam-based design studio’s book focuses on the “how” as opposed to the “what” of transparency, zeroing in on the paradox that the fight for accessible knowledge (by groups such as WikiLeaks) is often carried out through necessarily opaque and propagandistic means. *Black Transparency* swallows its own tail in pursuit of its subject, following the un-coiling and re-coiling of ideology and information at the hands of whistleblowers and organizations.[[46]](#footnote-47)

It’s as if Metahaven is proposing that the only effective counter to the complete erosion of our private lives, our individuality and the means of our own self-determinativeness is to set up a reified antithesis in the Hegelian sense, opposing the dominance of the digital world as a thesis. In line with Marshall McLuhan’s idea of a ‘counter-environment’ in his 1967 essay ‘The Invisible Environment: The Future of an Erosion’,[[47]](#footnote-48) Metahaven’s *Facestate* (2011) is a complicated installation at the Walker Art Center consisting of various objects apparently produced as examples of graphic design in line with the corporate identity of Facebook but clearly opposed to its aims. ‘We are interested in the ways in which Facebook and government, Facebook and employers, Facebook and friends, Facebook and enemies constitute a power arrangement, and the way in which this constellation might influence politics, currency, and the social contract.’[[48]](#footnote-49)

Metahaven’s concerns for the totalitarian effect of increasingly autonomous digital objects of control is shared worldwide, though most often only in a nascent form in comparison to their sophisticated approach on a multiplicity of levels, and their targeting of Facebook is emblematic of the concerns of many other artists. It’s been pointed out that their work ‘questions the purpose and value of design in a neurotic and treacherous era of geopolitical instability, economic recession, environmental crisis, cultural and moral confusion’[[49]](#footnote-50) but just as importantly their work questions the value of our existence as end users, bringing up the notion that we are nothing but components of the technology that give it a functioning life rather than individuals able to utilize our digital devices freely to our own ends; responding to this art leads to the inevitable conclusion that we don’t constitute the network of power but are merely components of the network’s power. Metahaven’s strategy of countering corporate propaganda with appropriated propaganda seems as effective as any other strategy these days, but is it capable of being effective outside of a ‘westernized’ context? What happens when the invasion of the digital is so rapid, when changes in technology are so swift, as they have been in developing countries of the ‘non-western’ world that no response is even possible because the territories have already been claimed and secured? Typing in ‘non-western new aesthetics’ gets you zero relevant results on Google, but anyone who has travelled to Africa, South America, India and ‘less-developed’ parts of Asia has experienced the widespread impact of internet culture. Perhaps more so than in the westernized social and cultural structures, where the increasing inclusion of the digital has been relatively gradual, the effect of the internet and its subsequent disappearance into the portals of smartphone apps as a means of navigating, defining and shaping human experience has been remarkably profound; whereas many in the developed world experienced the shift from dial-up modems (and the joy of moving from 14.4k to 56k!) to dedicated ISPs through cable, most people in the developing world have experienced the digital transformation through smartphone simply because it was more economical to build centralized cell phone towers than to try and implement land lines to every home. When digital content is provided exclusively through smartphone apps, with the individualized specificity of that experience governing the use-experience, then the shift from a non-digitized world to a digitized world is even more abrupt. This has resulted in some interesting effects. Very recently the Telecom Regulatory Authority of India forbid zero-rating mobile internet plans because they violated net-neutrality,[[50]](#footnote-51) thereby denying Mark Zuckerberg’s plan to provide free internet through mobile phones across India through a Facebook portal called ‘Free Basics’, after having prompted protests[[51]](#footnote-52) and an organized campaign.[[52]](#footnote-53) What’s strange, however, is that the debate isn’t quite settled; while many in India and elsewhere oppose Zuckerberg’s plan because it violates net neutrality, the very idea of net neutrality may no longer exist in part because the internet no longer exists. The notion that ‘smart villages’ would be a means of relieving the burden of crowded urban centers seems fanciful at best, as does the notion that ‘increased’ access to information will invariably lead to improvements in people’s lives regardless of whether or not this information is filtered through portals like Facebook or Google. Digital organisms, institutions, or functional objects (however you want to identify them) have shifted from being automatons within the internet to autonomous agents defining the internet.

This position is evidently symptomatic of the effect of the New Aesthetic across a broader range of cultures. The majority of artists discussed in this book are European, American or Japanese, presumably because the work by these artists is more readily accessible through the internet and art exhibitions in major Western cities where funding and a critical mass of technological means makes it easy. But what’s happening in the rest of the world? Is the New Aesthetic a phenomenon or an attitude that is confined to a Western setting? Even the briefest of consideration of these questions would correct the tendencies to be absorbed with just one location, and a recent article in *The Guardian* sent us looking at African art and the presence of the New Aesthetic in a politicized social context.[[53]](#footnote-54) A prime instance of this is Urban FabLab’s project African Fabbers,[[54]](#footnote-55) an effort to bring together European and African maker communities with an emphasis on open source software and alternative approaches to 3D printing. Run in two sessions – in Marrakesh (2014) and Dakar (2014), both associated with art fair events in those cities – its aim was to create ‘an opportunity to creative clusters from different continents and backgrounds to meet up and share knowledge, to investigate the interaction between African material systems and computer aided manufacturing technologies, to create ecological prototypes through an advanced craftsmanship approach for sustainable living’.[[55]](#footnote-56) Two interesting elements of the African Fabbers projects are noteworthy: first, there’s an emphasis on the collaboration between levels of technology, with the implication being that older forms must necessarily be paired with newer, digital forms for their continued survival; second, such a collaboration itself necessitates an inherent valuation of advanced technology and its associated cultural forms or, to put it another way, despite the best of intentions this is still a form of cultural colonialism driven by technology. The Venn diagram on the main page for African Fabbers shows it as the intersection between local technologies, digital fabrication and computation design but the imbalance is plainly evident. How to counter this? The Afropixel[[56]](#footnote-57) festival at Ker Thiossäne, Dakar certainly represents one effort. Begun in different forms in 2002, with the first official Afropixel event taking place in 2008, it’s based on the idea that ‘Technology doesn’t prevent tradition from existing, it’s the encounter between the two that is interesting’[[57]](#footnote-58) but at the same time it exhibits all of the hallmarks of New Aesthetic art with assertions like ‘Any designer will tell you that a pixel is the smallest element of a picture; a dot on a page. On its own, a pixel doesn’t give much away. But when it joins other pixels it forms a whole, contributes to a mass, and gives meaning to whatever it is it represents’[[58]](#footnote-59) on the website of its sponsor Moleskine, who provided all of the participants with Evernote ready notebooks in 2014.

It’s clear that a collective response is occurring in a New Aesthetic context, but individual artists are also working in a similar fashion. Folasade Adeoso has become well known both as a model from Nigeria and as an artist in her own right; her digital work consists of juxtaposed images that are often haunting, nostalgic, and jarring in their contrast between references to an older way of life and to digital artifacts. Especially in her series ‘Kinfolk’ (2014) {Fig. 86} there is an indication of Adeoso articulating a sensibility informed by technology, utilizing it for aesthetic purposes, aware of the temptations for its overuse, but deeply resistant to its intrusive and pervasive influences. Alexander Ikhide’s work functions in a similar manner as Adeoso’s but is more informed by an urban sensibility; originally from Nigeria and now working in London, Ikhide’s collages mix the old and the new but in a way that’s strikingly more contemporary, evidenced especially in his collaboration with the photographer Seye Isikalu on the project *Don’t Police My Masculinity* (2015)[[59]](#footnote-60) that incorporates the beautiful phrase ‘Love Yourself As Much As Kanye Loves Kanye’ by asserting: ‘In a world where Hyper-masculinity is unfailingly sold to us on a daily basis, “Don’t Police My Masculinity” playfully explores ideas of self-love, self-acceptance & general care-freeness of the Black Male in particular. Happy valentine’s day people! love yourselves first!’[[60]](#footnote-61) {Fig. 87}

### Sociological Interactionist Impacts of New Aesthetic Art

The German artist Aram Bartholl[[61]](#footnote-62) has been one of the major figures to emerge within the context of the New Aesthetic. Educated at the Berlin University of the Arts with an engineering degree in architecture, Bartholl first came to notice with his project *Bits on Location* (2001)[[62]](#footnote-63) which investigated the possibilities involved in the spatial repositioning of information sources, by attempting ‘to connect, through a series of examples, the digital content from locationless global data networks to physical space’[[63]](#footnote-64) and signaling a primary concern Bartholl’s work has had ever since; much of his work exaggerates the tensions that exist between specified and despecified localization and articulates the continuous functions of contrasts and overlays between digital realities and the normal world. Two projects have introduced Bartholl’s work into the broader art world: *Maps* (2006-10)[[64]](#footnote-65) and *Dead Drops* (2010-12).[[65]](#footnote-66) *Maps* {Fig. 88} has been a series of large scale sculptural reproductions of Google map pins used in a digital context to mark out highlighted locations and search results; Bartholl has created a series of life-sized versions of these pins to call into question the relationship between the real and the digital world with a clear assertion that this relationship is increasingly mutually dependent. The Google Maps pin, designed by Jens Eilstrup Rasmussen in 2005 as an integral part of the launch of Google Maps, has become so ubiquitous that it was acquired in physical form by MOMA in 2014; in Bartholl’s use, {Fig. 89} it’s become a sculptural intersection that highlights the complicated overlapping relationship of the way the world is represented with what is represented. While ‘Google’s maps have revolutionized how we interact with the world, how we perceive space and even how we navigate through it’[[66]](#footnote-67) Bartholl’s work questions the revolution itself by reversing the supposed continuousness of the relationship between the pin and the actual location, causing a heightened sense of a discontinuous relationship between the Google map pin and Bartholl’s pin. *Dead Drops* {Fig. 90} has taken this even further, as described by Bartholl:

“Dead Drops” is an anonymous, offline, peer to peer file-sharing network in public space. USB flash drives are embedded into walls, buildings and curbs accessible to anybody in public space. Everyone is invited to drop or find files on a dead drop. Plug your laptop to a wall, house or pole to share your favorite files and data. Each dead drop is installed empty except a readme.txt file explaining the project. “Dead Drops” is open to participation. If you want to install a dead drop in your city/neighborhood follow the “how to” instructions and submit the location and pictures.[[67]](#footnote-68)

Whereas *Maps* is an intervention, *Dead Drops* is a much more participatory art project that Bartholl has allowed to be copied, pasted and hacked worldwide, both metaphorically and literally, so that the idea itself has taken on a life similar to many instances of conceptual art from the 1960s which eschewed object production and commodification. Creating a peer-to-peer network that is more physical rather than virtual, like in the form of bittorrents, *Dead Drops* have served not only as locations to download files from but also to upload to because the USB drives are always public; borrowing a term from an information sharing method used by spies, Bartholl’s project has become a set of sites that are either remarkably banal or dangerous, as in the case of one Cologne instance where plans for bombs were discovered on the USB drive,[[68]](#footnote-69) but their artistic intent is still clear. More than just creating a community, though it has certainly done that with thousands of dead drops appearing worldwide, it embodies an artistic opportunity to share and communicate information, ‘a unique space for uncensored public conversation into the physical structure of the city’[[69]](#footnote-70) counter to any digital network’s reach.

Bartholl’s career has consistently been an exploration of the way the real and the digital overlap, even when its use of spontaneity has verged on an almost ridiculous level of fandom and opportunism. In 2009, while having coffee, Bartholl spied a Google Streetview car driving outside and proceeded to chase it down the street; almost a year later he appeared in a series of images on Google Streetview, which were subsequently appropriated as *15 Seconds of Fame* (2010).[[70]](#footnote-71) {Fig. 91} Creating a further level of critical depth to his work, Bartholl’s *Full Screen* (2014)[[71]](#footnote-72) {Fig. 92} was a curated project with a number of well-known artists contributing works that were displayed on Samsung Galaxy Gear smartwatches. Viewers were invited to wear the art and interact with it in a limited fashion, driving the questions that Bartholl has been examining in his art even further. In an interview Bartholl asks ‘The underlying question is, in what ways we can represent digital art?’[[72]](#footnote-73) and his answer is a direct rejection of the continuing relevance of the screen as a medium. It’s not just that over the course of the last fifty years the digital world has shrunk to the size of a watch and the interface has transitioned from room-sized objects with tiny monitors whose only representation of data consists of low resolutions text; the physical manifestation of the objects has changed and with it our conception of what data and its provider the ‘internet’ is. This providing has shifted in space and time; in more ways than just by making data available no matter where the user is, new devices (themselves quickly outdated in terms of technological capability) make the consumption of data literally timeless and spaceless, disconnected from the physical realm, and especially ironically so when in the form of wristwatches. While acknowledging that screens will continue to exist for a long time, often in a nostalgic capacity, and emphasizing that point with the reduplication of imagery from small screens to a huge LED screen, nevertheless Bartholl points out that ‘There will be screens where you don’t have the rectangle anymore. It’s hard to tell, and it’s going to take quite a while, but the next paradigm shift is going to happen soon.’[[73]](#footnote-74) We are so used to the idea of ‘seeing’ the internet through screens, but once haptic interfaces, voice commands and gestural forms of interaction were introduced the point of contact shifts from a specific referential interface to a decentered form of interaction that is positionless precisely because of its fluid nature. This move away from screens as a mediating but limited form of interactive structure is something that appears in an even stronger sense as an aesthetic strategy in the work of Hito Steyerl.

In many respects, the artwork produced by Hito Steyerl is one of the best examples of art of the New Aesthetic. In fact, Hito Steyerl as both an artist and an art critic has been a driving force behind many of the ideas and work of the New Aesthetic, setting the parameters of different aesthetic strategies as well as identifying work by other artists. Born in Munich in 1966, trained in philosophy at the Academy of Fine Arts, Vienna and later studying at the Japan Institute of the Moving Image and University of Television and Film Munich, she has exhibited widely at documenta 12, the Venice Biennale, and the Istanbul, Taipei and Shanghai Biennials, and has had numerous solo exhibitions at major museums worldwide and teaches New Media Art at University of the Arts in Berlin. Steyerl’s work is complicated, appearing in cinematic form, essays and books, art installations and digital objects, but we believe it’s appropriate to focus on two intersecting threads that drive her work. First, Steyerl maintains a refusal to disavow herself as the artist from her productions, especially in the case of films that are more documentary in nature, because she believes in the importance of the personal presence of the artist conveyed ‘by the idea that you cannot address a social issue productively without first understanding your own part in it […] [and she is] wary of sentimentality and false objectivity, she acknowledges herself as part of the picture, eager “to make my position transparent” and truthfully complex’.[[74]](#footnote-75) Second, Steyerl is intensely interested in the increasingly interdependent and interwoven nature of social media, social, political and culture changes, the increasingly uncontrollable nature of the virtual exchange of information, and a commitment to the freedom of images to have meaning regardless of any users’ intentions including, perhaps especially, her own. If these two threads seem contradictory then Steyerl’s aesthetic strategies are successful, for it’s precisely in the complex contradictions that the best of her work has its greatest effect. While much of Steyerl’s ideas have appeared in her essays and books, her art is a complex and highly effective embodiment of her exploration of the new and independently forming digital paradigms confronting the human condition. A major exhibition of her three films by *e-flux* in 2012 encapsulates Steyerl’s work well: *Adorno’s Grey* (2012), {Fig. 93} documenting efforts to ‘discover’ the near mythological layer of grey paint Adorno required for his lecterns so as to avoid distraction, while voiceovers tell the story of Adorno’s last lecture interrupted by bare-breasted female students; *Abstract* (2012), {Fig. 94} exploring through video a complex interlacing of violence and warfare, circling around the death of Steyerl’s friend Andrea Wolf who had been killed in Kurdistan as a revolutionary fighter in the PKK (Kurdistan Workers’ Party); and *Guards* (2012), {Fig. 95} using interviews with art museums guards to show how they’ve been trained in military tactics to secure the collections their attending to.[[75]](#footnote-76) As different as they are, each film is rooted in different aspects of Steyerl’s life – her philosophical background, her friendships, and her life as an artist – making them at least indirectly personal while at the same time fully structured within the language of video, documentary and cinema. In many respects this work is similar to the work of Metahaven, with a sense of complicity in the evidence of digital interaction. While these films at first don’t seem to distinguish Steyerl’s work from that of other filmmakers or as cinema per se, in that her roots in New German Cinema and the influence of film historian Helmut Färber are both clear and documented in interviews, each film is so highly attenuated to its medium and the specific stylizations necessary of the different subject matters, in a way that marks all of Steyerl’s art as important explorations into the changing nature of the digital and our interaction with the digital, that her work is radically different from that of her predecessors. The title of the first chapter of Steyerl’s book *Die Farbe der Wahrheit (The Colour of Truth)* (2008) is ‘Documentary Uncertainty’, an indication that regardless of the appropriateness of the medium Steyerl is always aware of how it can both undermine and betray her efforts, almost as if her films are an embodiment of Jacques Derrida’s notion of deconstruction. Taking together, all three films represent Steyerl’s efforts to trace the intersection of politics and aesthetics in a manner that dissects the force of images as potentially acting counter to artistic intention not only in regards to the communication of information but to the very notion of completeness. This is particularly true of *Adorno’s Grey*, about which one critic writes:

After the credits, the projected image drops out while the projector lamp is left to burn for a short while. In this white, messianic light, it is now possible to see that each of the screen’s collectively canted planes is painted in a different tone of grey respectively. Although the conservators never found the missing grey layer in Frankfurt, this final revelation of Steyerl’s filmic apparatus presents the missing culprits, which tainted the depiction of the represented wall. With this cheap, yet effective trick, the artist seems to be trumping yet another fragmentation of the recorded actions. And still, this final “proof” of an image contaminated lays bare not only the fact that cinema is itself composed of necessary illusions, but that these sensuous special effects can hold and distract our attentive gazes from actually seeing.[[76]](#footnote-77)

It’s that last point that’s so crucial: the fragmentation of recorded actions, the inherently deceptive but powerful nature of images that can fully reveal their nature as an illusion while at the same time still functioning as a deception, are presented in an intense fashion to the point that we no longer see them but accept them as self-evident and seemingly autonomous effects. Other films by Steyerl achieve much the same effect, such as *Lovely Andrea* (2007) and *In Free Fall* (2013), all revolving around (to borrow a phrase from *Lovely Andrea*) ‘filmic tension’ constructed similarly to Adorno’s conflict between praxis and theory that is evidence is his statement that ‘The unresolved antagonisms of reality reappear in art in the guise of immanent problems of artistic form. This, and not the deliberate injection of objective moments or social content, defines art’s relations to society. The aesthetic tensions manifesting themselves in works of art express the essence of reality in and through their emancipation from the factual façade of exteriority.’[[77]](#footnote-78) The only difference in this case is that the immanence of the digital as autonomous phenomenon has replaced the artistic in its common form with an accelerated form of an emancipation of digital, not just escaping the restrictions of artistic creativity but redefining its very essence as independent.

In the context of the New Aesthetic certain works stand out. Steyerl’s *How Not to Be Seen: A Fucking Didactic Educational .MOV File* (2013) {Fig. 96} is a satirical instructional film (with part of the title borrowed from a Monty Python sketch) purporting to show ways to avoid or confuse surveillance software by remaining ‘unseen’ in a manner similar to the art of Adam Harvey and paralleling the concerns of Metahaven. Shot at a desert site that was covered with photo calibration targets backed by computer generated and imposed images of different landscapes, with ghostly figures dressed in green that appear and disappear, the film instructs viewers that there are four ways to avoid detection – hiding in plain sight, shrinking to a size smaller than a pixel, living in a gated community and being female and older than 50 – and implies a clear set of motivations. Leora Morinis very astutely points out:

Despite the ostensible neutrality of the how-to format, the title also begs the question of motivation: why would a person want not-to-be seen? When the beauty magazine tells you “how not to appear desperate,” the implication is that it’s ugly to show how much you care (whereas otherwise you might’ve thought devotion was a good and powerful thing). In this regard, Steyerl’s video calls on a number of embattled realities […] At one point in the sequence, the voice-over explains that while “resolution measures the world as an image,” the “most important things want to remain invisible. Love is invisible. War is invisible. Capital is invisible.” To be sure, Steyerl’s works do measure the world as an image, but in her treatment, it’s these “most important things” that are rendered visible. It’s a pretty powerful picture.[[78]](#footnote-79)

Why would you want to not be seen? Maybe because you don’t want to be killed by a drone, a weapon of war that is focused on those photo calibration targets. Maybe because you think you’re important? Who is the satirically intended audience here if not both the terrorist and the powerful politician? And where do we, the viewers, the normal people, find a place between such forces, if we can find a place at all, to disappear without being disappeared? {Fig. 97} It’s pretty clear that the effects of the software – and it most assuredly is the software that becomes a driving force of agency with real effects outside of Steyerl’s film – function in an inverse relationship to most of people’s lives, in that their effect is more unavoidable the less we have to hide. The less concerned we are with privacy, the less concerned we are with being monitored, means that it becomes increasingly harder to avoid being spied on should we choose to do so in the future. On further consideration, *How Not To Be Seen* becomes less satire and more a frightening, powerful revelation on the new normal of the human condition, where our presence in the world is substantiated less in our physicality presence and far more in our digital identity which is, ironically, increasingly beyond our control as it becomes determined and accepted as determined by the digital objects that present our identity back to ourselves; unlike *Second Life*, with its notion that our avatars are our representations to the world and are controlled by us as users, Steyerl’s art is concerned with revealing that our ‘avatars’ (to use this outdated and outmoded term as an extended synecdoche) are chosen for us and, even more frightening, that the sense of choice itself is an illusion. What is rendered visible is not what we’ve chosen to be visible but what the digital makes visible to us.

### An Unachievable Autonomy of the New Aesthetic Appreciation

Levi Bettwieser, an American photographer living in Boise, Idaho, recently switched from shooting primarily digital to various forms of analog photography, a move clearly associated with his interest in antique processes in various formats. In 2014, Bettwieser came across a set of undeveloped film rolls dating back to WWII. With a lot of effort, experimentation and an awareness of the difficulty involved and the potential for failure, Bettwieser set out to develop these rolls and print the images.[[79]](#footnote-80) The results of Bettwieser’s efforts were incredibly interesting; as he acknowledges in a number of places, the original photographer clearly had an eye for composition and was focused on producing images that were personally meaningful, all the while also producing images that are of obvious historical significance. The discovery led Bettwieser to take on a growing collection of undeveloped film rolls and process them as successfully as he could, and to post the results on *The Rescued Film Project*,[[80]](#footnote-81) a Tumblr blog set up to share the images which has often generated more information than Bettwieser anticipated. Though many of the rolls he’s collected have been damaged beyond repair, Bettwieser has still diligently attempted to rescue each one, even to the point of posting a number of the failed images that still retain the barest of details but which verge at times on being entirely abstract. The reason we’re starting this section with Bettwieser’s project, however, isn’t because of the admirable and aesthetically interesting work he’s doing, even if his shift from the digital to analog and back to digital warrants at least an acknowledgement of the inescapability of the digital world. What caught our attention weren’t the images of vehicles and people from WWII either. Instead, it’s a set of images that are obviously a product of a flawed interface between developed analog film and the scanner or software that Bettwieser used, and this element is the most compelling in an analysis of the New Aesthetic. {Fig. 98} Six images, drawn from the same role of film and connected by similar people and setting, are covered randomly in glitch effects and distortions.[[81]](#footnote-82) Bettwieser is quoted by the author Attila Nagy as noting:

Thanks to a mysterious software bug that occurred while scanning these joyful family photos, probably from the 80s, strange colorful shapes swarmed the peaceful scenes, harmonizing with the color palette of the original negatives. The results are stunning. I personally almost feel like Neo from Matrix, when he starts to see the code.[[82]](#footnote-83)

One comment asks: ‘Is this real life?’ Perhaps it would be more productive to ask whether this constitutes a genuine aesthetic experience. Nagy notes: ‘this might be the fabric of our world’.[[83]](#footnote-84)

The fact that Bettwieser has left this images on his blog – a natural response, to be sure – indicates that these images have a power beyond the nostalgic, beyond their evocation of other places and times, beyond even the poignant presence of other individuals to an unconscious awareness of the inexorable and pervasive presence of the digital realm.

Photography, whether analog or digital, is an artistic format that often confounds the discourse of art history and the thoughtful explorations of aesthetics. Vilém Flusser’s *Towards a Philosophy of Photography* is one of the few examples of a sustained philosophical engagement with the medium, but there’s scant evidence of similar efforts. It’s also telling that one of Flusser’s other major books is titled *On Doubt*; Flusser clearly was interested in exploring the concrete ubiquity of symbols driven by technology in human culture through a position opposed to the primacy often granted by philosophy of Cartesian doubt, but Flusser’s conception of doubting doubt as a method can be borrowed as an assertion of the dynamic potency of photography as a way of flaunting the presence of the world rather than just as a means of representing it.

To think about photography means to think about the photographer’s intentions as well as its technical contingencies. Photographs are easily produced, or seemingly so, with the effect that the ability to produce photographs has become both relatively universalized, resulting in untold and increasingly forgotten millions of images particularly with the advent of digital methods. Most photographs are not regarded as art, but all are embodiments of the intentions of those producing the images, meaning that there is, nevertheless, an ontological resemblance between these captured pictures and the work of a serious photographer, a resemblance not present in other examples of visual artistic production. This resemblance is present in photography’s reliance on chance. Chance plays a determinative role in all photography, and this randomness of the capturing of images implies a distinct set of criteria by which to clarify the potential resemblance between a snapshot and a serious photograph, resulting in a lack of an ontological distinction between both types. There is always the possibility, albeit remote to the extreme in most cases, that a snapshot will result in a photograph of such quality that it merits aesthetic consideration. Furthermore, quality of production is always a consideration; no snapshot photographer wants to intentionally produce a bad image. Given this line of thought, what’s to stop further ruminations at an even more fundamentally metaphysical level? If chance and technology are reasonably understood to be determinative and constructive forces driving the production of aesthetic experiences in photography, partially independent of or in synthesis with the photographer’s intentions, then it’s entirely valid to assert the presence of algorithms, digital artifacts and errors and glitches as determinative and constructive forces and even entirely independent agents in the creation of aesthetic experiences. Bettwieser’s statement that he feels like Neo in a virtual Matrix makes a lot of sense if one thinks about the glitchy images he’s posted as aesthetic experiences as the result of artistic agency outside of the analog world, in which the totality of the images’ aesthetic nature is governed not by the intentions of photographers (and Bettwieser is part of the collective of ‘photographers’ as the developer of the film he’s restoring) but by the manipulative presence of software. In short, Descartes’ concern regarding an evil genius and his thought experiment’s development towards the ‘brain in a vat’ problem becomes, in the context of the New Aesthetic, less an issue of epistemic uncertainty and more about alternative aesthetic agents. It’s not just that we suspect that our aesthetic taste and judgments are influenced by our experiences but that our skepticism of the functional independence of our reflective judgments is fully justified; the digital world is increasingly not just something we respond to but a determinative force in our lives, including our aesthetic inclinations and assessments.

The images from Bettwieser’s Tumblr blog are an easy way to begin this section, and might be proof right from the start of our point that New Aesthetic art is sufficiently autonomous to warrant a sustained and distinct consideration, but it is still the point which is the hardest to defend. A simple argument against it, though the effectiveness of it is something debatable, is to note that regardless of the digital interference evident in the images they still required a person’s intent to photograph something. If we were to continue our investigations into New Aesthetic objects, one could suppose, then this would make any argument turn immediately away from work produced by artists to instances of aesthetic effects and ‘art’ produced entirely through computational results; it might seem almost a necessity to stop thinking about artists’ work and only think aout digital objects produced independently of human intentions. It’s still a goal of ours, however to think about these art objects of varying degrees of aesthetic value and importance as New Aesthetic objects; these are objects about which we can assert the introduction of variables into algorithms which are themselves self-generating, evolutionary, and sufficiently independent of human agency, and investigate the aesthetic effects that are due to inadvertent errors, glitches, and unforeseeable digital manifestations, all the while still referring to them as art. More succinctly, work like Bettwieser’s encourages one to find aesthetic objects that are entirely divested of human intervention in order to sustain the notion of New Aesthetic art as a form independently produced by an autonomous digital agency, and it’s obviously natural to continue this final section with a discussion of computer art. At the same time, though, we would forewarn against any assumption that that’s where this will remain, particularly in the sense that finding experienceable art that is *entirely* not a product of human agency may be a fruitless or impractical task, especially considering the necessary means by which the seemingly naturalness of the New Aesthetic manifests itself.

To start thinking about New Aesthetic art objects, perhaps it’s best to consider the closer approximation of digital art to its manifestations in terms of computer generated art once again. We’ve already discussed this a little bit in the first section, covering the artwork of Frieder Nake, A. Michael Noll, Georg Nees and Jean-Pierre Hébert, but we want to return to computer art to consider some different issues. By the early 1970s, the Institute for Contemporary Art in London had held an exhibit of computer art called *Cybernetic Serendipity*, the Computer Arts Society was founded, and Katherine Nash and Richard Williams had published *Computer Program for Artists: ART 1*.[[84]](#footnote-85) During this time the phrase algorithmic art started being used to describe artworks created entirely through algorithms written by artists, though most of those artists were computer programmers first who had taken an interest in the arts. Most instances of computer art are similar to those discussed at the beginning of this chapter – the computer was a tool, the understanding of complex and engaging visual design principles was superficial at best, and the artists often weren’t really artists – but a belief and confidence in the potential for computer art was clearly in place to the point that the art world started to accept computer art by the end of the 1990s. Holly Rogers, linking computer art to the growing recognition of video art, describes the increasing acknowledgement thus:

Hans-Peter Schwarz, one of the founding directors of the Zentrum für Kunst und Medientechnologie, Karlsruhe (ZKM, Germany), described their [computer art] ephemerality as setting off an “explosive charge” at the gates of traditional art establishments. At first this “explosive charge” was blocked by major galleries because of curatorial problems (how to include sound and performance in a gallery space, temporal modes of perception fundamentally at odds with the traditional gallery experience), aesthetic issues (video’s relationship to mass media such as television and untraditional modes of artistic discourse), and financial concerns (how to sell or keep something that is unrepeatable).[[85]](#footnote-86)

Until the 1990s, computer art was, at best, on the periphery of the art world, but the foundations for its acceptance and for a genuine New Aesthetic art was in place. This process of an increased presence and acceptance of New Aesthetic art, however, was facilitated not by the quality nor the market value of computer art – in fact, we would argue that aesthetic value or quality of computer art has generally remained subpar at best, substantiated by the remarkably low market value for most instances of computer art including those of historical importance – but from specific related and distinct factors.

Part of the success of the process lies in a major shift in the methods of production. The *Cybernetic Serendipity* exhibition of 1968, curated by Jasia Reichardt, provides a good example. It an exhibition firstly of art based on algorithms, art that was influenced by computational processes such as Gustav Metzger’s *Five Screens With Computer* (1968), two of Jean Tinguely’s painting machines, and Wen-Ying Tsai’s interactive cybernetic sculptures consisting of vibrating stainless-steel rods, stroboscopic light, and audio feedback control. Additionally, *Cybernetic Seredipity* also included practical designs for architecture and objects that showed the curator’s understanding of the intersections of art, design and early forms of digital design, perhaps the most ‘cybernetic’ type of all of the included objects. It also was an important influence in the formation of the Computer Arts Society by Alan Sutcliffe, George Mallen, and John Lansdown. For us, though, the most interesting part of the exhibition is the presentation of a survey of the field of computer music, including works by Lajaren Hiller & Leonard Isaacson, John Cage, Iannis Xenakis, Haruki Tsuchiya and Herbert Brün. {Fig. 99} As noted in a recent release of the recording:

During the preparation of the Cybernetic Serendipity exhibition two things became apparent.

One, that in order to show what was going on in the field computer music, it was necessary to include a considerable amount of material that was not strictly composed with or played by computer. Two, that dealing with an exploratory field, all attempts at a historical perspective or firm evaluation were out of place. The exhibition and this record, therefore, are essentially a reportage of current trends and developments in programmed and stochastic music.[[86]](#footnote-87)

In short, one of the curious things about computer art is that it’s rarely art produced by a computer; it’s not merely that the technology hasn’t been capable of autonomous artistic production (because it actually has even in the earliest days) but rather than the creative, imaginative work of the artist is something that the art world has been reluctant to abandon. The hand of the artist, the sense of prioritizing human craftsmanship, is an attitude that been reluctantly dispensed with only in the most recent years, as more and more artists turn to technological means for their production in various ways and to various extents; this includes David Hockney, Cai Guo-Qiang, Paul Pfeiffer, Ai Weiwei, Jenny Holzer, Pierre Huyghe, Bruce Nauman and so many others that a list is impossible to consider.

Where we’ve arrived, interestingly, is at a place where New Aesthetic art is both viable but continuously uncertain. Procedurally generated art can be considered aesthetically valid and the current vivacity and slipperiness of the New Aesthetic can be summarized neatly with a quote from the Indian artist Gopakumar R. P.’s work *Linguistic River* (2015): ‘I believe the work of art should change the existing visual, intellectual and aesthetical sense and experiment with finding new visual phenomena.’[[87]](#footnote-88) The fact is that a number of visual artists working without computers were beginning to produce work that established the foundations for a New Aesthetic art, and two important figures illustrate the tendency that many contemporary artists have taken to pave the way for the New Aesthetic: the Korean-American artist Nam June Paik (1932-2006) and the Swiss artist Jean Tinguely (1925-1991). Paik has been described as the artist who invented video art, who first brought a refined artistic sensibility to the use of electronics in artistic production, and whose participation in Fluxus and whose production of conceptual art radically transformed the possibilities available for subsequent generations. In video work, through the use of televisions as sculptures, by using neon lighting and laser effects with elaborate sound experiences, Paik pushed viewers to contemplate the rapid pace of change driven by technological innovations. His *TV Buddha* (1974) {Fig. 100} is rightfully regarded as his most famous and important artwork. *TV Buddha* has become an iconic artwork, which is surprising given that it was included almost as an afterthought in an exhibition almost as an afterthought at the Galeria Bonino in New York. Consisting of a closed loop – a seated Buddha sculpture is positioned so that it gazes at a television monitor that displays an image of the Buddha captured through a closed-circuit television camera – it’s a work that has sometimes been construed as a representation of a collision between an Oriental set of values or mindset and the Occidental tendency to assert a primary role for technological innovation. When Paik re-exhibited *TV Buddha* in Cologne that year, however, the artist temporarily took the place of the Buddha sculpture, thus denying the validity of that interpretation. The interchangeability of the figurative element is key for our purposes, and what we believe is a more accurate interpretation: the figurative sculpture and Paik’s own presence did not create a participating role but rather described a destabilized element in the closed system of the technology itself; whether as a living, breathing human being or an inanimate representation of a divine or semi-divine creature. What is activated aesthetically is the autonomy of the technology as a seeing agent, albeit one that remains unresponsive to any changes taking place in front of it. Paik would certainly have been aware that the role of the Buddha is not so much to exist as an object of worship but to be present as a model of enlightenment, an example of what an individual can become, and *TV Buddha* represents technology’s desire to achieve enlightenment as if technology was gazing actively, striving to better itself.

Some of Tinguely’s work is equally interesting and, in our opinion, achieves a similar result. Emerging from a tradition of Dada, Tinguely’s most famous artworks were kinetically destructive and self-destructive in nature, with Tinguely’s *Homage to New York* (1960) serving as the most famous and typical example. {Fig. 101} Set up in the sculpture garden of the Museum of Modern Art, *Homage to New York* was described by Tinguely as a ‘self-constructing and self-destroying work of art’ comprised of wheels, motors, a bathtub, a piano and various other objects and, once set into motion, proceeded to destroy itself with crashes and fire until stopped by the local fire department. While the link to Dada is apparent, as is the link to a long tradition of destruction in art, like Paik’s work there is a setting-forth of a systematic autonomy in *Homage to New York* that regressively undermines its sense of determinativeness; Tinguely’s aesthetics necessitated a lack of control on the artist’s part, once the processes had been set into motion, that transferred an autonomous agency over to the artwork. Much of Tinguely’s career can be understood as an exploration of the relationship between the artist, his work as technology, and human culture, with a clear conclusion that technologically-dependent objects have an alien life all to themselves, an interpretative position reinforced with a statement by Michael Landy, co-curator of a major exhibition of Tinguely’s work at the Tate Liverpool in 2009, that *Homage to New York* ‘committed suicide’,[[88]](#footnote-89) an act only a living creature with a sense of self-awareness could do.

The aesthetic strategies and their results as employed by both Paik and Tinguely are, in many respects, radically different from each other, but the resulting consequences are the same: in each case a system is created, closed and self-referential, initiated by the artists but quickly moving out of their control with unexpected results. In a way, both Paik’s and Tinguely’s artworks represent an aestheticization of Kurt Gödel’s incompleteness theorem, if aesthetic principles are considered axiomatic and human aesthetic evaluations are considered consistent. While we wouldn’t claim that Paik or Tinguely produced New Aesthetic art, we’re confident that their relationship to technology as a force opened opportunities prefacing a New Aesthetic interactionist strategy.

One of the most logical heirs to this, fully in a New Aesthetic mode, is the German artist Ralf Baecker. A German artist trained first in computer science and then as an artist at the Academy of Media Arts in Cologne, Baecker’s work has been the subject of a growing interest and focus as representative of a new generation of computer artists and many examples of his art show a sustained and insightful exploration of New Aesthetic issues. *Re-Active Platform* (2010-12) is a very good starting point; installed in a series of museums with a team of assistants,[[89]](#footnote-90) Baecker created a system of reactions between different computationally-drive sets of hardware and software which were also dependent on various environmental inputs as wide-ranging as motion and cosmic radiation. It seems that Baecker’s intention behind the work was to simulate an ontological foundation, namely, that reaction is the *sui generis* of autonomy, with a self-determining set of self-regulations as consequences of a sustained autonomy. More than almost any other artist mentioned, Baecker’s work exhibits an awareness of the presence of the digital functioning as an autonomous agent. Work like *Nowhere* (2004) – in which a ‘landscape’ based on users search movements on www.metager.de is sculptured on a milling machine – give a physical manifestation to the ‘geography’ of the internet.[[90]](#footnote-91) *Rechnender Raum (Computing Space)* (2007), {Fig. 102} an installation consisting of sticks, strings and plumb weights, exists as a fully-functioning, logic and exact network, with a reversal of the normal arrangements of output display (at the center of the torus) and computing mechanics (on the outside of the torus); in exaggerating the workings of its operational behavior, Baecker has created a work of art almost directly analogous to numerous models of consciousness presented in different philosophies of mind, even to the point of being similar to Kant’s description of the mind’s active relationship to its experience of the world. Taking this even a step further, Baecker’s *The Conversation* (2009) {Fig. 103} is an autonomous machine consisting of 99 solenoids circled around three rubber bands that respond to the surrounding electromagnetic fields of their neighbors as well as the changing pulling forces detected in order to conserve its own position, with the result being something akin to a homeostat that ‘tries to establish a hyper stable equilibrium’.[[91]](#footnote-92) In each case, Baecker is creating a system in which the system itself is responding on its own terms, creating an aesthetic configuration under its own power which is, fascinatingly, teleologically driven in an irrational fashion. Two pieces, though, need specific focus, as the best of Baecker’s New Aesthetic art: *Crystal Set* (2011)[[92]](#footnote-93) and *Irrational Computing* (2011-12).[[93]](#footnote-94)

*Crystal Set* {Fig. 104} takes as its basic premise the materiality of computational devices; the metonym ‘Silicon Valley’ is more than just a location but a description of one of the primary components of all computers, as are a wide variety of rare earth elements and other material. Attaching iron needles to the surface of a silicon carbide specimen with a semiconducting diode at the point of contact, Baecker has created a set of circumstances whereby both light and audible signals can be generated and responded to by the software, investigating the logical structure of the crystal which then

applies different electronic pattern to the contacts based on an analysis of current flow, resistance and response times in the specimen. By doing this it is inspecting its behavior in a closed feedback loop. As a result it generates raw and untamed signals visible and audible to the observer.[[94]](#footnote-95)

Bringing to mind, as Baecker himself alluded to in an interview,[[95]](#footnote-96) the raw crystal sets used in early commercial radios, *Crystal Set* is quite crude in appearance but sophisticated in execution and effect; more than just manifesting a sense of life, this work takes on a literal life of its own as well as a personality. Closely related to it, *Irrational Computing* {Fig. 105} has become Baecker’s most well known work, representing at an even more fundamental level than *Crystal Set* Baecker’s exploration of a ‘raw’ computational device. Using five interlinked modules, each responding separately to various input as well as responding at different levels to their companions’ output, *Irrational Computing* is a macroscopic presentation of the computational process that breaks away from the necessity of being purposive and logical. The effect is, as noted by the curator Carsten Seiffarth, that:

Digital systems, in their function, are conceived logically and rationally. The lowest physical or electro-technical level (crystals with semiconductor properties) are based, however, on quantum mechanical, i.e. statistical or unpredictable processes. Modern computer technology has thus tamed and domesticated the chaotic, so to speak. In his work, Ralf Baecker comments on this paradox by examining the aesthetics of the materials from which has developed a global digital network. “Irrational Computing” is not supposed to “function” – its aim is to search for the poetic elements on the border between “accuracy” and “chaos”.[[96]](#footnote-97)

Taken as a body of work – which is how Baecker sometimes refers to many of his artworks – the Irrational Computing objects are an exploration of randomness out of the natural and the man-made that parallels the intentions behind technological innovation. More than just heightening the viewer’s awareness of the materiality of contemporary computing – although that’s an important part of the work – Baecker’s work re-appropriates the digital which then creates its own paradox in the dichotomy between programmed and shaped material form that is the product of human intervention in opposition to a presence that grows over the duration and experience of the objects’ existence as apparent living-objects, based on the idea, as Baecker himself notes, of mathematician, physicist and inventor John von Neumann’s definition of artificial life, that ‘life is a process which can be abstracted away from any particular medium’.[[97]](#footnote-98) For us, Baecker’s art is a challenge to the anthropocentric notion of artistic agency and aesthetic effect precisely because its program quickly escapes the originator’s supervision, and it is New Aesthetic in that the conditions whereby the anthro-dependent qualification disappears behind an inherent and self-determined qualification of agency and its aesthetic effects.

This brings us back to the ideas of Lev Manovich, in particular his definition of ‘new media’. Writing about the GUI of applications, Manovich describes the design of the interface as increasingly visible, in opposition to modernist tenets, such that:

The designers no longer try to hide the interfaces. Instead, the interaction is treated as an event, as opposed to “non-event”, as in the previous “invisible interface” paradigm. Put differently, using personal information devices is now conceived as a carefully orchestrated experience, rather than just a means to an end. The interaction explicitly calls attention to itself. The interface engages the user in a kind of game. The user is asked to devote significant emotional, perceptual and cognitive resources to the very act of operating the device.[[98]](#footnote-99)

In essence, the increasing levels of interaction demand a similar attentiveness to the type employed in a theatrical experience, wherein a separation exists through a suspension of disbelief, with a heightened force of the artificiality of the aesthetic experience. However, an interesting effect is that the more the user becomes aware of the necessity of this heightened sense of the artificial there is a corresponding decline in a critical distance to the point that the artificial increasingly becomes naturalized. This transition within the event is evident in the work of James E. Murphy, an artist from Northern Ireland working in Berlin and part of a growing number of artists whose work is primarily presented online in the programming languages of the internet.[[99]](#footnote-100) Murphy’s work has covered territory similar to many other artists, including a few already discussed in this chapter, with work like *Relative Anonymity* (2012)[[100]](#footnote-101) presenting an avoidance of government security structures’ use of facial recognition through the use of stochastic noise and visuals, but three pieces in particular capture the released energy that defines Murphy’s work specifically. *The Politics of Creation* (2013)[[101]](#footnote-102) {Fig. 106} is a theatrical production that utilizes an aleatoric music and lighting system based on algorithmic formulae to create unique compositions for every performance; what’s interesting is not just the inclusion of chance in a work which is heavily indebted to the traditions of systematization in art, especially in its fascinating use of algorithms to push an ever changing set of musical transitions through instrumentation, key, rhythm, arrangement and structure, but also the sense of an invoked natural chaos partnered with the choreography creating a ‘closed system of causality as information about velocity, acceleration and positioning of dancers are fed back into the system affecting the very music they are dancing to […] [that] links the dancers and the system in a “dance” of their own […] as the piece progresses towards its finale’.[[102]](#footnote-103) The shift in the language is telling, as it’s clear that Murphy understands the mathematical structure to be an active participant in the performance, a digital collaborative partner to the human dancers. But what’s also clear is an emphasis on the transitory, the ephemeral and the lyrical tragic; Murphy writes about *The Politics of Creation*:

As a viewer the experience is of course unique in terms of its raw content but what’s more than this it seems to allow one to have an extended experience of the present moment. Whereas a regular stage production will be known to be predetermined, in TPoC the anticipation associated with knowing that the next series of notes or rhythmic pattern and ultimately how the choreography responds to it, will never be heard or seen again tends to expand the perception of “now” creating a mild hypnosis or meditative state.[[103]](#footnote-104)

*Found* (2014)[[104]](#footnote-105) {Fig. 107} and the previously discussed *What Colour Is It?* (2014) are quite different. *Found* is an almost aggressive intrusion into the user’s experience of a browser, consisting simply of the words ‘I Found My Soul In A Browser Window’ flashed repeatedly on the screen in a manner that someone suffering from photosensitive epilepsy should avoid at all costs. Using soft-focused typography that flashes in and out of visibility, with the words crossed and revealed in the most blatant of RGBY tones, *Found* isn’t functional, it is disconcertingly glaring visually, and offers no chance for reciprocity and reflective judgment whatsoever in a fashion. By removing any identification of the ‘I’ and by situating the conceptualized space self-referentially inside its own browser window, *Found* leaves us with an experience that closes any chance of interchange or exchange between the art and the viewer. And the previously discussed *What Colour Is It?* (2014) is more than just a simple confounding of our anticipated feedback but is a strong demarcation of the singular difference between the digital parameters of experience and our normative experience of the world at a phenomenological level wherein the interface ceases to function despite its appearance. Manovich’s observation that cognitive resources become increasingly utilized really seems to capture Murphy’s art, although Murphy’s art seems to have created a digital event horizon in a way that replicates the division between actors and audiences in Manovich’s notion of ‘interaction as theater’.[[105]](#footnote-106) At the same time, the increasing use of cognitive resources in the aesthetic experience contraindicates an engaged and personal aesthetic experience, and Murphy’s work heightens our awareness of this process in a very valuable fashion.

### Beyond the Theatricality of the New Aesthetic

Two projects by Lev Manovich bring out these issues in notable and fascinating ways: *Selfiecity* (2014) and *On Broadway* (2014-2016). Manovich is, of course, one of the most important theorists thinking about postdigital issues, but he’s also created a number of projects that may not be referred to as ‘art’ in the traditional sense, in that they often seem more like visualized sociological research, but certainly fall into a broad definition as such in that they invite the same type of responses one normally has to art. *Selfiecity* (2014), {Fig. 108} and its second manifestation *Selfiecity London* (2015), was an artistic project exploring data visualization through an analysis of 3200 Instagram selfie photos taken in Bangkok, Berlin, New York, Sao Paulo and Moscow[[106]](#footnote-107) with London added as a sixth city later.[[107]](#footnote-108) Starting off with 120,000 photos culled from a collection of 656,000, the organizers had these checked by Amazon Mechanical Turk workers to verify their status as a selfie photograph, reduced the sample set further to 1000 for each city after two Turks tagged a photo as a selfie, and then had each photograph further tagged by age and gender with higher skilled Turks. Given a conclusive set of selfies, the organizers then algorithmically estimated eye, nose and mouth positions as well as estimated emotional states. What emerged from these permutations of analysis is the means to visually represent various spectrums of data such as smiles, points of view, emotional states, the expressiveness of the poses and the propensity of selfies as a photographic subject. What was revealed in this project were apparent geographically determinable trends; for instance, people in selfies in Bangkok and Sao Paulo smiled significantly more than in the other cities, and women in Moscow took far more selfies than men and treated selfies more like a fashion shoot to project an image of themselves rather than simply as a marker of their presence or participation. Is *Selfiecity* art? The project itself engages with that question by including three essays analyzing the selfies as a social phenomenon and handling critical theory’s ability to analyze the selfie as a manifestation of our zeitgeist,[[108]](#footnote-109) but in a traditional sense it’s very hard to think about *Selfiecity* as ‘art’ not only because of the productive methodology involved, including the obvious contributions from a vast array of individuals, but also because of the sense that it’s a project more ensconced in anthropology. Well, we’ve not been talking about art in the traditional sense for a long time, and it’s clear that *Selfiecity* is but one instance of a new way of making art that is socially and cooperatively engaged and produced in a manner closely approximating Nicholas Bourriaud’s notion of relational aesthetics. At the same time, *Selfiecity* is a challenging artwork that is fully New Aesthetic in nature for the simple reason that it’s dependent on a productive methodology and aesthetic strategy that is itself uncritically dependent on underlying conventions of the nature of data. Recalling Otto Neurath’s infographics, with the transformation of data into visual form which almost perfunctorily and negligently draws upon its sources, *Selfiecity* manifests its visual appearance in a similar fashion, albeit in a manner clearly much more thoughtful and engaged, in that the data becomes the visualization rather than being revealed by the visualization. This is what makes *Selfiecity* particularly interesting and valuable and what makes it a genuine instance of New Aesthetic art: it’s not just that Manovich and his team translated the data into a visual form with its own aesthetic criteria, it’s that the aesthetic criteria were built into the aesthetics of the data itself as it was discovered through the research and the creation of the art. Zach Sokol writes:

Not only does *selfiecity* [sic] offer findings about the demographics of people taking selfies (as well as info about their poses and expressions, such as smile trends), it also shares a variety of data visualizations (such as collages that overlay hundreds of selfies that share certain characteristics), and allows visitors to explore the entire photo collection, filtering the information into several formats that could reveal patterns or trends that ripple throughout selfie culture.[[109]](#footnote-110)

While Sokol’s enthusiasm for the project is appreciated, it’s clear that he’s seeing *Selfiecity* only as a project whose forms are determined by the artists’ manipulation of the data rather than as a means of revealing the inherent aesthetic nature of the data itself. To put it another way, the ontologically circular nature of the data, generated autonomously within its self-determining aesthetic manifestation, reveals itself through the artistic choices Manovich and the rest made in a way that’s independent of those artistic choices; the fundamentally important aesthetic engagement for the viewer lies not in *Selfiecity*’s website, for instance, but in its autonomous aesthetic.

Equally important and interesting is Manovich’s *On Broadway* (2014-2016).[[110]](#footnote-111) {Fig. 109} As noted on the website for the project, *On Broadway* is an ‘interactive installation […] [that] represents life in the 21st century city through a compilation of images and data collected along the 13 miles of Broadway that span Manhattan’. Drawing upon the rich history of modern representations of cities’ identities, ranging from Pissaro’s series of paintings of the Boulevard Montmartre to *Spider-Man* comics and, especially, Edward Ruscha’s seminal *Every Building on the Sunset Strip* (1966), {Fig. 110} Lev Manovich and his team[[111]](#footnote-112) created a visual representation of a broad spectrum of data sources in real time and averaged over extended periods of time in order to provide a portrait of Broadway’s important role in the life of New York City. Instagram images, Google Street View pictures of the facades of buildings, taxi statistics obtained from the city, demographic data and collection of dominant colors by location and social media imagery were brought together to create a panoply remarkably similar in intent to Walter Benjamin’s unfinished *Arcades Project* (1927-40) as a data collage manifesting a personification of the life of this segment of the city. This last point is crucial, and it’s what ties *On Broadway* together with its artistic predecessors: what emerges out of the experience of this art installation is a sense of the life of Broadway, a sense that, as one write puts it, ‘NYC is a city that does sleep, a bit’.[[112]](#footnote-113) At the same time, *On Broadway* is curiously similar to *Selfiecity* in its dependence on big data for its raw information and its aesthetic appeal. To compare it to Ruscha’s work is illuminating: whereas Ruscha’s images of the building on Sunset Strip is just as much about the endurance of the photographer to image each and every building as it is about creating an extensive and all-encompassing image of that one location in West Hollywood, *On Broadway* doesn’t illustrate so much the efforts of the artists involved as it shows the presentation of the information generated by the people living, working and travelling on Broadway; whereas Ruscha’s work is an act of documentation, *On Broadway* is primarily a presentation of what had already been documented and archived by software data analysis and stored with the aesthetic affect fundamentally driven by the sublime realization of the existence of the data itself. Manovich notes:

How does a “data city” look like? We did not want to show the data in a conventional way using only graphs and numbers. We also did not want to use another convention of showing spatial data – a map. The result of our explorations is “On Broadway”: a visually rich image-centric interface, where numbers play only a secondary role, and no maps are used. The project proposes a new visual metaphor for thinking about the city: a vertical stack of image and data layers. There are 13 such layers in the project, all aligned to locations along Broadway. Using our unique interface (available as the online app and in large multi-touch screen installed at New York Public Library as part of “The Public Eye” exhibition), you can see all data at once, or zoom and follow Broadway block by block.[[113]](#footnote-114)

While Manovich notes that the intention is to produce a visually rich and interactive experience, the emphasis and the end result is clearly situated less in the superficial effect but in the creation of a ‘new metaphor’ that breaks through a digitized fourth wall. We would argue that this new metaphor isn’t as new as Manovich and his team think it is simply because its origins lie less in the creativity of the artists but in the driving force behind the New Aesthetic. John Brownlee makes an interesting point when he notes that ‘*On Broadway* is the latest in a series of experiments to leverage computers, the web, and massive data to represent our cities in new ways.’[[114]](#footnote-115) Leveraging the data, the software and the hardware means pushing them to act, to create the aesthetic experience, in ways that only they are capable of doing; *On Broadway* is, in our opinion, a fascinating and beautiful example of what New Aesthetic art is precisely because the data and its parameter-controlling manifestations achieve an incredibly determinative and autonomous agency in the creation of the aesthetic experience. Once the interactivity takes place the artists’ control permanently slips away and all that remains is the data. Nevertheless, we take as a central tenant of our position a point nicely articulated by Manovich, writing about *Selfiecity*: ‘New image-making and image-sharing technologies demand radically new ways of interpretation and analysis in what we might think of as a postdigital age, and *Selfiecity* is an attempt to explore and map these new representational forms.’[[115]](#footnote-116) Manovich is absolutely correct; New Aesthetic art and what it represents is about more than just appearing to be digital or postdigital but represents an entirely new way of interpreting and analyzing images, one that equally demands a new critical perspective. It’s not enough to simply assess how cool or new the work is, but rather how much of a paradigmatic shift is evidenced and embodied in the work.

Two artists that can be positively compared to the methodology of Manovich’s artworks are Ben Grosser and Matthew Rothenberg. Grosser’s work, already discussed earlier in the book, has been varied in form and content, but clearly aligns itself with a specific New Aesthetic strategy that is entirely invested in designing the function of digital objects towards an embodied form of autonomy. Works like *Interactive* *Robotic Painting Machine* (2011) {Fig. 111} bear some resemblance, in a non-destructive fashion, to Jean Tinguely’s work, but pushes far beyond what Tinguely’s work accomplishes to establish itself as a primary instance of New Aesthetic art because there are measurable results that can be assessed comparatively to the form of our own aesthetic choices. Taking the idea that intelligence can evolve even in software and, thus, that aesthetic sensibilities, as an expression of the needs of that evolved intelligence, can also evolve, Grosser built

an interactive robotic painting machine that uses artificial intelligence to paint its own body of work and to make its own decisions. While doing so, it listens to its environment and considers what it hears as input into the painting process. In the absence of someone or something else making sound in its presence, the machine, like many artists, listens to itself. But when it does hear others, it changes what it does just as we subtly (or not so subtly) are influenced by what others tell us.[[116]](#footnote-117)

*Interactive Robotic Painting Machine* is a programmed art-producing machine which at first seems to be part of a long tradition of similar machines tracing back to the early 1960s, but Grosser’s addition to it is clearly a heightened independence and even a sense of self-awareness in the capability of the work to respond. Having identified one of the primary aspects of artistic identity as the ability to think, listen, and hear oneself, Grosser has programmed the machine to, in effect, be an artificial artist. Still, as clever as this is, the autonomy is still programmed in, and the aesthetic responses through the programming can be predicted, thus leaving questions about the machine as an independent artist still in place; Grosser himself asks these very questions when he writes on his website:

Does an art-making machine of my design make work for me or for itself? How does machine vision differ from human vision, and is that difference visible in its output? Is my own consciousness reinforced by the system or does it become lost within? In other words, is this machine alive, with agency as yet another piece of the technium, or is it our own anthropomorphization of the system that makes us think about it in these ways?[[117]](#footnote-118)

What makes this piece fit into the category of New Aesthetic art is that uncertainty, particularly as it pertains to the question of anthropomorphization; it’s not so much a question of whether Grosser is attributing human form and personality to the actions of the *Interactive Robotic Painting Machine* but a question about the freedom we have to anthropomorphize a machine, to seemingly ascribe metaphorically human traits when what might really be happening is that those traits exist in a non-metaphorical fashion in the object’s digital basis. Far more interesting is *Computers Watching Movies* (2014), perhaps one of the most important and compelling examples of New Aesthetic art we’ve seen.[[118]](#footnote-119) {Fig. 112} Using software written by himself, Grosser provided computational devices not only the means to watch movies by tracking areas that attract their attentive focus but also the means to express that focus by plotting changes in the same manner that the focus of eyesight of vision can be tracked digitally today. Using well-known clips from six classic movies – *2001: A Space Odyssey*, *American Beauty*, *Inception*, *Taxi Driver*, *The Matrix*, and *Annie Hall* – Grosser’s artwork is given an opportunity to *aesthetically* present its response. It’s this last point that makes *Computers Watching Movies* so interesting, in that it’s more than just software programming coupled with hardware capability but is, rather, a means of granting aesthetic agency to a digital configuration almost as a means of testing its potential disinterestedness as an aesthetic object in its own right. Exhibited widely and winning the First Prize at the VIDA Awards for Art and Artificial Life in 2014, Grosser’s *Computers Watching Movies* is more than just machine vision but is also the embodiment of a new evaluative aesthetic paradigm; it’s not merely that this artwork gives us some insight into the changing nature of cinema itself[[119]](#footnote-120), it answers Grosser’s question ‘Will a system without our sense of narrative watch the same thing? I’m left wondering why I and the computer see things so differently.’[[120]](#footnote-121) The real issue isn’t why the human and the machine are seeing things differently. The underlying assumptions are that there’s some conflation between the human and the digital responses; however, not only is there no conflation, not only is it clear that the human and the computer see things differently, even more important is the fact that *Computers Watching Movies* contains the strong implication that the computer’s interest is quickly supplanting our own or that it’s vision, its method of aesthetic evaluation is supplanting ours. Is it possible that Grosser’s *Computers Watching Movies* is capable of achieving a purely disinterested perspective and would thus be capable of pronouncing pure, justified objective aesthetic judgments in a Kantian sense? Certainly at this point the answer is no, but that’s only due to the technical nature of Kant’s system that requires a subjective reflection. It’s clear that this work puts forward a vision of the future in which even something as aesthetic judgment, once assumed not only to be a privileged and exclusive form of human activity, transitions into the digital in a manner that seems to be a more effective implementation.[[121]](#footnote-122)

In a way this is similar to Matthew Rothenberg’s project *Unindexed* (2015).[[122]](#footnote-123) {Fig. 113} Rothenberg has worked in the tech industry in a number of prominent roles, but recently started creating his own art projects such as *Emojitracker* (2013),[[123]](#footnote-124) which tracks all emoji usage worldwide in a dynamic graphic format, and *Swipe Left* (2014),[[124]](#footnote-125) which conflated the dating app Tinder’s usage with drone strikes through incorporated images of kills by drone missiles. *Unindexed* (2015), however, is a masterpiece in its own right, one directly akin to Yves Klein’s conceptual artwork *Zone of Immaterial Pictorial Sensibility* (1959-62); described by Rothenberg as ‘An experiment in the nature of ephemerality and persistence on the web’ it was a website that functioned by continually searching for itself in Google and destroying every copied instance of itself once discovered, ‘making the precise instant of algorithmic discovery the catalyst of destruction’. Importantly, Google discovered the work 22 days later and destroyed it resulting in no backups and no corresponding existence except the memory of the event. What aligns *Unindexed* with Grosser’s work is the independence of the digital agent from human interaction; even though visitors to the *Unindexed* site were encouraged to share it and post to it the coding took control in an entirely separate fashion, breaking *Unindexed* free of human interactivity once set into motion. It’s this release from human control that makes these instances of New Aesthetic art both exciting and unnerving; more than almost any other work we’ve discussed, *Unindexed* not only is fully participant in new forms of digital art, influenced by the ephemeral nature of the internet and simultaneously having a persistent conceptual effect, its nature as functioning independently of the artist makes it a perfect example of New Aesthetic art. In an interview Rothenberg noted ‘Part of the goal with the project was to create a sense of unease with the participants – if they liked it, they could and should share it with others, so that the conversation on the site could grow […] But by doing so they were potentially contributing to its demise via indexing, as the more the URL was out there, the faster Google would find it.’[[125]](#footnote-126)

In a way, *Unindexed* forces us to confront a peculiar conundrum because of its permanent and ephemeral nature when faced with certain manifestations of digital objects: are we complicit in their continuing existence (which we most certainly are, if for no other reason than that page view counts are often determinative of their appearance in search results) or do they have a life of their own (which they most certainly do as well, existing on servers)? This dialectic complicates our response, and increasingly we make concessions to the presence of the digital into our lives, allowing it to function in a state of independent agency (if not actual independent agency) rather than risking any emotional dangers or existential uncertainty were we to try and intervene or act on our volition. What made *Unindexed* so poignant and poetic was the simple fact that the more it was searched for, the more it appeared in Google’s search results, and the quicker its demise would come; there was almost a sense of the tragic with a subsequent lack of comfort in one’s participation. This feeling of being uncomfortable is only due to its lack of familiarity, a lack that is quickly disappearing the more digitized our world becomes. Marius Watz posted on his Tumblr feed that ‘heavy use of algorithms is bad for you. That is, it is if you wish to consider yourself a computational creative capable of coming up with interesting work […] You cannot lay claim to “owning” any given algorithm (or hardware configuration), unless you have added significant extra value to it.’[[126]](#footnote-127) In his Tumblr essay from 2012, Watz writes about how coding itself should be regarded as an art form in that code exists as an entity in its own right similar to the traditional objects of artistic production. But what this really means, for Watz, is that code is not neutral: ‘Algorithms provide the means to produce specific outcomes, typically through generative logic or data processing. But in the process they leave their distinct footprints on the result […] “speaking” through algorithms, your thought patterns and modes of expression are shaped by their syntax.’[[127]](#footnote-128) We’re at the stage where what’s really interesting about this is how this indicates that there are new boundaries; while the algorithms created by Watz are themselves dependent on more fundamental algorithms, meaning that his own creations are flavored by the footprints of the preexisting syntax, nevertheless something new is emerging, and a work like *Unindexed* forces us to confront the existence of boundaries that are increasingly evident and permeable without any action on our part as users.

Finally, we need to take into account James Bridle’s own recent exhibition of his art in the NOME gallery in Berlin. The NOME gallery was founded in 2015 as an exhibition space presenting work that exists at the intersection of art, politics and technology. Ralf Baecker, Matthew Plummer-Fernandez, Quayola and Kirsten Stolle are some of the important figures already shown there, and Bridle’s inclusion signaled a clear commitment to art aligned with the ideas and effects of the New Aesthetic. Bridle’s exhibition ‘The Glomar Response’ (2015)[[128]](#footnote-129) references a curious piece of CIA history, when the *Glomar Explorer* was designed to salvage a sunken Soviet submarine in the 1970s, with subsequent requests by the press for information being met with the phrase ‘neither confirm nor deny’ that itself became a synecdoche for governments’ secrecy efforts. Bridle’s coinage of the phrase ‘New Aesthetic’ has been focused on the visual lexicon that involves glitches, pixelization and pixelated images, and general weirdness, but *The Glomar Response* develops through an exploration of the relationship between surveillance, secrecy and code that shows Bridle to be more than just a digital curator or collector of computational oddities. Through three projects – *Seamless Transitions*, which presents simulacrums of unphotographable locations through architectural visualizations derived from planning and construction documents; *The Fraunhofer Lines*, {Fig. 114} wherein gaps in documents obtained through freedom of information requests are presented as analogous to astronomical spectra analysis first done by the German physicist Joseph von Fraunhofer in 1814; and *Waterboarded Documents*, {Fig. 115} a presentation of ironic parallels between the British government’s claim that water damage prevented the release of information and waterboard torture techniques use in the war on terror – Bridle’s most recent art project represents neatly an exemplary summation of the New Aesthetic as new art. In an interview, Bridle noted: ‘For me this thing about the attempt to see though machine eyes is that it’s actually an attempt to see through aggregates of human eyes and intention, because actually what you’re seeing is the previously hidden intentions of the people that built these systems.’[[129]](#footnote-130) What makes this such an interesting statement is that *The Glomar Response* seems to be exactly the opposite of this statement, a denial of Bridle’s own optimism and utopianism found in the interview. Rather than an attempt to see through the aggregate of human eyes and intentions represented in the coding, *The Glomar Response* presents an increased pessimism particularly in the suggested notion of the natural development of the digital entities involved. In a way, Bridle’s most recent piece of art, especially *The Fraunhofer Lines*, masterfully aligns itself with the realist position in a debate in the philosophy of mathematics, in that the increasing encroachment is apparently not just a matter of design or evolution but was always present; if the presentation of spectral information can be used to reveal the actual chemical composition of stars in an aesthetic manner then similar means can also be used to reveal the actual nature of digital objects not as the result of programming but real in an independent fashion. The anger and, most importantly, the futility that many of the artists we’ve discussed in this chapter feel with the current state of surveillance and the intrusion of digital objects into our lives, lies less in the fact that they’re responding to the intentions and decisions of human agents and the morality of their actions and far more in the fact that this offers a glimpse of a future wherein our intentions, our decisions and our actions are increasingly out of our hands as they are guided by the digitalization of the world.

1. A witty and intelligent summary of this can be found in Tiernan Morgan and Lauren Purje, ‘An Illustrated Guide to Arthur Danto’s “The End of Art”’, *Hyperallergic*, 31 March 2015, http://hyperallergic.com/191329/an-illustrated-guide-to-arthur-dantos-the-end-of-art/. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Susan Hodara, ‘Liza Lou’s Handmade Sea of Sparkling Glass’, *The New York Times*, 2 January 2016, http://nyti.ms/1OBekoq. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. *Liza Lou*, http://lizalou.com/. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. Helaine Posner, Chief Curator, ‘Liza Lou: Color Field and Solid Grey November 8, 2015 – February 21, 2016’, *Neuberger Museum of Ar*t, https://www.neuberger.org/exhibitions/current/view1/314.html?width=660&height=500. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. Susan Hodara, ‘Liza Lou’s Handmade Sea of Sparkling Glass’. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. Don Garrett, “Teleology in Spinoza and Early Modern Rationalism” in Gennaro, Rocco and Huenemann, Charles (eds), *New Essays on the Rationalists*, New York : Oxford University Press. 1999, p. 310. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. Benjamin Grosser, ‘Flexible Pixels’, 2009-11, *Benjamin Grosser*, http://bengrosser.com/projects/flexible-pixels/. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. Manovich, *Software Takes Command*, p. 203. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
9. Adrien Mondot and Claire Bardainne, *Adrien M / Claire B*, http://www.am-cb.net/. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
10. *Adrien M / Claire B*. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
11. Adrien Mondot and Claire Bardainne, ‘Convergence 1.0’, 2005, *Adrien M / Claire B*, http://www.am-cb.net/projets/convergence-1-0/. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
12. Adrien Mondot and Claire Bardainne, ‘XYZT, Les paysages abstraits’, 2011, *Adrien M / Claire B*, http://www.am-cb.net/projets/xyzt/. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
13. Adrien Mondot and Claire Bardainne, ‘Hakanaï’, 2013, *Adrien M / Claire B*, http://www.am-cb.net/projets/hakanai/. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
14. Adrien Mondot and Claire Bardainne, ‘Le mouvement de l’air’, 2015, *Adrien M / Claire B*, http://www.am-cb.net/projets/air/. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
15. Christopher Jobson, ‘The Movement of Air: A New Dance Performance Incorporating Interactive Digital Projection from Adrien M & Claire B’, 11 November 2015, *This is Colossal*, http://www.thisiscolossal.com/2015/11/movement-of-air-dance/. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
16. Manovich, *The Language of New Media,* p. 218. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
17. Adam Harvey, *Adam Harvey Projects*, http://ahprojects.com/. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
18. Adam Harvey, *CV Dazzle*, https://cvdazzle.com/. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
19. Adam Harvey, *Undisclosed*, https://undisclosed.cc/. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
20. Which, we must point out, are generally regarded as entirely ineffective. Designed by the English artist Norman Wilkinson, it was intended less to hide and more to confuse the targeting technology of the day. Further, no evidence exists that it was inspired by Cubism except Picasso’s own claim. C.f. Wikipedia contributors, ‘Dazzle camouflage’. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
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22. Terry Adams (project manager), ‘Janus’, Research Programs, Office of the Director of National Intelligence, http://www.iarpa.gov/index.php/research-programs/janus. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
23. Metahaven (Daniël van der Velden and Vinca Kruk) *Black Transparency: The Right to Know in the Age of Mass Surveillance*, Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2015, p. 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
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25. Harvey, ‘How to Hide from Machines’. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
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27. Adam Harvey Projects: Stealth Wear, https://ahprojects.com/projects/stealth-wear/. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
28. Terry Adams (project manager), ‘Janus’. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
29. Zach Blas, https://www.flickr.com/photos/zachblas/. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
30. Zach Blas, ‘Escaping the Face: Biometric Facial Recognition and the Facial Weaponization Suite’, *Journal of the New Media Caucus*, 2013, http://median.newmediacaucus.org/caa-conference-edition-2013/escaping-the-face-biometric-facial-recognition-and-the-facial-weaponization-suite/. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
31. Zach Blas, ‘Escaping the Face’. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
32. Berry, *Critical Theory and the Digital,* p. 192. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
33. Berry, *Critical Theory and the Digital,* p. 209. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
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35. Blas, ‘Escaping the Face’. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
36. Blas, ‘Escaping the Face’. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
37. Metahaven, http://www.metahaven.net/. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
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46. Thom Bettridge, ‘Coup de Net: METAHAVEN’s “Black Transparency”’, *032c*, 20 November 2015, http://032c.com/2015/coup-de-net-metahavens-black-transparency/. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
47. Robert Wiesenberger, ‘METAHAVEN: Somewhere Near You, Soon’, *032c*, Summer 2014, http://032c.com/2014/metahaven-somewhere-near-you-soon/. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
48. Quoted in Andrea Hyde, ‘Metahaven’s *Facestate* Social Media and the State’, *Walker*, 13 December 2011, http://www.walkerart.org/magazine/2011/metahavens-facestate. [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
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