Digital Aesthetics: Introduction

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http://www.medienkunstnetz.de/themes/aesthetics_of_the_digital/editorial/

The early twentieth century saw the formation in various fields of new theoretical approaches sharing a skeptical attitude towards the fundamental certainties that had profoundly influenced occidental culture and science. Towards the mid-twentieth century concepts like truth, reality, reason and knowledge became central in an intensive contest between rationalism and relativism. In the course of this debate, several theories were dissociated from the self-referential character of their scientific disciplines and increasingly placed in correlation with other fields. Examples of metadisciplinary models include the cybernetic analysis of message transmission and man-machine communication or, more recently, postmodernist philosophy and its notion of ‹contaminated,› ‹weak› thinking. [1] This relativism manifested itself in various aspects of art: as an essential component in the process of producing experimental art from the first avantgarde movements onward; in the radical transformation of the forms of art reception; in the tendency to interconnect and establish interchange among various art genres (discernible in interventionist and interdisciplinary works or ‹mixed media›); andfinally in the intensified exchange among art, science, and technology. Artistic practice appropriated new media—initially photography and film, later video and computer—and new communication systems—post and telephone, followed by television and Internet. Under this premise, and above all from the 1960s onward, a gradual shift set in away from academic, orthodox positions

attempting to confine art to traditional techniques, and aesthetics to ontological foundations.

However, the profound transformations resulting from these new approaches did not invariably meet with understanding, let alone acceptance, from artists. If one further takes into consideration the recently re-ignited controversy about the long-predicted crises of art and philosophical aesthetics, as well the widespread discourse among postmodernist writers which was linked to tendencies in technological and academic theory, then everything does in fact seem to point toward a disintegration of art and aesthetics. Yet a large part of such polemics can be attributed to the fact that aesthetic theory and artistic practice have gone separate ways. Artists' increasing use of technology is bringing to light a far-reaching and on-going discrepancy between artistic perception, art theory, and aesthetics, which are seen to be notably diverging instead of developing synchronously and congruently. This gulf between theoretical «corpus» and artistic practice culminates in a paradox that without doubt leads to the often proclaimed end of art.

Nevertheless the conviction remains that certain symptoms of transition cannot be immediately equated with the radical disintegration of the fields involved. It is rather the case that new intellectual approaches and modes of experiencing must be found in order to enable the analysis and assimilation—as opposed to rejection—of the contemporary phenomena. One access route to these new forms is shown by the theory and practice of media art, and of interactive media art especially, whose renewing concepts are discernible in the fact that aesthetic the+ory is no longer focussed exclusively on the art object itself, but on its process, on system and contexts, on the broad linkage of different disciplines, and on reformulating the roles of the maker and the viewer of a work of art.

The complex process of transformation undergone by art and aesthetics, as well as the closely intermeshed interdisciplinary relationships, can be understood only by investigating those phenomena and theories which have so far driven forward the syntopy [2] of art, science, and technology, and in the future will continue to do so. It is not sufficient to describe the current state of art by concentrating on its epicenter; instead one must expand the horizon of consideration to adjacent fields and trace the historical developments in which corresponding changes and contemporary phenomena can be discerned. One aim of this hypertext monograph is to work out an aesthetic concept inherently formed by the context and creative experience of interactivity-based works, as well as their presentation and reception. The intention is to show potential paths towards a renewal of aesthetic discourses: paths already smoothed by those pioneers and artists whose tracks this essay follows. In this way various concepts of science, technology, and art are linked with a view to revising the notions of art, aesthetics, and spectator. Without a doubt the artistic use of new technologies and the specific current forms of interlocking science and art lead to diverse formulations of questions—of practical and formal, as well as conceptual and philosophical nature—to which only future developments will deliver an answer. The «Aesthetics of the Digital» addresses several of these principle questions. Some contain possible answers, others lead to new questions that open up space for further considerations.

Translation: Tom Morrison

[1] See Gianni Vattimo, La fine della modernità, Milan, 1985.

[2] See Ernst Pöppel, «Radikale Syntopie an der Schnittstelle von Gehirn und Computer,» in Die Technik auf dem Weg zur Seele. Forschungen an der Schnittstelle Gehirn/Computer, Christa Maar/Ernst Pöppel/Thomas Christaller (eds), Reinbek/Hamburg, 1996, pp. 12–29.