## Digital art objects vs Traditional art objects – Conceptual differences

In the previous section, we discussed the practicalities of artistic practice when computers are involved. We hinted at several points that such practicalities also implied more conceptual differences in how aesthetic objects are perceived when digital media is involved. In this section, we will go deeper into those differences.

To illustrate the type of questions we will address, let’s recall the example of “Structure des Quadrilaters” by Vera Molnar. We mentioned that this work is a series of works which share an underlying common process for creation. From a traditional perspective, we could say that the printed images in a series are the art object. However, this perspective ignores the underlying process and the relationship between the artist and the machine during the creation process. This raises several questions on the conceptual level of practice and the work itself:

* What is the relation between the artists, the work, the machine and the process?
* What kind of artist mindset does this type of creative practice need?
* Which art theory can be used for this kind of creative practice?
* Although each series has aesthetic qualities, are two different series different aesthetic objects?
* Generally speaking, we could ask: what is the aesthetic object underlying “Structure des Quadrilaters”?

### The new “digital artist”

We begin by looking at the creative practice and the relation of the parties involved, i.e. artist, machine, process.

As mentioned in the previous section, randomness is at the core of Vera Molnar's creative practice. In (MuDA 2019) she describes how she systematically uses randomness to broaden her perspective and explore the possibilities of the aesthetic object she is interested in. In (Molnar en Molnar 1989) she goes even further, using randomness to formally define form.

This approach of systematic study restriction of the field of study and formal definitions is often used in science. At first glance, it may seem that a methodological approach would not be suitable for art practices. However, this is one of the changes digital media brings to the table. Claudia Gianneti expresses this as follows:

*“While science, says Weibel, is distinctly methodological in character, art is generally not regarded as a method: «This is our first claim: art and science can only reasonably be compared if we accept that both are methods. This does not mean that we declare that both have the same methods. We only want to declare that both have a methodological approach, even if their methods are or can be different.”* (Gianneti 2004)

Peter Wiebel in (Peter 1998) elaborates more on how digital media bring science and art closer to each other. Jack Burnham places this change of paradigm in the context of scientific revolutions as follows:

*“In a way this situation might be likened to the "morphological development" of a prime scientific concept as described by Thomas Kuhn in The Structure of Scientific Revolutions (1962). Kuhn sees science at any given period dominated by a single "major paradigm"; that is, a scientific conception of the natural order so pervasive and intellectually powerful that it dominates all ensuing scientific discovery…*

*…the artist operates as a quasipolitical provocateur, though in no concrete sense is he an ideologist, or a moralist. “l’art pour l’art” and a century's resistance to the vulgarities of moral uplift have insured that…*

*…Scientists and technicians are not converted into "artists," rather the artist becomes a symptom of the schism between art and technics. Progressively the need to make ultrasensitive judgments as to the uses of technology and scientific information becomes "art" in the most literal sense.”* (Burnham 1968, 31)

This aligns at a higher level with the paradigm change of “technical craftsmanship in the praxis of artistic practice” mentioned in the previous section.

The new “digital artist” requires technical craftsmanship, methodological thinking, and collaboration skills. For the new digital artist, the boundaries between science, art and technology should be diffused and purposely disrespected.

### Digital practice vs art theory

Unfortunately, Claudia Gianneti points out that this new way of working required by digital media and the way art theory has been developing are diverging instead of converging:

*“…the profound transformations resulting from these new [technological] 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.”* (Gianneti 2004)

This nicely illustrates how the Rietveld Academy involves technology in the theoretical and practical education. For example, Studium Generale is one of the largest platforms in the Rietveld Academy to address art theory. However, if we look at the list of topics for the 15 editions (Rietveld 2023) we have the following:

* 2023 — 2024 -- TECHNODIVERSITY — Beyond datafication and digital colonialism
* 2022 — 2023 -- REFUGE – fleeing, flowing, leaking
* 2021 — 2022 -- OCEANIC IMAGINARIES — How can we liquefy our ways of being? How can we think from and with the ocean?
* 2020 — 2021 -- RESILIENT BODIES  — Strategies and Practices for Fluid Embodiments
* 2019 — 2020 -- RELATING (TO) COLOUR
* 2019 -- THE ART OF CRITIQUE  —  Image Power
* 2018 — 2019 -- TAKE A WALK ON THE WILD SIDE  — Fabulating Alternative Imaginaries in Art and Life
* 2018 -- WITHIN AND AGAINST THE ACADEMY — Study, Rehearsal and Improvisation
* 2017 — 2018 -- HOLD ME NOW  — Feel and Touch in an Unreal World
* 2016 — 2017 -- WHAT IS HAPPENING TO OUR BRAIN?  — Art & Life in Times of Cognitive Automation
* 2015 — 2016 -- BOTS, BODIES, BEASTS  — The art of being Humble
* 2014 — 2015 -- Are you alive or not?  — Looking at ART through the lens of THEATRE
* 2013 — 2014 -- VOICE ~ Creature of Transition
* 2012 — 2013 -- WHERE ARE WE GOING, WALT WHITMAN?  — An ecosophical roadmap for artists and other futurists
* 2011 — 2012 -- WE ARE THE TIME  — Art Lives in the Age of Global Transition

Here, we can see that in 15 editions in the last 10 years, only three have addressed technology in the title. Even in the one of this year on Technodiversity, the topic is presented as follows:

*“Our lives are subject to processes of datafication through which big tech companies and governments extract data from us for profit or social and political control. The material thus collected is fed into the algorithms and artificial intelligence trained to monitor human behaviour. In digital capitalism, or ‘data colonialism’ life is appropriated as a resource and managed and traded in the form of data. This not only perpetuates existing inequality and discrimination, but also leads to new injustices and power imbalances. How can we resist data colonialism and produce alternative technologies?*

*The concept of technodiversity can provide insights that cannot be reduced to capitalist extraction. Technodiversity recognises that technologies are temporally and spatially produced by different knowledge systems, ideologies, political interests, economic forces and cultural practices. This liberating perspective can create space for collectives, peoples, and identities to produce and control their own data – no data, small data, indigenous data, more-than-human data, feminist data, queer data – and not be governed by Big Data and oppressive algorithms.”* (Rietveld 2023)

Even though the topic addresses technology, it addresses how technology plays a role in society, it does not mention the creative practice based on technology. There is no explicit mention of how technology and artistic practice relate.

On the practical side, the university offers 23 workshops open to all students. Of those workshops, at most three focus on creative practice using digital media. Those are: X-Lab, CAD/CAM and computer workshop. Even of those, only the X-lab addresses unstable media as defined in the unstable media manifesto. The X-lab is the only workshop where there is support for students using coding for their practice. The X-lab has one employee and is open three days per week, 21 hours per week. The Rietveld Academy has about 850 students.

The DogTime Program is not much different. In the six years I have been involved at the institution, I have had two courses (Augmented Realities and UM Lab) that addressed and encouraged creative practice using technology. I have seen no course at DogTime, or the Rietveld Academy, that teaches the basics of programming either practical or conceptually. Even though one of the specialisations is called “Interaction Design and Unstable Media”, the graduation projects in the last five years of the department that address interaction or unstable media are more the exception than the norm.

As Claudia Gianneti said, there is a clear divergence between the theory and practice presented at the Rietveld Academy and creative practice using technology. In her words: *“This gulf between theoretical «corpus» and artistic practice culminates in a paradox that without doubt leads to the often proclaimed end of art.”* (Gianneti 2004)

This means the new “digital creative practice” requires its theoretical frameworks to embrace technical craftsmanship, methodological thinking, and collaboration skills.

Interestingly, we can smell a similar situation that promoted the rise of the historical avantgarde movements where art institutionalisation and practice diverged.

### The new “digital art object.”

In the traditional aesthetic theory, there is an emphasis on art as a manifestation of an “absolute idea” (Hegel), subjective judgement and disinterested pleasure (Kant). However, those are hard to align in a work like “Structure des Quadrilaters”.

For example, the Hegelian perspective of art as a manifestation of an “absolute idea” would not apply to any of the prints of the work, as the process described is what is at the core of each print. Still, none of the prints is the process itself. The subjective judgement of a disinterested pleasure of Kant is also not directly applicable to the series or prints of “Structure des Quadrilaters”. As Vera Molnar mentions in (MuDA 2019) she chooses the variations and prints that belong to a series depending on what is interesting to her at that moment.

Claudia Gianneti in (Gianneti, Cybernetic Aesthetics and Communication 2004) calls for a deviation of the Kantian and Hegelian inspired directly by cybernetics. Here information is the key concept to understanding aesthetic processes.

*“Every work of art, in fact every artistic expression, (is) now viewed as a message transmitted by a creative individual (an artist or group of artists), known as the transmitter, to another individual (or group), known as the receiver, over a channel (systems of visual, auditory, and other modes of perception)”* (Gianneti 2004)

From here, she describes the approach of Information Aesthetics where four methods are considered for the aesthetic synthesis:

*“The semiotic, the metric, the statistical, and the topological. The semiotic method is based on the examination of the sign; the metric method, as a sculptural principle, uses parameters such as width, length, number, or ratio in order to define a global structure, the micro-aesthetic, that takes material form as the gestalt or form of the work; the statistical method generates local structures, or a kind of micro-aesthetic; and the topological method, based on relational principles, is directed at variations of a certain gestalt.”* (Gianneti 2004)

The semiotic and metric methods are well known from traditional aesthetic principles. However, the statical and topological methods imply that aesthetic objects are not purely of a physical nature.

*“This concept is fundamental, since it interprets the aesthetic process as being one of*

*information. It replaces earlier aesthetic interpretative methods with a technique of observation and communication. In other words, works of art are viewed as the mediators of information (aesthetic information): ‘Works of art, it might also be said, are a special (that*

*is to say established, not given) class of ‹carriers› of the ‹aesthetic information›’.*

*The concept of information should here not be understood to mean an unquantifiable message or communication, but an informational content measurable in the transmission and storage of messages. All information on whose transmission communication is based, is built up by means of ‹signs›.”* (Gianneti, Cybernetic Aesthetics and Communication 2004)

This can be aligned with the perspective of System Aesthetics:

*“A "sculpture" that physically reacts to its environment is no longer to be regarded as an object. The range of outside factors affecting it, as well as its own radius of action, reach beyond the space it materially occupies. It thus merges with the environment in a relationship that is better understood as a "system" of interdependent processes. These processes evolve without the viewer's empathy. He becomes a witness. A system is not imagined, it is real.”* (Burnham 1968, 32)

Claudia Gianneti rounds this up by pointing out that:

*“…aesthetic theory 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.”* (Gianneti, Digital aesthetics: Introduction 2004)

Moreover, she claims that we should renounce the romantic idea of viewers of art being “passive consumers” dissociated from the work of art itself. Jack Burnham also aligns with this *“Rather the object art has become a stage towards further rationalisation of the aesthetic process in general.”* (Burnham 1968, 32)

I add that if the viewer is not an active part of the piece of art, it falls back into the traditional perspective of art.

I close this part by defining an aesthetic object as a physical or abstract object appreciated for its aesthetic qualities rather than its utility or practical value. Aesthetic qualities can include elements such as form, colour, texture, harmony, balance, composition, emotional experiences, interactive and sensory experiences.

### Relation to the avantgarde

In this chapter, we have illustrated how the new perception of the digital art object requires a rejection of the status quo. This and its relation to the other avantgarde principles was already foreseen in the 1986 Unstable Media Manifesto by V2\_ (V2\_ 1986) where they not only aim to define unstable media but also address how unstable media requires a new type of aesthetics that ruptures from the “traditional” aesthetic and audience of fine arts[[1]](#footnote-1). Here, I have extracted the parts of the manifesto that most illustrate this divergence:

*“WE DO NOT WANT TO BRING EXISTING ART TO THE PUBLIC,*

*WE WANT NEW ART AND A NEW AUDIENCE…*

*…WE WANT TO PROPAGATE CONTINUOUS REVOLUTION IN A WORLD FULL OF SO-CALLED CERTAINTIES, AND WITH THESE CERTAINTIES, WE WANT TO BREAK.*

*IT IS THE ART TO PREVENT THE INSTITUTIONAL AND THE CERTAIN. QUANTUM THEORY AND RELATIVITY THEORY HAVE MADE IT CLEAR TO US THAT THE SENSIBLE REPRESENTATION OF OUR EXPERIENCE ONLY APPLIES TO A LIMITED AREA. AND THAT THIS DOES NOT BELONG TO AN UNDENIABLE STATEMENT OF SCIENCE IN ANY CASE…*

*…WE MUST SHAPE THE NEW, ASSUMING THAT NEW FORMS CAN ONLY ARISE FROM NEW CONTENT AND NOT VICE VERSA. CREATING NEW ART MEANS MAKING NEW CONTENT VISIBLE, TANGIBLE, AND AUDIBLE.*

*ART MUST BE FUNCTIONAL. WE SEE ART AS A FORMATIVE PRINCIPLE IN SOCIETY. ART MUST UTILISE THE MATERIALS, MEDIA, AND POSSIBILITIES OF ITS TIME TO DETERMINE THE IDEAL FORM.*

*SCIENCE AND ART MUST BE A REVOLUTIONARY FORCE WITHIN SOCIETY AND NOT AN EMBELLISHMENT OF A MISERABLE EXISTENCE OR AN ECONOMIC FACTOR.*

*ART MUST BE DESTRUCTIVE AND CONSTRUCTIVE.*

*ART, SCIENCE, OR ANY MEDIUM IS NOT AN END IN ITSELF BUT A MEANS TO REALISE A FORMING IDEA. IT SHOULD NOT FORM AUTONOMY WITHIN OUR SOCIAL ORDER BUT BE PART OF IT. NOT TO AFFIRM THE PREVAILING MORALITY AND POLITICS, BUT TO PROPAGATE CHANGE. ART SHOULD NOT TAKE PLACE IN THE AUTONOMOUS WORLD OF GALLERIES AND MUSEUMS BECAUSE THEY ACTIVELY OPPOSE CHANGE; THE ART TRADE BENEFITS FROM IT AND IS NOT INTERESTED IN CHANGES. THEY WANT THE END PRODUCT AND NOT THE JOURNEY. THEY ASSUME THE ABSENCE OF THE URGE TO OVERTHROW THE RESULT. THEIR MOTIVES ARE PROVIDED BY THE SOCIAL CODE IN WHICH ART KNOWLEDGE HAS BECOME POWER AND THEREBY INFLUENCE AND PRESTIGE”*

This and the illustrations in this chapter show how digital practice follows the avantgarde principles of rejection of art institutions, questioning the autonomy of art, and challenging of the status quo.

### Illustration: Rafael Rozendal – The internet as canvas

Rafaël Rozendaal (1980-) is a Dutch-Brazilian artist considered one of the pioneers of internet art. We illustrate how Rafel Rozendaal's exploration of the internet as a canvas serves as a poignant illustration of the transformative shifts mentioned in the chapter.

In several of his talks, e.g. (Rozendaal 2014) and (Rozendal 2013), Rafael Rozendal emphasises that the internet is his canvas. This implies that his artworks are embedded on the internet and, as such, are affected by the type of PC, screen size, colour settings, and the user.

*“I just saw the Internet as a young child and then later in art school and I thought I can speak directly to my audience and that's absolutely amazing and so I decided not to treat the Internet as a portfolio but as a place for art so I didn't want to make sculptures and put pictures online and I said no the browser is my canvas and I'm going to treat it with respect.”* (Rozendaal 2014)

Here, he embraces the idea that the aesthetic object is no longer focused exclusively on the art object itself but on its process, system, and context.

For example, in his work [https://www.intotime.us/,](https://www.intotime.us/) he wants to explore ways to divide the screen, but since it is an internet-based work, he needs to define a set of generic rules, and then it is to the user to create the work by clicking on the screen. In other words, he reformulates the roles of the maker and the viewer of a work of art. Here is his description of the work:

*“…Here's another example just really simple rules you start with the screen. We all know the screen, and what's unique about the web is that each screen is different, so you have to think about composition in a different way because painters are used to I'll make a black, I'll make a square painting, I'll make a portrait or landscape, but on the internet, you don't know so the screen might be someone could look at it on their phone. It's like this: you start with some colour, and then you set a point, and the screen is divided into four sections, and you set another point, and so on. It's a dialogue between you and me because I'm making a set of rules, and you can play within those rules. So it has always been about the presence of the user and the influence of the user on the image and then the ground idea I'm very interested…”* (Rozendaal 2014)

He points out that it is crucial for his work to be part of the praxis of our everyday internet experience. *“…we're used to being on the internet. We see the work and forget about the device, but when we go to the exhibition space, suddenly, a computer is an object. You're no longer in that dream area when you're at home, and you forget about where you are.”* (Rozendaal 2014)

In other words, he challenges the added value of art institutions for the artwork. His digital artworks, accessible to anyone with an internet connection, challenge the traditional notions of art consumption, distribution, and ownership. The internet becomes both the medium and the exhibition space, democratising access to art in ways inconceivable within the confines of traditional art institution

1. This in contrasts to the 1987 Unstable Media Manifesto by V2\_ used in section (V2\_ 1987) where we see a focus on defining what unstable media is and not its relation to art institutions or as a reaction to the status quo. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)