

Towards an Effective Theory of Art

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Abstract

The Proceedings of the International Symposium on Electronic Art will be compiled from electronic manuscripts submitted by the authors. This paper provides brief style instructions that will facilitate high-quality, consistent, proceedings. The title “Abstract” should be 10 point, bold type, centered at the beginning of the left column. The body of the abstract summarizing the thesis and conclusion of the paper in no more than 200 words should be 9 point, justified, regular type.

Keywords

Art, technology, complexity.

Introduction

We artists, especially we artists who work with emerging technologies, are often required to explain our work, and this is a difficult task because an effective theory of art — a theory which has something useful to say about what art is and what it does or can do — has been elusive. This paper outlines an effective theory for art based on the complexity science and process philosophy. This theory may be coherently applied to any style of artistic practiced, and it opens possibilities for connecting artmaking with other human cultural practices, both in theory and practice. It is an especially useful theoretical framework for artists who’s practice engages with emerging technologies as materials and content because it describes the nature of the relationship between art and technology.

Which ‘Art’?

It is necessary to clarify what is meant by ‘art’, because the term is regularly used in a few different ways. I do not mean ‘art’ in the broadest, most general sense, as in ‘the art of war’ or if I were to say that my car mechanic is a real artist because of her skill and the care she shows in her work. Nor do I mean ‘art’ in the sense of ‘the arts’, as in ‘the arts and sciences’. Instead, I mean ‘art’ in the sense of ‘artworks’ or ‘art objects’. The things that artists make and of which we might say, ‘I don’t know much about art, but I know what I like’ - or even (especially), ‘that is NOT art’. I mean the things that are displayed in galleries and museums, the things that are bought and sold, the things that are written about in art magazines and art history books, the things that we might have been taught about in art schools, the things that are made by

artists, as well as the practices, discourses, institutions, markets and other cultural aspects that constitute ‘the artworld’.

My starting point is even more specifically a kind of art that is called ‘contemporary’ because of the way it seems to function at a certain edge of the present, and which is often characterised by a kind of self-consciousness about its own status as art and an active engagement with its current context. Art which engages with emerging technologies is always ‘contemporary’ in this sense, even if we might now be looking back in time at objects made in the past, such as the work of Nam June Paik. However, the theory I outline here is not limited to contemporary art, and it can be applied to any style.

The other senses of ‘art’ are not irrelevant because, taken together, all three senses of ‘art’ operate as a set of coexisting, nested meanings that have real histories and which function together as interconnected aspects of the contemporary global, Westernising culture most of us share to some extent. I am a practitioner of a kind of contemporary artmaking, one that involves the material use of emerging technologies, but I am also practicing in the context of academic research that crosses certain boundaries between the arts and the sciences, and I might occasionally congratulate myself for being a real artist in the sense that I am skilled and careful in my work.

Although these different senses of ‘art’ are always present together now in our shared cultural context, they have histories. We can do a bit of a trick here, and zoom out from the present context and the present moment, and look at the history of art in the West, and see that the different senses of ‘art’ have been dominant at different times. The sense of ‘art’ as skill or craft was dominant in the ancient world - at least in the ancient Western world - and it was only later that the sense of ‘art’ as a kind of creative practice different from other kinds of crafting, began to emerge. The good news is that I’ll be able stop using scare quotes around the word ‘art’ because there are some other available terms.

Teche / Crafting

The word techne comes from the Greek word for art, skill, craft, and technique. Heidegger, in his essay ‘The Question Concerning Technology’, pointed out that techne was a general term that included what we might now call ‘the arts’ as well as the sciences, and the technologies, which we now call crafts. The idea of art did not exist as a separate category

of making within this field. The practices that we now associate with artmaking were regarded by Plato as second-rate in this field of *techne* because they were mere imitations of the real world, and they were not concerned with the truth. He regarded the practices that we now associate with the sciences as the highest form of *techne* because they were concerned with the truth. The practices that we now associate with technologies, he thought, were the lowest form of *techne* because they were concerned with utility. Aristotle argued that the practices that we now associate with artmaking were the highest form of *techne* because they were concerned with the good, and the good was the highest form of truth¹.

Instead of *techne*, which sounds a bit archaic, I'm going to use the English word 'crafting' — and I'm thinking here about how the word is used in the context of the open-world game *Minecraft* — in order to evoke the elementary nature of making that is suggested by this way of *partitioning the sensible*, as Jacques Rancière has labeled the largely unconscious sensemaking processes in and with which humans are constantly engaged. The concept of crafting can be equally well applied, in a contemporary context, to art, to the arts (music, writing, etc.), to traditional crafts and also to the newest technologies. Perhaps it doesn't apply so seamlessly to scientific practices, but even scientists can craft compelling arguments, elegant experiments and sound theories.

I mention Rancière because his theories of art dovetail nicely with Heidegger's idea about *techne*, even if Rancière would almost certainly focus on their differences. Rancière has said that the pre-classical ideas about the practices we now think of as art are still with us. He has called this mode of thought, the 'mimetic regime' because...

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¹References needed.

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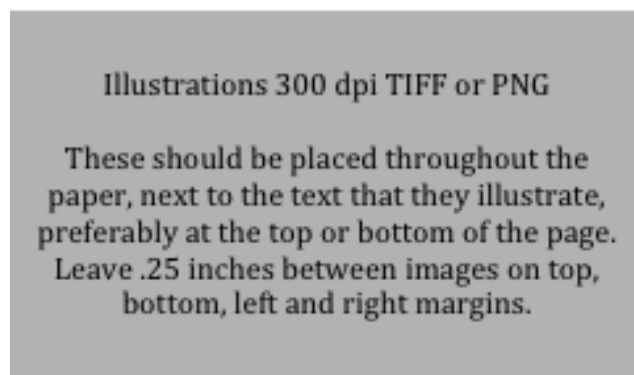


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Acknowledgments

The preparation of these instructions and the L^AT_EX and Word files was facilitated by borrowing from similar documents used for ICCG proceedings.

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References

[1] Boden, M. 1992. *The Creative Mind*. London: Abacus.

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