

# Introduction

## Departing from an Art Platform

Here . . . , in connection with the socio-political moment in which we are living, the goal of the new synthesis has been organization as a principle for any creative activity.

(Liubov Popova, 1921)

The ways in which culture occurs, how it is practiced, and the ways in which art enacts itself in relation to culture, humans, and society are now irreversibly coproduced by networked media technology. In order to understand this, we need to look at the ways in which aesthetic forms of life cut through processes of subjectification and organization, how they mobilize and reinvent network systems and cultures, and how those, in turn, condition and cocreate these forms of life. Everyday digital objects, gestures, and their assemblages, such as file uploads and downloads, form filling, data handling, searches and postings, protocols, scripts, software structures, and modification parameters are all plugged in to contemporary aesthetics and coconstruct the ways in which the individual, cultural, and social spheres are produced, organized, and disrupted. Art platforms both conform to and are part of this overall development, but they also stand out from it in very striking ways.

Art platforms bring together human-technical creativity, repetition, aesthetic amplification, folklore, and humour, all concepts to be examined in the course of the book, to generate a cultural organizational mechanism powerful enough to disrupt some of the domineering and stratifying tendencies of digital media, culture, and society. Art platforms are self-unfolding mechanisms through which cultural life may advance to produce fascinating aesthetic objects and processes; they occupy a special place within organizational aesthetics on the Internet.

Whereas art platforms possess a multilevel unfolding of their own and have direct involvement in the operation of digital aesthetics, they are generally unrecognized as a specific form of aesthetic life. On one hand, there is not a name for these phenomena, except the one this book proposes, but on the other hand, art platforms implicitly self-conceptualize as specific subjects of culture.<sup>1</sup>

Working with or thinking about the aesthetic practices and scenes of art platforms means following the paths they take through a complex set of mutually determining relationships that have larger subjective and societal

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effects and finding out what is happening to digital technology as a tool, as a context, as a metaphor, as an agent, and as culture-at-large.

In writing this book, I go round art platforms, drawing now nearer and then retreating, nibbling on a side and then releasing the object, continuing my circular movement in order to set up the idea of the art platform as a figure and an instrument that can be useful, imaginative, gay, and nonintrusive. Art platforms act as the horizons and catalysts enacting certain events but are also formed by such things; they stimulate certain struggles but also refrain from steady development and, as often as not, are formed by disjunctions, awkward mappings between technical, aesthetic, and social forces. In this way, I propose that art platforms can be thought of as a deviation from the main thoroughfares of digital cultures, paths that allow us to come closer to key issues manifesting in larger cultural formations—such as self-organization and creativity, folklore production and free participation—but that also allow us to discover the exceptionality of the particular, to hunker down close to the very stuff of digital culture as a means of their close reading in order to scent the exuberant air of today.

To have the complexity of the figure set up, let us start from something clear and simple, a tautology: An art platform is a network platform that produces art, here understood broadly as a process of creative living with networks. A ‘classical’ art platform differentiates itself from other networks and sites by a number of the relations it establishes and by those that emerge from within it. As a self-organized institution, an art platform is flexible; it is informed and codeveloped by users and the aesthetic work that it propels. An art platform can also take the form of a crossroads at the intersection of several systems or actors of different scales and as such may be a momentary expression of creative power. Therefore, in practical terms, an art platform can be a stand-alone website that, together with other actors, forms an ecology of aesthetic production, but it might also take place as a subsection of a large platform, or even as a space between a corporate service, artists’ work, hacking, collaborative engagement, and a moment of aesthetic fecundity. An art platform engages with a specific current of technosocial creative practices and aims at the amplification of its aesthetic force.

Here, the art platform is a terminological solution for describing a website or an assemblage of human-technical objects and relations reflexive of their own processual composition, which acts as a catalyst in the development of an exceptionally vivid cultural or artistic current. As a locus of such activity, it induces the propagation of aesthetic phenomena transcending the inventory of their formation, and as such it is a system whose behaviour cannot be deduced from the trajectories of its elementary characteristics. The aesthetic phenomena that emerge through art platforms are of a character ‘natural’ to technical networks. Be it software art, 8-bit music, short stories, ‘primitive’ Web pages, short videos, scripted behaviours of 3-D objects, or recorded reenactments, they are integral to the art

and cultures of the Internet age and delve deep into the exploration of the materiality of digital media. If art platforms seem a kind of misplacement of the organizational forces of a previous era, this is because they are an array of forces with which to explore and map the characteristics of the organizational aesthetics of a new type of cultural emergence.

As a process of emergence, an art platform is an assemblage of structures, notes, codes, ideas, emails, decisions, projects, databases, excitement, humour, mundane work, and conflict. Here an art platform is best understood through the metaphor of a railway platform, as an element that unfolds in its arriving and departing trains, in tracks that cover vast spaces, in the forests those rails run through and the lakes they pass by, in the humdrum and dreams of passengers and their bags and lunches, in the hills and sunsets forming the landscape, in the rain on the train's window, in the mechanics of an engine, logistics of rolling stock, semaphores, encounters, and in rail crashes. An art platform is never simply a technocultural object, but it is a resonance, a movement, an operation. The capillaries of aesthetic emergence in art platforms draw from the technical materiality of networks, databases, and software; from grass-roots, folklore creativity; from forces of repetition and sociality; from conflictual border zones and disjunctions between normality, capitalism, politics, quotidian labour and despair, escape, and creation.

## THE DIFFERENTIATION OF NETWORKS

An art platform is a particular type of practice, but it is also a type of network, a genre of network organization. As such, the art platform is a conceptual device that allows for a differentiation and problematization of networks.

Since the introduction of the concept of the network in the cultural sphere, it has travelled a long way. In the social sciences, and especially in the context of actor-network theory, as Bruno Latour reminds us, the network was celebrated as a conceptual device that allowed for an acute analysis of the performance of transversal relations among actors of different types and orders that constitute the social as a certain kind of circulation rather than as a fixed entity.<sup>2</sup> In actor-network theory, the concept of the network was conceived as a means to address societal processes without withdrawing into a closed, cultured, and mechanical universe of the traditional 'institution' and 'organization.' The idea of the network was at the core of the struggle against certain normative, essentialist, and linearly causal versions of modernity, and carried along with it the rhizomatic thought of Deleuze and Guattari<sup>3</sup> as a related conceptual practice introducing deformation, disequilibrium, and asymmetry while working through nonstructural and nonrepresentational processes of conjunction and change. The network, from this angle, was about difference, transformation, and heterogeneity.

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Or else, let us start anew. The concept of the network stems from network theory, whose language was developed by a branch of applied mathematics called graph theory that studies link relationships between objects. With Leonard Euler's<sup>4</sup> first proof of the theorem dealing with the Königsberg bridge problem in 1736, a concept of the graph was formed as a mathematical object consisting of discrete nodes (vertices) linked together by lines (edges), to be studied in terms of its connectivity, disembodied from any other characteristic. In the 1950s, sociology went on to borrow and adapt the conceptual apparatus of graph theory to apply it to the quantitative analysis of data, coupling the structural and the behavioural characteristics of networks.<sup>5</sup> Over the last decade, more or less, a radical update on these developments was undertaken and termed network theory, which was most prominently popularized by the book *Linked* by Albert-László Barabási. Network theory is on a mission to describe the general topological features of different kinds of networks including, but not limited to, biological, ecological, technical, social, and communication networks. This theory is a rapidly developing field, which no longer seems to be reproachable for its purely spatial approach (devoid of the dimension of time) and a level of general abstraction (the God's eye perspective).<sup>6</sup> Eugene Thacker's criticism of the concept of network stemming from network theory as essentially a Eulerian-Kantian enterprise, published in 2004, seems to be overcome by the most recent developments, which urge the examination of the properties of 'real-world' networks in empirical terms and for the recognition of the dynamic properties of networks evolving over time, including both the behaviour of the nodes and the changing character of the links between them.<sup>7</sup> The development of the typology of networks, to account for hierarchical structures, for instance, is a new direction pursued for its ability to address heterogeneous networks.<sup>8</sup>

Curiously enough, the social sciences form a terrain of the imagination where the exact sciences meet the humanities in order to effectively misunderstand each other. Such a 'misunderstanding' is essentially a set of beliefs of how one strand of thinking and acting, which is quantitative and mathematics based, can make use of another, which is qualitative and which is at its best a poetic act of hacking the process of formalization, and vice versa. Throughout the twentieth century, a number of disciplines were formed that essentially work on the translation between and use of both sides. Examples include operations research, social simulation, or to an extent, organization theory, to be discussed a bit further on in this introduction. It is worth noticing that network theory is ultimately a quest to understand the systems whose underlying structures are networks.<sup>9</sup> In this endeavour, a 'family photograph' develops, with its stepgrandmother in the second row, namely, system theory (with organization theory on its lap). Here, network theory aspires to be a cybernetics of the twenty-first century, a mode of thinking based on the successful application of a number of abstract conceptual instruments to the analysis of diverse fields in order to

understand them at a sufficient degree of generality, while often subjecting what is thus analysed to the rigours of greater efficiency and control. Such sciences can acquire the reputations of being mere pseudosciences while at the same time having an enormous impact and efficacy in practical applications, in military research, engineering, agent-modelling systems, robotics, and biotechnology, to name a few.

The two concepts of the network discussed previously, a network as an emergent ensemble that is elusive and heterogeneous in its inclusivity of actors, and producing an ongoing resonance between them (from actor-network theory) and that of a network as a topological distribution producing coefficients of connectivity (from network theory) do not exhaust the means of thinking networks, of imagining them in both heterogeneous and nonlinear ways and of being able to differentiate between them. There are ways of developing concepts that need not be marked as the sole property of a specific mode of thinking and making but which can be unfolded as openly shared and enriched by their combinations, such as Gilles Deleuze practiced and argued.<sup>10</sup> Such approaches have given us concepts of network production such as the bifurcation (Prigogine and Deleuze/Guattari), networks as assemblages (Manuel DeLanda), and ecologies and media ecologies (Guattari, Bateson, and Fuller), to name a few.

Media ecology<sup>11</sup> is a green metallurgical concept that is both modest and mad. Its modesty is in its close and quiet attentiveness and in being submerged in the material, which we listen to while it is given space and means to speak. Media ecology's madness is in its explosiveness as a way of working that not only wipes away traditional tools of understanding but also disassembles the world to the state of a primal soup, in order to further reflect on its phylogeny in action. Media ecology is formed of networks, which are never found at equilibrium but are forever disassembling to become 'something else.' It is formed of networks that mutate into objects, resonances, pictures, people, and organs. Alternatively, one could argue that networks have nothing to do with media ecologies, which involve complex processes of differentiation and amplification that well-defined networks with their accumulated flavour of pernickety tracing cannot stand up to.

Media ecologies are processes of emergencies of particular assemblages that are discovered and participated in by sensitively following the activity of material composition. They are conceptual devices to question the evolving couplings of humans, animals, networks, machines, wave space, and art in order to fight premature or final closedness. Media ecologies are not especially preferential towards humans, though, nor is much of the vitalist philosophy the concept partially stems from.

What then, in this context, are art platforms? Particular types of networks? Seeing them as such allows us to talk about how they are constructed, how they operate, and what their actors, agencies, and publics are. What is it that gets produced by their metabolism? Are art platforms a particular type of media ecology whose constituents are to be described

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as if by a taxidermist? Or shall we instead talk of a media ecology of art platforms? We could discuss what human-technical processes emerge as art platforms, how they evolve, disassemble, change appearance, set things off. Media ecology is, first of all, a way of looking and seeing, of doing and making. An art platform is an entity, an activity, and a process of development. Ideally, it is a concept that is inclusive of a reflection upon its own media ecology.

A number of concepts might thus be used to address the phenomenon, but it is worth developing an approach that would allow for an art platform to manifest all its facets and particularities on its own terms to enable the concept to run free, to find something new to trip over.

Art platforms are plugged into processes of creativity and subjectification, into art worlds, folklore and repetition, into the late capitalist eminence of ‘immaterial’ labour, into the politics of participation, publics and self-organization. Art platforms shed light on key factors in the organization of cultural practices today, suggesting an analysis of the shifting positions, linkages, and policies in their technoaesthetic significance. Developing their own mechanics of becoming, art platforms provide us with concepts, which may help reflect upon more powerful or traditional trajectories, as well as demonstrate the existing and future practices of divergence. In designing their time and space figuration, art platforms become settings that ask questions. What becomes culturally significant, what constitutes such a process, especially in relation to wider figurations of culture? How do cultural processes acquire agency, and what is their value? How might they organize themselves, and what constitutes their ecology? How open can such a process be? What are their poetics of diversity and its new orders? What lies at the heart of art platforms? How does its force exhibit itself? What plays out in such an assemblage as an art platform? How do technical acts such as the writing and execution of code or the development of interface design couple with time, political decisions, email communication, working together, enthusiasm, funding, small gestures of signing in or adding a vote; how do they couple with inventiveness and humour?

Art platforms are types of networks, a specific colouration of new media ensembles, a fashion and an obsession, which do not form an Internet genre that is soon-to-become-obsolete due to technical upgrades. Art platforms disseminate themselves among a variety of activities undergoing formation and change across contemporary new media: in participatory platforms and social networks, democratic widgets, postarchives, online curating, 3-D worlds, and other loci of technocultural reality. Art platforms, their parts, features, and effects can be found across the Internet, as stand-alone websites, sections of larger portals, islands and constellations of objects. Art histories constructed personally for each database user, video exhibitions assembled as part of video-sharing sites, the usage of taxonomies and wikis as integral elements of new curating—all are proliferations of the germs if not memes of the aesthetic devices experimented on by art platforms.

As a current that is strongly articulated in the movement of artists on the Internet, art platforms come in the footsteps of archives and databases aimed at collecting and historicizing new media art, such as Media Art Net, the Walker Art Centre Collections of net art, Netzspannung.org, V\_2 Archive, and so on.<sup>12</sup> All of these initiatives are more or less successful attempts to maintain and enhance the sustention of media and digital-media-based art. These projects aim to reflect on media art by constructing durable systems of files, descriptions, contexts, and links; by building histories ever at risk of being rendered conventional. Whereas classifying, reflecting upon, and preserving media and digital media art is a task of immense importance and difficulty, such initiatives tend to work primarily with rather categorical concepts, for instance, of what is worth including in a collection (in terms of its past influence) or how an art trend can be traced and presented once it is removed from an immediate living state. More importantly, such projects primarily focus on art, or what is presented as art.

In contrast to that, art platforms engage with living practices in their blurred and ‘dirty’ forms between a more broadly defined swathe of culture and art. Here, they are found in the ‘grey’ zones of cultural production. They undergo formation in ways that allow them to be witnessed and taken part in. Such cultural production has not yet acquired the kinds of aesthetic value characteristic of art; however, it is here that brilliant aesthetic practices may be born (as well as mediocre repetitions of fixed formulas). Despite the term, art platforms work with such practices that often do not self-conceptualize as art per se but that might become culturally significant. Such ‘art’ in ‘art platforms’ is precisely the point of their strength: something becoming art, failing to become art, aspiring to become art, where art is an avant-garde formation of new realities, language; ways of living, seeing, and imagining. As such, art platforms aim at mapping wide assemblages of ideas, territories, and practices in the processes of emergence that always maintain a possibility of breakthrough as well as of failing to come to fruition.

Here, the openness and polyphonic character of the new regimes of organization come to the forefront to distinguish art platforms from other forms of nurturing and structuring culture. Dealing with creative production, experimenting politically with governance methods of different sorts, self-organization and formulations of autonomy, art platforms unite projects, activities, and discourses of differing levels, aims, working methods, materials, contexts, and outcomes. In doing so, art platforms compel one to think about the organizational forms of culture—and, as such, organizational aesthetics.

## A PLATFORM FOR ART

The concept of a ‘platform’ as an organizational concept is shaped most expressively by the history of political struggles, revolutions, and

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avant-gardes. Initially used most often in a political sense, a platform meant a program, an outline of theories or beliefs, the future prospects and organizational guidelines upon which a number of people could agree. A popular example of such usage of the term can be found in a pamphlet titled ‘Organizational Platform of the Libertarian Communists’ published in 1926 by a group of Russian anarchists in exile, Dielo Trouda (Workers’ Cause), that set out to establish a number of common ideas and working principles.<sup>13</sup> Although it set out a debate among anarchist groups on stronger organization and disorganization, it is exemplary in its usage of the term.<sup>14</sup> Probably the earliest bright example, however, is the pamphlet ‘The Law of Freedom in a Platform’ by Gerrard Winstanley, a member of the Diggers who cultivated common lands, aiming to distribute crops without charge in the seventeenth-century England. The text is a thoughtful and vivid plan for a new structure of society addressed directly to Oliver Cromwell.<sup>15</sup>

Since then, ‘platform’ has generally meant a set of shared resources that might be material, organizational, or intentional that inscribe certain practices and approaches in order to develop collaboration, production, and the capacity to generate change. A platform would be likely to emphasize collective and preferably anonymous work, encourage inclusivity and the dissolution of the amateur versus professional or high-brow versus low-brow registers of work. Art activism and artist collectives are two other forces that have further shaped the concept of a platform, and these have a long and complex set of histories.

In the 1920s, Soviet constructivism set out to establish laboratories as production and organization platforms to process art as engineering, to turn factories into culture engines and massively and collaboratively manufacture culture.<sup>16</sup> The collective and anonymous organization of creative activity was regarded as a true basis for social engagement and the profound political transformation of society and individuals on the basis of art. The laboratory as a factory, as material resource and as a creative repository, a platform to stand on to move the earth with an Archimedean lever, was tested by the constructivists as well as objectivists, engineerists and productivists.<sup>17</sup> Organizational methods of art activism, such as situationists, Gutai and the lettrists, CoBRA and the International movement for the imaginist Bauhaus, Fluxus, Art Workers Coalition, and the Art & Language groups of the 1960s continued on to the rather poorly documented North American, British, European, and Russian community art and art collective activist practices of the 1970s and 1980s.

The features of a platform as an alternative system of organization and circulation and as a resource to constantly reposition art to reflexively disrupt institutional, representational, and social powers can also be recognized in many of the organizational constellations of art collectives and activist art groups of the years following 1968. Group Material, S.P.A.R.K., PAD/D, and Gran Fury<sup>18</sup> as well as the Exploding Cinema,

the Scratch Orchestra, the International Mail Art Network, Brixton Artist's Collective, and Working Press<sup>19</sup> of the 1970s, 1980s, and onwards are among many that explicitly carried out art as a collectively distributed social practice that forms society.

Political movements and artistic laboratories, art collectives and activist groups, and other such influences on art platforms often drew on the potential of the technological, whether in terms of providing education, training, or instruments, routes of communication, distribution, and presentation for carrying out political acts or as an aesthetic dimension to work in and with. Platforms, whether they are feminist groups or youth centers, e-learning systems and participatory design toolkits, databases of artistic ideas<sup>20</sup>, trucks,<sup>21</sup> and camps<sup>22</sup> are all organizations of technologies, bodies, and concepts, exploring and pursuing certain kinds of knowledge, aesthetics, and politics.

A renewal and flattening of the term arose during the Web 2.0 hype and in such use originates from Tim O'Reilly's article in which he describes 'the (new) web as platform,' not as a figure of speech but a description of concrete developments.<sup>23</sup> Throughout the 2000s, the idea of the platform is rearticulated as a website, possibly a tool repository but also largely as a concentrator of data flows. To articulate the position of art platforms in relation to the participatory web, let us first roughly generalize on existing art platforms.

## ART PLATFORMS PRECISELY

Technically speaking, an art platform usually has, and often centres around, a database, structured in a variety of ways, that users can upload to (sometimes with sets of restrictions applied, such as filtering), download from, or browse through (again sometimes with filtering) and sets of functions centred around this activity, such as voting, ranking, featuring, commenting, and others. Stand-alone art platforms, such as the software art repository Runme.org, or the 8-bit music community Micromusic.net, both of which will be examined in later sections of this book, all have such structures. More freeform and ad hoc, or relational and flanêuring, art platforms have ways of dealing with massive amount of cultural work, whether constituted by complete projects, artistic pieces of data, or creative 'mud,' to enable an appearance and amplification of a certain aesthetic power. Lists, threads, blogs, diaries, and collages may all become the 'databases' of art platforms. But this simple technical description must immediately be supplemented.

Art platforms appear as experiments in the aesthetics of organization. They focus on a certain kind of cultural practice, as an open-ended and grass-roots process rather than on a set of objects. The cultural or artistic practice, the moment of a certain aesthetic formation undergoing rapid change that the platform embraces certainly may exist prior to and beyond

the art platform, often at the borders of art, in grey zones of culture as described above. Art platforms participate in and often enable the processes of formation and amplification of currents in culture and technosocial movements, some of which may produce aesthetic brilliance across domains beyond art.

Creativity, folklore production, frustration, aesthetic intoxication, and other dynamics self-organize and evolve through systems such as art platforms. Here marginal, unprofessional, self-governed currents may create new cultural figures and work out vectors of change, whether aesthetic, social, or subjective. The strength of art platforms lies in the way they deal with immanent creative cultural forces that are at once insubsumable in their entirety and diversity to any single principle or institution and that are a foundational power in arts, economies, and politics, domains where, more often than not, they may be beheaded.

A development that addresses and capitalizes on the changing role of creative cultural emergence in social, political, and economic life and one that is closely related to art platforms is the participatory web, or phenomena that have recently been subsumed under the ‘Web 2.0’ title.

### PARTICIPATORY WEB

‘Web 2.0’ is an umbrella term, which has even been claimed as a trademark,<sup>24</sup> that has been used to address the diversity of technical means enabling Internet users to participate, exchange, link, map, upload, post, edit, and comment—all in all, to engage in social creation online. The phrase ‘Web 2.0’ was popularized by O'Reilly Media<sup>25</sup> in 2004 to market the rising phenomena of participatory content production, collaboration, sharing, and communication through the interfaces of wikis, blogs, collaborative mapping, tagging, or social networking platforms. It has since become a buzzword, triggering both excitement and criticism.

There are two, or rather three, key conceptual issues in grasping such activity: its technical realization, explained in the following; and its communal creative ‘substance’ as interwoven with its implications for policy and forms of economy. O'Reilly and his confederates stress the technical side, maintaining that the previous (Web 1.0) versions of online creation and collaboration were only open to people (understood as companies) who had software packages with which to, first, create content with some other word, image, or video processing software, then create an html version of it with an html editor, and then upload the data with a file transfer application. According to this account, such data was most often published on personal websites or portals ran by companies or institutions. By contrast, and still in technical terms, Web 2.0 platforms allow any user to create, upload, and edit data within the browser window without the need for special desktop software: All applications are served through a Web browser

that allows interaction with any content. For Web 2.0 adepts, a platform spans ‘all connected devices,’ ‘delivering software as a continually-updated service,’<sup>26</sup> and is ‘a platform for interacting with content.’<sup>27</sup> Even ‘the web and all its connected devices as one global platform’ implies the meaning of a platform as of a server (or servers) ‘delivering desktop-like applications over the web.’<sup>28</sup> Such a definition is useful and helps to make a distinction for designers and programmers between Web 1.0 that was supposedly about static, html-based websites that are sometimes characterized as the read-only Web and Web 2.0’s dynamic platforms, characterized as the read-write Web. (In this respect, Web 2.0 become an extension of content management systems.)<sup>29</sup> Here the credibility of the Web 2.0 term ends because such a description does not adequately address the politics of the technical architectures and applications involved. O'Reilly and his followers try to raise the profile of the term by nodding towards the fostering of community, collaboration, the ‘architecture of participation,’ ‘rich-user experiences,’ and ‘collective intelligence,’<sup>30</sup> but they continuously fail to prove that such cultural phenomena were not present in the time of what they term as Web 1.0. This criticism is not new; Slate.com has called Web 2.0 merely a technical upgrade, whereas the participatory or social aspects of Web 2.0 are ‘what the Web was supposed to be all along,’ as Tim Berners-Lee, whose first browser incidentally included a write function, puts it.<sup>31</sup> Despites the term’s poverty, its success subsumes all the attempts to talk about social software; a participatory web; collaborative work; and other, different, and preexisting models.

How do art platforms as a partially marginal avant-garde genre relate to the participatory platforms that have gained enormous popularity in the recent years? It would be just as misleading to radically withdraw art platforms from the field of operation of the participatory Web as to not distinguish between their methodologies at all. This task is intricate; on the one hand, both art platforms and the participatory Web feed on the same machinery of creative energy, building algorithms and acting spontaneously in order to get warmed up next to its thrumming engines, making it more structured or functional, pleasurable, or accelerated and intense. Both art platforms and the participatory Web deal with the human capacities, technology, and societal structures that generate what is known as culture. This book tends not to distinguish in a hard and fast way between culture and art; it is focused on the grey anomalous zones in which one becomes another and vice versa, and my interest is driven precisely by these processes of conversion. It is through the allowance for these moments that the participatory Web and art platforms may differ from each other, as particular technical settings, devices, and ecologies whose metabolism produces diverging energies.

Art platforms exhibit a capacity to form a system of human-technical assemblages and arrangements that produce a common aesthetic, political, and creative horizon of the practices involved. The arrangements can

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include various structural devices, whether a taxonomy (list of categories) or associational classification (keywords), collections of scripts, files, reports, and recordings, constellations of contributions or a list of the latest ones, digital objects and postings, most popular projects, features, and texts. The structure of art platforms may vary significantly, but generally each one comes into being in order to enable the amplification of a particular aesthetic drive in a manner individually tailored to it.

Participatory platforms are not always interested in creating the conditions that might allow for such an aesthetic amplification to occur, to transform itself and become something else. The logic of their operation generally performs itself in relation to different societal functions and systems. It is worth repeating that it is, however, perfectly possible to create art platforms inside and as parts of participatory networks of different sorts; an art platform may indeed implant itself into the body of the participatory Web. Given this, any assemblage of code, creativity, sociality, anger, excitement, repetition, and amplification may, under certain conditions, become an art platform.

One of the features art platforms exhibit is a certain kind of attentiveness to and allowance for the mechanisms of differentiation. Such differentiation, while often being generous and maintaining affinities to the abundance of practice in its cultural performance, also acts as an inductive force to propel the aesthetic becoming that an art platform enhances. Here, one could speak about filtering or moderation that may be in place and that can be decisive in terms of what gets in (and is far from being ‘automated curation’)<sup>32</sup> or about human-technical policies and interfaces that enable certain kinds of aesthetic features and choices or about various kinds of distinction.

Thus, some art platforms may occasionally seem ‘undemocratic.’ After all, Internet technologies offer a great variety of tools enabling common, user-based decision making, and it seems that recently an urge to develop democratic widgets is intensifying. But if we look attentively at such developments, we might notice that many participatory platforms based on peer decision-making exhibit numerous features and methods of control, normalization, and/or distinction and choice. These start from ‘abuse teams’ in the case of blogs, the banning of certain users or accounts, or creating collections of the most useful postings on the matter core to a certain group and continue on to include more specific arrangements. For instance, the enormous power the ‘talk page’ has over the production of an article on Wikipedia makes it an efficient filtering mechanism because Wikipedia netiquette expects editions or new contributions to be discussed on the ‘talk page’ of the article prior to changes being published; suggestions by known authors (although only by username) are treated with more trust; and rarely do undiscussed contributions from unknown users survive for more than a few hours. Slashdot.org, the legendary news resource ‘for nerds,’ offers a highly elaborate set of multilevel filtering mechanisms relying on software

decisions and user contributions. However, the initial choice of whether a particular posting is to be published on Slashdot.org is taken by a team of editors who are employees of Open Source Technology Group.<sup>33</sup> Such examples are not offered to make a claim that all Internet developments are identical. However, differentiation can be more usefully seen as a nuanced gradient, and deciding on a variety of trajectories of organizing means choosing different topologies of danger to manoeuvre between rather than deciding in a blank manner on a higher or lower degree of openness, collaboration, and ‘democracy’.

Generally, the complexity of new mechanisms of openness and control, as well as of creativity as linked to those in relation to capitalism, freedom, and culture requires a careful investigation, some of which will be undertaken in the following chapter through the discussion of certain aspects of autonomist Marxism, the FLOSS (Free Libre and Open Source Software)<sup>34</sup> movement, and a few other concepts and practices.

The question of organization comes to the fore here. Manifold changes in forms of production and character of labour, with changing social structures, control apparatuses, social practices, and aesthetic forms of life act through destabilizing and energetically open organizational processes. Organizational aesthetics, a concept and a process through which an art platform operates in ways reflexive of its own aesthetic genesis, sheds light on the ways in which digital culture and aesthetics are constituted and advance.

## ORGANIZATION

Sven-Olov Wallenstein links the major change in function, organization, and perception of an (art) institution to the time period between the 1960s and the 1970s, and he regards it as a consequence of the conception of a new kind of the political. For him, such changes are specifically exemplified by the paradigmatic work of Michel Foucault.<sup>35</sup> Through Foucauldian theory, a ‘general’ understanding was built of institutions as modelling and controlling apparatuses that ensure the production and management of subjectivities necessary for the current mode of production, social order, and various other vectors of dominance. For Wallenstein, it is since this advent of a critical understanding of the institution that the critical stance was upheld by (art) institutions themselves, shaping a process in which the radical questioning of strategies and structures, self-criticism, and experiments in the degree of openness became a source of legitimation and a model of operation.<sup>36</sup> Since then, strategies of anti-institutional institutional behaviour started being employed as something between good manners and a survival strategy. Curating, the organization of art, and organizations in art have gone on a quest for radical self-transformation that includes the transformation of perception, of action, of authorship and

public participation, of staging the becoming and life of art in the rhetorical modalities of flexibility and experiment never before encountered on such a scale and level of proliferation. And art institutions were only one kind of organization setting off towards constant self-questioning and change.

The transformation of organization that was paralleled by, and had to follow, deep changes in the character of labour and of the political, is addressed in a current of analysis called organization theory.<sup>37</sup>

The concept of organization is one of those that are core to the social sciences. The origin of the notion of organization is commonly attributed to the work of Max Weber (as it is the one that has proliferated most beyond the boundaries of social theory) and is exemplarily addressed in his book *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization*. Weber distinguished three types of organizations: charismatic (such as small-scale revolutionary movements or religious groups), traditional (patrimonial and feudal forms) and rational-legal—all based on a different administrative apparatus.<sup>38</sup> It is the rational-legal organization, or ‘bureaucracy,’ that became the core focus of organization studies as the field formed to a large degree around surveying, understanding, and facilitating the management of organizations in the industrial or business sector.<sup>39</sup> This, despite some attempts to distance itself from business and to differentiate via the study of youth communities and other kinds of organization.

Although the nineteenth century saw the dawn of organizational, or indeed, institutional theory, as attributed to institutional economists, sociologists, and political scientists,<sup>40</sup> the argument for organizations remained one of a general character roughly from 1880 to the mid-twentieth century. Later, organization studies were enhanced by accounts of communication structures and processes that sustain organizations. These were essentially regarded as systems for differentiating and coordinating human activities. The process of organizing and other factors at play such as exchange, decision, and action theory also gained their devotees. Nevertheless, for a significant amount of time, whether structural or processual, organizational analysis coalesced around the ‘orientation’ of organization (orientation, a goal, was seen as a defining characteristic of organization that distinguished it from other social systems)<sup>41</sup> and drew its arguments along the lines of hierarchical forms of power and its legitimization.<sup>42</sup>

Despite this, some trends in organization studies fought for a more open-ended and process-related theory, and the 1970s brought along an active rethinking of the ontology of organization theory in the light of postmodernism. It is quite surprising to see that, with the resources of Foucault, postmodernism, postcolonialism, and gender theory, only in the 1970s did the racist and chauvinist biases of organizational functioning and its concomitant privileging of those in power become more evident. The violence and despair of Foucauldian disciplinary society brought quizzical looks to the faces of those previously concerned with running it effectively. Radical organization theory and its follow-up, critical management studies, had to

be established on grounds having nothing to do with the classic organizational analysis, to become a break-away paradigm of thought.<sup>43</sup>

If we look at societies, not as solid social structures to be found in relations of exteriority to the individuals or the nonhuman or technical agents composing them, as in Durkheim's tradition of analysis, but through Tardé's refusal to differentiate between micro and macro scales, equipped with a concept of a society as a form of association,<sup>44</sup> then thirty years of radical organization theory and its descendants stand out more vividly.<sup>45</sup> One of the writers in this current, Gibson Burrell, sought to refound organization theory, or radically break away from it, on the grounds of the apprehension of the roles it plays in maintaining the dominant homogeneity of socioeconomic and cultural order and in the propagation of certain versions of the rationality of modernity.<sup>46</sup>

It is not surprising that with the crisis or decline of organization as an adequate formulation, organization theory increasingly had to look for ways of updating the concept of organization in a way that would problematize the rational, hierarchical, representational, industrial, and functionalist orthodoxy it had previously developed and relied on. Large organizations underwent a radical decline, and network organizations, typified by flexible contracts, outsourcing, and precarious labour, came to replace bodies whose allowances for social heterogeneity were long questioned, even while such organizations were still being referred to by some as 'a source of pride'.<sup>47</sup> Organization theory found itself under a pressing demand to formulate new epistemological systems and to develop a certain ontological relativism (one drawn from actor-network theory, for instance) in order to be able to address and support organizations in changing market conditions. Boundlessness and flexibility, time-based and process-driven social formations, network nature, and the instant generation of actors found in organizational relationships are explored in a number of books and articles that together make a rather enormous bibliography.

Among these, here comes disorganization theory<sup>48</sup> and aesthetic organization,<sup>49</sup> along with creative and cultural entrepreneurship, e-commerce, business modelling and knowledge management—terms that signify a fragmentation of organizational analysis. This became a moment for the unfortunate naming of the discipline to play out. A feedback loop that locks the theory into such a rigid dependency on one of its objects of reflection can only amplify the limitations. What can organization theory do in the absence of organization, or if organization escapes, or if such theory is opposed to 'organization' and has a political project against it?

From another perspective, organization theory is one of the offspring of system theory (especially in the work by Tavistock Institute,<sup>50</sup> focusing on interactions along the boundaries of organization with the environment rather than among discrete units that are considered part of a system) and owes much of its initial inspiration and its conceptual devices to cybernetics.<sup>51</sup> Both start off from viewing systems in a manner that is

inclusive of the technical, social, and biological as a result of interactions both within themselves and with their environment, focusing on what constitutes, structures, and maintains these interactions and how those can be optimized to a maximum efficiency or can be subjected to prediction and control.<sup>52</sup> System theory's constituent parts, as accounted for by Bertalanffy,<sup>53</sup> such as game theory, theory of automata, and interestingly, graph theory and network theory, among others, in parts superseded or joined by operational research, action research, and simulation all exhibit a certain usefulness, if not owing their birth, to the military-industrial complex, however indignantly it is denied at times.<sup>54</sup> The Tavistock Institute of Human Relations mentioned previously, one of the outposts of organizational analysis in Britain, hosted the Institute of Operational Research, which in part arose from the need of the Royal Air Force to improve on the usage of a new technology—radar—during the Second World War. As J. Barton Cunningham reports, engineers working on radar had been put in contact with its end-users, following which it became possible for scientists (appointed as staff officers) to further collaborate with those in charge of higher command.<sup>55</sup> The operational research group studied these operations and evaluated their successfulness and the consequences of the usage of radar, making changes to the system as a whole including, essentially, its communications factors. From the mid-forties, operational research kicked off in many places around the world. In the United States, an independent branch developed, that of ‘operations research,’ that together with action analysis (and game theory) form a certain set of applied methodologies that today continue to be used in simulation, personality profiling, and software agent-based modelling of military conflicts<sup>56</sup> as well as in management studies, modelling and in changing ‘for the better’ the dynamic behaviours of complex and open systems, such as depressed human beings, organizations full of office plankton, nations on fire, or self-guided missiles haunted by automated defence systems.

Cybernetics certainly did not result only from the military experience of Norbert Wiener and the later aversion to it or from the telephone communication optimization of Claude Shannon; it was also developed by people such as Gregory Bateson, to be joined subsequently by Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela in its ‘second wave’ who, like Heinz von Foerster, introduced a means of thinking that situates the position of the observer reflexively in relation to the system and offered the concepts of autopoiesis<sup>57</sup> and self-organization, both of which have significantly gained currency in cultural practices in the last decade. Whereas autopoiesis, especially in its application by Félix Guattari, can be used to reflect on the advance of creativity (discussed in broader terms in the next chapter), it is rather organizational aesthetics that can join self-organized creative powers with other human-technical objects and systems at different scales to transduce them into significant aesthetic events.

## AESTHETICS AND ORGANIZATIONAL AESTHETICS

Organizational aesthetics is a process of emergence and a mode of enquiry that gives us a way to understand a digital object, process, or body. It is not only a way of looking, but also a dynamic of assembling and coming up with such a body. Considered as a process in which phenomena construct and operate themselves, it delves into the changing manner of actualization of various strata, which in turn move towards assimilation with aesthetic registers. As such, aesthetic registers such as those of sensuality or signification become planes that are also explicitly inhabited by social, economic, and political forces, a process that is as exciting as it is grim as it opens new horizons of the possible while enhancing stratification and capture to unforeseen levels.

Organizational aesthetics conceptualizes aesthetics as a register of becoming, a flow of production, a spectre of experience, and a mode of engagement ranging in its articulation from the political to the aural, from the social to ecological, from the performative to the formal. Such an aesthetics does not directly relate to the sensual apparatus or to art as we know it. Rather, it is about differentials in action and contemplation, which as such do not primarily send us off to the sensual, nor lock us into the form/content debate, but stage passage via routes of diversion, peering through, collapse, despair, humour, pain, trial, contrivance, and experiment. Such expansion or evolution starts before the morphogenesis of forces constituting a human being in a given society acquires a language by which it becomes quite fixed, enduring throughout such a process of structuration while retaining some of its fluctuating intensity. Such an understanding of aesthetics shares some of its resonances with what Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari describe as a desiring-machine (rather than an apparatus in Jacques Rancière's terms of the 'making sensible').<sup>58</sup> Curiously enough, Deleuze rather traditionally conceptualizes aesthetics in relation to the sensible and to affect. Alain Badiou draws attention to this when accounting for the philosophy of art, within which he roughly identifies three vectors, slightly blurred but largely unchanged during the twentieth century: didacticism, classicism, and romanticism.<sup>59</sup>

For Badiou, thinking about art (understood as a precise approach to aesthetics) means enquiring into art and truth in terms of immanence and singularity. His own conceptualization places art in relation to truth in a manner that is both singular and immanent: Art is capable of truth that nothing else is capable of, and such truth is immanent to art. 'Art itself is a truth procedure.'<sup>60</sup> Because art is finite and truth is an infinite multiplicity, to distinguish such a position from the Deleuzian idea of art cultivating the infinite chaotic within the finite (which is, for Badiou, romantic), and to account for truth as an event, but not an event that can happen as a single work of art (which in Badiou's schema would be a Christian

modality), Badiou suggests that art is a procedure of truth, and such an artistic procedure is woven from a multiplicity of individual works.<sup>61</sup>

But relationship to truth set aside, art and aesthetics are directly plugged in to the electric waves of life. The Nietzschean idea of aesthetics includes a reflection on nature, which has an artistic force, ‘artistic state,’ itself. In such a state there are ‘artistic powers which erupt from nature herself, without the mediation of any human artist, and in which nature’s artistic drives attain their first, immediate satisfaction . . . as intoxicated reality.’<sup>62</sup> Such an abundant generation of intoxication is the ontogenetic quality that I am looking for, something quite distinct from a putative truth procedure. From such a perspective, aesthetics is a machine generating material variants of reality to enable knowledges, practices, and perceptions to constitute and affirm themselves. In this it partakes in the overflowing of creative emergence and surges with the energy and growing pains of coming into being. Art draws from this source. Art is a historically acknowledged and institutionalized form of creativity becoming tangible, socially acceptable, limited to cultured and human society. There are certainly other forms and currents in this process. That is why this book deals with autocreativity, the lifeblood of networks, as well as with freedom, repetition, and aesthetic brilliance; digital folklore, art currents, publics; and with objects and processes that stem from and define the topology, architectures, densities of amplification and equilibriums of creative emergence today.

The organizational aesthetics of art platforms is a practice and speculation on the forces that build them up and change them, that structure and channel their emergence but also enable them to make themselves available for varied practices, uses, and logics. Art platforms exhibit a capacity to become eventful, to reach a threshold that amplifies the material inhabiting them into forces of brilliance, enabling the transition into a different reality.

In such an account, organizational aesthetics does not primarily deal with the process or a body of organization in the arts, nor does it account for new postmodern types of organization in global business and culture. Organizational aesthetics is not preoccupied with the institutions destabilized by network logic, restructured and rearranged as leaking organizations. These are attended to and are to be further explored in the search for the keys to the new functionalities and collapses of today.

Notwithstanding this, art platforms mimic certain aspects of the structuring genealogy of organizations, partly due to their partaking in the sphere of organizations and networks dominated by forces and interests of particular kinds. They have to fight against, or learn to subtly deploy, the reflexions and projections of such forces that acquire the capacity to work from within upon their formation. Besides, energies and agents enter and leave art platforms to become parts of other ensembles, and in doing so, they may leave behind or project a trace to contaminate and recompose the forces acting and logics being actualized. That is why the organizational aesthetics of art platforms generates its effects on the fields of power, maybe

even playing a role in their constitution, effects generated to the tunes of diverse vectors of valorization and in ways that are composed by different objects, forces, and relationships: some form of inventory of which I hope to present.

The organizational aesthetics of art platforms can be conflictual and misbalanced. It plugs into the flows of energy and matter, humans and software; it participates in the formation of the more habitual, in the morphogenesis of the societal, but also retains certain catalytic functions to disrupt a putative balance and produce a variation.

Organizational aesthetics starts off from looking into the bare, the chaotic, and the turbulent plateau of emergences, of creative forces to then trace how these get pictured and mapped, restricted, capitalized on, exploited, but also how they may revolutionize the structured, the possible, and the different.

The account of the organizational aesthetics of art platforms presented here concentrates on an experienced yet relatively unseen, unknown but everyday reality. With the rapid development of software and the cultural practices that are triggered by the new generations of Internet applications and uses, many cultural behaviours are practiced while being either stupidly celebrated or disdainfully condemned. I am certainly interested in how these new emergent practices get structured and couple with the forces of imitation and repetition, but there is an audacity of curiosity in openly thinking of what their power is and to describe this power through means that do not exhaust it, or reduce it to a simple decidable equation. An organizational aesthetics of art platforms allows us to notice and get a grip on something that is widely discussed but is essentially lost in such debates, either under the rubric of a general creative ability that psychology feeds us with, under the neoliberal creative industries policies of cognitive capitalism or a totalizing Marxist critique of the latter. Today's polemics simplify once again, as previous polarized debates did in relation to the advent of the mass media, negativizing and denying certain powerful registers their own existence. I focus on what is brought along with the profound turmoil of the new types of networks, with new media constellations entering the cycle of becoming as rightful actors, setting certain forms of life into play, and on the experience and generation of cultural forms that vividly shape and inhabit these moments.

Organizational aesthetics works with the raw and virtual material of the creativity that traverses art platforms, which it structures and organizes while trying to keep it vital. My account of organizational aesthetics here, a quest for art platforms, focuses on how these energies work and what works alongside them: what type of objects and practices they create a space for, what kind of planes and pedestals they form, and what events they stage. Equally important is to understand the interplays of power such energies feed, and the kinds of structurations and conduct they imply. New kinds of actors are born from such interactions, which couple with existing

registers such as language, patterns of visuality, or software, or transform the fields of production, be it industries or subjectifications of different sorts in unmatched ways. The following chapters read art platforms very closely to account for their specificity, to feel the precision of their materiality.

## AN ASSOCIATION, A PRACTICE, A TOOL, AND A METAPHOR

An art platform is a living organism, a continuous combination of factors, thriving on differentiation, responsive to its own fluctuation, and amplifying creative forces to enact a transformation. If we were to generalize on all the art platforms we can find, assemble them to be compared and analysed down to a common set of characteristics, to then decompose a generalized art platform into a set of simpler parts in order to understand how they function, will it provide us with an understanding of how the whole works?

A complex system behaves in ways that cannot be understood through the sum of the behaviour of its parts. Understanding the constituent processes of art platforms, in fact, does not authorize any generalization beyond itself.<sup>63</sup> If we follow what Isabelle Stengers offers as an aesthetics of learning and knowing, we will find that art platforms allow for aesthetic phenomena to manifest in a variety of ways, for different types of forces to come to the forefront. Such forces might even be frustration and aggression, or imitation, channelling itself to become a subcultural type of the stereotypical; alternately, we might witness a genuine digital aesthetics, a new language, an organizational revolt, or other occurrences.

How, in art platforms, are aesthetic phenomena channelled to repeat or deviate? How are they enabled? Shall we study objects, materialized cultures, and practices to deduct their implicit and explicit orders or shall we create objects, environments, organizations, and art platforms that would allow us to act and think anew, to depart from the path of the ‘normal’? This would imply focusing on the movements, atmospheres, things, life events, acute moments of art platforms and eliciting an understanding of their emergent complexity as it develops itself. In an object such as an art platform, a factor can be insignificant or it may change everything. Letting art platforms tell their stories allows the hearing of something new, a story of the empirical or real that resists the too easy conceptualization of digital culture that is readily at hand. In doing so, we will learn something about the networks today; by following their rich integration with cultural dynamics, we will also discover something about technology and learn to appreciate the ‘simply technical’ as something more.