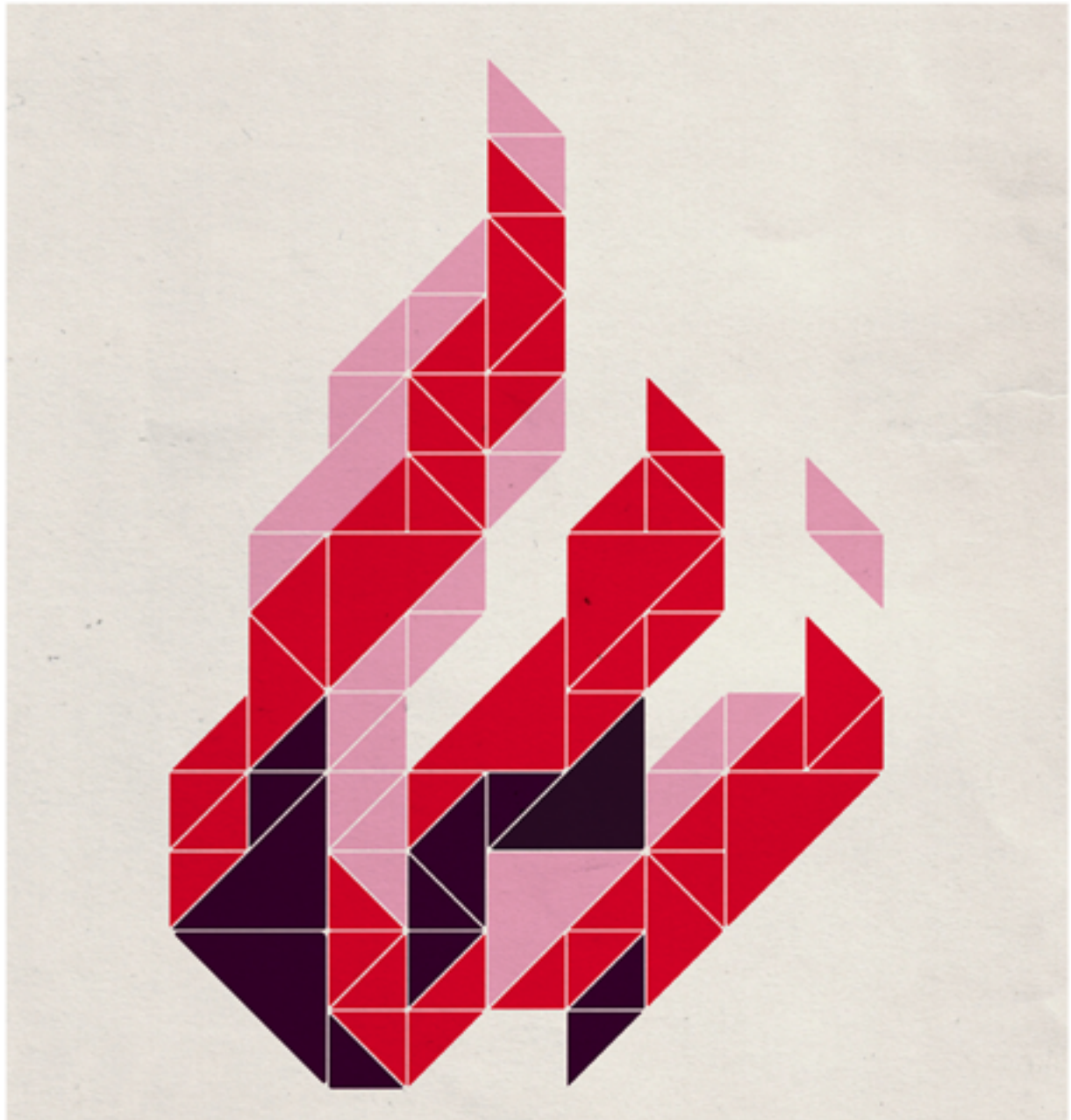# New Aesthetic, New Anxieties

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NEW AESTHETIC NEW ANXIETIES

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1. AESTHETIC TURNS

A month before this book was developed, the Dutch Electronic Art Festival 2012 exhibition *The Power of Things* opened its doors. The exhibition examined notions of materiality and beauty through a collection of eighteen works which were mostly sculptural objects. Numerous people attending the opening night and their overwhelmingly positive responses filled the curatorial team with a sense of pride and achievement. The next day, however, one of the curators encountered a renowned media art critic outside the exhibition venue and asked him if he had enjoyed the exhibition. The answer (to the curator's surprise) was a firm 'No'. According to the critic, this is not the time to address such tedious things as natural phenomena, let alone relate these to trivial discussions on beauty! How could one, in these dark times, ignore the threats we are facing and the slashed cultural funding to create an exhibition that does not take a critical stand against the crises at hand? Did the critic have a point? Was this exhibition an exercise in fiddling while Rome burned? The critic refused to acknowledge that at this very moment a push for aesthetics - as a politics of form and experience - is a potentially radical gesture.

In 2006, Claire Bishop signalled that art criticism often fails to judge the artistic merit of socially engaged practice as "emphasis is shifted away from the disruptive *specificity* of a given work and onto a *generalized* set of moral precepts" (64). Indeed, if the artistic experimentation and the reworking of forms, affects and materials is downplayed, art becomes stagnant and only preaches to the converted. With the recent 'social turn' in contemporary art, curators and artists have quite often resorted to the discourses of political autonomy to frame the historical present. Certainly, the current situation is characterised by new pressures and urgencies, requiring clarity and firm directives. But if this results in a reduction of legitimate political positions, perspectives and stances, then the operative zone for art becomes very narrow.

There is a level of accountability and risk-taking involved here. Politics cannot just be coquettishly applied to the white cube gallery space and expected to stick. This was, for example, the case at the 2012 Berlin Biennale, where the curators invited the Occupy Berlin movement into the gallery space of KW Institute for Contemporary Art, the main biennial venue. This move ignored the fact that the Occupy movement is about public dissent in public space; it is about "the street" being heard. Locking up Occupy in the white cube is a simplistic curatorial gesture of putting "politics on display." A performative act such as this, turns artistic practices and curating into performances of already-activated political processes.

Perhaps an exhibition like *The Power of Things* was difficult to read as critical, because a critical exhibition - in traditional electronic art terms - typically entails a bunch of computer screens and robotic sculptures in a dark industrial space, brought together under a dystopian scenario serving as an exhibition theme. Such classic 'critical' electronic art exhibitions, however, inform an antiquated interactive electronic art aesthetic - one that dictates that critically looking at technology's impact on our world is best achieved by displaying hardware at work, and dispensing with frivolous topics such as beauty. Critical art, however, is also a question of sense and perception, of transformative forms and diagrams. The approach of *The Power of*

Things explored relations between different materials in the world. This involved an aesthetics aimed at generating new hybrid or more-than-human collectives.

The Power of Things exhibition included only a few screens, and their presence was always to support sculptural objects. *Pigeon d'Or* (2010) by Tuur van Balen, for example, was a proposal to genetically modify pigeons so their excrement is composed of soap and, therefore, the city is cleaned rather than soiled when pigeons defecate. The installation included material things which gave viewers a sense of a project's conceptual and thematic scope. Most works in the exhibition were sculptural objects, or objects with screens as support, instead of time-based or image-based interactive works. This was not a prohibition on the use of screens, but an attempt to complicate certain established and conventional exhibition practices in new media art.

Other works such as *Irrational Computing* (2011) by Ralf Baecker dealt with the materials and aesthetics of digital processes. Using semiconductor crystals (the key technical component of information technologies), five modules based on varied electrical and mechanical processes that form a kind of primitive, macroscopic signal processors. *Irrational Computing* is not supposed to 'function' – its aim is to search for the poetic elements on the border between 'accuracy' and 'chaos', amplifying the poetic side of these materials. Similarly, *Pulse* (2008) by Marcus Kison dealt with the materials and affects of digital processes in the form of a cascade of wires and exposed mechanical parts. *Pulse* is a live visualization of real-time emotional expressions on the internet. Each time an emotion is identified in a recent blog entry, a red shape-shifting object at the centre of the installation transforms itself, so that the new volume of the shape creates a visual representation of an overall current emotional condition of internet users.

Beyond the domain of new media art, human-computer relations are also not new to the contemporary art world. The works of Thomas Bayrle presented at dOCUMENTA (13) for example, are machines which move in rhythmic and hypnotic ways, accompanied by barely audible soundtracks of murmured prayers. Also at dOCUMENTA (13), in a neighbouring venue, several physical experiments by physicist Anton Zeileger were installed, which affectively materialized the work of a field which is normally quite opaque to those outside it. Although the contemporary art world could not be said to be hermetic (an interest in machines and their aesthetics stretches back to at least Futurism), the new media art world and contemporary art world still remain very much distinct. Manovich infamously referred to this as the difference between 'Turing-land' and 'Duchamp-land' (Manovich, 1996). Curator Catherine David expressed the Duchamp-land view in an early statement when she suggested "technology in itself is not a category according to which I judge works. This type of categorization is just as outmoded as division into classical art genres (painting, sculpture…). I am interested in the idea of a project; ideally the means of realizing the project should arise from the idea itself" (1997). However, from the perspective of a decade of change, we can now recognize the reticent politics of the 'project' as a characteristic of neoliberal governmentality.

The conversation about the New Aesthetic, even though it arose from a design context, is remarkable for the way that it so naturally disregards established divides of creative industries, art practice and theory. It posits an aesthetic turn that has

arguably animated all of these scenes; an aesthetic turn brought about itself through a 'new nature' (Bridle 2011c).

Irit Rogoff argues in her essay on the notion of 'turns' in contemporary art's trajectory (including those within the practice of curation itself), that "it seems pertinent to ask whether this umbrella is actually descriptive of the drives that have propelled this desired transition" (2008). Contemporary art workers encounter suggestions of turns with ambivalence and a certain secret sense of relief - everyone needs senses of movement in their frames for working, the styles of comportment for what they do, in order to enable a capacity to absorb, recognize, situate and insightfully propel individual practices into intelligible scenes of aesthetic encounter - usually this takes shape as an exhibition. But what constitutes a turn, and what kind of comportment do specific turns register in relation to the larger historical presents in to which they are pitched and thrown? Rogoff asks:

> Are we talking about a 'reading strategy' or an interpretative model, as was the understanding of the 'linguistic turn' in the 1970s, with its intimations of an underlying structure that could be read across numerous cultural practices and utterances? Are we talking about reading one system—a pedagogical one—across another system—one of display, exhibition, and manifestation—so that they nudge one another in ways that might open them up to other ways of being? Or, are we talking instead about an active movement—a generative moment in which a new horizon emerges in the process—leaving behind the practice that was its originating point? (2008)

For Rogoff, who seems very much aware of the relationship of art world trends to networked connectivity and socio-technological change, what is at one moment heralded as a turn can easily "harden" into a series of "generic or stylistic tropes," and might risk even resolving "the kinds of urgencies that underwrote it in the first place" given that it is designed to deal with interdisciplinary challenges at the precise points where things "urgently need to be shaken up and made uncomfortable" (2008).

Taking up this challenge to consider disruption, Michelle Kasprzak (Curator at V2_ Institute for the Unstable Media in Rotterdam) invited one facilitator and six writers to come together in a 'book sprint' to explore these issues. The book sprint format involves a group tasked with writing a book over a few intensive days - in this case, we met over approximately four and a half days. Talking, writing, editing, eating, drinking, and debating ensued and the result of those focused days of effort is this publication. We are proud of what emerged in this interdisciplinary group of curators, writers, and academics, although of course as we neared the end of this process we found ourselves wishing for "just one more day". As an initial step towards a deeper analysis of this contemporary moment where new aesthetics appear against the backdrop of global discord and unrest, we hope you find it as interesting to read as we have found it to (collaboratively) write.

Rotterdam, June 2012

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INTRODUCTION

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3. INTRODUCTION

> It's 2011, and I have no idea what anything is or does anymore. (Taylor, in
> Bridle 2011c)

How do we think about media art aesthetics and the production of critical knowledge
as the creative industries paradigm consolidates around us, amidst ongoing financial,
environmental and political crises? Can we still claim a special place for media art
given the increasing ubiquity of informational technologies in everyday life and the
intensification of cultural distribution through social media platforms? This book
reflects on these questions through the recent New Aesthetic. More specifically, we
are interested in reflecting on why a notion developed by the British designer James
Bridle caused such a reaction across multiple contexts, sectors and segments of
network culture. Pitched as a highly-curated batch of crowdsourced visual and textual
content on the commercial microblogging and social networking platform Tumblr, the
New Aesthetic was presented as a 'shareable concept', a 'theory object'. This
collection, moreover, was delivered with a message: the machines were telling us
something, trying to speak to us, and we just need to return their affectionate,
surveillant gazes, and communicate with their program languages.

The term New Aesthetic felt the full force of love and hate from a disparate crew of
writers, media art theorists and practitioners, designers, object-oriented
ontologists and curators in an outpouring of frenzied attention and criticism. Ironically,
even ambivalent responses were well documented. Since its explosion online, many
have relegated the phenomena of the New Aesthetic to the status of a 'non-event.'
But how could such a thing be both phenomenal and superfluous, attracting so many
contributions, sightings, parallels and revisionist accounts, including from new media
practitioners themselves? The question of *how* and *why* the New Aesthetic became
emblematic of a particular kind of sensibility, one arguably characteristic of a
disruptive network culture, is the subject of this book.

Approaching this topic, we want to think through the anxieties, misunderstandings,
arguments, bruised egos and skirmishes the New Aesthetic generated. We attempt to
move beyond lazy thinking, positions of pious indifference or naive enthusiasm, and
ask what the New Aesthetic might tell us about this juncture in which find ourselves,
as curators, critics, artists theorists and creative workers. We especially want to
explore the discomfort and challenges of the New Aesthetic for a number of
commentators working in proximity to 'new media aesthetics.' Somehow the New
Aesthetic as a point of conversation seemed to generate strong boundary anxieties
at a time when media art and the cultural sector in general, here in the Netherlands
and across Europe, are having serious difficulties conceiving of present conditions and
future visions of their own. Especially considering this fact, the sense of beautific
sentimentality and foreboding captured by its images, along with the distributive
attention it attracted, raises interesting questions for the future of new media art.

The first section of this book provides some definitions and introduces key themes.

This is followed by a series of reflections by curators on how curatorial practice and expertise in proximity to the New Aesthetic makes sense of its objects, forms and artifacts. We then move to conceptually situate the New Aesthetic - as one kind of emergent aesthetic form - into a broader episteme of computationality and periodisation of neoliberal governmentality. This is an attempt to expand our perspective on what the New Aesthetic might mean, and also consider how media art can reimagine itself by asking some difficult new questions.

WHAT WAS THE NEW AESTHETIC?

Defining the New Aesthetic is necessarily problematic. It's a vibe, an attitude, a feeling, *a sensibility*. Posted to the blog for The Really Interesting Group - a creative design partnership based in East London - Bridle introduced the term on May 6th, 2011 by stating:

> For a while now, I've been collecting images and things that seem to approach a New Aesthetic of the future, which sounds more portentous than I mean. What I mean is that we've got frustrated with the NASA extropianism space-future, the failure of jetpacks, and we need to see the technologies we actually have with a new wonder. Consider this a mood-board for unknown products.
>
> (Some of these things might have appeared here, or nearby, before. They are not necessarily *new* new, but I want to put them together.)
>
> For so long we've stared up at space in wonder, but with cheap satellite imagery and cameras on kites and RC helicopters, we're looking at the ground with new eyes, to see structures and infrastructures. (Bridle 2011a)

The post contained a series of digital images documenting this sensibility associated of the future. These visual artefacts included satellite imagery, tracking of geotagged data from iPhones, the location of Osama Bin Laden's 'hideout' on Google Maps from a *New York Times* article, splinter camouflage on military jets, the Telehouse West data center in East London by YRM Architects and 'low res' industrial design by United Nude, among others. At a glance, these appear as a random set of images. Indeed, something about it recalls what ADILKNO once described as vague media, "their models are not argumentative, but contaminative. Once you tune in to them, you get the attitude. But that was never their intention; their vagueness is not an ideal, it is the ultimate degree of abstraction" (1998). However, perhaps the reference to mood-boards is more telling, a highly contemporary technique of *concepting* integral to creative labour in advertising and design settings. This is a cultural technology which involves creating an 'atmosphere' or *context for consumption* around a product (Ardvisson 2005). Explicitly for Bridle, it is something designed for network culture to take up: for him, the products are 'unknown.' In this respect, it aims purely to evoke a potential atmosphere around standard infrastructure. It performs a sense of notional space, but not a natural sublime. On the contrary, the New Aesthetics strives to stare down a thoroughly hybridized socio-technological world (Latour 2011).

In his original pitch, Bridle reflects on digital and networked technologies from the weird perspective of a father figure for the machines in the style of Alan Turing. For Bridle, "child machines" should be educated not through Turing's politically incorrect method of punishment and rewards, but through positive reinforcement, care and creative communicative strategies (2011c). Let's be frank, there is an urgent need to interrogate computational processes, but Bridle's kitsch affection for thinking machines is ultimately underpinned by a political naivety that could perhaps only be maintained by the creative classes. The socio-political asymmetries perpetuated by data-mining, the privatized social graph, facial recognition technologies, drone attacks, and camouflage are swept aside by the positive message to make the world "more exciting, make it better" (2011c).

We're not surprised any longer by the political aporias of the creative sector - even whilst they claim an ethical stance. We aim to take the New Aesthetic in other directions; we're interested in intersecting practices or ecologies, technical critiques and questions of medium-specificity in the computational episteme. We're curious about unknown products, especially as it relates to a potential for producing new spaces for the common. But rather than fixating on Bridle's pitch, let's find some other angles and approaches into this vague terrain. Let's follow some practices, discourses and criticisms associated with the New Aesthetic, refigure distinctions between expert and layman, the commercial and the noncommercial, the proper and improper. Let's build some critical feedback loops along these confusing trajectories.

ALGORITHMIC AGENTS

Recent debates over the 'correct' use of algorithms can help us start to define the New Aesthetic in useful ways. Last February, Norwegian born, NYC-based artist generative artist Marius Watz posted a brief article on his Tumblr that was intended to act as a warning sign and wake-up call to his peers - the community of artists and designers for whom the medium of computer code is their working toolset. He wrote,

> Yes, heavy use of standard algorithms is bad for you. That is, it is if you wish to consider yourself a computational creative capable of coming up with interesting work... You cannot lay claim to 'owning' any given algorithm (or hardware configuration), unless you have added significant extra value to it. To do so is at best ignorant... This doesn't mean you shouldn't experiment with great algorithms. (Watz 2012)

In effect this was a critique of what Watz called "algorithmic laziness" and seemed to be an attempt to sketch the contours of acceptable algorithmic use in artistic practice. As Bruce Sterling (2012a) commented, "A 'canon of algorithms.' What an intriguing development."

It is helpful to know a bit more about Watz to understand the relevance of his comments and to feel his concern. He has worked in the medium of the algorithmic image for the last decade, taking his practice to countless festivals and events in the global new media circuit as he progressively executed a transition to the gallery scene.

Jumping from the medium of the screen and the projection to more tangible outputs, last year he became the first 'Artist in Residence' at Makerbot industries, the open-source, VC-backed company that produces the most affordable and popular 3D printer. Watz is slowly becoming a familiar sight in hacking spaces and mostly-Western art and technology institutions.

Instead of choosing the comfortable position of an artist who concentrates on their own work and won't intervene in debates, Marius Watz frequently contributes. As an evangelist of the generative, he started the Generator-X conference showcasing latest generative strategies and software processes in digital art, architecture and design, has curated several software art exhibitions and teaches frequently coding and modeling workshops for beginners, freelancers and professionals. While modest, he is also very opinionated, and will enjoy a (polite and good humored) polemic on blogs, social networks and mailing lists now and then. This is just to say that Watz really cares about code, and has great expectations about its role in art practices today. He doesn't want his great love, the computated image, to be banalized or the tools of his trade to be used poorly. Some of the most determinant of these tools are, probably, algorithms.

From this perspective, the entry posted on February 13, 2012 on his Tumblr titled 'The Algorithm Thought Police', was a sincere effort to unpack the problematic relationship between the artist who writes code and the larger entities that she manipulates to produce a visual output. Because these entities, in his words,

> Are not neutral vessels. Algorithms provide the means to produce specific outcomes, typically through generative logic or data processing. But in the process they leave their distinct footprints on the result. […] "speaking" through algorithms, your thought patterns and modes of expression are shaped by their syntax. (Watz 2012a)

These entities - lists of instructions that calculate a function - would be easy to recognize, if not name, by most citizens in western societies today. Because they codify through their outputs a specific, increasingly ubiquitous texture of reality, a skin that's being overlaid in buildings, fashion, cars, jewelry, print publications, and chairs.

A list of the creative coder's 'problematic friends', in Watz's affectionate term, would include, among many others: Circle Packing (which define an area in circles progressively without letting them enter in contact, until the area is completely covered), Polygon subdivision (different techniques of splitting an area in polygonal shapes) and boids (the simulations of the behavior of birds flocking); or voronoi, which is "the partitioning of a plane with n points into convex polygons such that each polygon contains exactly one generating point and every point in a given polygon is closer to its generating point than to any other" (Bhattacharya and Gavrilova 2008: 202)

Algorithms are a technical aspect of the medium within which the New Aesthetic is being created, used, disseminated and remediated. Watz's concerns point us to issues of technical literacies, know-how, categories of distinction and boundary conditions that are necessary for establishing new modes of critique. The same concerns regarding the use of tools, forms, and the creative treatment of digital

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objects, the politics of their management and so on, seem to circulate everywhere across various academic and artistic scenes that are literate in computation and politics. In our current conditions, these questions of medium-specificity, material access to devices and techniques of interrogability that support the development of media art practice themselves face new challenges. Processes of obfuscation, the refrain of efficiency, intellectual property regimes, built-in obsolesence, censorship and surveillance form part of a wider constitutive context through which these practices become politicized. In V2_'s recent publication *Vital Beauty*, Dutch media art critic Arjen Mulder makes explicit the stakes of this scenario,

> All the signs indicate that technological art will succumb to current social pressure and becoming something useful to people and the economy. In the process, we will lose part of what I will call the intellectual life of our times: the extent to which we are able to be conscious of the present. Artists are not creative in the sense of constantly coming up with new content. Rather, they change the form, the medium, the framework. In their hands, form is elevated to method, media become cocreators, and blueprints turn into diagrams. (Mulder 2012)

What is interesting about creative experimentation which is conscious of tools and politics is what new forms of critical art try to gather up and deal with: the complexity of our incontrovertibly aesthetic negotiations of things.

Whether radical, formalist, corporate or fascist, aesthetics compose subjects in a contract with technological, political and economic realities. In this way, new forms of sense and perception offer up different ways of thinking about our intimate attachments to the historical specificity of the world. In this sense, they are also forms of publicity for specific kinds of comportment. Already with Futurism and the historical avant-garde, artworks' proximity to publicity worked to disrupt and deregulate cultural values through the shocks of modernity. The New Aesthetic, however, does not present a modernist manifesto, nor invent an autonomous aesthetic grammar. Rather, the New Aesthetic exists as a Tumblr that evokes particular subjectivities; a cascade of images, a collection, an archive, or more specifically, a database that attempts to document a certain unfolding condition.

This condition in question is precisely the age of the algorithm, or the regime of computation (Golumbia 2009). For Sterling, it captured "an eruption of the digital in the physical", (2012b) for David Berry, this was an attempt to "see the grain of computation" (2012a). The New Aesthetic signifies the digital and computation through image files. That is, the Tumblr accumulates representations of pixels, standardized objects, calculative operations and other instantiations of applied mathematics.

Somewhat paradoxically, however, as the New Aesthetic attempts to document the 'reality' of this condition - the ubiquity of computational processes - it remains caught in the computational regime itself. This is most obvious through the emphasis on visual knowledge and in the tension that exists between representation and mediation in software (Chun 2011). The New Aesthetic attempts to represent the condition of computationality, but does not reflect on its own status as media. This is why the New

Aesthetic seems to evoke what already was, rather than what might be. Indeed, if the New Aesthetic suggests a particular subject, as we go on to discuss, it would be more accurately described as desubjectified, or partial. Defined more by intensities than by consciousness or action, which are deprioritized or unavailable, this is comparable to what Tiqqun call the *Bloom* (2000), but we describe under computationality as *the riparian user* (Berry 2011). However, we want to suggest that this is not some critical failure of the New Aesthetic (it was never trying to be otherwise); rather, it can be taken as a generalized symptom of disassociated relations that are characteristic of software, bound by the logic of computation.

It is a related concern that the computational regime is operative during a phase when the post-89 market-driven social and economic reforms of neoliberalism have come into crisis, impacting upon our comportment in the present as producers, critics and everyday negotiators of culture at large. This is another, until recently, obfuscated paradigm of production for today's fine art *and* creative industrial work. As a neoclassical economic approach to governmentality, it stresses the efficiency of private enterprise, delimits the state's role in providing from public services through a politics of risk privatization and social disinvestment. As welfare state agendas are deemed outmoded, in the view of its historian's like David Harvey, neoliberalism names the deepening penetration of processes and regimes of capitalization into political and social institutions – and indeed, cultural consciousness (2007). On many levels it is not a changed capitalism, merely an intensified, pernicious version of real subsumption. But its difference, tracked early in 1979 by Foucault in *The Birth of Biopolitics* (2008), is the way in which the latter has succeeded in creating greatest conceptual distance between the state, corporate takeovers of wealth, and the conception of the 'free' liberal democratic imaginary of citizenship. This freedom rises into its own ethic above all other political imperatives, and cultural logics.

For affect theorist Lauren Berlant, both art and popular cultural experiments process the present of our neoliberal, networked relations and their conditions of possibility (2011). Aesthetic relations take shape as trackable 'genres' or forms which enable contemporary subjects to attach to and at least inhabit the contradictions and ambivalence of this Now. A genre, perhaps especially when pitched as 'new' (pertaining to now) offers us a recognizable form that we can "groove with" or hold onto, so that we modulate and adjust to the present in the form of affective contracts upon encounters with people and things. Genres, significantly, can be both efforts towards, and defenses from, more politicized ways of thinking and feeling through the present.

Most relevantly, Berlant has taken up these approaches to aesthetic forms to replace the persistent legacy approaches to aesthetics inherited from modernism that are very much unsuited to thinking through moments of ongoing crises. In Badiou, for example, events throw us into a new present, supposedly rendering old tools, categories and analytics, including political analytics, supposedly obsolete (2009). Berlant de-dramatizes this to suggest contrarily that the present moment is increasingly being experienced as the imposition of a sense of extended crisis. Incidents don't infact shock us *differently,* the drama in fact is the opposite of this; things more tend to pile up and we navigate them in a mode of adjustment that itself feels as permanent as it does precarious (2011). For her, new aesethetic genres invested in the political, the

ones that in some way actually respond to, ride on, or aim to make sense of crisis, are also becoming increasingly reflexive. She tracks and theorizes such new genres as different instantiations of dealing with what is unfolding about the present's political scenes. This consciously political investment in new genres, which we share (differently between us) as curators, critics, writers and media theorists, connects us sensually to the pursuit of productive knowledge; indeed it is an attempt to bring consciousness and knowledge more in line, rather than experience these as glitched (2011). We pay attention to new forms of art and aesthetic encounter so that something, indeed anything, about the present might become more knowable. Here especially, the New Aesthetic poses a particularly interesting case for understanding the politics of aesthetic attachments to form in the technocultural present.

Deleuze and Guattari, reflecting on the state of philosophical thought in their late work, expressed deep concern that "the most shameful moment" had already come "when computer science, marketing, design and advertising, all the disciplines of communication, seized hold of the word concept itself and said: 'This is our concern, we are the creative ones, we are the ideas men!' We are friends of the concept, we put it in our computers" (1994: 10). There should be no doubt that the New Aesthetic arises from a certain 'creative context'. But the New Aesthetic is also an estranged idea, a "bastard" of sorts born from network culture. Besides appropriating already-existing content, it's trajectory was driven by collective emailing, tweeting, posting and commenting. Bridle himself would note before eventually closing the Tumblr, "it's a rubbish name, but it seems to have taken on" (2012c). To be sure, the New Aesthetic has enthusiasts, but there is also a real sense that it is a resented and unwanted child. It comes from the wrong parentage (creatives, Wired, SxSw, commercial design), and has been subject to ridicule, mockery and outright dismissal. However, being born out of these conditions, it provokes confusion and discomfort that does not easily dissipate. Contra Deleuze and Guattari (or perhaps, to put it more accurately, in the spirit of their thought), we need to now reconsider the conditions of possibility for concept production here. There is no simple solution, only problems and questions, to which we now turn to examine.

4. NEW ANXIETIES

> The #tumblresque is not John Berger's Ways of Seeing but sprays of seeing. (Wark 2012)

What is it about the New Aesthetic that makes you so damn uneasy? There's a deeply intriguing quality about the New Aesthetic that is more remarkable than any of its merits: it cannot be ignored. Since Bruce Sterling's first essay popularized the term, the Tumblr that stood as its main platform of communication, and the group of ideas, references and icons that its originators gathered under its umbrella have been refuted, dissected, mocked, celebrated or laughed at. Those who have felt obliged to enter the debate about the New Aesthetic come from philosophy, from new media art practice and curation, from interaction design or from the digital humanities. But almost no one has passed on the opportunity to say something; nobody has just shrugged with indifference and said 'they can't be bothered'. The fact of the matter is, everyone seems bothered, somehow.

This needs to be investigated because, quite clearly, it says something about the state of these disciplines and those who are working today in this cultural space. While it would be almost impossible to find any unconditional apologist for Bridle's proposition, it's even harder to find indifferent commentators. Whatever the New Aesthetic is, it's a set of ideas that can make you feel twitchy and uncomfortable, for a range of reasons depending on who you are: the academic, the digital curator, the new media artist. Whether we call it a brand or a half-formed body of theory, it reflects back insecurities, biases, or feelings of inadequacy as often as it attracts valid critical responses.

But what would happen if we properly embraced the New Aesthetic as a topic for network culture? It is claimed the term refers to a 'new nature', and as Haraway reminds us, references to nature inevitably raise questions of the common, "we turn to this topic to order our discourse, to compose our memory … to reinhabit, precisely, *common* places - locations that are widely shared, inescapably local, worldly, enspirited; that is, topical. In this sense, nature is the place in which to rebuild public culture" (Haraway 2004: 65). The New Aesthetic has temporarily lit up and disturbed network culture, not only in terms of common concerns, but as a gauge of the state of net discourse. These anxieties, moreover, can be *useful*, especially in what Matthew Fuller and Andrew Goffey describe as the collision of *grey media* and *grey matter*, where "the cracks, faults and disturbances marking our mental universes offer the same kinds of opportunities for exploitation as do bugs in the algorithmic universes of software, and one stratagem is always in the position of being able to turn another to its own account" (2010: 157). Let's dig into some responses, and diagnose the health of the current debate.

If we examine the New Aesthetic as an anxious topic, the process comes with its own perils. Whatever goal Bridle had when he opened the New Aesthetic Tumblr, it was

inevitably affected - maybe derailed - when Sterling posted his essay to *Beyond the Beyond* blog at Wired.com on April 2, 2012. Many of the answers and additional commentary, while insightful, ignored that this notion was a work in process, an atmosphere or mood, a temporary litany of findings, and not a final and definitive statement.

Sterling's initial post set the tone for the considerable debate that followed, by both claiming this project as a 'serious' avant-garde arising from British media designers, while acknowledging its shortcomings on a theoretical level. Of course, Sterling shares an investment with Bridle in science fiction and future-thinking, and there was more than a little wish-fulfillment here, although expressed in a satirical register. Nevertheless, the urgency of the New Aesthetic was the major aspect of the essay itself:

> I've seen some attempts along this line before, but this one has muscle. The New Aesthetic is moving out of its original discovery phase, and into a evangelical, podium-pounding phase. If a pioneer village of visionary creatives is founded, and they start exporting some startling, newfangled imagery, like a Marcel Duchamp-style explosion-in-a-shingle-factory… Well, we'll once again be living in heroic times! (Sterling 2012b)

Other positive attributes were listed: that the New Aesthetic is 'telling the truth', 'culturally agnostic', 'comprehensible', 'deep', 'contemporary', 'requires close attention', 'constructive' and 'generational' (2012b). His piece worked hard to mythologize the 'movement' through the legitimacy of a modernist canon, citing Russian Constructivists, French Impressionists, Italian Futurists; even adding a comparison of Bridle to Andre Breton-style Pope of this emergent scene.

However, Sterling also noted a number of considerable downsides or troubling aspects. Beyond recognizing the messiness of the accumulative Tumblr format, these mainly revolved around the lack of rigorous theoretical analysis and comprehension. In particular, the fact that many of the images refer to radically different phenomena and issues - splinter camouflage, for instance, is not about computational vision, but the physiology of human perception - and almost none of these can be easily indexed back to a Turing notion of artificial intelligence or thinking machines. On the contrary, the imagery generated by the machines is a profoundly human problem:

> I hasten to assure you that I'm not making lame vitalist claims that our human reactions are mystical, divine, immaterial, timeless or absolute in truth. I am merely stating, as a stark and demonstrable fact, that our machines have no such reactions. To rely on them to do that for us is fraudulent. (Sterling 2012b)

The real trouble here, as Sterling notes, is that this conceptual framework hinders the development of an aesthetic agenda grounded by the specific material workings of these technologies. More concerningly, as we also observed in the introduction, it obfuscates the political problems perpetuated by these digital and networked systems. These critical comments, in any case, were for the most part lost in the discourse on the new aesthetic that followed his essay, which tended to follow the 'heroic' narrative. If the new aesthetic is 'collectively intelligent', then Sterling's essay

worked to propane-fuel this intellectual discourse.

The new aesthetic inevitably raised questions around its novelty, historicity, ontological basis, gender bias, politics. Here, a central concern was the 'new' in the new aesthetic itself, what does 'newness' refer? Marius Watz, writing on the *Creator's Project* in a series of responses to Sterling's essay, argued the case that this aspect was deceptive, "most of what NA offers up for examination is not all that new. Technologies like machine vision and geo-location are old by most standards" (2012b). In his reading, a sense of everyday practices and the ubiquity of digital and networked systems were claimed as distinctive instead: "what is new is their integration into our lives to the point where we are bringing them to bed" (2012b).

Moreover, if aesthetics can be taken as a sensibility related to a transition in the pervasiveness of computation, then this experience is one that is equally wraught by anxieties or disturbances. As Watz puts it,

> This is the new Aesthetic - human behavior augmented by technology as often as it is disrupted. The New Aesthetic is a sign saying 'Translation Server Error' rather than 'Post Office'. The New Aesthetic is faces glowing ominously as people walk down the street at night staring at their phones - or worse, their iPads (Watz 2012b).

Indeed, disruption and augmentation can even be generalized beyond this phenomenological state, given increasing transformations associated with software infrastructures throughout everyday life (Dodge and Kitchin 2011), and the pressures they have brought to bear on institutional forms (Lovink 2012). In other words, if there is a sensibility, it becomes one of experiencing the large-scale 'breakdown' carried along by socio-technological processes at large.

In the recognition of this shifting ground, a number of reactionary responses immediately arose regarding the relation between media art and this wider condition signalled by the new aesthetic. In this context, Mez Breeze, a practioner of code poetry and artist involved in early net.art, raised concerns regarding the appropriative dynamics of new aesthetics in its role as an aggregative litany of digital images. Using the term, 'The Phrase That Shall Not Be Named', the specific act of labelling work was criticized as an act of assembling cultural capital, 'cred value', 'ego aggrandrisement', or cultural capital capable of being monetized: "name the new art phase in order to perform/get x" (2012).

This process was understood as raising a series of questions around cultural ownership and attribution: "to employ a relevant phrase: it just smells wrong" (2012). Indeed, for Breeze, the 'faux-trendoid label' problematically grouped together a series of practices, techniques and approaches to digital and networked technologies that had much longer histories and were related to competing conceptual frameworks and discourses: "appropriating + remixing graphic markers/standards from marginalised or 'other-fied' disciplines/decades does not a new genre/paradigm make" (2012). Her position raises important questions around both the histories and immediate future of media art practices. Nevertheless, gesturing to the dynamics of concept generation in network cultures ("and so it goes"), she would conclude with the highly pious note: "this too will pass" (2012).

But how satisfying is this familiar claim that media art is playing a long game, so that any emerging developments can merely be ignored, and business can continue as usual? Certainly, the traditional resources and funding that have supported media art are quickly evaporating or, at least, they are increasingly held in question; but there is also a larger ongoing question of the role of these artistic practices in a period of pervasive computation. In a provocative set of secondary remarks on the topic, effectively rubbing salt into the wound, Sterling declared on his blog,

> It may be, that after a long generation of 'New Media,' 'computer art,' 'digital art,' 'device art,' 'net.art,' 'code art,' and similar always-new pseudonyms, we've found a better perspective. We've paid a bill in blood and struggle, and a generational shift has occurred. It's like watching a generation slog it out in the muddy barbed wire, and then seeing a drone appear overhead … The barbed-wire and bayonet era of net-art is over. It is one with Ypres and Verdun now, and its trenches will fill in with grass. It will never return. (Sterling 2012c)

Such commentary strategically disregarded any distinction between the design context of Bridle and media art practices for the purposes of pursuing an agenda of algorithmic art.

Elsewhere, the cultural politics of curatorial work was a major strand in this discussion. Christiane Paul posted on the empyre mailing list,

> I have a hard time even seeing the novelty of the 'new aesthetic' construct - as many people on CRUMB have pointed out, it stands in the tradition of many strands of artistic practice that have developed over decades. CTheory or Turbulence have certainly established a lot more (curatorial) context for approaching digital works than the 'new aesthetic' tumblr. Tumblr itself, with its focus on the latest post, seems to have decontextualizing tendencies.
>
> On a larger scale and along the lines of Nicholas Carr's The Shallows, I'm interested in how the online environment, which seems so deeply contextual by nature, can also obliterate context through the privileging of 'the latest post' rather than a dialogue and "deep" crosslinking of ideas. (Paul 2012)

Meanwhile, in a highly conservative response to the term, Robert Jackson drew a line between Bridle's 'low' social media and 'high' media art practices, noting "the triteness of using Tumblr as the 'official site'" (2012). Immediately evident in the title of his contribution, 'The Banality of the New Aesthetic', Jackson stated explicitly: "memes require instant satisfaction. Art requires depth" (2012).

More radical enthusiasm about the New Aesthetic came from Greg Borenstein, who suggested that when viewed through Object Oriented Ontology (OOO), the New Aesthetic is a "visible eruption of the mutual empathy between us and a class of new objects that are native to the 21st century" (2012). The New Aesthetic, in this case, can supposedly "help us imagine the inner lives of our digital objects" picking up on the

"pigeon language" that takes place "between their inaccessible inner lives and ours" (2012). Like Bridle, Borenstein is enamoured with how such artifacts capture "the trace of interaction designers, surveillance drones, gesture recognition systems, fashion designers, image compression techniques, artists, CCTV networks, and filmmakers all wondering about one another without getting confirmation" (2012).

This line of thought was continued by games designer and theorist Ian Bogost, who argued that the new aesthetic should expand its apparent "correlationalist" interest in human relations and embrace the possibilities of an expansive more-than-human ontology: "to my eyes, the New Aesthetic could use a dose of good, old-fashioned twentieth century immodesty. Not naïve fascism or impulsive radicalism, but bigger eyes, larger hopes, weirder goals" (2012). Drawing from the object-oriented ontology position outlined in his recently published book *Alien Phenomenology* (2012), Bogost's intervention argued on the terms of OOO for a consideration of relations between things, rather than an exclusive interest in digital and networked technologies and human sense and perception, or anthropocentric categories of beauty – for an *alien aesthetics*, as it were. This, he suggested, points to the fact that NA only covers a selective interest in the vast metaphysical dimensions of the real, a point conveyed through a (Latourian) litany of other potential things to consider aesthetic relations between: "airports, sandstone, koalas, climate, toaster pastries, kudzu, the International 505 racing dinghy, the Boeing 787 Dreamliner, the brand name 'TaB'" (2012). Suffice to say, OOO is interesting and raises significant controversies, but here we are not interested in producing litanies, and hold concerns regarding the politics of the OOO project (Berry 2012; Galloway 2012; Golumbia 2012, Parikka 2011). Indeed, this is a significant and contested discussion, only tangential to this *New Aesthetic, New Anxieties* project, and therefore, perhaps, a topic for another time.

If the New Aesthetic hit the blogosphere as a shareable concept or theory object, it took some time for female responders to point out that the zeitgeist was the investments of "a whole lot of men doing the looking, talking, and writing about the New Aesthetic" (Aim 2012a). While women artists and curators contributed art historical perspective, including Joanne McNeil of Rhizome.org (2012), and Mez Breeze analyzed the gendered heroics of its claim to art movement status, Rahel Aima and Madeline Ashby, respectively writer and futurist gave a basic instruction in 70's psychoanalytic feminist screen theory. In her blog post at *The State*, entitled 'Curation, Gender and the New Aesthetic', Aima awkwardly suggested that the attraction of the New Aesthetic might lie in the possibility to "briefly inhabit a (conventionally) feminised subjectivity?" (2012b). In her words,

> The New Aesthetic is about being looked at by humans and by machines — by drones, surveillance cameras, people tagging you on Facebook — about being the object of the gaze. It's about looking through the eyes of a machine and seeing the machine turn its beady LEDs on you. It's about the dissolution of privacy and reproductive rights, and the monitoring, mapping, and surveillance of the (re)gendered (re)racialised body, and building our own super-pervasive panopticon. (Aima 2012)

Ashby went further, rebooting Laura Mulvey's seminal destruction of Hollywood

objects to point out that what was being celebrated and sentimentalized by the New Aesthetic were fairly normative investments in the (en)gendering of control and domination. This seemed like a rather ordinary, age-old aesthetic of "everyday (women's) life",

> That spirit of performativity you have about your citizenship, now? That sense that someone's peering over your shoulder, watching everything you do and say and think and choose? That feeling of being observed? It's not a new facet of life in the twenty-first century. It's what it feels like for a girl. (Ashbery 2012)

From here, more general reflections were made on the psycho-dynamics in screen power, and the lack of attention to the ontological and historical differences carried along by the New Aesthetic itself:

> The fact that it's a conversation between artists and the forces observing them is nothing new. We've been through this before. We used to design cathedrals so grand God had to notice. Now we print the pattern of faded denim jeans on linen pants so cleverly the Internet has to notice. We crochet masks so facial recognition-enabled cameras won't notice… Someone has always been watching. (Ashbery 2012)

Significantly, these perspectives suggests that the New Aesthetic not only sentimentalizes surveillance, but much more uncannily, extends or projects phallocentric screen relations onto the actuality of things. Of course current feminist approaches to the cinematic gaze are more nuanced that Mulvey's radical and polemical reduction. Spectator identifications, whether in the cinema or across multiple forms and kinds of screens are not so clean cut. It could easily be argued though that the resort to her work somehow mirrors the reductive assumptions of identification in the New Aesthetic itself. But furthermore, identification is less helpful in theory than attention to drives, attachments, habits, and especially, logics, when dealing with new media. The New Aesthetic takes place in a post-cinematic moment, a computational moment, as we will argue in this book. We need to take media far more seriously in considerations of political questions. If the notion of the gaze is significant, then it emerges from how the New Aesthetic marks out its strangeness *in media* and as a theory object. Here we draw on (not only) feminist contributions to suggest that the New Aesthetic's projective attunement speaks not to a romance not with God or the internet, but with the bemusing inhumanity of media power.

NET EFFECTS

The new aesthetic episode, and the set of reactions it spawned, reveals what can happen when an open sketchbook of ideas and experiment in transparent research is conducted in our current network culture. In a post to the CRUMB list, Honor Harger captured a sense of the more tragic outcomes of the debate with some sober reflections. She highlighted, in particular, her dismay at the extreme reactions to Bridle's Tumblr, especially the 'sneering insults' of his work. By contrast, she insists, that this project was never a 'movement', but a personal project. It was never concerned with media art practice, and judging it within those terms is at best 'pointless', at worst, 'unfair',

> That someone's research project, undertaken in the open and transparently, has gone so ballistic, so quickly, and with so little input or comment from it's author, is a sign of our times, I guess. It doesn't speak well of the future of open, intuitive, long-form modes of public research, that's for sure. (Hoger 2012)

Clearly, net discourse currently unfolds with a degree of carelessness, a kind of terminal case of blindness and incomprehension. This alone should make us take pause.

Indeed, we might wonder the extent to which this outpouring was provoked by and aimed at Sterling's post, an essay loaded with high praise, polemics and provocations (but forgotten criticisms). There are some significant concerns here. How can a new generation experiment and develop within a network culture characterised by such intensity, but also competing interests, investments and agendas? The new aesthetic might offer a topos or a common, but this space is rife with conflict. Various accusations that Bridle presented a set of half-baked arguments that cannot withstand rigorous analysis is somehow as obvious as it is irrelevant. Coherent theses or complete philosophies are not usually presented in the shape of single-serving Tumblr. But testing an idea and contrasting it with other contributors to add to it and open it up to external input is an important aspect of network culture that should be supported. Work in process needs to be taken as such, and as Christopher 'm00t' Poole might put, we need to maintain spaces where people are free to make mistakes (2010).

Discussing the recently published book *Imagery in the 21st Century* (2012) in a post to the iDC list, Trebor Scholz,

> At first, I asked myself, what holds the twenty chapters in this book together. What do all the puzzle pieces add up to? An analysis of contemporary imagery felt like an uncomfortably all-embracing ambition. What are we talking about when we are thinking about contemporary visuality? The advent of infographics, games, CCTV, animated gifs, art generated by algorithms, histograms, 4D visualizations, or Instagram? Constructively, the authors reflect on imagery not merely through the lens of a specific device, genre, social practice, or social function, and it becomes clear that image literacy can no longer be the exclusive domain of art historians. But are we really, as the

book suggests, amidst an image revolution? … What, then, is so subversive or new, a Tumblr image collection might help to answer. (Schulz 2012)

While acknowledging the significance of the New Aesthetic Tumblr to convey a different sense of visual knowledge, Schulz expands his analysis to consider a call for new literacies for analysis, intepretation and critical reflection. This is something crucial that we support, something that we want to develop throughout what follows.

Opening up a space of discussion in the public sphere about a new way of looking at the world is not something that happens very often. When it did, that window of opportunity was not a result of the efforts of hundreds of researchers in the higher education sector - it happened because a group of designers in London that make witty blog posts and do keynote presentations in creative industries conferences, somehow caught the imagination of an audience. Even if the thesis was somehow confused and confusing, this amalgam of pixelated nostalgia, drones and computer vision stood for something strongly enough that people would be willing to listen.

So while some academics will just point at the capacity of talented designers to frame a (possibly flawed) idea in a catchy way and dress it up with interesting images, other thinkers and researchers in the New Media community will confess they only have themselves to blame for their incapacity to make their work resonate out of their sphere of influence.

It would be risky to make assumptions, but Bridle's sudden decision to close the New Aesthetic Tumblr on May 6th this year feels like his response to the debate sparked by his ideas; one more sign of discomfort. And although he achieved a nice symmetry by terminating the site exactly one year to the day it was first opened, a feeling of incompleteness looms over the whole enterprise. His ambiguity about the future of the New Aesthetic - "The project will continue in other forms and venues" (2012b) - doesn't offer the promise of a clear deliverable. The products, for now, remain unknown.

CURATORIAL READINGS

5. A BLOGPOST AS EXHIBITION
6. COLLECT, REMIX, CONTRIBUTE -> CURATE?
7. ERROR 404: NO AESTHETIC FOUND

5. A BLOGPOST AS EXHIBITION

The contemporary obsession with novelty is an obsession of high capitalist consumerism: we need to own the newest tech gadget, dress ourselves in the latest fashion, enjoy the freshest foraged ingredients for the new thing in molecular dining experiences, and continuously and persistently come up with new exciting ideas to market ourselves and our jobs. As communications guru Marshall McLuhan said in one of his numerous probes, "At the very high speed of living, everybody needs a new career and a new job and a totally new personality every ten years" (McLuhan 2002: 114-115).

'New' is both trendy and trending, 'new' is youthful, 'new' surprises us, 'new' is the varnish elaborately used to shine up that what is already there, what has been lying around in the bottom of the drawer collecting dust and what no one paid attention to… until it becomes the latest 'new' thing. Perhaps 'new' is to modes of consumption what 'radical' has been to contemporary art over the past few decades. 'New' as a term in contemporary art is used sparingly however, as 'new' indicates a highly significant breaking point. In past decades contemporary art and art theory have tended to build more on palimpsestic models, which allow for a layering of conceptual and theoretical influences by predecessors and peers. Contemporary art therefore prefers to use the term 'turn', which is milder and allows for baggage to be included and schlepped along.

The 'new' comes into art in a different way, in the sense that art makes us see things 'anew' and defamiliarises our perception of things. In his original blog post on 'The New Aesthetic' of May 6th 2011 on the Really Interesting Group website Bridle intends to make us "see the technologies we have with new wonder" (2012a). In other words, Bridle is employing a tested curatorial strategy of selecting images in order to have that very collection produce a different way of looking – he wants us to see with 'new' eyes, as it were. So let us treat Bridle's original post as curated exhibition space, a curatorial project which attempts to unearth something about contemporary visual perception and image production.

Blog posts are rigid exhibition platforms: they are unforgivingly linear, so that the sequence of images – whether intended or not – has to be read according to a certain hierarchy. Bridle's New Aesthetic blog kicks off with a NASA satellite image of an agricultural landscape (2012a). We see an abstract painterly composition, consisting *de facto* of a rocky land formation with a pixelated green pattern. The origin of this image does not seem to be of great importance, as its biography is summarised in a minimal hyperlinked caption as "Guardian gallery of agricultural landscapes from space". What matters though, is the visual impact of this image. Its natural rough and organic textures mix with unworldly patches of green, as if the latter were photoshopped into the image. The caption suggests that what we are looking at is real, but whether this image is real or fake is probably besides the point. What Bridle wants us to see in this image, it appears, is its seemingly digital aesthetic. How this image was produced however, by means of satellite technology, is not revealed in what we see. Bridle seems to have selected the image because its graphics suggest a pixillated version of a landscape. The technological properties that are foregrounded in

the image are those that can be discerned on a surface level; the technologies related to its graphical iteration are not those that concern its creation.

In addition, we only recognise this image as beautiful, and perhaps strangely alienating, because of its framing and conditioning as an aesthetic image. It is this framing of the image that trigger its visual and art historical references, such as for example aerial photography and land art. What is also interesting about this image is that it 'works' by grace of its technological mediation: The image is captured from a huge distance by satellite, a perspective that is foreign to us and by corollary is capable of conjuring up an imagery that is visually and conceptually intriguing. If we would be walking in the landscape we would not experience the same visual impact, as we would recognise our surroundings as known and ordinary. Here Bridle has put forward a pure surface image. Its referent in the real is of no consequence for our aesthetic appreciation of it. In that sense, this image can be perceived as a hermetic – whether we place it online as a jpg or print it out and hang it on the wall. Its ontology remains the same, only its scale and mode of presentation might change.

It is all the more curious then, that Bridle's last image posted on the blog – closing the series of his exhibition, as it were - is photo documentation of British sculptor Cornelia Parker's work *Embryo Firearms* (1995). Parker is well-known for probing and stretching the possibilities of the materials she works with. She destroys and explodes matter to push it into a new form, or resuscitates discarded materials into new lives. Her work has been described as 'brutal beauty or sweet carnage' (Hattenstone 2010). Much of Parker's work is ephemeral and site-specific, it is always spatially embodied and ranges from pulverised sculptural particles to giant shotguns. The materiality of things – where it begins and where it ends – is what Parker is interested in.

Why would Bridle choose to include Parkers' piece consisting of a pair of cast steel Colt 45 guns in their earliest stage of production? There is no pixel fetishism or other digital-sensibilities-penetrating-physical-surroundings that characterise the other images in the selection. Instead, the objects are guns coming into being, halted in their development and therefore never fully functional, perfectly polished and facing each other as if mirrored. They are commodities that are not yet socially engaged. What is compelling here about Parker's colts is that they capture the promise of a product, a Colt 45. But more specifically, the work is a referent, a gun, and the physical object proper into one. This, indeed, makes us see things anew, as the promise of the New Aesthetic goes and is hardly a strategy unknown to conceptual art. But what is interesting about the references to conceptual art work on Bridle's blog is that conceptual art, like the New Aesthetic, has paid similar heightened attention to publicity regimes, the relationship between art, image and matter as an investment in the actual experience of the work (see Alberro 2003).

The acknowledgement of art objects as commodities and things that have perceptual, semiotic and material impact, together, is set out for example in Brian Jungen's recent conceptual art practice. His work consciously toys with the complexity of the relation between raw material, the pure commodity and the commodity-object of art. Jungen uses plastic chairs to construct whale skeletons or Nike sneakers to make tribal masks. His practice is all about what Jessica Morgan calls "misplaced use value" (Morgan 2006): his objects are mass-produced consumer items, but also singular art

objects that keep a referent outside the sphere of art. Jungen's objects, like Parker's guns, are hyphenated and accumulative objects and are always-already literate in the strange sociality of things.

In 'The fetishism of commodities and the secret thereof', Marx shows how commodities seem to capture social relations in their very essence:

> A commodity appears, a first sight, a very trivial thing, and easily understood. Its analysis shows that it is, in reality, a very queer thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties. So far as it is a value in use, there is nothing mysterious about it, whether we consider it from the point of view that by its properties it is capable of satisfying human wants, or from the point that those properties are the product of human labor. It is as clear as noonday that man, by his industry, changes the forms of the materials furnished by Nature, in such a way as to make them useful to him. The form of wood for instance, is altered by making a table out of it. Yet, for all that, the table continues to be that common, everyday thing, wood. But, so soon as it steps forth as a commodity, it is changed into something transcendent. It not only stands with its feet on the ground, but, in relation to all other commodities, it stands on its head, and evolves out of its wooden brain grotesque ideas, far more wonderful than "table-turning" ever was. (2007: 83)

It is this uncanniness that art works exacerbate and that curators choose *how* to deal with critically (this decision not fixed in advance) quite differently to designers, especially in display decisions. Design tends towards flatter dynamics of utility, beauty and branding that seem still able to travel well once the object is turned into a representation only. Whether the commodification process collapses into a flat representation online, or is halted, such as in Bridle's mood board or Parker's guns captured by it, the different suspensions of this drama accentuate the commodity status of the thing, fixed into surface. Critical artists differently take account of these uncanny dynamics of commodification in their individual works. Unlike the first image in Bridle's collection, the photo of the art work *Embryo Firearms* cannot be reduced to a flat image since the artwork actually physically exists, or "stands on the ground" in Marx's terms (2007: 83). Its documentation on a webpage works on a different visual and interpretative register than the physical object itself. Here it *does* matter whether you are looking at a jpg file on the screen or encountering *Embryo Firearms* spatially, because the difference creates very different perceptions of aesthetic encounter in the viewer. Indeed there is limited to no "encounter" with *Embryo Firearms* upon flattening. The conditions of presentation (e.g., gallery, museum, or studio) and how the work is contextualised, installed and framed in relation to its surroundings alters our reading and experience of the work. To stage it in space is to take in to account the embodied and perceptual experience of its imaging and how it impresses on the body as a proximate material-semiotic thing.

In contrast to the first image in Bridle's collection, which seems to be able to exist solely on the webpage because it is already a transcendental commodity, *Embryo Firearms* as documentation therefore feels like it is floating in space, excised from a larger picture, decontextualized, and even bulky in comparison with the other images,

which radiate a lightness of form, even those that depict images of fighter planes. *Embryo Firearms* can never inhabit that lightness because it identifies itself *prima facie* as a an object installed in space and time and human-scaled relation, whilst the satellite image does not. Even though aesthetically we can read the documentation of *Embryo Firearms* as an image of art, it lacks the objectness that was precisely the inquiry of the work. So why was it taken up in the collection, and why does it even close the series? Well, because for the New Aesthetic, the idea is that softwarized material strives flatly in the direction of transcendental commodity status, *even when it doesn't get there.* On the "mood-board for unknown products" (Bridle 2012a) Parker's guns are unable to be truly staged as queer vascillations of metaphysical and theological, natural and artificial, materials and labour.

6. COLLECT, REMIX, CONTRIBUTE -> CURATE?

Remixing and collaging elements found on the Web has been a part of net art since its inception in the 1990s. Early works such as MTAA's *Ten Digital Readymades* (2000), created by entering the term 'ready made' into a search engine and archiving those search results, exemplified the sense that material on the web offers rich fodder for artists to develop work, with or without heavy subsequent alteration by artists (Kasprzak 2009). A few years later, comparable collections -or 'flea markets of images' (Ramocki 2008) - became widely available on the web due to the growth of uploaded content and sharing media online, as well as the ongoing evolution of search engines. Those factors, coupled with simple website development becoming an increasingly rapid and easy process, has produced conditions for creative expression that ranges from 'surf clubs', group blogs where artists share the fruit of their Web surfing and fragments of their art practices, to image collecting on the pinboard-style photo sharing platform Pinterest. What is interesting about *Ten Digital Readymades*, however, and the link it sets up between Duchamp and process, is how computation actually serves to reinvigorate our understanding of the radical aspects of the readymade concept.

In an essay by Matthew Fuller, reviewing net art practices that used appropriation and remixing before the advent of social web-phenomena such as surf clubs, Tumblr, and Pinterest, he states:

> Firstly, each piece of work is not especially apart from the other works by the artist or groups that produced it - it is part of a practice. Secondly, each work is assembled out of parts that belong to a collectively available resource. So this again, is something set aside from the standard issue art modes, unique visions, talented individuals and all the rest of it. It is the power to connect. (Fuller 2001)

Putting Fuller's quote into context, he seems to support the idea that assembling something out of parts that 'belong to a collectively available resource' provides a more or less direct lineage from the earliest Dadaists collage art, to net art, to surf clubs, to Tumblr, and to Pinterest. Fuller's assertion is that this kind of online bricolage brings us out of 'standard issue art modes' confronts the perennial battle between low and high culture, i.e., between the talented artists and the hopeless amateurs, since anyone can access the collective resource online, appropriate things, remix them and start collections. The establishment side is represented in Guardian blogger Stephen Moss's assertions that "the great majority of popular culture in the UK is worthless, moronic, meretricious, self-serving, anti-democratic, sclerotic garbage: it's the enemy of thought and change: it should be ignored, marginalised, trashed" (2007). Of course, we would not deny malaise just to creative industrial pop, but we need to acknowledge, regardless, that the lines between the production of professional cultural workers (and commentators) and creative work produced in more economized modes have been more complex and blurred for some time.

We want to emphasize that curating and collecting are not the same, though some might argue from that premise. One can collect stamps, miniature trains, and art, but curating implies a public gesture and a subject position that frames the collection and

intends to produce connections between the collected items. In other words, curation is interested in producing meanings that push the collection to be more than the sum of its parts. It calls for a positioning – be that aesthetic, thematic, technological, political or otherwise. One could argue then that collective spaces like Tumblr and Pinterest are curated spaces because they are public and – to a certain extent – themed. However, do these image collections in their openness and volume tell us more about the images we are viewing, or are they just producing more of the same? Curating, any curator will grudgingly admit, is seldom democratic, it is based on selection, and selection is never inclusive by default. The phenomenon of online collection as it relates to curating is described at length in *For What and For Whom?*,

> The larger role of the curator encompasses the creation of links to other creative dialogues, writing and contextualising work, developing the physical (or virtual) exhibition sequencing and flow, and perhaps most important of all, nurturing a relationship with the practitioners who make the work and understanding the narrative inherent in their career trajectory. (Or, in the case of those who work with historical collections, having a scholarly background on the movements/time periods/artists represented in these collections). What can and will be lost in the reduction of the term curator to mean one who clicks on a thumbs-up or thumbs-down icon is that sense of for what and for whom. (Kasprzak 2008)

There have been attempts at open online curating. For example, the open source software application KURATOR by programmer Grzesiek Sedek and curator Joasia Krysa (2004), which merges a platform for source code (as art), with an open and collaborative curatorial platform:

> Designed as free software that can be further modified by users, kurator follows the structures and protocols of conventional curating and implements a series of algorithmic processes that partly automates these procedures. It translates curatorial protocols into modular software protocols, breaking down the curatorial process into a series of commands or rules. The software opens up the curatorial process to the public by offering a system that is open to user input — in terms of submitting examples of source code, arranging displays, commenting on these, adding functionality and modifications to the software itself. (KURATOR 2012)

Users can add code to the repository, tag it, browse other contributor's comments and submissions. In that respect its dynamics resemble more that of a social networking space or a database than a curatorial space. Marina Vishmidt comments in her rhizome post on Kurator that it,

> Posits 'software curating' as a way to distribute curatorial process over networks of people, including artists and others, and finally outwards from the special domain of an individual. It further combats the reification of taste by partially automating many of the traditional metiers that distinguish the curator - selectivity being one. (Vishmidt 2005)

We must ask, though, can the attribution of meaning and criticality be automated?

Can this job be done at all by a machine? And can open source models just be copy-pasted and applied to curatorial practices? Where do we locate its criticality if any? These are questions that must be considered when we investigate online image collecting and moving curatorial techniques to the online realm. They will not answer themselves, nor go away anytime soon. We should encourage further experimentation, artistic research and theorization of these topics.

7. ERROR 404: NO AESTHETIC FOUND

At the core of new media art is the question of how culture is embracing digital technology. Representing digital artefacts and online behaviours in the physical world is a recognized artistic strategy among new media artists to address this question (for an example, Bartholl 2012). Although many new media artworks are part of or comment on the "eruption of the digital into the physical" (Sterling 2012) that the New Aesthetic speaks to, we have been challenged to think why many of them would be out of place posted on the New Aesthetic Tumblr or grouped as part of that meme.

THE REPRESENTATION PROBLEM

The New Aesthetic meme lives online (Bridle 2012a, 2012b), which by default means that any physical thing or event it embraces is by definition a digital representation of that thing or event. This is problematic for an artwork that is conceptually grounded in the fact that it is *physical,* taking place in three dimensional space and time. This includes many new media artworks that formally fall under the New Aesthetic. Take Aram Bartholl's artwork *Maps* (2006-2010) for example, posted on the New Aesthetic Tumblr on June 2, 2011. In *Maps* Bartholl places actual-size Google balloons in public spaces to investigate the aesthetic of "the red map marker of the location based search engine Google Maps" (Bartholl 2006). Clearly, it is the sheer overwhelming impact of a larger-than-human-sized Google Maps balloon that communicates the awkward relative measurements of digital artefacts that we seem to accept without question in the digital realm. This awkwardness only really becomes apparent however when one physically encounters such an 'out-of-proportion' Google balloon. By documenting and posting such an encounter on a Tumblr, the Google Maps balloon is re-introduced into the digital realm in which its proportions are commonly accepted, which consequently radically decreases the artwork's communicative power.

Even better examples of this 'representation problem' for new media artworks in the light of the New Aesthetic exist outside of the New Aesthetics Tumblr. Take Aram Bartholl's *Dead Drops* (2010-2012) project for instance, "an anonymous, offline, peer to peer file-sharing network in public space" (Bartholl 2010). The file-sharing network exists of USB flash drives 'embedded into walls, buildings and curbs accessible to anybody in public space' and on which everyone is invited to drop or find files (*ibid.*). The *Dead Drops* concept can undeniably be communicated through photo or video documentation, but the artwork itself can not. The artwork consists of physically standing outside in the street with ones laptop pushed against a wall mounting the USB drive while receiving suspicious looks of passers-by as one drops files or picks them up. It is this embodied experience imposed by the materiality of a dead drop that makes a user think 'Is this legal?', 'Do I owe somebody copyright?', or 'Are the lyrics to this song perhaps too explicit?' In other words, it's the fact that *Dead Drops* materializes file sharing in our daily urban environment that confronts us with the ethics of online file sharing, which moreover happens anonymously and users consequently feel less accountable for their actions.

Similarly, performative projects that (by definition) belong to the realm of the New Aesthetic suffer this 'representation problem'. *Topshot Helmet* (2006/2007) by Julius von Bismarck for instance, recreates the bird's eye (or 'topshot') perspective that is common in the digital realm, for instance in video games or online navigation applications such as Google Maps. It recreates this perspective by means of a head-mounted display that depicts live video from a camera floating above the user's head pointing downward. The artwork comments on the unnatural perspective that this bird's eye view is to humans - it's even hard to navigate an empty room with the *Topshot Helmet* on. More important, it conveys this reflection on the bird's eye perspective common in the digital realm through the physical experience of this perspective. *Topshot Helmet,* the artwork, *is* the embodied experience of the 'topshot'. Any form of online documentation of the artwork is mere representation of the actual work; something that might convey the idea behind the artwork but not do justice to the artwork itself.

For many posts on the New Aesthetic Tumblr, the fact that Tumblr only allows for representations of projects in the physical world is not at all problematic. A glitch design is a glitch design when captured in the photograph of a billboard or flyer. Similarly, a military vehicle with pixel-like camouflage does not transform its meaning so much in the documentation of the vehicle; it is already a surface print afterall. Many artworks that represent digital artefacts and behaviours in the offline world (and hence thus by definition belong to the 'New Aesthetic'), however *do* reference strongly differentiated experienced in the physical world. For this reason, artworks such as *Dead Drops* and *Topshot Helmet* sit uncomfortably under the New Aesthetic meme. The meme lives online, while these artworks live in the world, are conceptually grounded in their materiality, and convey their concepts and material-semiotic negotiations through embodied experiences.

BEYOND THE PIXEL SCULPTURE

Many of the posts on the New Aesthetic Tumblr are relatively straightforward physical renditions of a digital aesthetic. Take the many pixel sculptures for example that feature on the New Aesthetic Tumblr and those that appear in the lectures that followed it. They seem to say not much more than something in the vein of "We look perfectly normal on a computer screen, so what are you looking at?!" Besides perhaps provoking awareness regarding the low resolution of the digital realm in comparison to the world offline, these sculptures do not really affect our view on pixels, and it's safe to say that pixel sculptures do not influence our behaviour when we engage with pixels. Many artworks that by definition would qualify as belonging to the New Aesthetic however do much more than that. We might ask why it is exactly those works, that aim to affect our views and influence our behaviour, that seem to be missing in the New Aesthetic discourse. Take *Domestic Tension* (2007) by Wafaa Bilal for instance, a perfect exemplar of a 'native product of modern network culture' (Sterling 2012), but never discussed in the light of the New Aesthetic.

> In DOMESTIC TENSION, viewers can log onto the internet to contact or "shoot"
> Bilal with paintball guns. Bilal's objective is to raise awareness of virtual war and

privacy, or lack thereof, in the digital age. During the course of the exhibition, Bilal will confine himself to the gallery space. Over the duration, people will have 24-hour virtual access to the space via the Internet. They will have the ability to watch Bilal and interact with him through a live web-cam and chat room. Should they choose to do so, viewers will also have the option to shoot Bilal with a paintball gun, transforming the virtual experience into a very physical one. Bilal's self imposed confinement is designed to raise awareness about the life of the Iraqi people and the home confinement they face due to the both the violent and the virtual war they face on a daily basis. This sensational approach to the war is meant to engage people who may not be willing to engage in political dialogue through conventional means. DOMESTIC TENSION will depict the suffering of war not through human displays of dramatic emotion, but rather through engaging people in the sort of playful interactive video game with which they are familiar. (Bilal 2007)

Just as pixel sculptures do, *Domestic Tension* takes a digital phenomenon of affective experience and networked mediation into the physical: the opportunity to shoot an (often anonymous) person that could be on the other side of the world; a principle at the heart of any online first-person shooter game. Would *Domestic Tension* however sit comfortably next to a pixel sculpture in the New Aesthetic conceptual container? Arguably it wouldn't. *Domestic Tension* is much more than a physical rendition of a digital aesthetic; it has a politics of affective experience and embodied encounter that aims to affect political sensibilities and influence behaviour. Pixel sculptures rather lack such aims. This fundamental difference between a politically engaged new media artwork and a pixel sculpture seems marked and symptomatic for the New Aesthetic; the New Aesthetic claims a status as an emergent aesthetic, but does not really aspire to any sort of active or emergent impact. While it makes claims about the reality of the present, it does not wish to politically affect views or induce behavioural changes in that reality, like art commonly does. It merely documents and collects.

How can an aesthetic that is concerned with "how culture is embracing the tools of today" (McNeil 2012) be this far removed from the material situations in which these tools operate and seemingly steer clear of their political implications? The so-called New Aesthetic's elision of embodied experiences and *of* digitality beyond surface, is an elision of position taking *through* asethetics and of art's investment in behavioural changes. It's exemplars would bear a striking resemblance to contemporary art using new media technology if it's concept were actually politicized (see Tribe and Jana 2006). But it doesn't seem designed to do that. Perhaps this is why it features so many weak experiments with new media art's toolset? Could the New Aesthetic simply be a poor attempt at curating new media art online? If so, its style is far from new and merely borrows from evolutions and throughout the history of new media art, evolutions which have been widely discussed for some years (see, e.g., Manovich 2001; Fuller 2005; Munster 2006; Bosma 2011; Brouwer, Mulder and Spuybroek 2012). Introducing a New Aesthetic that speaks to the "eruption of the digital into the physical" (Sterling 2012), but that does not account for embodied experiences, steers away from this eruption's contextual dimensions and political implications. It is like buying a domain name, but not knowing how to build a website. Sometimes when one receives a 404 error, it's not worth taking a screenshot of it and posting on a Tumblr

like *Screenshots of Despair*. Without some analysis or comprehension of these material and technical process of mediation, there is no aesthetic there.

IRRUPTIONS

8. THE NEW AESTHETIC AS REPRESENTATION

This chapter will look at the common conception of the new aesthetic as a form of *mere* representation, and particularly how, so far, the New Aesthetic has been presented as screenic images. It will point to the importance of the medium in understanding both the new aesthetic as collected on Tumblr as well as the wider question of how it is understood through this mediation. We constantly require attentiveness with such a surface reading, as it entails a kind of flattening of the digital. A flattening which may, or may not, have a presumed indexicality, such as time, place and subject. We might also want to think about the metadata implications for a digitally constructed indexicality provided by geolocation, technical specs, and so forth embedded in the image. We can also not only stay at the level of the screen, thereby avoiding and/or perpetuating screen essentialism. Furthermore, we have to wrestle with questions regarding the computational while still having a tendency to lean on poor (representational) tools to do so.

It is interesting to note that a feature/bug of computational systems is sometimes thought to be due to the immaturity of the disciplines and methods, but after 40 years of writing code/software we still suffer from the same problems – namely its complexity and our lack of metaphorical language to describe it. Whether inscribed within a model of procedual, functional or object-oriented structure, code is usually bigger than a single human being can understand. Thus, in a running system, and in escaping our comprehension, it inevitably has aporia and liminal areas that mean we cannot truly predict, control or even understand its operation. Whilst here we haven't space to reflect on the radical potentialities this unpredictability and risk that this 'glitch ontology' opens in control societies, it is nonetheless suggestive for political and artistic practice.

The New Aesthetic, then, can be understood as a comportment towards "seeing" computation, responding to it, or merely being correctly attuned to it (in a subsequent chapter this is explored due to its potential for the passification of the user). We might therefore ask what are that the kinds of 'things' that show up as equipment, goals, and identities in this new aesthetic and how they are specific to computationality. As Heidegger argues,

> So it happens that we, lost as we usually are in the activities of observing and establishing, believe we "see" many things and yet do not see what really is. (Heidegger 1995: 60)

Temptations towards showing the images of the new aesthetic as somehow unmediated, particularly in relation to machine, or computer produced images, fetishizes the "thing" whilst also obscuring its mediation. The New Aesthetic, in other words, brings these patterns to the surface, and in doing so articulates a movement towards uncovering the "unseen", the little understood logic of computational society and the anxieties that this introduces. Nonetheless, we should, of course, be alert to the aporias that it thereby introduces.

Without an attentiveness to the layers of software beneath this surface interface we

are in danger of further 'screen essentialism'. In terms of the computational as instantiated within computational devices (or code objects), one of the key aspects is that the surface can remain relatively stable whilst the machinery layer(s) can undergo frenetic and disorienting amounts of change (Berry 2012c). This frantic disorientation at the machinery layer is therefore insulated from the user, who is provided with a surface which can be familiar, skeuomorphic (from the Greek, *skeuos* - vessel or tool, *morphe* - shape), representational, metonymic, figurative or extremely simplistic and domestic. It is important to note that the surface/interface need not be visual, indeed it may be presented as an application programming interface (API) which hides the underlying machinery behind this relatively benign interface.

As discussed in the introduction, the scope and boundary points of the New Aesthetic are currently being drawn, redrawn and contested. This is great: it lives, it is being tracked and experimented with, reworked and so on. But critical attention needs to be paid especially to the New Aesthetic's formal investments in the non-human dimension of the computational, both in terms of a worrying (rather than methodological) decentring of the human, but also its related problem of granting anthropomorphized agency to code.

Indeed, this raises questions about what we might call the "thinginess" of the new aesthetic object more generally. To a large extent this "thinginess" or perhaps the difficulty in engaging with it has been obscured due to an over-reliance on images to represent its sets of new aesthetic "things" that purport to be in the world. This mere pointing to materiality (even screenic images are material in an important sense) and assumes transparent means of communication facilitated by computational commmunicational systems. That is, there appears to be a theory of communication inbuilt into the new aesthetic as shown in its popular registers. We need to take account of this.

THE REPRESENTATION PRACTICES OF THE NEW AESTHETIC

The new aesthetic is deeply influenced by and reliant on patterns and abductive reasoning (Berry 2012a). This is a common thread that links the lists of objects that seem to have nothing more in common than a difficulty to reconcile a tenuous digitality, or a retro attachment towards older forms of digital rendering and reproduction. In actuality it is no surprise that we see a return of 8-bit retro – it could perhaps be described as the abductive aesthetic par excellence, inasmuch as it enables an instant recognition of, and indeed serves as an important representation for, the digital, especially as the digital becomes high-definition and less 'digital' by the day (see Jean 2010). Differently, this is a 'down-sampled' representation of a kind of digital past, or perhaps digital passing, given that the kinds of digital glitches, modes, and forms that are chosen are very much historically located – especially considering that we are moving into a high-definition world of retina displays and high-pixel density experience (for an example, see Huff 2012).

As computation, and by definition its carriers, code and software, increasingly withdraw into the background of our experience, we have increasingly seen this foregrounding of representations of, and for, the digital/computational across art and

design. In some ways, 8-bit images are reassuring and still comprehensible as different from and standing in opposition to the everyday world people inhabit. In other ways, however, the glitchy, retro 8-bit esque look that we see in pixelated works are actually distant from the capabilities of contemporary machines and their 8-bit blocky ontologies provide only limited guidance on the way in which software now organises and formats the our shared, and sharable, world (Berry 2011). So ironically, just as digital technologies and software mediate our experience and engagement with the world, often invisibly, so the 'digital' and 'software' is itself mediated and made visible through the representational forms of pixelation and glitch.

As notions of abduction and related aesthetic styles in art and design become more prevalent it will be interesting to see more exemplars of this form emerge and see how we deal with them. Whilst today we tend to think of the 8-bit pixelation, satellite photos, CCTV images, and the like, it is probable that alternative, more computational forms will probaby take over. Perhaps skeuomorphic images will become increasingly common? Or indeed skeuomorphic representations of older 8-bit technologies (for example enabled by MAME and other emulators) (see MAME 2012). Conceivably, this leads to a form of cognitive dissonance, perpetuating drives to look for pattern aesthetics everywhere. Apophenia, the tendency to see meaningful patterns or connections in random or meaningless data (called a type 1 error in statistics) is definitely playing out in the New Aesthetic in this regard. We might further expect that people are also seeking digital or abductive explanations for arts of other moments, for visual or even non-visual experiences which may not be digital or produced through computational means at all, a digital pareidolia.

Pareidolia involves seeing importance in vague and random phenomenon, for example a face in a random collection of dots on paper. The term 'digital pareidolia' we coin to gesture towards this tendency in the New Aesthetic to see digital causes for things that happen in everyday life. Indeed, under future regimes of computationality it might be considered stranger to believe that things might have non-digital causes. Thus apophenia would be the norm in a highly digital computational society, perhaps even a significant benefit to one's life chances and well-being if finding patterns becomes increasingly lucrative. Here we might consider the growth of computational high-frequency trading and financial systems that are trained and programmed to identify patterns very quickly.

> Software is not only necessary for representation; it is also endemic of transformations in modes of "governing" that make governing both more personal and impersonal, that enable both empowerment and surveillance, and indeed make it difficult to distinguish between the two. (Chun 2011: 58)

When we speak of seeing the grain of computation, or perhaps its 'seams', what do we mean by this and what is being articulated in particular discourses around the representation of the new aesthetic? Here we might note that seeing the grain of computation, is a *merely* representational model of understanding a media form, and although useful in one dimension is unable to capture a range of specific medial aspects and issues that are very important, and to which we now turn.

9. WHAT ARE THE CONDITIONS OF POSSIBILITY FOR THE NEW AESTHETIC?

We want to raise the question about the *conditions of possibility* for the new aesthetic, that is, for the possibility of surfacing the digital through representational and mediational forms. Firstly, let's look at the notion of a form of foundational ontology that informs everyday life and thinking through a notion of computationality. Secondly, we will examine the question of technology, understood here as the specificity of computational technology, and its diffusion as networked, mobile, digital technologies. Creative practices are assumed for the sake of this chapter to be ontic dramas that take place always already within very specific informational, network and political organizations. Whether fine art, non-profit or creative industrial, such ontic activity displays hugely variable degrees of awareness of these conditions. If, as we have argued, the New Aesthetic offered up a way to think about and inhabit a present regime of computationality without explicitly and reflexively taking account of what it is that we attend to, then let us consider the background nature of this computational way-of-being.

COMPUTATIONALITY

In order to move beyond the vagaries of the 'technological sublime', we should begin the theoretical and empirical projects that can create 'cognitive maps' (Jameson 1991). First we should draw attention to basic categories in what we might call informational, or computational societies. This is helpful in enabling us to draw the contours of what is called 'computationality', and in articulating the relationship of this the new aesthetic. As the digital increasingly structures the contemporary world, curiously, it also withdraws; it becomes harder and harder for us to focus upon, as it becomes embedded, hidden, off-shored, or merely forgotten about. Part of the challenge for *citizens* of a regime of computation is to bring the digital (code/software) back into visibility for exploration, research and cultural critique. Of course reflexive media art work, artistic and curatorial, has demonstrated significant and active investments in this.

Computationality is a central, effective, dominant system of meanings and values that are abstract but also organizing and lived. To take account of what computationality is to the New Aesthetic cannot be understood at the level of mere opinion or mere manipulation. It is related to a whole operative body of computational practices and expectations, for example how we assign energy towards particular projects and how we ordinarily understand the 'nature' of humans and the world. The meanings and values that it sets up are experienced as practices which are reciprocally confirming, repeated and predictable, at the same time as being used to describe and understand the world itself. It is possible that software itself is the explanatory form of explanation itself (see Chun 2011).

When the New Aesthetic, alongside similar media art practices, contributes to a sense

of reality, touches a growing sense or suspicion towards the digital, or gives a sense of the limits or even the absolute, this is also because experienced reality beyond everyday life is too difficult for most members of a society to move or understand. What we are dealing with is a heuristic pattern for everyday life – the *parameterization* of our being-in-the-world. An example of parameterization as a kind of default (digital) grammar of everyday life would be say, that mediated through the 140 characters in Twitter or other social media.

Computation in this sense can be considered as an *ontotheology*. A specific *historical* epoch defined by a certain set of computational knowledges, practices, methods and categories. Related to this is a phenomenological experience of *frantic disorientation* caused by, or throught to be contributing to lived experience – which is not incidentally an important marker of the specificity of the New Aesthetic that foregrounds or even renders as normal the loss of control, loss of human importance or the erasure of difference between human and non-human. Therefore new aesthetic registrations of the computational regime involve, in an important sense, an *abductive* aesthetic built on patterning and first order logics, in which computational patterns and pattern recognition become a means of cultural expression.

Patterns are deeply imbricated with computerized recognition, repeated codes, artifacts and structural elements that enable something to be recognised as a type of thing (see Harvey 2011, 2012 for a visualisation of facial pattern recognition). This is not just visual, of course. Patterns may be recognised in data sets, textual archives, data points, distributions, non-visual sensors, physical movement or gestures, haptic forces, and so on. Indeed, this points to the importance of information visualisation as part of an abduction aesthetic in order to 'visualise' the patterns that are hidden in sets of data.

Thus, computationality (as an ontotheology) instantiates a new ontological 'epoch' as a new historical constellation of intelligibility. Code/software is the paradigmatic case of computationality, and presents us with a computational 'objects' which are located at all major junctures of modern society. To view it as an ontotheology enables us to understand the present situation and its collections, networks, or assemblage of 'coded objects' or 'code objects'.

One of the things that the New Aesthetic strongly expresses (which indeed is not that new in fine art or pop culture) is the concept of a 'glitch ontology'. To see the 'eruption of the digital into the physical' (which we understand as 'iruption') everywhere, is to acknowledge glitch as an ontological condition. Heidegger has very interestingly conceptualised the way in which everyday objects come to presence and withdraw from our attention over time, depending on the way in which they are used, which he describes as *Vorhandenheit* (or present-at-hand) and Zuhandenheit (or ready-to-hand). The common example Heidegger uses is that of a hammer, which observed in a detached manner appears as 'present-at-hand', as an object decontextualised before us. In contrast, when used by the carpenter it becomes 'ready-to-hand', that is part of the activity, or making, of the carpenter, no longer noticed as a discrete object.

In contrast to the more subtle shifts in the vision/use of the hammer, computational devices appear to oscillate rapidly between *Vorhandenheit/ Zuhandenheit* (present-

at-hand/ready-to-hand) – this is a glitch ontology. Perhaps even more accurately, computational things are constantly becoming ready-to-hand/unready-to-hand in quick alternation. By quick this can mean happening in microseconds, milliseconds, or seconds, repeatedly in quick succession. The upsetting of seamless user experience through ongoing risks of, and exposure to, glitch, is an ongoing development issue within human-computer design, which sees it as a pressing concern to be 'fixed' or made invisible or seamless to the user (Winograd and Flores 1987). We want to emphasize that this is a concept of 'glitch' that is specific to computation, as opposed to other technical forms (Berry 2011).

Once glitch creates the conspicuousness that breaks the everyday experience of things, and more importantly breaks the flow of things being comfortably at hand, this is a form that Heidegger called Unreadyness-to-hand (*Unzuhandenheit*). Heidegger defines three forms of unreadyness-to-hand: Obtrusiveness (*Aufdringlichkeit*), Obstinacy (*Aufsässigkeit*), and Conspicuousness (*Auffälligkeit*), where the first two are non-functioning equipment and the latter is equipment that is not functioning at its best (see Heidegger 1978, fn 1). Importantly here, if equipment breaks you have to *think* about it.

Conspicuousness, or conspicuous computation is not a sign of completely broken equipment. Conspicuousness only 'presents the available equipment as in a certain unavailableness' (Heidegger 1978: 102–3), so that as Dreyfus (2001: 71) explains, we are momentarily startled, and then shift to a new way of coping, but which, if help is given quickly or the situation is resolved, then 'transparent circumspective behaviour can be so quickly and easily restored that no new stance on the part of Dasein is required' (Dreyfus 2001: 72). As Heidegger puts it, it requires 'a more precise kind of circumspection, such as "inspecting", checking up on what has been attained, [etc.]' (Dreyfus 2001: 70).

In other words computation, due to its glitch ontology, continually forces a contextual slowing-down at the level of the mode of being of the user, thus the continuity of flow or practice is interrupted by minute pauses and breaks (which may beyond conscious perception, as such). This is not to say that analogue technologies do not break down, the difference is the conspicuousness of digital technologies in their everyday working, in contrast to the obstinacy or obtrusiveness of analogue technologies, which tend to work or not. There is also a discrete granularity of the conspicuousness of digital technologies, which can be measured technically as seconds, milliseconds, or even microseconds. All of these aspects of glitch ontology raise interesting questions about our experiences of computational systems.

The New Aesthetic is interesting in this context because of its implicit investment in representation, showing the surface of the extent to which digital media has permeated our everyday lives. In Deleuzian terms we might think of two strata here: the first, computationality as the plane of content/materiality; and creative practices including the New Aesthetic as the plane of expression (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 43). Importantly, and as Deleuze and Guattari make explicit, such a formulation is useful because each plane does not need to have a direct connection, logic, or resemblance to the other. Indeed, the representational plane, as it were, can be only loosely coupled to the other.

Computation, understood within the context of computationality, pervades our everyday life. It therefore becomes one particular limit (there are others of course) of our possibilities for reason, experience and desire within this historical paradigm of knowledge, or episteme (see Berry 2012c). One can think of creative practices as being bounded extricably with the computational and the foundation for developing a cognitive map (Jameson 2006: 516). The fact that abduction aesthetics are networked, sharable, modular, 'digital', and located both in the digital and analogue worlds is appropriate, because they follow the colonisation of the lifeworld by the technics of computationality.

David Hockney writing about his *Fresh Flowers* (Grant 2010) links his artistic work to the medial affordances of the computational device, in this case an iPad, stating 'when using his iPhone or iPad to draw, the features of the devices tend to shape his choice of subject…The fact that it's illuminated makes you choose luminous subjects' (Freeman 2012). Parisi and Portanova further argue for an algorithmic aesthetic with their notion of 'soft thought':

> the aesthetic of soft thought precisely implies that digital algorithms are autonomous, conceptual modes of thinking, a thinking that is always already a mode of feeling ordered in binary codes, and is not to be confused with sensing or perceiving. Numerical processing is always a feeling, a simultaneously physical and conceptual mode of feeling data, physical in the actual operations of the hardware-software machine, conceptual in the grasp of numbers as virtualities or potentials (Parisi and Portanova 2012).

Other researchers (Beaulieu et al 2012) have referred to 'Network Realism' to draw attention to some of these visual practices. Many of the artworks in this book can be seen to fall under this category of work. Such works display similar investments in producing visual, affective and object-based articulations of digitality and the network.

The Tumblr blog that presents the New Aesthetic to us as a stream of data – again, significant in this reading of computationality (see also Kittler 2009) - collects digital and pseudo-digital objects through a computational frame, and is only made possible through new forms of computational curation tools, such as Tumblr and Pinterest (2012). The New Aesthetic thus gives a description and a way of representing and mediating the world in and through the digital, that is understandable as an infinite archive (or collection). Secondly, alongside many other creative practices including art practices that we have pointed to in this book, The New Aesthetic alternately highlights the fact that *something* digital is a happening in culture – something which we have only barely been conscious of – and also that culture is happening to the digital. Together these aspects ontological, technical, and of course material, contribute to what we might call the condition of possibility for emerging aesthetic practices invested in the present, invested as these are in irupting the 'digital' into the 'real'.

More surface-level investments such as those captured in the New Aesthetic we might say remain focussed on the aesthetic in the first instance (rather than the ontological) and in this way perpetuate the obfuscation of the sociological and political reality of computational conditions. This is a useful point of distinction for considering

the difference *between* aesthetic forms instantiated within the computational condition. The point we want to make is that the collections that Bridle and Sterling in particular are identifying are in fact more *symptomatic* than exemplary of a computational paradigm in creative work, of whatever kind. Some of us think this is a fairly obvious point to make, but it nevertheless needs this degree of explanation. Surface digitality elides computational realities that inform aesthetic feeling, while holding unclear or haphazard investments in such hidden or lower level realities.

10. THE NEW AESTHETIC AS MEDIATION

Let's explore the notion of mediation within the contours of the New Aesthetic, in particular the computational contribution or facilitation of certain way of working, looking, and distributing. Whilst we are aware of the limitations that the structure of this book enforces on our discussion of mediation, and especially the difficulties of explicating the complexities of computational media, it is clear that emerging creative practices are problematising, in some sense, this medial dimension. Indeed, medial change is linked to epistemic change – and here of course, we are referring to a *software condition*.

Software presents a translucent interface relative to a common 'world' and so enables engagement with a 'world', this we often call its interface. It is tempting, when trying to understand software/code to provide analysis at the level of this surface. However, software also possesses an opaque machinery that mediates engagement that is not experienced directly nor through social mediations. Without an attentiveness to the layers of software beneath this surface interface we are in danger of 'screen essentialism'. In terms of this analytic approach, one of the key aspects is that the surface can remain relatively stable whilst the machinery layer(s) can undergo frenetic and disorienting amounts of change (Fuller 2003). This frantic disorientation at the machinery layer is therefore insulated from the user, who is provided with a surface which can be familiar, skeuomorphic (from the Greek, *skeuos* - vessel or tool, *morphe* - shape), representational, metonymic, figurative or extremely simplistic and domestic. It is important to note that the surface/interface need not be visual, indeed it may be presented as an application programming interface (API) which hides the underlying machinery behind this relatively benign interface. Here, are useful links to many of the formulations around a notion of the New Aesthetic.

Indeed, we argue that the New Aesthetic is interesting as a kind of pointing or gesturing towards mediation by digital processes, in some instances connecting to claims whereby it renders human input or control unnecessary – similar to claims about a non-human turn. This is the very act of automatic computation or a form of idealized artificial intelligence is in some senses a technical imaginary that runs through the Bridle/Sterling formulation. Mediation itself can be understood within a frame of understanding that implies the transfer between two points – often linked to notions of information theory. Guillory argues,

> the enabling condition of mediation is the interposition of distance (spatial, temporal, or even notional) between the terminal poles of the communication process (these can be persons but also now machines, even persons and machines). (Guillory 2010: 357)

The software that is now widely used is part of a wider constellation of software ecologies made possible by a plethora of computational devices that facilitate the colonisation of code into the lifeworld (see Berry 2012d). In other words, software enables access to certain forms of mediated engagement with the world. This is achieved via the translucent surface interface and enables a machinery to be

engaged which computationally interoperates with the world.


AVAILABLE COMMODITIES

In this vein we want to explore the notion of *availability* in relation to this idea of surface. It is helpful here to think of the way that computationality has affordances that contribute to the construction and distribution of a range of commodities. We think of computationality as the very definition of the framework of possibility for social and political life today, that is, again using computationality as an ontotheology (see previous chapter). Here we think of a commodity as being available when it can be used as a mere end, with the means veiled and backgrounded. This is not only in technical devices, of course, and also includes the social labour and material required to produce a device as such. But in the age of computationality we think it is interesting to explore how the surface effects of a certain form of computational machinery create the conditions both for the black boxing of technology as such, but also for thinking about the possibility of political and social action against it. I will call this the paradigm of availability. Upon this surface we might read and write whatever we choose, as we are also offered a surface to which we might read the inscrutable however we might wish.

What is striking about the paradigm of availability made possible by computationality, is that it radically re-presents the mechanisms and structures of everyday life, themselves reconstructed within the ontology afforded by computationality. This moment of re-presentation is an offering of availability, understood as infinite play and exploitability (interactivity) of a specific commodity form which we might call the computational device. Here we think of the computational device both in terms of its material manifestations but also as a diagram or technical imaginary. That is, it is not only restructuring the mechanisms and structures, but the very possibility of thinking against them. Part of the paradox of availaibility, however, is that the 'deeper' structures are progressively hidden and offered instead through a simplified 'interface'. In computational capitalism this affects not just the what we think of as naturally computational, for example a laptop, but also other technical and mechanical devices that are reconfigured through this paradigm.
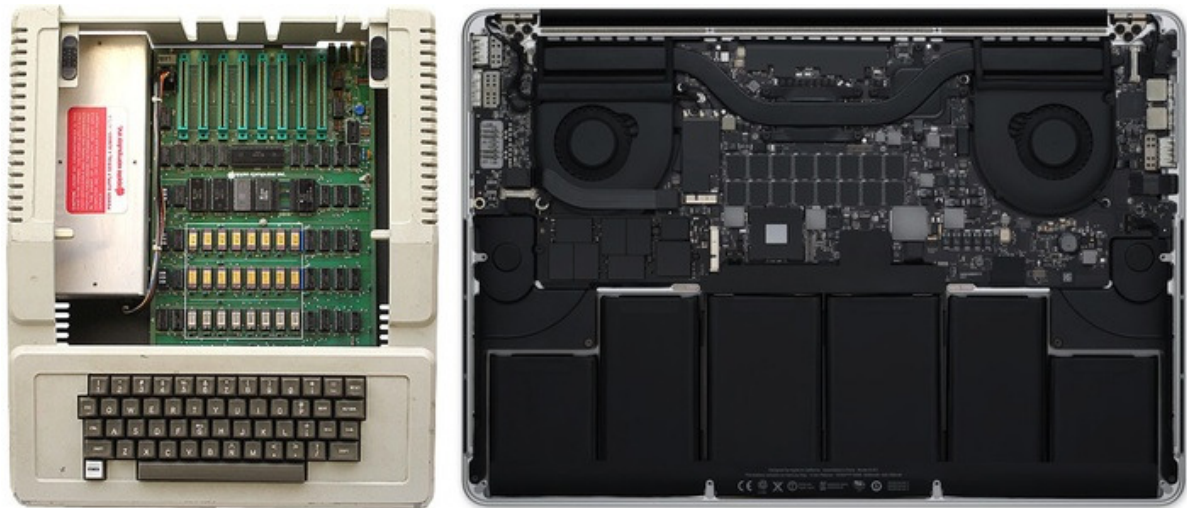
Internals of an Apple II computer (introduced 1977) and Apple's 2012 Retina Macbook Pro (Begemann 2012).
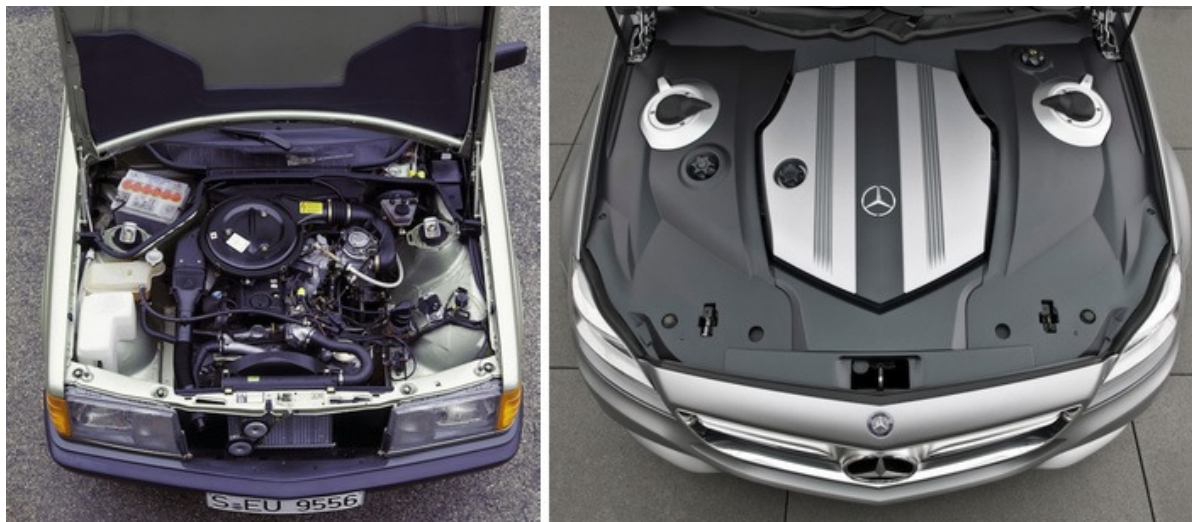
Engine compartments of a 1982 Mercedes-Benz Series 190 (W-201) and a 2010 Mercedes Benz Concept Car called "Shooting Break" (Begemann 2012).

Here we see how this computational means to black-boxing the mechanism, and the affordances that computation grants, eg. miniaturisation, concretisation, obfuscation, and so forth, become part of the way-of-doing within consumer capitalism. The computer becomes increasing dense and aestheticised (even internally as shown above) and the access point is through the obligatory passage points of the interface. Equally, the car reveals a similar logic of hiddenness and obfuscation, with the driver, now user, given an 'interface' to the engine and associated mechanical system. These interfaces are built on rational and directed process of reason, what we might call 'mere reason' as a subset of possible ways-of-doing or acting. This is also where the logic of computationality and the practices of computational consumer capitalism converge in the creation of technical devices with inbuilt obsolescence and limited means for repair or maintainence.

Kant argues that 'mere reason' (rather than 'pure reason') is a programmed structure, with in-built possibilities of "misfiring", and nothing but calculation as a way of seeing right. The computer is a technology that caused Derrida some concern for precisely the reason that it attempt to substitute for the flux of everyday experience an appearance of certainty that cannot represent human experiences adequately (Golumbia 2009: 16). "Mere" reason is not like the two major categories of cognition, "pure" and "practical" reason, specifically because in its quest for exactness and precision it actually eliminates the possibility of human agency in thinking or cognitive practice.

Driven by rapid changes in technology and particularly innovation in social media, we are seeing a transition from static information to real-time data. Real-time data streams are new ways to consume various media forms through data stream providers like Twitter. In fact it can be argued that Twitter is now the de facto real-time message bus of the internet. This new way of accessing, distributing, and communicating via the real-time stream is still playing out and raises interesting questions about how it affects politics, economics, social, and daily life. But there's also the question of what does the real-time stream do to the aesthetic experience? Particularly when the real-time mediates art or becomes a site for artistic installation or innovation.

To pick up a theme introduced early in the book, we have continually questioned and critiqued the behaviour gestured towards in earlier discussions of the New Aesthetic as a way-of-seeing, or even a way-of-being. This passivity suggested in a subjectivity linked to the New Aesthetic that elsewhere has been described by Berry (2011) as a *riparian subject* or *raparian user*. That is a subject that is encouraged to follow, watch, or consume streams of data without necessarily participating in any meaningful way in the stream. Here,

> riparian refer[s] to the act of watching the flow of the stream go by. But as, Kierkegaard, writing about the rise of the mass media argued: The public is not a people, a generation, one's era, not a community, an association, nor these particular persons, for all these are only what they are by virtue of what is concrete. Not a single one of those who belong to the public has an essential engagement with anything (Berry 2011: 144).

Above we gestured already towards the softwarization of 'close reading', and the changing structure of a 'preferred reader' or subject position towards one that is increasingly algorithmic (of course, this could be a human or non-human reader). Indeed it is suggestive that as a result of these moves to real-time streams that we will see the move from a linear model of narrative, exemplified by books, to a 'dashboard of a calculation interface' and 'navigational platforms', exemplified by new forms of software platforms. Indeed, these platforms, and here we are thinking of a screenic interface such as the iPad, allow the 'reader' to use the hand-and-eye in haptic interfaces to develop interactive exploratory approaches towards knowledge/information and 'discovery'. This could, of course, still enable humanititistic notions of 'close reading' but the preferred reading style would increasingly be 'distant reading'. Partially, or completely, mediated through computational code-based devices. Non-linear, fragmentary, partial and pattern-matching software taking in real-

time streams and presenting to the user a mode of cognition that is hyper attention based coupled with real-time navigational tools. Thus,

> the riparian user is strangely connected, yet simultaneously disconnected, to the data streams that are running past at speeds which are difficult to keep up with. To be a member of the riparian public one must develop the ability to recognise patterns, to discern narratives, and to aggregate the data flows. Or to use cognitive support technologies and software to do so. The riparian citizen is continually watching the flow of data, or delegating this 'watching' to a technical device or agent to do so on their behalf. It will require new computational abilities for them to make sense of their lives, to do their work, and to interact with both other people and the technologies that make up the datascape of the real-time web (Berry 2011: 144).

11. THE POLITICS OF EMERGENT AESTHETICS

In the well-known lecture, 'What is Critique?' Foucault traces "the critical attitude" from the "high Kantian enterprise" (*to know knowledge*) to everyday polemics found in governmentality. In this way, criticality is a stance that follows modernity: an act of defiance by limiting, exiting and transforming historically constituted arrangements of power. Foucault referred to critique in this context as "the art of not being governed, or better the art of not being governed like that, or at that cost" (2007: 45). Expressed as a will, this is conveyed by a suspension of judgment that drives praxis into a direct involvement with prevailing conditions of possibility and power/knowledge, he adds,

> If governmentalization is…this movement through which individuals are subjugated in the reality of a social practice through mechanisms of power that adhere to a truth, well, then! I will say that critique is the movement by which the subject gives himself the right to question truth on its effects of power and question power on its discourses of truth. (Foucault 2007: 47)

This reconfiguration of problems is suggestive of a way to suspend the riparian user within the altered historical context of computationality and neoliberal govermentality. Consider the practices associated with media art: hacking, free and open source software, net criticism and so on. Consider Philip Agre's influential framework of 'critical technical practice' (1997) or, more recently, Julian Oliver, Gordan Savičić, and Danja Vasiliev's 'Critical Engineering Manifesto',

> The Critical Engineer considers any technology depended upon to be both a challenge and a threat. The greater the dependence on a technology the greater the need to study and expose its inner workings, regardless of ownership or legal provision… raises awareness that with each technological advance our techno-political literacy is challenged.
> (Oliver, Savičić & Vasiliev 2011).

Such examples aim to process existing regimes precisely through their capacity to suspend or reconfigure any 'correct' techniques and contexts for engaging with informational infrastructures, whether commercial interfaces, platform services, junked hardware, atmospheric sensors, network traffic or geo-tagged data. We are suggesting that these practices work to hack the relational, affective and algorithmic logics of neoliberal subjectivity to the extent that we begin to actively think with these infrastructures in new ways, apply a threshold of encouragement to break privatized senses of risk and loss, to diagram structural violences, to reconfigure at-risk ecologies of practices, and so to foster different modes of comportment. If critique always forms within pre-existing conditions and settings, it does so through 'voluntary disobedience.'

There are, of course, constant and ongoing risks involved in critique, and in critical cultural practices, since they are provoked by difficulties carried along by insecurity and precariousness itself. Nevertheless, we should not be disheartened or disappointed by these challenges. As Judith Butler argues in her commentary on Foucault's lecture, this is "a moment of ethical questioning which requires that we

break the habits of judgment in favor of a riskier practice that seeks to yield artistry from constraint" (Butler 2001). The moment, or movement, of critique is not based on correcting errors or mistakes, but on a 'virtue' of questioning the limits themselves.

Critical aesthetic practices tend to involve pulling open conductions of control, surfacing from twisted ensembles of things, dragging their problematic configurations into view. Such efforts have been central to media art in the past, but how can these practices be fostered under current configurations of compulationalism and the destructive tendencies of neoliberal governmentality? Can the New Aesthetic illuminate these ecologies of practices in new ways, to light up for an instant the investments, subjectivities and conflicts that define a critical network culture?

Refresh

A key premise of this book has rested on a relatively uncontroversial claim that the digital, especially software, is an increasingly important aspect of our post-Fordist informational societies and cultural practices. We have taken a synoptic look at the digital through the phenomenon of the New Aesthetic, the questions it raises, and the style of comportment that it suggests. This experiment in thinking the present through collaborative and interdisciplinary authorship has enabled us to consider the profound ways in which computationality and neoliberal governmentality are imbricated within emerging aesthetic forms, expressions, logics and effects. The 'deep' materiality of the digital crystallizes particular social forms and values, but also generates new mentalities in combination with economic forms and social relations. This notion of computationality as *ontotheology* indicates the prevailing *doxa* of a digitally material world. Indeed, as Marx argued,

> Technology reveals the active relation of man to nature, the direct process of the production of his life, and thereby it also lays bare the process of production of the social relations of his life, and of the mental conceptions that flow from these conceptions (Marx 2007: 493, footnote 4).

We are not suggesting here that excesses of instrumental reason, delegated into machines, have created a totalitarian dystopia where the computational and the instrumental have become synonomous. That is a reading of technology that Heidegger criticized as a poor understanding of technology which remains "caught in the subject/object picture" (Dreyfus 1997). In Heidegger's final analysis, the goal of technology was "something completely different and therefore new" (1977: 5). It involved increasingly efficient orderings of resources simply for the sake of this ordering and it has created a world in which "everything is ordered to stand by, to be immediately at hand, indeed to stand there just so that it may be on call for a further ordering" (1977: 17). Crucially, it's at this level that we have been drawing links between computationality, thought and comportment.

Neoliberal Re-Forms

We now find ourselves in a situation of increasing reliance on digital technologies of computation and calculative rationalities. Many of these systems were initially designed to support or aid the judgement of people in undertaking specific activities, analyses, and decisions, but they have long since "surpassed the understanding of their users and become indispensible to them" (Weizenbaum 1984: 236). With a lack of adequate technical literacy, combined with processes of blackboxing, these systems themselves resist interrogability. Accordingly, in our current dependency on computationality, such infrastructures tend toward growth, through addition of control at higher and higher levels of abstraction (Beniger, 1986). Indeed, as Kitchin (2011) argues, software can tie in strongly with specific regimes of governmentality, in dense and complicated patterns and dynamics:

> Over the past two centuries a mode of governmentality has developed in Western society that is heavily reliant on generating and monitoring systematic information about individuals by institutions. Software-enabled technologies qualitatively alter both the depth and the scope of this disciplinary gaze, but also introduce new forms of governance, because they make the systems and apparatus of governance more panoptical in nature. At the technical level, software is producing new machine-readable and software-sorted geographies that are radically altering how cities are regulated… Software creates more effective systems of surveillance and creates new capture systems that actively reshape behaviour by altering the nature of a task. In recent years there has been much academic attention paid to qualitative changes in surveillance technologies as they have become digital in nature, leading to the development of a new field of surveillance studies. That said, there is still much conceptual and empirical work to be done to understand how forms of governance are being transformed and the role played by software, and not simply the broader technologies they enable. (Kitchin 2011: 949)

Neoliberalism's deep penetration into subjectivity, or what Foucault called subjectivation, pulls economized, 'market-civilization' thinking into social spheres in ways that work in destructive and atomizing registers. This is one of the challenges, in our view, marked by the New Aesthetic.

Drawing on Lauren Berlant's conception of mediatized subjectives that attune to such presents by finding form (2011), we have considered the New Aesthetic as just one kind of affectively compelling genre that had success as a 'concept' for hinging oneself to an obfuscated present. From specific conditions of possibility, it spoke of patterns, computational regimes and economic conditions that had become very much our own. The New Aesthetic twisted conventional anxieties; for us, the predictable resistance seemed too staid, even for those who were ambivalent about it. This phenomenon showed us that to think aesthetic encounters now, we need to think differently. The New Aesthetic isolates the urgency of our need for new concepts: to be clearer on how the dynamics of civil society have become increasingly eroded away and are being reworked by computational technologies and neoliberal technocratic orders.

These relate to aesthetics of comportment, to orientations with objects, relationships,

things and communities. Experimental art and critical projects might attempt to think through these infrastructures by playing with and breaking the logics and medial affordances differently. We are emphasizing the urgency precisely because all of this plays out on the topos provided by computational technologies, on loose, hazy neoliberalized social fabrics, which in a similar way to software, render older forms of attachments and subject positions irrelevant. As Gelernter argues:

> No moment in technology history has ever been more exciting or dangerous than 'now.' As we learn more about now, we know less about then. The Internet increases the supply of information hugely, but the capacity of the human mind not at all… The effect of nowness resembles the effect of light pollution in large cities, which makes it impossible to see the stars. A flood of information about the present shuts out the past (Gelernter 2010).

Irruptions of the Digital into the Real, Economics into 'Culture'

Writing in the Dutch context, we understand the contemporary period's inattention to the effects on the subject of neoliberal transition as symptomatic of the success of its ideological takeover. Emerging aesthetic forms and critical practices can raise important questions about the autonomy and continuity of the human agent in this present where matters of autonomy for cultural practitioners and critics are becoming increasingly stressed and questioned.

In such contexts, moving toward a *technological* politics is necessary. Consider for example that the auto-curation of the stream's processing – Tumblr blogs, Twitter feeds, and so forth - does not just provide information to the user, but also actively constructs, directs, and even newly creates, significant socio-cognitive conditions for the subjectivity of the real-time stream, a kind of *algorithmic humanity*. This is how the subject is captured by the New Aesthetic, whose comportment seems hooked to the minimization of risk, and shot through with projective sentimentality. We feel phenomena such this might, as Derrida has argued,

> Oblige us more than ever to think the virtualization of space and time, the possibility of virtual events whose movement and speed prohibit us more than ever (more and otherwise than ever, for this is not absolutely and thoroughly new) from opposing presence to its representation, 'real time' to 'deferred time,' effectivity to its simulacrum, the living to the non-living, in short, the living to the living-dead of its ghosts (Derrida 1994: 212).

Software changes the games of cultural work and production; the lesson takes a long time to learn and is complicated by other parallel conditions. The neoliberal economy is not just driven by software as a kind of symbolic machine but instead is made of software, as Galloway has emphasized (2012a). It fosters in a logic of "the extraction of value based on the encoding and processing of mathematical information" (10). But this is not just to say that software is a kind of conceptual motor underpinning the economy, and useful for thinking it through: "more and more, software is the thing which is directly extracting value" (10). For Galloway, this software condition, like our

crisis-ridden economic condition, is impossible to "wish away;" there is contrarily a "special relation today between the mode of production and its mathematics" (11). The New Aesthetic found this special relation, in its absolutely direct capturing of its patterns, channels and economies of attention.

Implications of an Apolitical New Aesthetic

If it is not obvious by now, we have been as a collective differently innervated, perplexed and ambivalent about this thing called the New Aesthetic. While we are keen to distance ourselves from a possible passive reading/writing of its style, a style that we have described as *riparian*, in as much as it encourages consumption of a certain kind of digital product(ion), the New Aesthetic as a *case* has delivered to us more understanding of the present condition and the possibilities of using media to reconfigure things a little. The way that the phenomena so strongly linked computation with consumption and aspects of the neoliberal economic reality, enabled us to generate new insights and questions; for example, about the care for artistic and creative work, that we have captured in the curatorial anxieties stressed in the middle section of this book. It has felt crucial, moreover, that these complex assocations that we have generated in proximity to the thing create reflexive articulations. Here, we are recognizing our own potential breaks from computational and calculative reason. As Darrow Schecter notes,

> The exercise of power and the formalisation of knowledge to be intimately bound up with the constitution of living individuals as subjects of knowledge, that is, as citizens and populations about whom knowledge is systematically constructed… Subjects are not born subjects so much as they become them. In the course of becoming subjects they are classified in innumerable ways which contribute to their social integration, even if they are simultaneously marginalised in many cases. (Schecter 2010: 171)

Our neoliberal selves have become more strongly attached to the norms of 'market civilization' through specific combinations of rationalities, strategies, technologies and techniques that mobilize government at a distance, and by manipulations of power through the economic and discursive networks of a massively deregulated and expanding new media (Gupta and Sharma: 2006).

The most conventional anxiety around neoliberal subject formation is that this mode of governmentality reduces citizens to consumers only, enfolding all of life and culture to its representational practices. This is its logic of course, but it can not be ever fully achieved. As Wendy Brown (2006) has argued, the difference of the regimes and practices of neoliberal transition is that they emphasize market rationality as an already-achieved state, rather than an aspiration. This gives neoliberalism a teleological force and ordinariness that is difficult to counter, and unpack. It is significant twist of already-realized market rationalization that has significant ramifications not just on a theory of the subject, but following from this, on any theory of the spectator or user of art, media, design, and culture. The New Aesthetic acknowledges the ensconcement of neoliberalism in subjectivity, but to think aesthetics 'now', how can we think beyond this?

Indeed, there are huge difficulties. To the extent that neoliberal governmentality subordinates state power to the requirements of the marketplace, 'political problems' become literally privatized, while citizens are simultaneously promised new levels of freedom, consumerism, customisation, interactivity and control over their lives. This exacerbates anxiety about whether such freedoms can be claimed or registered. In other words, the subject is promised an unfulfilled expectation, to the extent they are able to exert their individual agency. While the liberal subject aspired to own her labour and was mobilized by related ideals (inverted in Marx), the neoliberal subject is tasked not just with 'looking after themselves,' but with totally embodying their own human capital biopolitically and over time: as gathered, contextually adaptive, and collateral.

This is of huge relevance to a politics of aesthetics, since once the subject becomes figured as *their own* human capital, it erodes away the distinction between figure and ground, production and reproduction, creating mobile, speculative identifications, such that we have observed in the New Aesthetic. The subject's comportment towards constant growth is both necessary and precarious, as growth is considered more important than returns; the subject invests in opportunities, selves, presence, objects, tools, computer learning and so on, to maximize claims on the real (see Boltanski and Chiapello 2006).

In order to facilitate neoliberal governance, certain infrastructural and technocratic systems have been put in place; bureaucratic structures, compatible computational agencies and so forth. But it is clear that providing information to citizens is not sufficient for controlling and influencing behaviour. People's ability to understand and manipulate raw data or information is more limited in many contexts; there is a heavy reliance on habit, understood as part of the human condition. As computational procedures pick up more of this ordering work, goals and projects come to be co-expressed within a computational structure: real-time streams that are procedural, algorithmic, modular, and quantitatively expressed, are very amenable to neoliberalism. Indeed, the identities or roles that we take on enable us to carry ourselves computationally, through self-tracking, life-hacking, monitoring, etc. Clearly, these also link to the representational practices of a passive New Aesthetic.

The New Aesthetic sentimentalizes some of these hard facts. Meanwhile, the ideological encroachment of market rationalization, which the curators among us have found it critical to think *with,* especially in proximity to the concept of care and artistic labour, has significant ramifications not just on a theory of the subject, but on approaches to critical practice around emergent aesthetic forms.

New Aesthetic: Critique as Practice

A concept often referenced from Foucault is his notion of 'problematicization.' During a late interview with Paul Rabinow, he explained this as an act of thought involving the process of *defining* a problem (Foucault: 2000). Problematization is a rare concerted effort that occurs when confronted with 'difficulties' that arise from political, social and economic processes. These difficulties sometimes catalyze thought by interrupting its consistency; they provoke multifaceted or opposing responses, but

ultimately responses that together posit a constitutive context of the problematic.

Under such conditions, thought, for Foucault, is that which allows one to 'step back' from conduct, to present conduct as an object of thought and to question its meaning, goals and conditions: "thought is freedom in relation to what one does, the motion by which one detaches from it, establishes it as an object, and reflects on it as a problem" (Foucault 2000: 117). This motion of freeing up conduct is the object of Foucault's work, but also his practice. In other words, problematizations are sought out and re-posited in untimely ways in the present. Here, "what is important is what makes them simultaneously possible: it is the point in which their simultaneity is rooted; it is the soil that can nourish them all in their diversity and sometimes in spite of their contradictions" (Foucault 2000: 118) The re-positing of problems themselves – an act of both discovery and creation – is the domain of critique. How does this work? There exists a strange doubling in the notion of re-positing a problem – a gesture of heterogenesis that cannot be secured through a set of formal criteria, nor a morality of solutions, but always a kind of movement that grapples with its own constitution.

We understand that emerging aesthetic and critical practices do have potential to create such movements. They present opportunities to rethink not only the context of media art, but a variety of situated practices, including speculative design, net criticism, hacking, free and open source software development, locative media, sustainable hardware and so on. This is how we have considered the New Aesthetic: as an opportunity to rethink the relations between these contexts in the emergent episteme of computationality. There is a desperate need to confront the political pressures of neoliberalism manifested in these infrastructures. We agree with Hal Foster in a recent essay, "surely now is a bad time to go post-critical" (2012). Indeed, these are risky, dangerous and problematic times, and these are periods when critique should thrive, but here we need to forge new alliances, invent and discover problems of the common that nevertheless do not eliminate the fundamental differences in this ecology of practices (Stengers 2005). Here, perhaps provocatively, we believe a great deal could be learned from the development of the New Aesthetic not only as a mood, but as a topic and fix for collective feeling, that temporarily mobilizes networks. Is it possible to sustain and capture these atmospheres of debate and discussion beyond knee-jerk reactions and opportunistic self-promotion? These are crucial questions that the New Aesthetic invites us to consider, if only to keep a critical network culture in place.

New Aesthetics: Practice as Resistance

Any range of emerging aesthetic forms, processing these conditions, could offer certain 'exploits' to surface the digital and its inequalities and control in different ways (Thacker and Galloway, 2007). What we might call the 'knowledge infrastructure' is an important possible site of resistance in itself, reinforced through the diffusion of technologies of the information society. This can clearly be seen in the practices of the hackers of the free software and open source movements and their critical practices and discourses. Whilst we have not had space or time to engage with these hacking

practices in relation to the New Aesthetic here, it is clear that the overlaps, synergies and connections remain relevant – here we think of open access, piracy, and glitch as some of the possible critical movements that also have a popular following and link to currently existing cultural practices. There are also important critiques to be established and interventions to be made in a constantly strengthening and contentious regime of intellectual property rights which walk hand-in-hand with the growing institutionalisation of the *informative* part of the economy. It remains the case that the onward march of copyright and patent regimes is not just overbearing, but in some cases threatens life itself. The dimensions of a critical making-visible of computationality, accordingly, must remain linked to an aesthetic practice,

> New technologies and new ways of using information are continually being developed and these serve to question our assumptions about copyright and creativity. The current criminalisation of piracy, data 'theft' and hacking are the latest salvos by industries trying to restrict the flow and use of their creative work. It is interesting to note that the owners of these creative works are seldom the creators and pressure for the extension and strengthening of copyright comes almost exclusively from the multinational corporations. This alone should raise questions as to who is benefiting from the rise in intellectual property protection (Berry 2008: 28).

We might consider how creative works are increasingly distributed through parameterization, *data-pours* and the 'embed' mechanism, which, of course, Tumblr also uses. These are important dimensions of comprehension and critique (Liu 2004). For exampe, certain national copyright regimes have been structured to create 'safe harbours' for particular ways of using and sharing digital culture more generally. At the level of the screenic these practices have increasingly become invisible to the user, who remains bolstered by the ease of flow of the streams of data across the browser onscreen, whilst computational processes mediate the 'correct' use of copyrighted materials, display authorisations, and so forth. Needless to say, whilst also collecting so-called 'tracking' data about how the screen and interface are used through the use of *compactants* and related technologies (Berry, 2012a).

The New Aesthetic and Everyday Life

In so far as neoliberal governmentality also subordinates state power to the requirements of the marketplace, political problems *turn* to be re-presented or cast in market terms. If the New Aesthetic concerns the ubiquity of digital and networked systems, then think about how computation has challenged and reconfigured the ways in which citizens and subjects now understand themselves, for example: (1) Education – How well educated and literate or people in relation to the digital structure of the contemporary world. How active are they in their participation in the politics of digital technology, (2) Health - What typically is the condition of people's physical strength and health, additionally their mental and physical skills for development and coping? (3) How well acquainted are people with the arts in digital culture and how proficient are they in artistic practices and their relation to them; and lastly (4) Conviviality - How compassionate are people privately as citizens of

'informational societies'? How devoted are they to helping others who suffer deprivation and hardship? How conciliatory are they towards their opponents and enemies in network cultures (flame wars, etc.)?

Clearly too, the New Aesthetic as the surface manifestation of the computational device, its politics, has been useful for gaining only so many hooks on the comprehension of the present and the possible forms of practice and critique towards this condition. We considered firstly that the New Aesthetic is an ideological manifestation of a computational ontotheology being instantiated in a number of medial moments (technology, politics, social movements, the environment, the state). We also wished to deconstruct its attractive manifestation of the commodity form as ends without means, in effect an example of commodity fetishism. Finally, our critique implies a new form of literacy, which elsewhere Berry (2012c) has called 'iteracy,' able to understand and intervene directly in the technological system we inhabit.

Cognitively, it has been argued that streams are also suited to a type of reading called 'distant reading' as opposed to the 'close reading' of the humanities (Moretti 2007). This 'close reading' has created a certain type of subject: narrativised, linear, what McLuhan called 'typographic man' (1962). At present, there is a paradoxical relationship between the close reading currently taught in educational institutions and the distant reading required for algorithmic approaches to information. To illustrate, books are a great example of a media form that uses typographic devices for aiding cognition for 'close' reading: chapters, paragraphs, serif fonts, avoiding textual 'rivers' and white space. Most notably, these were instantiated into professional typographic practices that are themselves now under stress from computational algorithmic approaches to typesetting and production. Close reading devices required a deep sense of awareness in relation to the reader as a particular conscious and active subject: autonomous, linear, narrativised, and capable of feats of memory and cognitive processing. Devices, meanwhile, were associated with a constellation of practices that were surrounded around the concept of the author.

We want to extend this observation and consider how neoliberalism and computation complement each other, but where nonetheless this complementarity opens folds for critically thinking through the issues and questions that are raised both by the new aesthetic and the new anxieties it appears to introduce. Crucially, Foucault's perspective on criticality, introduced at the start of this chapter, suggests the possibility of a subject manifested within arrangements of power, whilst nonetheless capable of drawing limits, capable of being a line-of-flight within computationality. Here, as Schecter notes,

> Critical thinking can deconstruct the visible harmony between casual
> seeing and instrumental reason... in contrast with monolithic appearances,
> surfaces are characterised by strata and folds that can inflect power to
> create new truths, desires and forms of experience (Schecter 2010: 175).

This link between perception (not just visuality) and power raises the question of an aesthetic itself deployed towards intelligibility. Tumblrs, and related collection-oriented computational systems certainly contribute to visualizing forms of understanding, through the generation of geometric and photographic truths manifested in painted

screens and surfaces. However, there is still important critical and creative work to be done to fully confront this reality of 21st century visual culture, one that is computationally mediated and saturated with consumerism and markets. Indeed, we would argue that the question remains not one of finding the representational New Aesthetic, but the conscious and active cultivation of *new aesthetics* (plural).

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