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On The Subject Of Onto Unconscious Characteristics Of Screen Tools And Their
Impact On Artistic Practice

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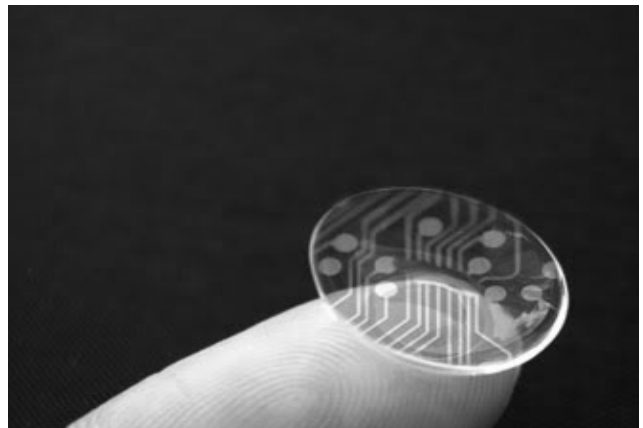
On The Subject Of Onto Unconscious Characteristics Of Screen Tools And Their Impact On Artistic Practice

"Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic." Arthur C. Clarke

I believe that the surface of some artworks functions as metaphorical pseudo-interactive screens, whereupon the viewers body/mind/culture complex is projected, inscribed and negotiated. As an origin of this tendency it is very obvious to mention the advance of computer technology, internet and social media. The blending of knowledge and its accessibility, a network that encompasses a near infinite amount of knowledge and the all pervasive and present interactive screen. It is a leveling of knowledge forms combined with a highly adaptable multipurpose tool - it is all presented on the same screen and it is everywhere.

"Just as water, gas and electricity are brought into our houses from far off to satisfy our needs in response to a minimal effort, so shall we be supplied with visual and auditory images, which will appear and disappear at a simple movement of the hand, hardly more than a sign." Paul Valéry

The main difference between the computer screen and the artwork is the type of interaction possible. The interface then being the body and mind of the viewer, not the touchpad, keyboard, mouse, interactive browser, database, algorithmic search tools and so on. Of course it can be claimed that the same goes for interaction with a computer, and that is of course true - it does take a body to operate a computer *but* this is a severely limited interaction, so far. What I mean by "so far" is that the difference between objective reality and virtual reality between body and robot is gradually disappearing. Reproductions of reality are moving towards reality. Virtuality is approximating reality. This is already happening with for example the advance of retinal screens,



the amount of pixels and frames per second are growing, the move from keyboard to touchpad, from mouse to voiced commands, the advancement of 3d printing, digital maps are getting photographic and interactive, the smartphone's are getting more and more embedded into everyday life. The interaction is also extending our physical bodies, drones piloted from afar, GPS systems and so on. The architecture is changing to accommodate the screen. Already in the sixties central position of the conventional television set in any middle-class living room was taken into account by architects. The design of furniture is also made to fit computers, a plain thing as a computer table is proof of that. I've experienced people trying to use the zoom function of the Ipad, two fingers on the touchscreen moving opposite each other, on a picture in a book. Art is of course affected, but how?

Generally I assume that the relation between man and technology is our primary ontological condition, yet each of these relations that define and transform our techno-perceptual experience is *non-neutral*, specific to context and culture. But some parts of modern technology evade this parameter; algorithms being one of the more interesting cases. Another is the personal computer and the smartphone, adaptable and multi-purpose tools, each of them user defined. One concept I will use often in this text is algorithm, so here is an informal definition:

"In the logician's voice:

"an algorithm is

a finite procedure,

written in a fixed symbolic vocabulary,

governed by precise instructions,

moving in discrete steps, 1, 2, 3, . . . ,

whose execution requires no insight, cleverness,

intuition, intelligence, or perspicuity,

*and that sooner or later comes to an end."*¹

I believe art is a place where tools, technology and the ontological conditions and consequences of these are being negotiated and mirrored. If one assumes that the general ontological framework of humans is affected by the mechanistic approach of algorithms, art could serve as an ontological mirror for these changes as well. So humans are encouraged to develop different modes of experience. But as stated before the algorithm could be considered *neutral* and would thus be embedded in the tool/art mirroring in a more discrete manner than non-neutral specific technology. Hypothetically if we are now on the brink of an algorithmic usurpation of the mind, the production of art would also be algorithmic. If that is the case, art is in the process of developing its own

1 *"The Advent of the Algorithm: The 300-year Journey from an Idea to the Computer, David Berlinski*

algorithms to escape the audiences algorithmic understanding. There is a feedback effect taking place. The last bit is somewhat speculative and could be interpreted as techno paranoia. But it might just be the case - though it is quite a claim. At the present moment it generally seems more fruitful to consider art and technology negotiating and mirroring each other in different ways. The most reasonable scenario is that both feedback and causal effects are taking place in the field.

The interactive screen is radically different than other screen mediums, photography, film in the way that it is actually *doing something*, calculations. It is a process, that is linear - in much the same way a human mind functions. It exists in time. The way we think, the way we write is linear, we grow - and in the same way that we don't have direct access to the thoughts of our fellow humans. In that sense they have anthropomorphic characteristics on a fundamental level. In some sense they become the equivalent of synaptic processes. They are also hidden beneath the exterior of the screen, the same way thoughts are hidden behind the surface of the face. Our interaction is generally also "face-to-face" oriented towards the screen, again anthropomorphic characteristics.

But the thing I want to suggest is that this kind of hidden world behind the screen, the ones and zeroes, the algorithms all of these fundamental building blocks are present in an ontological unconscious. These elements and their inherent structure and functionality is affecting the content on the screen and the techno-soma relation with the screen is affecting us. They are causally linked. Of course there is the possibility of consciousness being organized as a computer from the beginning. Here I will include a small paragraph that makes sense in this context:

*"Computation . . . is observer-relative, and this is because computation is defined in terms of symbol manipulation, but the notion of a 'symbol' is not a notion of physics or chemistry. Something is a symbol only if it is used, treated or regarded as a symbol. The Chinese room² argument showed that semantics is not intrinsic to syntax. But what this shows is that syntax is not intrinsic to physics. . . . Something is a symbol only relative to some observer, user or agent who assigns a symbolic interpretation to it. . . you can assign a computational interpretation to anything. But if the question asks, 'Is consciousness intrinsically computational?' the answer is: **nothing is intrinsically computational**. Computation exists only relative to some agent or observer who imposes a computational interpretation on some phenomenon. This is an obvious point. I should have seen it ten years ago but I did not."*³

Some artworks are gradually becoming metaphorical pseudo interactive screens, how does this relate to the above stated. It relates in two ways. Primarily that artists are affected in the same way as other human beings' intimate connection with technology, and their art will show characteristics

2 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TryOC83PH1g>

3 (page17) (2002) "Consciousness and Language", Cambridge University Press, Cambridge UK

of that. And secondly that art is consciously applying some of the mechanisms of general interactions with screens to critique and raise questions in regards to this new type of reality, and on a more fundamental level questioning the general ontological relation between man and technology. So I believe one type of art is tight-rope-walking between on the one side the non-neutral stance; context and culture specific and a neutral stance; general, speculative and abstractive. In the citation above, the definition of computation as symbol manipulation, I would like to infer that this type of computational symbol manipulation is exactly what is taking place to a large extent in contemporary arts.

So here follows an account of a few examples, that I will try and deconstruct and see how they can be applied in the art field. It makes sense to use examples and metaphors for this - not to banalize the spectrum of these thoughts, but to put them in a framework that is easier communicable.

The vastness of the potential knowledge on the internet available needs a request, needs a goal, without it nothing makes sense and you are doomed to wander aimlessly in a library eternal. So it is remarkably useless unless instrumentalized. So to get an answer you have to have a question. All search engines functions via algorithms and they are affecting what answers we are getting.

So the answer you get is affected both by the choice of search tool, economic interests, and how the question is phrased. Algorithms are practical for some types of knowledge - for example if I want to find out when Columbus discovered America, I just enter: "when did Columbus discover America" it works (I actually tried and I only reached "when did C" before it figured out what I wanted to know). More complex matters, like: "what is the meaning of life?" it can not help with. So the more specific a question the better the answer gets, the more abstract and broad the worse it gets. But even in matters more suitable for machines it still only functions by the method of approximation. A librarian might suggest fictional literature that touches upon the subject, or a friend might relate your question to a skiing trip where he broke his leg, but learned the importance of family. But more often than not humans are prone to the wander aimlessly in the library, guided by machines. The way we get lost is the same way we find answers. Guided by approximations of an algorithm that is trying to decipher what we want, what we do not know we want - but actually do want, commercial interests, pop-up windows, short-cuts and recommendations some engineered via previous searches to name a few parameters. You end up on a somewhat relevant pages somewhat random pages. Informative but often general.

Contemporary art is applying this in new ways, establishing new types of relations between objects and knowledge. An example is the widespread use of an increasingly larger number of references to areas of knowledge often outside of art – geography, physics, mathematics, computer-

science, anthropology – often sprinkled on top of the objects themselves in a very casual and blasé manner. The knowledge is often only as deep as the relevant wikipedia article allow. To some degree I see artists are getting critical towards this approach, but generally it is exploited. One response might be that some people are trying to accelerate this type of approach. Making the superficiality reach critical-mass. Which could result in an abandoning of the referential aspects of a work, a re-thinking of what types of knowledge and interactions between material and idea, processual thinking and preconfigured thinking is actually possible in the art experience. Another response would be trying to exclude any types of referential material. Making us question material qualities to an even larger degree, the non-referentiality becomes a quality in itself. Left with the empty shell we are *still* overcome with questions. This strategy relate both to the invisibility of the algorithms and the impact it has on knowledge. They are not visible for humans. They take place in places we don't have access to and in speeds we cannot fathom - and the specific algorithms are well guarded corporate secrets. But they are visible in some sense. For example in the question of a search on Google you see the result, but not the processes. So here the analogy would be that the algorithmic understanding of the artwork, the approximation of the internal logic is also invisible. You only have access to the surface of the artwork, the screen.

But there is an immense difference in the pattern recognition and the pattern formation of the art work. Or in the presentation and the production of an art piece. One artist dealing with this issue of pattern recognition and formation is the artist and electronic musician Goodiepal. One of his many alter egos. He imagines a robotic intelligence in the future is deciphering everything, his art is trying to avoid this pattern recognition machine. Several strategies are included in this attempt; spelling wrong, using outdated technologies, applying intuition, randomness factors. The evasion of deconstruction and the anticipation of analysis is at the heart of the matter in contemporary art. Be it a group critique or an alien analyzing the remains of an extinct species.

AFTERTHOUGHTS

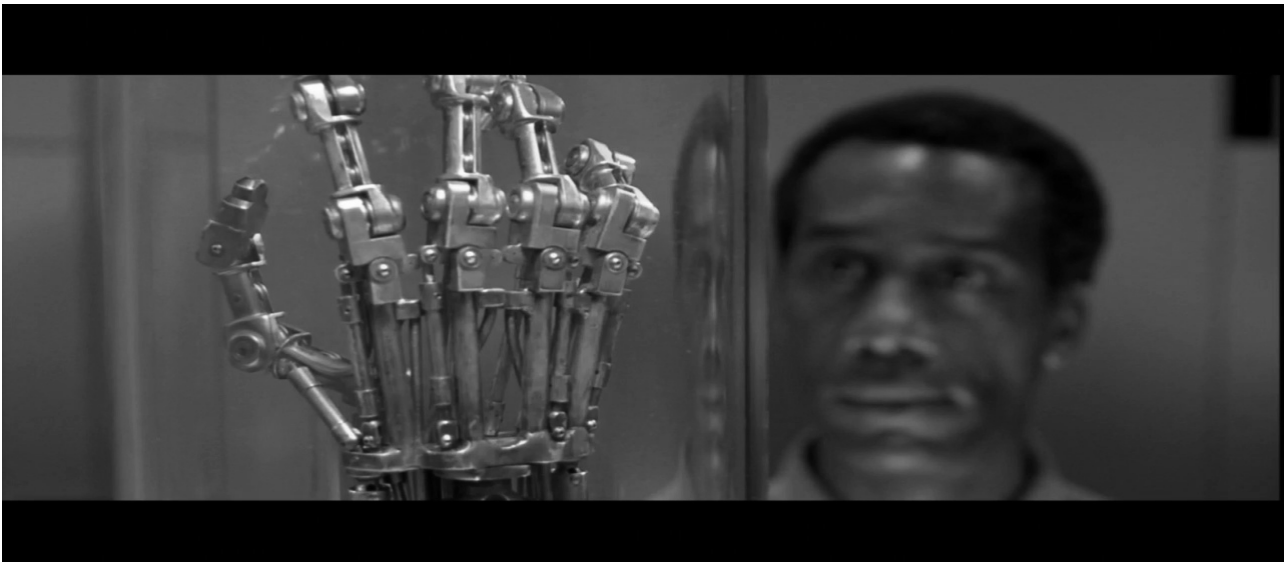
An obvious critique could be the coupling of an phenomenological approach paired with some sort of unconsciousness, an unholy alliance between Freudian thought and Merleau-Ponty. They are to a large extent not congruent images. The body does not have the same key-role in a freudian perspective. The phenomenological viewpoint is that your body is your access to the world and this being-in-the-world is of course defined by your sensory data and thus it is useful to forget theoretical constructions and actually experience it.

"But the nature about which empiricism talks is a collection of stimuli and qualities, and it is

ridiculous to pretend that nature thus conceived is, even in intention merely, the primary object of our perception: it does in fact follow the experience of cultural objects, or rather it is one of them."⁴

Another critical aspect is that algorithms actually are quite specific. They do have characteristics in common - but perhaps they are too specific to be ontologically *neutral* in our techno somatic relation. But how to describe the impact of such an immense amount of specificities? The idea that the tool relationship is our primary ontological relation is also debatable. That art serves as a ontological mirror is also quite a simplification. Art is a lot of other things as well.

I would like to include some of Jung's thoughts as well. I see him as somewhat more adapt at handling cultural specificities and phenomenon than Freud. Especially reading his book on UFO's was insightful. He was the first to invest serious thought into this relatively recent phenomenon. Which he regarded as an result of leaving behind worship of god. Because the collective



unconscious and the unconsciousness still had the predisposition and need for this type of worship, this unfulfilled need resulted in the bubbling up of the unconsciousness in the most prone area of the psyche. This was the area of science, which had its own mythical qualities akin to that of religion. If one were to say that art could be a prone area for these types of manifestations, which does not seem far fetched in my opinion. These myths are now very much connected with the spread of the internet; "The Matrix", "Terminator 2", "The Lawn-mover Man" to name a few movies, and the whole cyberpunk literary genre.

4 *Maurice Merleau-Ponty "The Phenomenology of Perception" p.24*

ANALYSIS OF OWN WORKS:

Installation art is my main area of focus, a genre that is trying to include more senses than just the traditional visual art work. Again art is approximating life in the same manner as technology.

The first work I am going to describe is "*Kongle*"

It is a sculptural piece consisting of a log, used as a plinth. Upon it rest a mirror and upon the mirror is placed an oversized plaster 3d model of a pinecone. Three elements. The work is clearly using the framework of classic art; the plinth, the plaster figure. Using classic materials and representational forms. The piece is not directly questioning the authority of these norms. By "not directly questioning" I mean that the critical aspect is not the underpinning structure of the piece. The transformation of the classic elements from typical stone plinth to log, and from bronze sculpture or similar to 3d plaster print is typical of contemporary art.

The log is an object that relates to time and nature in a very direct manner. The dendrochronic analysis is a very straightforward view on the object. Dendrochronology is an old analytical method that involves the counting of tree rings. Time is inscribed in layers upon layers, each winter and each summer is physically present and readable. The log is dead and severed, its life cycles revealed as in an obduction of a human body. But here the mirror intervenes, it is covering this surface. A classic vanitas symbolism is relevant; a remembrance of the mortality and aging of all. But with a twist, you see the pine-cone as an artificial or synthesized life-form, that is beyond aging. Again this contrasts with the plinth, the potential outcome of a real pine-cone seed. It is covering the surface upon which is inscribed the seasonal time, and upon it rests a 3d print of a pinecone. The 3d-print is a strange sort of object, which have a direct connection to the matrix of the computer. It is mathematized and is a file, able to be copied endlessly, furthermore, its oversized character is affirming the non-relation to space that is a general characteristic for 3d animations. This doubling of the pinecone into a 3d-print, and then the doubling of the 3d-print into the mirror which rests upon wood is as natural as it is paradoxical. The materials presented are referring to each other in a syntax of redoubling and paradox. Again it is clear to see that the materials presented are very much embedded in the framework of the artwork.

"Purpur"

This installation piece consists of 4 aquariums. One contains living specimens of *Nucella Lapillus*, the purple dye producing sea snail. It has historically been used for this production at least on the British Isles. It is native to the coasts of Northern Europe. Another variant of these mollusks are found in the mediterranean sea, the *Murex Brandaris*. This was amongst the most valued and unique

trading goods up until the synthetization of a colour with a similar hue. The chemical components of the snail has never been produced artificial.

The second contains a Giant Crab that has been preserved in silicone. The components of the crabshell are not joined in a naturalistic fashion, but are separated and disjointed. In much the same manner as a manual for assembling IKEA furniture or Lego. It is an invasive species in the Barents Sea. Originally an crab from Kamtjaka imported by USSR to the Kola peninsula, as a means of income for the somewhat poor region. It has since its initial introduction to that region spread with rapid speed. It is considered an invasive species in Norway. It has reached the town of Bergen, devouring all in its path.

The third is of a paint type that is specific to ships. It has been used a lot since the sixties up till present. It is toxic, and the possible cause for a lot of environmental damage. Especially mollusks are prone to the effects, and the *Nucella Lapillus* is being affected in a detrimental fashion. Hermaphrodites are getting more and more common. It is deep blue.

Lastly there is an aquarium that holds the only hand crafted object in the installation. An organic screw like sculpture floating in the middle of the water, which is fluorescent. It is made of concrete. Here there is a reference to Jeff Koons' equilibrium piece. A Spalding basketball suspended in a watery liquid.

All four of these items are shown with the same technique. So they are given equal value in some sense, they are imitating proto-science in some sense. The amount of possible connections between these objects is numerous. There is a focus on the complex interaction between culture and nature. The way ship colour is affecting paint producing snails, and how the advent of chemical colours changed the snails qua toxicity, and how China is somehow involved in the process. And how ship paint is used in ship freighting industry to ensure the longevity of the transporters. The sea also becomes this metaphor. This scene of action where the boundaries of objects and nations are dissolved. As paint is dissolved from a ship at port. The unconscious and the sea have always been associated. The objects displayed also possess surrealistic characteristics. They seem disconnected, but connected, strangely symbolic, an internal logic akin to dreams. The amount of possible connections could result in some sort of *shock effect* or short-circuiting. The idea of convulsive beauty is a concept I find relevant in this context, was coined by André Breton:

*“Beauty is like a train that ceaselessly roars out of the Gare de Lyon and which I know will never leave, which has not left. It consists of jolts and shocks, many of which do not have much importance, but which we know are destined to produce one Shock, which does...The human heart, beautiful as a seismograph...Beauty will be CONVULSIVE or will not be at all.”*⁵

5 André Breton; "Nadja"

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