THE 'FINISHED' WORK
OF ART
IS A THING OF THE PAST

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At the close of this century we are witnessing a major change in how value is determined. The value of material wealth is giving way to the value of information. In this time of transition, these apparently incongruous value systems mix and form hybrid systems for determining value. Unique, precious material objects still hold their value; some actually increase in value in a relatively short time. Information that is useful but scarce is also valuable. Scarcity, even in an era marked by an abundance of information, is still a key factor in determining value. Those who hold valuable information may still wish to maintain exclusive, proprietary control—to increase the life of the information. Information is subject to decay or aging. Information is not inexhaustible. It may revert to data, the raw material from which it is formed. How and when information is maintained and released is determined by those in control; those who initially recognize its value, manage it and operate with it accordingly.

Contemporary art is part of an emerging sector of the economy called information and knowledge. Knowledge-workers create information for others to use. Worker in this case does not imply those who act only upon the instructions of others, knowledge-workers think for themselves. They know things that others do not know. They solve problems or help others solve problems. Knowledge-workers produce information, they transform data into information—distinguishing key aspects of disorder through the discovery and/or imposition of form. Artists fit nicely into this description of knowledge-worker. Contemporary artists, curators, critics and art historians are the knowledge-workers who form the contemporary art domain of the new sector of the economy called information and knowledge.

CONTEMPORARY ART MUST BE SEEN AS INFORMATION TO BE OF VALUE

The product of the knowledge-worker is information. The product of the artist is art. In an economy where value is determined by information and knowledge, art must be seen as information to be of value. The process of creating information requires a set of skills, methods developed through higher education and experience. Creative processes, in their most basic forms, can be taught and learned. Creative processes thus become products themselves. Although these creative processes have universal characteristics, creative work is messy, chaotic and mysterious. In art schools experienced artists attempt to teach young, emerging artists how to work, how to create art.

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Audiences for art (the consumers of art) have to be creative themselves to find the products of artists valuable. If the work of art is an object, then an audience has to be able to decode the object to extract information encoded in it. This participatory investment is most commonly described as interpretation. Interpretation, besides being an intellectual exercise, is an intuitive, subjective process verging on psychic identification. Essentially, the work of art is performed by the audience, who retrace the creative processes of the artist through a kind of virtual creative process. Galleries and museums focus the attention of audiences on objects of art in isolation: the 'white cube' removes the art work from the world at large and permits the work's aura to be witnessed in a quiet contemplative serenity; that is, conducive to psychic identification. With contemporary art, curators and critics offer their assistance in this information exchange. Dealers and artists themselves also go to great lengths to help audiences find ways of relating to objects of art. The dealer loves and respects his or her artists; the artists display their personalities in public appearances, offering clues for interpreting (identifying with) their works.

The art object described above is a material manifestation of vision and thought; the artist sees and thinks and completes the creative process by fixing his or her perceptions and experience in material form. Traditional forms—painting and sculpture—have been extended through photography and architectural manipulations (installation), including attempts to integrate information technology (video and computer-integrated media). Over time there have been attempts to shake up the whole system of material, object-based art. Ideas have become accepted as art (conceptual and neo-conceptual art) and performance art and other kinds of 'live' events (some via telecommunications) have been introduced to the world as art; performance art often centers on the physical reality of the body itself. These conceptual and 'live' forms have found more receptive audiences in public spaces not defined as art spaces. When artists move into public spaces they find that audiences in these neutral spaces invest in their work differently. They are not interested in history, not even in recent history. They are interested in today; the experience at the moment of exposure.

The problem with the conceptual or live forms has been economic. How can one exchange art to economic advantage if there is no adequate system of currency, an accepted symbolic medium of exchange? Part of this economic problem is due to the fleeting, immaterial and impermanent nature of conceptual and live forms. The work does not manifest itself as a currency for exchange. There is no accumulation of material history. This has led to an obsession with documentation (catalogues, interviews, photography, video, CD's, CD-ROM's) and the indirect commodification of live forms through mementos or souvenirs (limited edition prints or drawings or other unique material objects deriving from the production process).

An emerging solution to problem is apparent in the recent proliferation of immaterial objects. Open-ended, 'living objects', or more precisely 'living systems' are now being produced under the generic description of software. Living systems, such as expert systems or other manifestations of artificial intelligence/perception/experience, while in their primitive stages of development, present a very serious challenge to fixed or 'finished' art as we know it today. Artists working in live forms will first collaborate with the experts who make immaterial objects (multimedia programmers), then they will learn how to author these living systems themselves.

THE LIVING ARTIST'S BODY OF WORK IS NEVER 'FINISHED'

Let us return to what we understand fully. When we visit a museum or gallery and view objects of art, an aspect of the interpretative process is based on knowing when and where the object was made. Art works by living artists have to be viewed differently than works by deceased artists. Curators, critics, art historians, dealers and artists always point out the importance of knowing the entire body of an artist's work when one is attempting to decode a single, discrete object of art. When an artist dies, his or her body of work is complete. Each object is then a fixed component of a body of work, complete in and of itself. The living artist's body of work is an open-ended, expanding work-in-progress and therefore each single, discrete object of art is part of the body of the unfinished work-in-progress. An audience interpreting such unfinished work must update the work with more rigor than they update the 'finished' works of deceased artists.

The work of dead artists can be decoded for information it provides about a specific period of time (the past). While the works of certain deceased artists sustain their value as information and therefore increase in value as material objects, this value is based in their concreteness and ironically the fragility of their finite material reality. A painting from the 17th century can afford to look dated. Audiences are not so kind when viewing contemporary art by living artists.

INFORMATION IS THE PERCEPTION AND EXPERIENCE OF DIFFERENCE

Contemporary works of art are valued most if they appear to be up-to-date. The fresh 'new look' always has value. Hot new work by young artists, or brand new twists in new works by established artists, have the look or appearance of information. New technologies are great for achieving the 'new look' and for creating the 'look of information', whether or not the work achieves value as information. Contemporary artists, young and established, compete for the most up-to-date look. Appearance is a territory. Curators, critics, art historians, dealers, collectors and artists participate in this search for contemporary artists who distinguish themselves as being hip (informed) through the look of their work. Audiences are exposed to the newest, most informed work, and they verify through their ex-

citement and energy if the work is charged with information value. The new look can never be predictable. Information is always a perception and an experience of difference. It must come as a surprise. The most unlikely things slam together to become information. Often it is impossible to explain why specific works are so information rich. All information is time sensitive and in a very short time the new look becomes tired and old. A work by a living artist that has gone out of fashion is practically lifeless (95% dead).

The 'new look' can be easily dismissed as the primary attribute of superficial art or shallow art that will quickly fall out of fashion. Surely an art work of real depth will stand the test of time. Deep works are structured so their information is released slowly, over the long run. Usually these deep works are seen to function as universal knowledge structures. Universal works of art defy identification with a specific time or place. But from another perspective, perhaps the deepest works of art are constructed to be totally devoid of information, thereby functioning as attractors of layer upon layer of incomplete interpretation, an ongoing investment of intellect.

Speculation on how a particular work of art will function in terms of information can be addressed by asking three questions of any work of art:

1. Is the work of art loaded with information?
2. Is the work of art totally devoid of information?
3. Does the work of art transform data into information?

The first question asks if the audience is informed by the work? Does the work offer a rich field of information and knowledge to the viewer? Can the viewer learn and take something useful away from the experience of the work? The second question asks if the work of art defies those who would try to extract information from it? Such a work could be labelled anti-information. It offers no information and literally rejects all associations with information. The third question reintroduces the term data, the raw substance from which information is created. Artists as knowledge-workers distinguish aspects of disorder, previously indistinguishable data, with form. They perceive difference, significant difference, and construct situations (frequently in or through the use of material objects) where information can be produced by the audience. Does the work of art transform the data in the field around it, which is constantly changing, into information? These three questions can be asked of both material and immaterial works.

IDENTITY IS ADDRESS
IN THE TERRITORY OF APPEARANCE

One single critical problem emerges from this period of chaotic transition. How can a work of art be updated so it does not lose its value in such a volatile information environment? Information (and certainly art in an information age) has a very short life. Contemporary art begins to fade immediately after it

is exposed to an audience. The living artist updates his or her body of work through subsequent releases of new work. The living body of work is continually updated through twists and turns, rather than reversals in direction. The thread of consistency, aesthetic logic, must remain unbroken. At the core of the living artist's evolving work there must be a redundancy of form and a consistency in the method by which disorder is processed into form. This redundancy of form and method creates a recognizable identity. This identity is the address of the work—the site of information. An evolving body of work has no fixed address except its recognizable appearance. Identity is address in the territory of appearance.

The stability created by one's own history (a body of finished art works) produces the artist's address in the trans-spatial territory of appearance—his or her identity. This address, while necessary for recognition, unfortunately prescribes the parameters of new works. All mature artists with considerable bodies of work eventually fall victim to the weight of their own history. They must continuously update what they do while remaining consistent with their past work. In fact a common strategy in the 20th century has been to remain completely consistent—to repeat the same information as art over and over and over. In a 21st century culture, value will be determined increasingly by the freshness or newness of information, and this vitality of information will be based on the timely, continuous introduction of apparent new qualities. Stability, unless it is poetic ("poetry is news that stays news", Ezra Pound), will not be a positive attribute in an environment characterized by continuous change. The difference between poetic stability and mundane redundancy is that poetic information is volatile in its own way.

ETHERIAL CULTURE IS GROUNDED, MADE CONCRETE, IN ITS AUDIENCE

In a digital era immaterial 'objects' are increasingly prevalent, but their function will initially differ little from their material predecessors. They are carriers or rejectors of information, or transformers of data into information. As immaterial objects of art, they function best in virtual spaces. Where museums and galleries are physical architectural sites best suited for the public presentation of material objects of art, immaterial objects function best on networks—virtual public spaces that connect private spaces. At the turn of the century, there will be an increasingly more complete synthesis of material and immaterial objects, of physical and virtual architectures, of value systems based on dichotomies of scarcity and abundance, material wealth and information wealth. Mixed economies, perceptions and experience will countervail to produce radical new hybrids.

The stable, poetic information structure of an ambiguous artwork yields information through the creative efforts of its audience. The audience interprets (participates, interacts with) the work to create information. The chief edge that immaterial objects have over material objects is their potential for direct,

active participation and interactive manipulation by audiences. Immaterial objects fly back and forth across networks at the speed of light into private spaces where audiences can manipulate and modify identical, digital copies of original art works, updating these works as their information is consumed, or more correctly, processed. This is why interactivity is such an obsession in computer-integrated media. The whole digital arts sector is completely chaotic and volatile except for the potential of societal integration via networks and connectivity.

Ethereal culture is grounded, made concrete, in its audience. Works of art in the immaterial domain are never finished, they are simply introduced (initialized) and placed (contextualized) for participation and interaction: the audience may add to, alter, customize, pass on, subtract from the work, etc. The identity or address of the work is therefore shared by the artist and the audience. The artist, of course, may choose to revisit any or all of his or her own works for revision in such an interactive environment.

This updating process—where the artist sends instructions for transforming his or her entire existing body of work by adding, subtracting...emphasizing, amplifying...twisting, tweaking, reversing, transposing...recontextualizing, destroying...(you name it)—is how attractiveness, vitality and ultimately value will be maintained and recreated in the new information economy. The artist will no longer simply be as good as his or her latest work. Instead, the artist's work will only be as valuable as it is up-to-date. Works of art previously valued because they represented concretely the perception and experience of a particular, fixed period of time will have to be updated and at least partially reformed to maintain their value as information. The artist, while living, will participate in this updating process with his or her audience: curators, critics, art historians and anyone else with access to the work.

RADIO AND TELEVISION AND TELECOMMUNICATIONS-BASED MULTIMEDIA CONTINUE TO UNDERMINE 'FINISHED' ART

For the roughly seventy years that art has coexisted with instantaneously updatable electronic media (radio, then television and most recently telecommunications-based multimedia), artists have functioned primarily as reactionary figures, producing material history valued largely because of its stability and strong ties to the past. Things are far more complex in the 1990's. Today artists are moving in two completely opposite directions, determining and fulfilling the criteria of two incongruous value systems. For some, value is determined by establishing and dating 'finished' works of art—setting up stable structures designed to hold and perhaps increase their value as they recede into the past. For others, art is valuable only if it is current—existing as a living system, characteristically fluid or 'liquid' in nature. Building in mechanisms for updating works of art, such as interactive mechanisms, is a strategy for maintaining and recreating the value of art as information. In such interactive works

the potential interval frequency of revision will become the primary factor for determining value.

In between these divergent value systems there is a broad spectrum of hybrids. Paradoxically these include traditional material objects that function as highly sophisticated information generators and immaterial objects structured as 'poetry' which stand rock solid against the swirling, chaotic patterns of change. Art that produces information, transforming data into information in its relationship with audience, is always a living system (whether concrete and solid, fluid and liquid, or fleeting and etherial). The contemporary artist and his or her audience breathe life into such systems, or more precisely each distinct 'species' of living system. The evolving living works of a living artists naturally defy completion and stasis and death (and ultimately extinction—being discarded and forgotten). One emerging strategy for survival is to build in mechanisms for updating. Making interactive works that are updated as they are used certainly has potential as a survival strategy.

Programming interactivity is all about the potential for sustaining the life of the work; making updatable art invites the audience (including the artist) to participate in creating the future of the work. This contrasts with the usual abandonment of the 'finished' work of art. As we look back at 'finished' works of art, left behind to sustain themselves (in special vaults, the 'white cubes') against the ravages of time, it is clear that the 'finished' work of art is a thing of the past.

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