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## The Digital Aesthetics of Climate Crisis

During the last year (2009-2010) we have witnessed a big wave of interest in the climate crisis building up towards COP15 and quickly fading again after the failure to reach a binding agreement. Digital climate art was part of this wave, but is digital climate art only a politically correct, green-washing court jester, or does it have a more essential role to play? Does media reflexive digital art have a special role in the climate debate, and how can the climate crisis be articulated through digital art as an artistic and aesthetic problem? Is there a new genre of digital climate art, and if so, how can it be characterized and critically discussed?

Climate change is not only a difficult subject for making politics but also for making art. First, it is a very complex issue that goes deep into the roots of the concepts and dichotomies through which we normally understand reality, e.g. nature vs. culture, reality vs. representation, surroundings vs. technology. Second, there seems to be a difficulty in finding the criteria for evaluating and discussing digital climate art. The climate debate, meanwhile, has developed from being a scientific discussion in climate research to also being a political and cultural discussion, which opens the arena for art (Kovats & Munz, 2009; Witzke & Hede, 2009). I will suggest that the role of digital climate art is indeed to explore the new and prevalent complexities that climate change puts on the agenda along two lines, which may overlap and be interrelated in many existing art works: The epistemological and the political.

The epistemological has to do with the current changes of our environment due to technology either as unforeseen results (e.g. pollution, disruption of ecological balances) or as new ways to see, interpret and master nature (e.g. measuring global warming, CO<sub>2</sub>). In this way the climate crisis is related to our developing interface culture. The climate crisis points to a contemporary crisis of representation we already know from computer interfaces and which is inherent to – and often articulated in – digital art. From this perspective the climate crisis is related to a techno-cultural development around digitization with slogans like ubiquitous, embedded and mobile computing. It is an epistemological problem related to how we perceive and interact (sic!) with the world through interfaces, which overlaps with the political: With the climate crisis we are trying to recognize and deal with something, which we

see some early signs of but will have to act upon before it is too late and the evidence becomes clear. We still mainly perceive climate change through mediation, as statistical forecasts, scientific models and visualizations, whereas when I look out my window it is still uncertain whether the weather I experience is related to the climate crisis. We cannot perceive the CO<sub>2</sub> level or its effects with our immediate senses, thus we have to turn to the interfaces of instruments, technology and science in order to recognize the extent of the crisis. As such, climate change introduces us to the fact that our immediate environment, the weather and climate, are becoming mediated, even in the deep country, when there are no computers or interfaces in sight!

This epistemological challenge is however crucial to critical digital art, which (especially in its media-reflexive periods from early computer art to net art, software art, hacktivism and locative media art) has revolved around exploring the hidden, invisible, unreadable processes and algorithms within software and reflecting upon the aesthetic, cultural, political dimensions of this. Digital art has often asked questions about the nature of the computer as an “instrumental medium” that combines electronic executive signals and interpretable signs at its interface (Nake, 2000; Pold, Forthcoming (2010)). Such a (political, critical, cultural) reflection is now of primary relevance for the climate crisis and for the way we experience climate change. On one hand, digital art might help ‘educating’ our perception towards a situation where it becomes vital for our survival to interpret and act upon mediated and highly complex signs; on the other hand, digital art might bring forth critical discussions on the computation and construction of mediated perception. We need to understand both the new post climate-crisis environment and how technology is part of this, and even plays a dubious double role – both as a necessary precondition for recognition and as part of the problem. Furthermore, we need to understand how to act politically in such a situation. How do we develop social, political and cultural forms that can discuss, negotiate and take action faced with the climate crisis where the best solutions might be complicated, unpopular, hypothetic, long and far-reaching beyond our own generation and our immediate fellow citizens?

As proved by the failures of COP15, these problems are still urgent and will not disappear even if we currently mainly deal with them by looking the other way. The epistemological and political challenges of the climate crisis are challenges for a digital climate art – a climate art 2.0, if you wish – without a yearning for unspoiled nature but realizing that we live in an interface culture where our relations to our surroundings (both natural and social) are inherently mediated and ‘interfaced’.

### References

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