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The Coded Aesthetic Experience

Manovich (L.M. 2010, 4/16) asserts that complexity is the new visual art paradigm and supports this with reference to digital art that transfers ideas and techniques from scientific research or is inspired by the “historically specific imagination” of 19th and 20th century art and science (L.M. 2010, 13/16). A factor related to the rise of complexity is literacy. We suggest that the traditional sense of literacy is fundamental to making, and making sense of, digital art.

Dobson and Willinsky claim that the written and printed word is ubiquitous.

“What is literally digital about literacy today is how much of what is read and written has been electronically conveyed as binary strings of ones and zeros, before appearing as letters, words, numbers, symbols, and images on the screens and pages of our literate live [...]. Yet what we see of this literacy is remarkably continuous with the literacy of print culture, right down to the very serifs that grace many of the fonts of digital literacy.” (T.D. & J.W. 2010)

Indeed, various user-generated content show that the internet is text-based. “Texting” increasingly dominates mobile communications. Reading technologies, i.e. e-readers, are redefining books. Yet, the reliance on the word has not diminished. Print remains the dominant form of communication and evaluation.

The purpose of this paper is to explore these claims within the context of digital art. The authors focus on what is entailed in learning about programming to experience “Microcodes” (P.T. 2009). Do viewers’ understanding of code enhance their aesthetic experience to allow for a level of complexity?

We probed these questions in two ways. While Thayer tried to guide Dubinsky through the fundamentals of programming, the two were engaged in a dialogue about aesthetics and literacy.

Questions raised were: a) How does code art fit into the wider scope of contemporary art? b) Why should people want to make an effort to engage with programming code? c) How do the Microcodes embody code as an expressive medium? In this paper we discuss some implications of the exercise and advance two interpretive strategies for attending to what we call the coded aesthetic experience. (L.D. & P.T. 2010)

At this juncture Dubinsky cannot fully access or appreciate the Microcodes as an active user. A further investment of effort seems the only alternative. Such commitment comes with questions that continue to inform, but also can hobble, the visual arts, digital or not. For example, isn't art expected to stand on its own and not require a private language or a skill to decipher it? Or are the Microcodes a case where deciphering is the aesthetic experience? Viewers may have the requisite skills or elect to become literate in this circumstance by building on existing ability to communicate with text.

Any art work is subject to interpretation whether it appeals to sensorial experience or meaning making. Written and spoken words convey an interpretation, but other forms of expression may at times be more appropriate. We conclude with two strategies for interpretation. The artist provided the first:

If we don't make the code part of the work visible, we have no-one but ourselves to blame if our work is interpreted as something other than what we intended. It similarly follows that as long as we keep hiding the code, those who come to experience our work will never manage to develop a proper language of interpretation. We can try to counter misinterpretation or incomplete interpretation by providing explanatory texts. But this might wipe out any possibility of ambiguity and leave suggestions to become mere statements. The aesthetic experience offered retains its qualities only if the onus is on the viewer to glean this information directly from a combined examination of the work. (P.T. 2008)

Bruner's (J.B. 1962, p.59) four aspects of experiencing art provide the second:

a) the connecting of experience that is the reward for grasping a work of art, b) the manner in which achieving understanding of a poem or picture requires an expression of human effort, c) what is moving about experiencing an object of beauty, and d) wherein lies the generality of that which we find beautiful.

Each can be applied to experiencing code-based art like other visual art. If there is an aesthetics of complexity particular to digital media, there also remain universal conditions related to literacy. Bruner emphasizes that experiencing art requires work. This need not be laborious even if learning code is central to the experience.

Bruner wrote about beauty in the early 1960s when it was a dominant aesthetic ideal. Our modern frenetic and fractious age suggests that other at-

tributes may be appropriate. Bruner allows for routes of engagement that easily apply to code-based and digital art. He writes about "the construction and exploitation of the category of possibility, the formulated but empty category through which we search out new experience." (J.B. 1962, p.61)

Representations are the very stuff of art. We began with concerns about literacy and digital art. Microcodes suggest that there is something more here than just computer programming. Many of the codes do not appear to "do" anything when they are run. Yet, we can see that they are providing instruction; they suggest a possibility or complexity, rather than explicit instruction. They invite viewers to understand a set of representations and to make sense of coded aesthetic experiences.

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