

DIGITAL ART AND CULTURE AFTER INDUSTRY? – TOWARDS AESTHETIC BUSINESS STUDIES

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The article discusses art's potential to critically probe new media economies and sometimes even develop new economies. With references to theoretical concepts from early marxist art theory it focuses on digital art, where the production, distribution, showing and selling has become part of the artistic work. The main example is *Electroboutique* (Chernyshev, Shulgin et al.), a series of works that address the current value of critical art.



Fig. 1. The exterior of the *Electroboutique* by Chernyshev & Shulgin, Trondheim, Norway, 2009.



Fig. 2. *Commercial Protest* (from *Electroboutique* by Chernyshev & Shulgin): A viewer sees her own portrait as a mosaic made out of transnational company logos.



Fig. 3. wowPod (from *Electroboutique* by Chernyshev & Shulgin): a huge distorted but still functioning iPod.

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Who dominates in this country without morals, without faith, without any feeling; and from where do all feelings, all beliefs and all manners come, and where do they end? Gold and pleasure. Take these two words as guiding lights and travel through this great plaster cage, this beehive of black streams, and follow the serpents of this thought that agitates and lifts the work. You see. Examine first the world that has nothing. (Honoré de Balzac, *La Comédie humaine, Scènes de la vie parisienne*)

We live in a so-called 'new economy' and this is nothing new. New economies have emerged, boomed and crashed several times. Art and culture have played prominent roles in such new economies, from the 1880's panormania to the various new media crazes during the last 30 years. Art often serves as the backdrop to champagne soirées and helps the nouveau riche establish themselves and gain some cultural capital during economic boom periods. In many instances this leads to a rather traditional, mainstream and sometimes even pre-modern view on aesthetics, far from the ruptures of contemporary art and aesthetics. A central example would be the concept of experience economy that Joseph Pine II and James H. Gilmore launched in the late 1990s. [1] If one looks at Pine and Gilmore's concept of aesthetics it borders on the escapist and is characterized by immersion and passive participation. Their principal guidelines are "Theme the experience", "Harmonize impressions with positive cues" and "Eliminate negative cues", and their primary examples are Disneyland, Las Vegas and the Hard Rock Café. [2]

However, art's most valuable contribution is perhaps not the icing on the cake or the aesthetic harmonizing of contradictions, but exactly the opposite: the ruptures, disruptions, clashes and breakdowns – all the ways that contemporary art explores things, situations and constellations that break apart, contain paradoxes or contradictions in relation to business. In many ways this seems to be the drive when "avant-garde becomes software," [3] net-art becomes web design or software art invades the app store. Instead of arguing that art might be a means to serve economic ends, we should ask whether the economy could potentially become artistic in some way.

Actually, we see traces of this already happening. When a cultural content industry, such as the music industry, is in crisis and its business model is deteriorating because of dwindling CD sales, competition from easy web-based distribution and copying, then both new and major acts bypass the industry by carrying out the marketing and distribution themselves, using the web and social networks. Instead of an industry of major record labels handling the relationship between artists and audiences, this becomes part of the artistic work defying industrial standards and forming less standardized and industrialized relations between artists and audiences. In fact, the business model, including how to finance, market, distribute and profit from the content, becomes part of the artwork and it becomes part of the artistic statement to question common models. This is of course helped by lowering production costs, easy networked distribution, new relations between artist/author and audience/consumers mediated by more flexible, dynamic or situational artworks. These new relations between artists and audiences are also indicated by diverse but related concepts such as “relational aesthetics,” [4] the “craft consumer,” [5] Free Software production and Free Culture including a culture of modification and remix. [6]

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Consequently, it becomes evident that art’s relation to the market and economy is part of the artistic development and innovation, but this also means that art becomes ‘about’ the economy in a more direct way. How should we interpret this, how do we learn from it, and how do we develop aesthetic business studies?

In order to look into this, we first need to introduce a few theoretical concepts from early marxist art theory, because here we can find positions that discuss how art can potentially play a critical, constructive, progressive, if not revolutionary, role. In the 1930s materialist art theoreticians such as Georg Lukács and Walter Benjamin were discussing how the change in the base, or “Unterbau”, of reproduction technologies affected the superstructure, or “Überbau”, of culture, economy and thinking, and how art could respond to this. A prime example is Georg Lukács’ reading of Honoré de Balzac’s *Illusions perdues*, which he sees as a novel about how literature becomes part of a capitalistic production process, and he discusses how this becomes a theme in terms of both form and content in the novel. The novel explores relations between developments in printing technology (personified by the printer and inventor David Séchard), book trade and the failure of romantic poetry (personified by the main character, the failed poet Lucien de Rubempré). As such, it is a novel about the commodification of literature and the capitalization of the mind (“Geist”). It is, however, not just a product of this, but rather a media-realistic, disillusioned although clear-sighted, literary exploration demonstrating relations between the base, the superstructure and literary strategies in this changing economy; and it does this through the literary form of the novel (e.g. the portrayal of the main characters, the use of melodrama, etc.). It is an example of a conscious exploration of a new discourse economy, exploring how material changes influence the formal conditions of the artwork. [7] The main character and poet, Lucien de Rubempré, becomes disillusioned, but the novel develops a view on the literary market and contemporary society through its development of an alternative formal, novelistic language.

With his concept of “Tendenz” (tendency) Benjamin also argues for a formal relationship between art and the production process in a way that might help elucidate how art can function as a probe for investigating change. Technological revolutions in media lead to fractures in artworks and art history, making the deep “Tendenz” visible. [8] In this way, the normally hidden, deeply layered fractures, constellations or contradictions become observable if probed by art. Furthermore, while constructing a marxist dialectic view on art history, Benjamin is clearly not interested in ‘politically correct’ literature and art:

...rather than asking, 'What is the attitude of a work to the relations of production of its time?' I would like to ask, 'What is its position *in* them?' This question directly concerns the function the work has within the literary relations of production of its time. It is concerned, in other words, directly with the literary *technique* of works. [9]

In continuation of these arguments by Lukács and Benjamin it is important that art is not created uncritically on the premises of media and economy but that it seeks a conscious, reflective and critical exploration, and this has of course become even more relevant with the rising importance of media. How the production process and market relations are positioned *in* the work is what to look for, rather than the work's attitude to the market and media. Contrary to the view on art and aesthetics promoted by Pine and Gilmore, we should look for art which focuses on the fractures that reveal deeper tendencies (Tendenz) when carrying out aesthetic business studies. Or, in other words, as suggested by the initial quotation from Balzac, follow the money; if not to collect it, then to see which new routes it takes and to observe the creatures and creations it passes by.

ELECTROBOUTIQUE

Let us start our aesthetic business studies and look briefly at some relevant art. Under the concepts "Media Art 2.0" and "Electroboutique" a group of artists, including Aristarkh Chernyshev and Alexei Shulgin, have made a series of artworks – each produced in a "limited number of copies (like Ferrari)" and sold "at affordable prices (like Sony)" – which they show and sell at galleries, festivals, museums and on-line, often installed in a shop-like environment. [10] The intention of the project is to create opportunities for new media art in galleries and museums, which have often neglected it because of technical difficulties and its immaterial character, making it difficult to exhibit and sell. Furthermore, many of the *Electroboutique* works also perform a humorous and poignant criticism of the (art) market and the relation between art and design.

One of these pieces, *Commercial Protest*, which is a flat screen TV equipped with a live camera contained in a shopping cart, showing the captured images – e.g. images of the viewer – as company logos, is introduced in this way:

It is difficult to protest these days against capitalism, especially if you are a member of capitalist society and enjoy all its benefits. Any convincing form of protest very soon gets appropriated by the system and starts being used for its sake: in politics, in advertisement, in design, etc. But we want to protest! – and offer the new, realistic form: *Commercial Protest*. We protest in the form of a critical but/and commercially suitable artwork. *Commercial Protest* reveals the essence of modern people; – it shows what we are all made of. A viewer sees her own portrait as a mosaics made out of transnational companies logos (variant: consumer goods). These images are globally recognizable and constitute the visual language of today. The supermarket cart that contains the TV set emphasizes the ugliness of the ultimately consumerist world. We protest against such state of things with this piece and set a fair price on it. [11]

It is obvious that this is a criticism of consumerism, which is paradoxically packaged as a nice, fairly-priced art object for galleries and collectors who can see themselves as live logo portraits. The irony is, of course, an integral part of the artwork, where the artist realizes that "criticism in art becomes an aesthetic category and eventually acquires itself the features of a consumer project," [12] and, as such, critical art becomes a brand in the art market. However, it is not only ironic but also a comment on a situa-

tion where software art is not accepted by the large institutions that still need objects, though the experimental and experiential dimensions of software have become an important part of the market, e.g. in smartphone app stores. Much commercial design is driven by innovations in art: however, artists often do not get a share of the revenue, especially in the copy-paste culture of new media. With this in mind, *Electroboutique* openly copies concepts from not only art history, including Russian Constructivism, and media art in the tradition of Nam June Paik or Jenny Holzer, but also from design icons, and relaunches them as new artworks – a good example being the huge distorted but still functioning iPod, *wowPod*, or the various distorted television remakes.

In short, we will point to the following tendencies guided by *Electroboutique*:

- The recuperation of critical art by design and the market, which *Electroboutique* answers by recuperating commercial aesthetics and rhetoric. This is done in a sincere, manifest and, to some extent, successful attempt to sell art and make a living, which is again creating some provocation in the new media art ghetto – e.g. when it was presented at the transmediale festival, Berlin, 2008. Recuperation is not new, neither in art nor design, but *Electroboutique* highlights its way of working by using it artistically and by recuperating design in media art for sale.
- Fractures between the immaterial and the object or between software and hardware in the art market and in the general economy – in this case, handled and highlighted by constructing object-based software art. This both mimics the more traditional contemporary art world alienated by new media art, such as net-art and software art, and alienates parts of the new media art scene; though more former net-artists are following the same route (cf. e.g. the attempt to enter new media art into the contemporary art scene of the Brussels art fair with the exhibition *Holy Fire*). [13] It is hardware-based art building on insights from software art, especially around the visual culture of interfaces, as stated in one of the manifestos: “We live in a world of visual interfaces. Televisions, print advertisements, politics, shop-windows, show-business, internet services, bank systems are primarily interfaces whose task is to shape the process of information transfer and the translation of ideas. Working with visual interfaces, we make them visible and tangible. We uncover the structures of today’s world.” [14] As such, *Electroboutique* smuggles software art into the art world disguised as artistic objects.

Of course many other examples could be made pointing towards these and more contemporary tendencies, but we hope you get the general idea: art has the potential to simultaneously question and develop the economy. There is a straight line from *wowPod* to iPad, and to the future of sculptured and visually attractive entertainment centres from Apple that will replace our TVs and hi-fis, or from *Commercial Protest* to the narcissistic self-promotion through one's iPhone and the many branded platforms on Web2.0 (just start watching how portraits mix with brands and logos on an average Facebook page...). As Piero Manzoni has already demonstrated with his *Merda d'Artista* in 1961, which was 30 cans of artist's shit sold at the equivalent price of gold, the artist is the modern day alchemist making artificial gold. However, the smell of it, or its non-existent traditional use value, also casts a critical light on the virtual foundation of our money-based capitalistic economy. The main point is to focus on how art develops an artistic economy, and thereby reflects critically on the current economy while developing alternatives. As Shulgin himself puts it: “Contemporary art has got one more function. It finds out the possible borders of consuming.” [15]

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