Chapter 2
Digital Art and Cultural Commentary

Introduction

This chapter establishes grounds for perceiving digital art as a critical voice—one that can facilitate both personal and affective responses to globalisation. It posits that digital art is borne of a turbulent era, sharing an intimate history with globalisation. This chapter shows how art can function as a platform for cultural commentary. It also provides means for considering and contextualising the digital art case studies presented within the text (Fig. 2.1).

The first part of this chapter foregrounds the emergence of digital art through discussing art’s capacity to articulate and respond to, technological change. Digital art is contextualised in terms of earlier styles of expression, ranging from Modern cinema to 1960s technological art. The impacts of digitisation and the Internet upon artistic production, experience and display are then examined. This chapter explores how digital art both challenges—and confirms—earlier artistic practices and discourses. It also shows how digital technology can be used to generate diverse styles of art, with varying levels of interactivity and immersion.

Art and Technological Change

Some seventy years before the advent of digitisation, Walter Benjamin observed how ‘the work of art of the Dadaists became an instrument of ballistics. It hit the spectator like a bullet, it happened to him, thus acquiring a tactile quality.’1 Their art generated affective responses to emotive subjects such as war, class conflict and political change. Feelings of shock and repulsion were often conjured by Dadaism and Situationism. These movements continue to influence digital works of art, with disjunction and self-reflexion often apparent.

As cultural theorist Frederic Jameson observed, Modern expression presented ‘fragmented senses of the world.’\(^2\) One Modernist technique that features strongly in digital art is montage. Montage emerged as a form of cultural backlash in its critique of conservative bourgeois tastes. It was deliberately ‘ugly, dissonant, bohemian, sexually shocking’.\(^3\) Using irony and irreverence, many Modern artists countered the neo-Platonic ideals of their predecessors, namely the notion that art should capture aesthetic ‘truth’ and the sublime. Artists like Marcel Duchamp reflected this dissidence in his work through manipulating or destroying their art materials.\(^4\)

As Lisa Saltzman writes, Modern art—like digital art—was irrevocably tied to its moment of production. The devastation of World War I produced some art that was ‘driven in its acts of repression and denial to re-create itself according to an idealized notion of the past rather than create itself anew after acknowledging and mourning its losses.’\(^5\) However, artists and filmmakers like Pablo Picasso and Fritz Lang used feelings of destitution despair as catalysts for innovation. Picasso’s painting *Guernica* and Lang’s film *Metropolis*, for example, appeared as what cultural theorist Guy Debord termed ‘art in the epoch of its dissolution’\(^6\) or ‘the pure ex-

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pression of impossible change.’ In similar ways, many digital artists use Modern principles of disruption, civil disobedience, dislocation and juxtaposition create anti-aesthetics, which challenge traditional Academy art. Andrew Darley argues that digital technology ‘tends much more to foreground itself as a technique within the work itself—thereby linking itself to anti- or counter-realist forms’.8

Another way that digital art responds to earlier practices is through the incorporation of political protest, and adaptation of popular media ranging from poster art to advertising, film and photography. Modern cinema, in particular, has strong resonances with digital art. Geraldine Pratt and Rose Marie San Juan contend that Modern cinema shows some of the earliest articulations of virtual, immersive and experiential affects. The writers see strong similarities between Modern film and digital expression, arguing that cinema and cyberspace produce comparable effects of dislocation and disembodiment, arguably privileging the visual as a way to simulate proximity without physical presence, and thus transforming the relationship between subject and object of viewing in particular ways.9

Michael Heim shares this view, in claiming that

[e]xiting a movie theatre resembles somewhat the exit from a virtual world. After hours immersed in screen adventures, you emerge from the dark to blinding bright daylight. The sensory shock brings with it a residual emotional tone aroused by the film.10

While Pratt and San Juan describe digital impacts in terms of Modern film elements such as detached proximity and disembodiment, many digital artists show to the contrary, how digital technology can re-engage the body, through conjuring senses of physical immersion, interaction and intimacy. Joanna Berzowska’s tactile and responsive garments—explored in detail in Chapter Seven—show digital technology to be personal, sensory and feminising.

Mark Nunes posits that the awareness of digitisation’s spatial, temporal and kinetic impacts is comparable to earlier technological responses. In his text Cyberspaces of Everyday Life,11 Nunes offers an analysis of analogue and digital technological affects. He compares the development of the British mail service to the rise of email, in terms of popular shifts in the cognition of nearness, distance and space.12 Yet despite similarities, the scale of digital affects is unique. It is a key distinction to make, because it establishes one argument about the comparative nature of digital and analogue affects, and another about the level of impact.

7 Guy Debord, The Society of the Spectacle, p. 30.
12 Mark Nunes, Cyberspaces of Everyday Life.
The Modern concept of art ‘happening’ and generating physical responses is resonant with digital art. The digital collaboration iCinema, for example, employ earlier principles of space, time and narrative in their works, which are then reformulated through digital technology. In their installation *T_Visionarium II*, which is closely examined in ‘Chapter Five’, high levels of interaction, immersion and response confront the user. A generative surround sound system, tactile and responsive interface and evolving graphical system, which is sensitive to the user’s line of sight, enables *T_Visionarium II* to transcend the limits of Modern cinema, through transforming the physically passive art spectator into an active user.

**Digital Art Terminologies**

Just as the isolation of digital expression from the field of art is problematic, so is the elevation of it to a separate domain. This action would reflect technological determinist assumptions, underscored by the sense that media art is fundamentally different or ‘new’. This notion pervades the writings of Marshall McLuhan and Lev Manovich, and is evident in early net.art expressions, explored further in Chapter Four. As a formalist idea, technological determinism privileges digital form over content, valuing digital media for its own sake. It is shaded by the ideal that digital art is a novel and form of creative expression. Technological determinist accounts view analogue and ‘old school’ formats as static, outmoded and corrupt. Digital media triumphs as the vanguard technology: capable of exhilarating speeds.

Lev Manovich writes that ‘those of us who work with digital art often debate another convergence – the convergence between art world and computer world’.13 Manovich creates a binary between what he terms ‘Duchamp-land’ and ‘Turing-land’,14 and argues that in Duchamp-land, an art object is defined by the criticism it provokes, which can be prompted by its ‘literally destructive attitude towards its material, i.e., its technology’.15 ‘Turing-land’, however, is diametrically opposed. It emphasizes the digital medium rather than the message. As opposed to Duchamp-land, Turing-land works tend to lack irony in their critique of art mediums, for ‘objects in Turing-land take technology which they use always seriously’.16

In reflecting upon Technological Determinist productions, Patrick Lichty observes how they often harbour the assumption that ‘the present is a bore, and it takes too long for projects to get out of beta. The acceleration of culture demands the con-

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sumption of ideas at their peak of freshness.'

To the digital determinist, the pure innovation and exhilaration of technology is the message in itself, with analogue technology rendered static, outmoded, and corruptible. In works such as Mawd-sley’s *Simian* series, digitisation triumphs as the vanguard technology: capable of excessive speeds as it cuts through space and time. However, the exhilaration of the media is often at the expense of the critical message.

Writers like Anna Munster and Geert Lovink, however, advocate approaches that negotiate divisions between subjects and objects. In conversation with Lovink, Munster perceives what she terms ‘media art’, as a fluid and distributed aesthetic. However, the contention that digital expression is not art—as indicated by Manovich’s essay ‘The Death of Computer Art’—is problematic, for it prescribes what art is or should be. Such claims, argue Munster and Lovink, require ‘a rethink of aesthetics beyond the twinned concepts of form and medium that continue to shape analysis of the social and the aesthetic.’ By removing digital art from its contexts of production, Technological Determinism isolates the medium from the message. Through simply claiming that the medium is the message, such theorists privilege digital form over content. In challenging Technological Determinist approaches, this book locates digital art in continuum with earlier art discourses and expressions. Globalisation is similarly conceptualised in relativist terms, which connect current conditions to previous moments in time.

Terms like ‘new media’ arguably wittingly sever art’s ties in declaring that digital expression belongs to a different practice, discourse, time or technology. This ‘newness’ severs digital art from past expressions and aligns it with what Donna Haraway describes as a ‘Twenty-first century technoscience and technoculture are nothing if not frontier practices, always announcing new worlds, proposing the novel as the solution to the old, figuring creation as radical invention and replacement, rushing toward a future that wobbles between ultimate salvation and destruction but has little truck with thick pasts or presents.’ Technological determinists often extol the innovation of digital technology, rendering analogue a redundant or obsolete format: static, outmoded and corruptible.

In his use of the term ‘New Media’, Lev Manovich for example ascribes a distinct novelty to the form. Yet, as Richard L. Richards contends, ‘[m]ost new media have been developed in dialogue with existing “old” and established media forma-

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tions such as cinema and television’.²² He argues that any examination of digital technology in light of ‘previous models of technological change’²³ will ‘blunt any facile notion of “newness”’.²⁴ By omitting the adjunct of ‘art’, Manovich’s term locates digital expression outside the realm of art. Darren Tofts suggests, the term ‘new media’ favoured by Lev Manovich assumes that digital media ‘lacks predecessors’.²⁵ Equally, the alignment of the medium to the message imposes a distinct causality, limiting the potential for digital art to be art as opposed to media. Hansen explains that it is not ‘simply that the image provides a tool for the user to control the “infoscape” of contemporary material culture, as Manovich suggests, but rather that the “image” has itself become a process and, as such, has become irreducibly bound up with the activity of the body.’²⁶ An artist may use digital technology to convey a message but from there, the message may transcend the medium to express outside ideas such as the affects of globalisation upon the individual.

While Munster and Lovink use terms such as ‘new media art’ and ‘new media theory’, Tofts disengages with the notion of novelty. In his classification of digital media he omits the descriptor ‘new’ and chooses the phrase ‘media art’.²⁷ In doing so, he creates possibilities for comparative artistic discourse while acknowledging new forms of art. Through contextualising digital expression in terms of earlier art discourses and strategies, Tofts provides a relative framework for articulation.

However, Tofts argues that the term ‘digital art’ is far too reductive in ‘foregrounding the computer as the decisive factor in the art-making process’. Yet, clearly digital technology informs its production, experience, history and conceptualisation. ‘Digital art’ is consistent with other artistic terms that invoke a technology, such as video art, creative writing, printmaking and painting. One problem with his terminology, however, concerns his choice of the word ‘media’ in his classification ‘media art’. ‘Media’ is a general term used to describe various mass communication formats, from television to radio and newspapers. The category of ‘media art’ also provides no way of distinguishing between digital and analogue works, for example. Some theorists question the value of that distinction, instead viewing digital technology as a continuation of earlier formats. Yet, the differentiation is critical, if we view digitisation as affecting the production, experience, and understanding of digital art.

²⁶ Mark B.N. Hansen, New Philosophy for New Media, p. 10.
²⁷ Darren Tofts, Interzone, p. 9.
Art and Cultural Critique

Installations like Marnix de Nijs’ *Run Motherfucker Run* also engage with the idea of art responding to contemporary cultural and political events. To this end, digital works may be reminiscent of Frankfurt School art, which instigated new forms of creative opposition in seeking to tear down regimes and foster new ways of thinking. Under the auspices of Theodor Adorno, the Frankfurt School invoked Marxist discourses in seeking to unite art, politics and technology. Writers such as Walter Benjamin, Max Horkheimer, Leo Lowenthal and Herbert Marcuse were concerned with the social, political and economic conditions that influenced and repressed, practices of art. In their expression of cultural phenomena, Frankfurt School theorists reflected dual senses of articulation: as both speaking about and connecting to the world. Through connecting art and cultural commentary, Frankfurt School artists and theorists negotiated artistic limits, and provided new modes of cultural critique (Fig. 2.2).

Walter Benjamin’s notions of mechanical reproduction and industrial design also surfaced in Frankfurt School art. Corporate motifs were ironically used in their backlash against stifling political and economic conditions. Adorno’s adaptation of Thorstein Veblen’s theories of consumption reiterated Marx’s analyses of Western capitalist political economies. He engaged with the idea that in an era of mass consumption, art is marred by constraints imposed by the cultural power brokers. In his critique of Aldous Huxley’s Brave New World, Adorno highlights many of these tensions between mass culture and art production. Huxley’s text, Adorno claims, exemplified the ways in which homogenisation was beginning to ‘massify and destroy individual thought and action.’ Under these conditions, the principles

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of ‘Community, Identity and Stability’, Adorno notes, ‘came to replace the three ideals of the French Revolution’.  

Art and cultural theories of the Marxist tradition challenged political and economic foundations. Schneider Adams observes how as ‘early as 1857−1859, in his *Introduction to the Critique of the Political Economy*, Karl Marx argued for tying art to the culture that produced it’, based upon the premise that the production of art was influenced by social and political contexts. Marx’s opposition to the formalist ideal of ‘art for art’s sake’ was evident through his concern for production, and the social and economic contexts influencing content. As Schneider Adams states, ‘[f]or Marx, art did not belong in an ivory tower inhabited by aestheticians, but rather in the larger context of society and the economic historical process.’ This sense is apparent in the theatre of German playwright Bertolt Brecht. In emphasising the importance of the message over medium, he suggested that artists had a responsibility to provide cultural critiques, with art functioning as something more than just aesthetic form. Marxist theorist Ernst Fischer also championed that ‘art, if it is truthful, must also reflect decay. And unless it wants to break faith with its social function, art must show the world as changeable. And help to change it.’ This is one of the key tenets of Walter Benjamin’s theory that art functions as a ‘political commodity’.

### The Production of Art

Mechanical art’s focus upon content—as opposed to form, aura and originality—is pertinent to digital art. In ‘The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction’, Benjamin shows how art produced through ‘mechanical’ or industrial means, might oppose formal assumptions of authorship, originality and aura. In making these claims, he suggests the capacity for technological expressions to be artistic and termed ‘digital art’, as opposed to ‘graphic design’, ‘video’ or ‘multimedia’. Benjamin’s understanding of mechanised forms of art is centred on the idea that once it is replicated through technological means, such as film or photography, it has the capacity to reach mass audiences and have unprecedented large-scale social and political impacts. By expanding the category of art to include new kinds of ex-

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34 Laurie Schneider Adams, *The Methodologies of Art*, p. 60.  
pression. Benjamin arguably ‘detailed a shift in the function and ontology of art in the age of technical reproducibility’.  

Walter Benjamin’s seminal essay ‘The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction’, discusses the liberation of art from traditional concepts of aura, originality, authenticity, and authorship. By exploring mechanical art and the principle of replica, he subverts constructed formal boundaries of artistry, production and display. Through articulating art in terms of its surrounding cultural and political contexts, Walter Benjamin perceives mechanical art’s capacities for self-reflexive critique. Through conversing with an industrial backlash to the ‘academies’ of Western Europe, Benjamin engages with wider questions concerning the nature of art, production, and cultural change. Benjamin’s questions about the place of art in the industrial era are pertinent to the conceptualisation and location of digital art. As the following chapters show, digital artists are engaging with new technologies—as means of production—within their works.

In a return to Walter Benjamin’s notion of the creative industrialist, digital artists are transcending formal categorisations and the traditional binary of artist/critic. Digital collectives such as Rhizome, ISEA, Critical Art Ensemble and Ars Electronica have also affected the practice by providing ‘buffer zones’ between art and discourse. New collaborations between artists, designers, programmers and academics challenge traditional notions of artistic production. In a return to the Benjaminian notion of the creative industrialist, Enwezor observes how ‘on occasion artists are able to compete with computer researchers, rather than simply creating new demos for commercial software, thus functioning as “memes” for computer industry.’  

Art and artistry, under these conditions, transcends the fixity of formal categorisations. The collaborative involvement of artists, designers, programmers and academics has also challenged traditional notions of authorship.

However, Okwui Enwezor claims it is ‘the artist who decides what an object of art is or what it can be, not simply the progressive, formal, transformation of art inside of the medium of art.’  

Enwezor proposes that the artist that should lead the interpretation of their work. This interpretation challenges the role of the Academy (or established galleries and academic institutions) in influencing aesthetics, values and taste, and determining what art is or may be. To this end, the notion of ‘art as art’ is valid when viewed purely as form, and in isolation from the realms of personal meaning, context, and experience. But according to Enwezor, when we perceive ‘art as meaning’, we gain a new language for expressing often inaccessible phenomena, such as globalisation and digitisation. However, we might also create space for art audiences to subjectively determine meanings. While art offers external languages derived from criticism and artists’ intents, it also generates internal responses. The

37 Mark B. Hansen, New Philosophy for New Media, p. xx.
perceptions and reactions of the experiencer are important. This is particularly so for tactile and interactive digital works, which seek to generate affective responses.

**Art and Digital Technology**

One way in which digital expression converses with earlier forms of art is through self-reflexive engagement with its moments of production. The conversations created by contemporary digital works reveal conflicting perceptions of the Internet, its origins and the cultural impacts of digital technology. While the emergence of the Internet is debated, it is often linked to Joseph Licklider’s notion of a network formed of globally connected computers. Licklider headed a computer research program in October 1962, which would form the basis of the United States’ Advanced Research Projects Administration (ARPA) and the development of ARPANET in 1969. The computer system was a complex network that would retain nuclear weapon control in the event of a Communist strike. ARPANET was designed so that if any element were destroyed, the remaining parts would retain operational autonomy for counter-attack.

While ARPANET is often attributed as the first global Internet, many of the ideas that influenced its inception can be found in earlier writings, to include Leonard Kleinrock’s 1961 PhD proposal *Information Flow in Large Communication Nets*—a paper that describes connected communication networks. Despite conflicting accounts of the Internet’s origins, its association with the military administration ARPA may explain early perceptions of digital space as strategically structured, regulated and controlled. This sense underscores Rita Raley’s notion that the computer is emblematic of a controlled society. While this claim will be explored in relation to the art of Ross Mawdsley, Mark and The Yes Men in the following chapter, other artists have engaged with more open constructions of the Internet.

In challenging the formal structures of distribution, criticism, and display, some 1960s interventions in art and technology asserted critical independence through challenging the limits of art and technology. During this period, figures like Desmond Paul Henry were actively experimenting with art and digital technology. Henry created ‘drawing machines’ that produced early versions of digital art. The artistic group Fluxus were also mixing different technologies and exploring ideas of

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