Review: Digital Aesthetics: Two Handbooks
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Digital Aesthetics: Two Handbooks

Soraya Murray

Victoria Vesna, ed. Database Aesthetics: Art in the Age of Information Overflow. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007. 305 pp. $75, $25 paper

Christiane Paul, ed. New Media in the White Cube and Beyond: Curatorial Models for Digital Art. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008. 273 pp. $65, $29.95 paper

New media forms such as interactive installations, internet art, computer art, and electronic games attract and repel the art world, upending aesthetic and critical conventions along the way. Exhibitions of these types of works occur globally, yet they remain difficult for the mainstream art establishment. The challenge issues partly from practical technological obstacles in presentation, but more significantly from the linkage of technical developments to military, industrial, and business practices. Two recent texts argue that electronic and digital media forms warrant a place in the discourse of contemporary art, as aesthetic expressions that speak to societal and technological concerns of their time.

Victoria Vesna's *Database Aesthetics* collects sixteen essays by artists, practitioners, theorists, and curators of new media, united by an interest in what transpires when a proliferation of data becomes raw material for creative expression. The texts range from rigorous philosophical inquiries into the nature of aesthetics to questions of database ideology. In this case, the burgeoning medium of data induces a new set of concerns related to its management, translation, framing, and organization, as well as more subtle issues of access and control. Within the microcosm of database aesthetics, the book foregrounds macrosystemic concerns that shape and mediate its institutional reception.

Vesna's introduction creates access points for more traditional arts audiences through several linchpin issues of contemporary art that overlap with the notion of database aesthetics, chiefly conceptualism and institutional critique. Vesna proposes, "The most promising arena for conceptual work in the twenty-first century is already in

place since the archives and database systems are being developed with dizzying speed. It is in the code of search engines and the aesthetics of navigation that the new conceptual fieldwork lies for the artist" (xi). She suggests that data and its formations are the new sites of intervention and critique for the
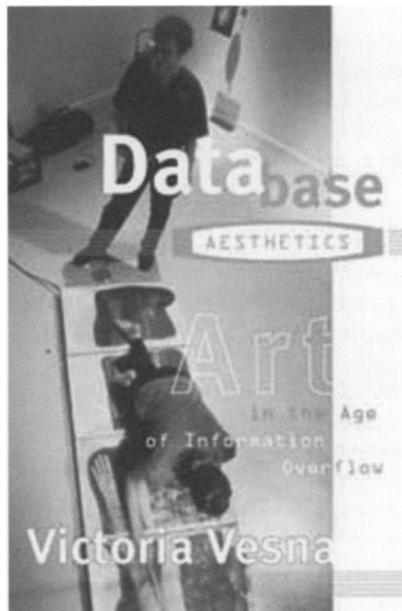
artist—a provocation that serves as a call to action for both critical analysis and creative thought. A media artist and theorist, Vesna points to how we are "increasingly aware of ourselves as databases" (xiii), suggesting by extension that all our informational traces can be collated into a digital semblance or likeness. It is true that a cluster of circulating data, made up of passwords and personal information, may form a kind of self-portrait. For example, with their playlists, images, data files, and apps, iPods arrange variables into meaningful unities that become reflections of their users. However, a question must be asked as to whether the terms of those variables need dictate the limits of self-expression. With artistic intervention, the broadened expressive possibilities of data, and more generally of electronics and the digital, are made clear.

A second intersection—and potential tension—with the traditional art world involves questions of authorship and originality. For digital artists, who frequently collaborate and work almost exclusively in forms that can be easily duplicated, it has historically proven difficult to integrate their

creations into existing institutional structures. How does one, for example, display code in such a manner as to make it aesthetically accessible? Will the virtuosos of the future be those data manipulators who have the most elegant or insightful frameworks, or the most eloquent tags on their data files? Or are these outmoded matters of "taste" that will no longer apply in the context of a new database aesthetics? These and other questions test the limits of art practice, presentation, and entrenched scholarship.

Add to these the difficulty of defining database art due to continual changes in technology and a lack of standardization, and one is quickly faced with a frontier of contested language and an expanse of unmapped territory. The intellectual freefall is exhilarating and terrifying, and after the fifty-odd years in which digital and electronic art has been produced, some of the terms and debates are finally beginning to have heft and longevity. What remains to be seen is how museums, universities, and art institutions will extend to the digital their commitment to preserve and display the best of what culture has to offer. Further, as Vesna rightly points out, the underlying ideological shift from organization by categories to continuous streams of data may prefigure the turn to interdisciplinarity as a pedagogical effort to mitigate the disorienting shift to data culture and informational economies (29).[1]

Many of the essays included in the volume were previously collected by Vesna in a 2000 special issue of the academic journal *AI and Society*, published in the United Kingdom.[2] The contributors, however, are primarily US-based, but even more specifically interconnected through the University of California Digital Arts Research Network (UC DARNet), which fosters collaborative research and teaching in digital media. One commonality of these authors is what Vesna describes as a wish to experience information as humanizing, rather than only through its understood functions of ordering, categorization, and rationalization—all with potentially dehumanizing results (xi). Put another way, each contributor seeks to create meaningful connections through (and to) the data, giving sense to it. These are not texts that proselytize the utopian promise of database rationality. However, here the similarities largely end, as each author proceeds to elucidate the aesthetics of the database

from a unique vantage point. In Vesna's own essay, the writing reveals her conceptual fascination with the hubristic pursuit of "codes" that unlock the meaning of life, namely the mapping of the human genome and the Visible Human Project. These examples give evidence of ways in which collection and presentation of data shape ideology and cultural reality, aspects that Vesna explores in her own artistic interventions, which seek to recalibrate our relations to these scientific pursuits.

The essays by the theorist Lev Manovich and the artist Grahame Weinbren both draw on the cinematic, particularly the question of narrative as an extension of the function of data sequencing. Taking divergent positions, they become foils in discourses about the place of the database in the continuum of cinematic and literary history. Interestingly, Weinbren picks up Vesna's thread on data as itself fluid and inaccessible, and made evident and static only through representation in a chosen medium. Change and constant flux is the rule; it is only through probing the frameworks of databases that it is possible to understand their larger systems of self-representation. Certainly this is an overarching message of the anthology: caught in the flow of an unfathomable amount of data, it is the data architecture that brings order and meaning to the disconcerting simultaneity of too much information.

Essays by practicing artists pinpoint areas of interest related to mining digital aesthetics and include contributions by Norman M. Klein, Nancy Paterson, George Legrady, Lynn Hershman-Leeson, Eduardo Kac, John Klima, and Marko Peljhan, among others. Each weaves explication of the author's own work with discussion of the greater possibilities and limitations of the media he or she explores. Of particular note is Bill Seaman's coining of the term "recombinant poetics" to capture a type of artistic expression defined by interactive, computer-mediated, generative environments and direct engagement with digital-analogue elements experienced as fields of meaning (125). Robert F. Nideffer brings electronic games into the discussion, asking how, in game engines, functions may dictate form. He argues that game engines mirror the values and conditions of those who develop and play them, that they reflect and shape the social conditions from which they arise.

Nideffer extols the virtues of user-modification and calls for self-analytical structures in the system of game development, an industry lacking in a self-critical apparatus beyond the logic of sales (229).

The barrier between artists' writings and theoretical investigation is often broached,
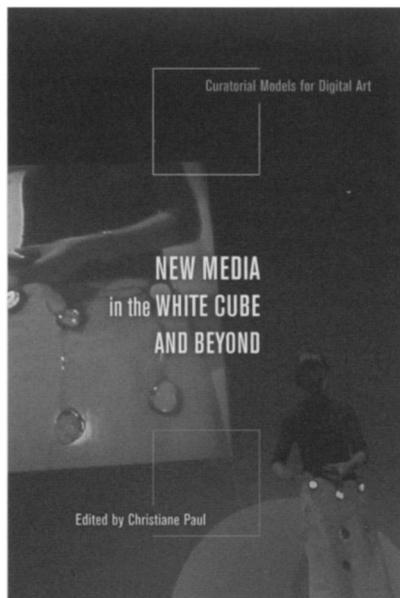
especially in the case of Vesna's essay, as well as in the contributions of Warren Sack and Sharon Daniel. Sack's "Network Aesthetics" addresses the database and its interfaces through a honed meditation on the function of artificial intelligence. His own project, Conversation Map, distills commonalities of knowledge into legible form, to provide a dynamic, bird's-eye view of online conversations. This important project in digital public space denaturalizes the idea of common-sense knowledge as universal or standardized, and visualizes extremely fluid semantic connections in legible form. Daniel challenges the database medium to serve the greater interests of humanity, through her projects that decenter authorial agency using technological interfaces. She conceptualizes an "aesthetics of dignity" in which social consciousness and a commitment to social democracy drive her practice. For example, her Palabras public browser interface provides inexpensive access and training for underrepresented communities to record, edit, tag, and sequence video clips online. Daniel's dual aims of distributing control of data tools and building social-technical

infrastructures to foster community agency in the datasphere are undergirded by potent theorization and examples of her own work. In this manner, the database—a twenty-first-century form of collection and taxonomy—becomes a potential site of dignity rather than domination.

The new-media curator and theorist Christiane Paul provides one of the most taut, cogent essays on the subject of database aesthetics. Paul outlines several data models that contextualize raw data in sets of relations: hierarchical, networked, relational, defined by client-server relations, and object-oriented. The categorical nature of her terminologies provides a common language; however, the true contribution to the discourse lies in the essay's contemplation of databases in the context of artistic reception. Paul notes the commonplace understanding of databases as patently nonaesthetic or even anti-aesthetic (96). Building on Manovich's work, she distinguishes between what she calls "front end" and "back end" functions of the database (97).[3] The former refers to what a user or participant sees manifested, while the latter denotes the algorithmic functions and collated data that drive its manifestation. This distinction differentiates the data visualization from the data in itself and clarifies that the materiality of the data is inaccessible, because it is in itself imperceptible without mediation. Giving ample artistic examples by practitioners such as W. Bradford Paley, George Legrady, Natalie Bookchin, and Golan Levin, and even non-digital artists like On Kawara, Paul elucidates the ways in which the logic of database aesthetics seeps into cultural production at large. As with this essay, many of the writings connect the challenges of digital media to a larger set of shifts occurring in the art world that have pushed the limits of what art can be. Since the 1950s, a series of moves—from material aesthetic concerns to (often anti-aesthetic) conceptual drives, toward archives as art, and from representational to abstraction—have all complicated criteria for the evaluation of artworks, as well as their integration into existing cultural institutions.

The questions naturally arise: Why make data "aesthetic" in the first place? What relevance can there be to experimenting with data and data frameworks as forms of art making? Such concerns are addressed in the focus of the new-media curator Steve Dietz on the "individual, idiosyncratic, and

imaginative point of view" as an essential disruption of the expected uses of the medium. In a previous essay, entitled "Ten Dreams of Technology," Dietz has also argued for the importance of "artistic" practices for holding open diverse technical possibilities: "Unfortunately, continued openness is not a foregone conclusion, and future dreams of technology may be only what the corporations and institutions can imagine, which would be the biggest failure of all."[4] That is to say, conceding the terms of data and database usage to those who serve only instrumental rationality and the financial bottom line disallows possibilities that may lie in the irrational, the open-ended, the nonsensical.

Database art (and its presentation) gestures toward the postmodern move from top-down structures and master narratives, to networked models of broad-based, interconnected affinities. Artistic practice has already embraced the archive as art, collaboration as a creative model, and nontraditional materials as viable artistic media. The anxiety surrounding burgeoning forms like software art is not only about how technology will affect longstanding art-historical conventions of beauty, originality, aura, and content. It also issues from the notion that digital art lies inherently beyond apprehension. If aesthetics is in some way tied to sense perception, art's potential move beyond such spheres generates considerable skepticism. Such a shift indeed poses real challenges—practical, theoretical, and aesthetic—for artists, institutions, and art professionals. Addressing such concerns, Christiane Paul's anthology New Media in the White Cube and Beyond collects twelve essays by major figures in the field, ranging from artists and scholars to curators and museum professionals. Its focus on curatorial practice and presentation allows for in-depth if occasionally overlapping investigations, as authors recount versions of shared histories according to their particular vantage points.

The essays are divided into five sections that include histories of new media, integration of new media into traditional museum structures, the art object's transition from object to process, alternative zones for presentation, and, finally, individual case studies. Through these areas of inquiry, Paul and her collected peers seek to illuminate the challenges of curating, presenting, and conserving new media. In addition, the

collection foregrounds the new and shifting role of the curator and artist in their shared responsibilities of collaboration, facilitation, participation, and mediation. While Paul indicates the focal point of her inquiry to be technological art that is digital in its final form, the collection is instructive beyond these confines (3).

The first cluster of essays creates a general "terrain" of new-media discourse with two substantial essays by Charlie Gere and Sarah Cook. They dovetail well: Gere's contextualization bridges the gap between art history and the history of technology, while Cook takes those foundations and applies them specifically to the broadened possibilities of curatorial practice. Gere's essay outlines the many ways in which museums remain unprepared to show kinetic, robotic, telematic, computer, and net-based artworks—despite decades of practice in some of these fields. His history is lucid and effectively condenses a broad spectrum of concerns into a legible map, asserting that postwar art cannot be fully understood without the lens of technological developments that defined it (25). Cook's no-nonsense overview of possible exhibition models and curatorial strategies is extremely pragmatic, instructive in its approach. In particular, her three models of exhibition and three modes of curating give practical guidance and a set of terms for tackling the problem of new media in the institution.

Part 2 asks the complicated questions of how traditional art venues might best interface with new media and whether these venues are the best presentational spaces for such projects. Paul's essay on the practical problems of display seeks to redefine the role of the curator, get "new media out of its ghetto" (64), and tackle the thorny issue of audience reception. This is the most provocative area of her investigation, and the airing of those dirty-laundry problems of new media is as entertaining as it is informative. How do we better engage wider art audiences, she asks? How can museums better assure the continual functioning of technological presentations? How do the conventional prohibitions governing museum spaces (i.e., not to touch the art) conflict with interactive audience participation? With the naming of these and other problems, they seem to wither a bit and become more manageable. Dietz, in his short essay "Curating Net Art," challenges institutions

concerned with contemporary art to include net art and adapt their curatorial practices to the demands of contemporary art making.

The third section addresses the most contentious area of inquiry for art history and the institution: What need be done to adapt to the larger artistic shift from object to process? How can the existing protocols of the museum space be augmented to include the needs of new-media art, incorporating forms that undergo version shifts from site to site, are often collaborative, and don't quite conform to a description of their objects? Joasia Krysa points to "immateriality," "transformative systems," and "distributed curating" as alternative approaches that reconceptualize curatorial work in computational terms (89). Jon Ippolito's essay, "Death by Wall Label," plays on the notion of wall-text as "tombstone" for the artwork that captures its meaning in stasis. Advocating for the adaptability, variability, and collaboration that characterize new-media art, Ippolito argues against the museum's attempt to fix meaning onto works that are inherently dynamic and that characteristically exist in versions, often with shifting dimensions, contents, and collaborators. Through an evolution of captions that convey what he calls the "behaviors" of these works (as opposed to their materials), Ippolito proposes that artists emulate the changeability of media in their museum documentation.

The fourth part draws in the question of community agency and otherness in relation to sometimes-inaccessible technologies, including strategies of anarchy outlined in Hakim Bey's celebrated conceptualization of a "Temporary Autonomous Zone."[5] Patrick Lichty asks how such a concept might be appropriated into "online spaces of creative practice in which the sociocultural contracts of the institution are nullified," which he terms "cultural autonomous zones" or CAZs (183). As is consistent with the anthology's historical approach, Lichty contextualizes the new role of the curator within previous moments in which the status of the art object underwent a transformation. His conceptualization of "DIY curating" evokes the do-it-yourself culture associated with tactical media and other noninstitutional approaches (184). The final section presents case studies of exhibitions, reports from the field, so to speak. Beryl Graham; Lichty; Caitlin Jones and Carol Stringari; and Tilman Baumgärtel,

Hans D. Christ, and Iris Dressler provide their frontline perspectives on the status of new media. With examples from exhibitions of games, interactive installations, video, and other media, these notable curators and professionals unveil the practical outcomes, the successes and failures of actual presentations.

Together, the two anthologies bring art and technology into relations of commonality, rather than difference—no small feat, since artists and technologists often have divergent systems of valuation and speak different disciplinary languages. More important, these texts conceive of new media as capable of conveying affect, beyond mere technological gimmickry. By developing sophisticated artistic interrogations of the advanced tools, the writings encourage zones of critical enquiry that outstrip the logic of technoscientific progress. Instead, they recognize data and its many iterations as also operating within spheres of cultural production, hence warranting their criticalities.

Art theorists and historians may have a unique perspective to offer in the analysis of new media that currently exist largely separately from contemporary art exhibitions. Because these digital and electronic art forms are often not directly in dialogue with contemporary art practice and its histories, it is notable that the collected essays situate their discussions in those terms. In addition, the highly contingent and experience-based nature of these works makes it imperative that such presentations are recorded, historicized, and documented for posterity. Of course, the immaterial nature of data-based art and the innovative visual logic made possible by the digital continue to challenge art history as an object-based discipline. Yet these media and their logics seem at home among the diverse conceptual, interventionist, and otherwise socially engaged practices that have increasingly gained legitimacy within the canon.

The larger contribution of these volumes lies in the networks of intellectual exchange they forge among aesthetic theory, art discourse, and new media. Though existing works of electronic and digital art might not seem readily assimilable into art institutions, their very potential for disruption underlies their potential importance for those institutions. After all, virtually all the major movements of modern and contemporary art initially posed challenges to museums and art-presenting institutions, and to the field of art history. Indeed, such institutional openness does not herald the relaxing of disciplinary standards, but revitalizes the role that art scholarship can play in shaping the language of aesthetics in the twenty-first century.

1. With the term "informational," I refer to Manuel Castells and his in-depth analysis of informational society as illuminated in his three-volume series *The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture* (Oxford, UK, and Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1996-1998).
2. *AI and Society* 14, no. 2, "Knowledge, Culture and Communication" (2000).
3. See Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001), 227.
4. Steve Dietz, "Ten Dreams of Technology," *Leonardo* 35, no. 5 (2002): 509–22.
5. Hakim Bey, *T. A. Z.: The Temporary Autonomous Zone, Ontological Anarchy, Poetic Terrorism* (Brooklyn: Autonomedia Anti-copyright, 1991), available online at www.hermetic.com/bey/taz_cont.html.

Soraya Murray holds a PhD in art history from Cornell University and teaches at the University of California, Santa Cruz. She has published on contemporary art, technology, and globalization in *Art Journal, Nka: Journal of Contemporary African Art,* and *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art.* Murray is completing a manuscript on bodies under the duress of advanced technologies and globalization, and their visual representation in contemporary art and media culture.