The Progress of Ambiguity: Uncertain Imagery in Digital Culture

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Abstract

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Within a culture of persistent efficiency, ambiguous imagery represents a critical alternative. This thesis bridges studies in technology history, network and political theory, and art history. It attempts to account for contemporary artistic practices that critically address some of the objectionable tendencies within digital culture. These practices, this thesis proposes, may be best characterized by their radical use of ambiguity and un-certainty – qualities at clear odds with the rational, efficient nature of digital technologies. This thesis indicates a lineage of this nature in computer and Internet history, twentieth-century cybernetics, and larger philosophic histories. Rooted in symbolic logic, digital technologies carry a heritage of *disambiguation*—a dominancy of overdetermined, reason-based principles writ furtively in algorithms and protocols. They thus espouse ideologies via systematized calculation and centralized command, despite the commonly-perceived transparency, fluidity and egalitarianism of the Net.

Working within-but-against these surreptitious structures are radical practices that critique, undermine, leverage, and offer alternatives to ideologies of disambiguation. In opposition to a contracted, answers-fixated dominant culture, artists are advantageously positioned to point back to the realm of questions – in all of its arable uncertainty, inquisitiveness and ambiguity. This thesis is structured around case-studies of artwork made by Constant Dullaart, Rosa Menkman, Jon Rafman, Internet Surfing Clubs, Ryan Trecartin, and Oliver Laric. Their practices contest the disambiguous nature of digital technologies to open up critical fissures in the semantic structure of digital culture.

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Introduction

This thesis offers a theoretical framework drawn from contemporary artistic discourse that engages critically—if ambiguously—with digital culture. The following pages appreciate ambiguous digital imagery through an analysis of artworks by Constant Dullaart; Rosa Menkman; Jon Rafman; Ryan Trecartin and Oliver Laric, as well as collectives of professional and amateur image-producers. These practices, my thesis proposes, may be best characterized by their radical use of ambiguity, uncertainty and vagueness – qualities at clear odds with the rational, efficient nature of digital technologies. This thesis considers what roles ambiguous aesthetics might play in countering the *disambiguous* nature of digital culture.

Rooted in symbolic logic, digital technologies carry a heritage of disambiguation – a dominancy of overdetermined principles writ furtively in algorithms and protocols. They thus espouse ideologies via systematized calculation and centralized command, and despite the commonly-perceived transparency, fluidity and egalitarianism of the Internet, the spaces it produces are hostile toward ambiguity. The first section of this thesis maps this anti-ambiguous imperative within digital technology, and indicates its lineage from computer and Internet history, twentieth-century cybernetics, and larger philosophic histories. This proposed framework to approach digital disambiguation provides a model with which to comprehend some of the ideological tendencies of the digital age that are particularly pernicious to the more ambiguous qualities of creative and social behaviour. In doing so, it brings attention to artworks that confront ideological biases inherent within digital culture.

The second, larger section of the thesis focuses on works by contemporary artists each developed as case-studies that highlight particular uses of ambiguous digital imagery. Specifically it discusses the use of slowness and silence in the Web-based artwork of Constant Dullaart; the glitches of Rosa Menkman; the cyberflâneurie of Jon Rafman and Internet Surfing Clubs; the saturated information-flow of Ryan Trecartin; and the pluralized visual vocabulary of Oliver Laric. I argue that the imagery produced by these artists stands in opposition to the disambiguous nature of digital technologies in such a way as to open up critical fissures in the semantic structure of digital culture. Their artworks extend the ambiguous qualities already inherent to the common state of networked digital imagery – that which German artist Hito Steyerl has called the "poor image." As she defines: "The poor image is an illicit fifth-generation bastard of an original image. Its genealogy is dubious. Its filenames are deliberately misspelled. It often defies patrimony, national culture, or indeed copyright... It mocks the promises of digital technology."[1] Such impure, dirty, and poor images can take on a radical identity in distinction from today's highly regulated, streamlined surfaces of dominant digital imagery. Artists' engagement with these digital aesthetics may enact, as media theorist Mark Poster has written of such critical activity, "a radical reconfiguration of the [digital] language... outside the pattern of the rational."[2] Such non-rational forces pose a challenge to the dominant ideological structures within digital culture.

The artists discussed in this thesis each proffer such a challenge with the use of ambiguous imagery. Through a variety of tactics their practices each extend a voice of

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1   Hito Steyerl, "In Defence of the Poor Image," *e-flux Journal* 10 (November 2011).
2   Mark Poster, *The Second Media Age* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 1995), 57.

uncertainty into a system that necessitates certainty. They do so through images that fragment and glitch digital files; through formats that compel slowness and silence against the speed and noise of information flow; through practices that amble through the virtual commons; and through imagery that exploits the instability of digital media.

The degree to which non-rational, ambiguous cultural activity represents political alternatives to the disambiguous character of digital culture is the topic of this thesis. It addresses networked activity by artists, steeped in what media arts scholar Olga Goriunova calls the "'grey' zones of cultural production," to question if real pluralism may be fostered in digital culture.[3] In appreciating the aesthetics of ambiguous art generally, and digital images specifically, this thesis attempts to track practices that offer a way out of the tightly-controlled power structures of digital information systems. It senses the capacity for practices and images born in digital culture to present transgressive modes of cultural and political engagement. This project endeavours to respond to and legitimize art practices that may go unseen within discourses of political engagement and display cultures of contemporary art. It also, in its experimental nature, seeks not to bluntly position the discussed artworks as critically oppositional, but to weigh their imagery within the political setting of digital culture.

Existing discourse surrounding the art practices discussed in this thesis tends to either condemn them as naval-gazing wankery, or inflate them as an inherently critical, radically collaborative form of media activism. In this thesis, I attempt to account for this discrepancy by using the diverse discussions to map-out a territory of power within the

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3   Olga Goriunova, *Art Platforms and Cultural Production on the Internet* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 7.

network age. I explore how ambiguous digital images—playful, lo-fi, lowbrow pictures—might participate in political discussion. The emergent aesthetic tendencies discussed in the following pages constitute a variety of practices that produce imagery linked through their footing in the ambiguous.

'Ambiguity,'[4] as I use the term here, is consistent with its Latin root *ambigere* – "*to dispute about*" and "*to wander*:" to *amble*, or ambulate.[5] Distinct from obscurantism, ambiguity may uncover the complexity of a situation. Distinct from ambivalence, ambiguity may counter meaninglessness. It may manifest actively as doubt or skepticism, and, when fulfilling its more transgressive potentials, may pose a challenge to dominant, standard, or official *certainties.* Like Mikhail Bakhtin's *Carnavalesque*—outside of officialdom, Chantal Mouffe's *agonistic spaces*—inside of public discourse, and Jacques Rancière's *Dissensus*—voicing unrest, ambiguity proffers an affirmative demonstration of uncertainty. Ambiguity in the hands of artists may approach something radical through the suggestion that the present situation on hand could be something other. It may equally offer up counterpoints to conventional tastes and opinions, or demand that alternatives be acknowledged. Here, ambiguity is a political tool engaging with the distribution of a *certain* power to make it *uncertain* – to render complex a simplified and indomitable force. In its most radical, active instantiation, ambiguous art may call into question the bases of any common sense: it may, to employ the French philosopher Jacques Rancière's terminology, re-determine "what presents itself to sense experience;" or it may disrupt, as Belgian political theorist Chantal Mouffe suggests, "the contingent nature of any social order."[6] Ambiguous art carries the

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4   Coming from the Latin *amb-* and *agree*: "*to drive both ways*; *An Etymological Dictionary of Modern English,* London: J. Murray, 1660.
5   "Ambiguous." *Online Etymology Dictionary*, Douglas Harper, historian, 15 Apr. 2012.
6   Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible* (London: Continuum, 2004), 13; Chantal Mouffe, "Artistic

potential of casting a worldview into doubt, parallel to its own liquid form. The ambiguous artworks within this thesis may resemble Umberto Eco's *open work* in which literary texts are understood not as one-way paths of information, but fields of 'open' meaning. For Eco, such works are inherently political in their expression of a pluralistic worldview.[7]

   Artists' use of ambiguity is hardly without precedence in Western aesthetic traditions. With imagery that is unresolved, unclear or unreadable, ambiguous artworks have been generated to allow for open and dynamic engagements. Such ambiguity can been seen in the Medieval grotesques and marginalia in illuminated manuscripts, where depictions of hybridized creatures lacked a singular sign or subject; to genres of *capriccio* and fantasy showing not-quite-real places. It is present from Renaissance techniques of *chiaroscuro* and *sfumato*, where ambiguous, shadowy depths allowed forms to blend; to Mannerism's break with the rational order of classical proportions; and to the preference for strangeness and unfamiliarity in Romanticism, where mountain vistas and ruins held a sublime beauty beyond measurement and calculation. This taste for wildness, mystery and impurity endured into the twentieth-century when Surrealism and dada offered an ambiguous aesthetics obsessed with the unknowable and un-showable. Before them, artists had developed representations of time, and the fragmented and polyvalent images of the Cubists and Futurists avoided singular moments in favour of non-linear narratives and unstable forms. Various mid-century experimental endeavours brought chance and risk to the fore, and ambiguous authorship became characteristic of contemporary art internationally in Fluxus and experimental performance and theatre. Pop Art's ambiguous

Activism and Agonistic Spaces," *Art & Research* 1.2 (2007): 2.

[7]   Umberto Eco, *The Open Work* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1989), 150; 83.

footing in mainstream culture grabbed from the flow of public media to ambiguate the place of the art object. It may be shown that New Media Art from its outset has been concerned with injecting ambiguity into the technical context from which it arose. Early computer-plotted imagery developed by artists such as Vera Molnar and Manfred Mohr sought to push machines to deviate from their technical restrictions. Dirty New Media Art, rooted in the 1970s Chicago experimental video of Phil Morton and Dan Sandin, amongst others, hacks hard- and software to build broken, *dirty* artworks against the smooth, clean interfaces of commercial computers. These were strategies that demonstrated how artful ambiguities participate in creating alternative spaces in which fixed definitions and impenetrable logic may become questionable.

My argument recognizes ambiguity as a fundamental characteristic of human thought and language: it appreciates ambiguity as a quality that is essential in social and expressive behaviours. [8] For Wittgenstein, vagueness was a primary feature of language, as it was for Bertrand Russell.[9] Images, moreover, are characterized by, in Jean-Paul Sartre's wording, "a sort of vagueness, of basic indetermination."[10] For Martine Joly, not just words or images, but any 'complex utterance' is characterized by polysemy.[11] In the American philosopher Terry Horgan's account, vagueness is a characteristic quality of everyday thought and discourse: "although vagueness is logically incoherent, it is also a benign, beneficial, and indeed essential feature of human thought."[12] This lack of logical coherence

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[8]   See, amongst others Steven T. Piantadosi, Harry Tily, and Edward Gibson, "The Communicative Function of Ambiguity in Language." *Cognition* 122 (2012), 280-91.

[9]   Wittgenstein's position is elaborated by Terry Horgan, *Spindel Conference 1994: Vagueness* (Memphis, TN: Dept. of Philosophy, Memphis State University, 1995): 15; "all language is vague," he said: Bertrand Russell, "Vagueness," *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 1.2 (1923): 84-92.

[10]   Jean-Paul Sartre, *L'imaginaire: Psychologie Phenomenologique De L'imagination* (Paris: Gallimard, 1952), 217.

[11]   Dario Gamboni, *Potential Images: Ambiguity and Indeterminacy in Modern Art* (London: Reaktion, 2002), 13.

[12]   Horgan, section 23.

gives way to forms of language that Horgan labels *Dionysian*. Riddled with ambiguities, Dionysian language is, perhaps counterintuitively, competent and necessary in everyday discourse. This ambiguity is "ubiquitous in our language and thought."[13] In contrast, unambiguous "*Apollonian* discourse is quite rare."[14] This form of language manifests in highly structured, strictly logical articulations, as in pure mathematics and computer programming, and exhibits nothing of the vagueness crucial to human thought and language. Here, an inhuman syntax demands an ordered, refined and unambiguous treatment of information.

Given that such Apollonian language makes up the very bedrock of our digital technologies, it may be cause for alarm that the overwhelming majority of information communicated, stored and calculated globally is done so within its disambiguous structure. The worldwide amount of data produced in the "digital universe"[15] in 2012 alone was 2.8 zettabytes (2.8 trillion gigabytes) – and this amount doubles nearly every two years.[16] In comparison, the amount of information represented by this figure is equivalent to over 573 times the estimated amount of all words ever spoken by human beings.[17] Devoid of ambiguities, binary logic runs supreme in this dominant digital information network, giving way to what the philosophers Deleuze and Guattari have termed *striated* cultural space.[18]

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13   Ibid., section 22.
14   Ibid., section 25.
15   This is a measure of all the digital data created, replicated, and consumed in a single year. John Gantz and David Reinsel, "The Digital Universe in 2020: Big Data, Bigger Digital Shadows, and Biggest Growth in the Far East," *International Data Corporation and EMC Corporation* (December 2012): 1.
16   These figures from John Gantz and David Reinsel.
17   It is also well over 300 million times the estimated data in the U.S. Library of Congress. These figures inferred by estimations from Caltech's *Center for Advanced Computing Research*'s Roy David Williams, <http://ict.stmargaretsacademy.org.uk/computing/hardware/dataquan/d_p_ten2.html> (Retrieved 2012-07-31), which are debatable: Mark Liberman, for example, offers much larger figures in his *Zettascale Linguistics,* University of Pennsylvania. <http://itre.cis.upenn.edu/~myl/languagelog/archives/000087.html> (Retrieved 2012-07-31).
18   Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1987), Chapter 14 'The Smooth and the Striated.'

This, as hypertext theorist Stuart Moulthrop has argued, is "the domain of routine, specification, sequence, and causality."[19] In the Apollonian, anti-ambiguous realm of the digital is a pandemic flattening of meaning into mere strings of code. As German media and literary theorist Friedrich Kittler has written of optical fibre networks: "inside the computers themselves everything becomes a number: quantity without image, sound or voice... With numbers, everything goes."[20] In its propensity to erase differences and expunge ambiguities, digital language represents a disambiguous tendency that extends to other, far-reaching qualities of digital culture.

Though ambiguities seem to proliferate within digital networks, their basic, Apollonian structure may in fact be shown to impede ambiguity. Common myths hold that cultural activity online is unbound, plural, and polyphonic, and thus easily lends itself to rich and varied meanings, as the sociologist Maurizio Lazzarato has contended.[21] Conversely, the Net may impose an arguable mono-culture, in which creative and cultural expression is disambiguated along its structural biases. Aesthetic philosopher Vito Campanelli condemns the Web as a site of *monolingualism* in which the perceived pluralism and *polyphonic* nature of the Internet is exposed as an incestuous homogeneity of digital media expression. Despite the potential of its wealth of discursive avenues, "individuals and groups," he writes, "speak on their own terms."[22] Here, the most significant of expressions may be, as technologist Jaron Lanier worries, "anonymous blog comments, vapid video

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19 Stuart Moulthrop, "Rhizome and Resistance: Hypertext and the Dreams of a New Culture," in *Hyper/Text/Theory*, Ed. George P. Landow (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins UP, 1994), 302.

20 Friedrich A. Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter* (Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 1999), 1-2.

21 Lazzarato focuses on the Internet's many-to-many distribution structure: Maurizio Lazzarato, *La politica dell'evento* (Soveria Mannelli Catanzaro: Rubbettino, 2004), 107.

22 "...resulting in an enormous number of opinions travelling on parallel tracks, destined never to meet." Vito Campanelli, *Web Aesthetics: How Digital Media Affect Culture and Society* (Rotterdam: NAi, 2010), 25.

pranks, and lightweight mashups."[23] The most fecund of online spaces—hive-mind

cesspools of online geekery—may be little more than naval-gazing communities, or "echo-

chambers," as Internet theorist Geert Lovink puts forward.[24] This propensity toward a self-

referential, singular, and apolitical discourse stems from a penchant for control and

predictability within digital technology, and may be epitomized by disambiguation.

Disambiguation

> "The introduction of computers into our already highly technological society
>
> has... merely reinforced and amplified those antecedent pressures that have
>
> driven man to an ever more highly rationalistic view of his society and an
>
> ever more mechanistic image of himself." Joseph Weizenbaum[25]

Disambiguation is a method specific to computer programming, but I suggest the

concept may connote wider, hidden influences in digital technologies that abolish

polysemy, uncertainty and vagueness.[26] "The removal of ambiguity,"[27]

disambiguation belongs most precisely to a tenet of algorithmic design that

describes processes of determining a single interpretation for an expression. The

term is commonly encountered on *Wikipedia* in indexes where ambiguous terms

with multiple encyclopaedic entries are categorized. For example, the word

'mercury' denotes multiple referents (a planet, an element, a god...), and thus in

order to retrieve any single associated entry a search term must be first

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23   Jaron Lanier, *You Are Not a Gadget: a Manifesto* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2010), Chapter 1.
24   Geert Lovink, *Networks Without a Cause: A Critique of Social Media* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2011), 2.
25   Joseph Weizenbaum, *Computer Power and Human Reason: From Judgment to Calculation* (San Francisco: W.H. Freeman, 1976), 11.
26   I first saw a critical eye turned toward disambiguation by designer, educator and media activist Mushon Zer Aviv, *Lost in The Open? Navigating the Open Web and Free Culture* (02 February, 2011 *Transmediale*, Berlin).
27   "Disambiguation," *Oxford English Dictionary,* Web (accessed 20 November 2011).

disambiguated. Thus, while the word might lend itself to broad, *mercurial*

inferences, it finds only a series of discreet, certain, and unambiguous states within

this digital realm. Disambiguating algorithms are used rampantly in many digital

technologies and play a surreptitious role *behind-the-screen*.

Examples of this can be seen when online stores reference 'customers like you,'

when word-processors make grammar and spelling suggestions, and when speech-to-text

software 'decides' appropriate transcriptions for multivocal terms (such as the homonyms

their, *there* and *they're*). More broadly, disambiguation serves to maintain the predictability

and manageability of information flows within software: the fewer the unknown variables

within a system, the easier that system is to control. Practical though this may be, it

represents a more widespread condition of digital culture in which ambiguities are

expunged systematically.

Not only do these hidden algorithms clarify and streamline engagement with

computers, but they also dictate particular modes of engaging with systems and their flows

of information. In so doing they uphold ideologies that have been formed alongside the

disambiguating principles inherent within programming architecture. In 1976 the

renowned humanist technologist Joseph Weizenbaum had already identified this

architecture as mounting from a "passion for certainty" and "quest for control" shared by

scientists and programmers.[28] In driving a technological progress established in the

language of abstract digital logic, their methods sustain certain ideological precedents that

also seek to eradicate ambiguity.

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28   Weizenbaum, 126.

This is evident in the historical development of the notion of rationality within the European intellectual tradition, wherein scientific worldviews underscored an unambiguously ordered and reasonable universe. A mix of ideological forces throughout the sixteen and seventeenth centuries saw their main actors seek knowledge-forms founded on concrete, unambiguous certainties. Such forces espoused strictly coherent claims that would abide by the law of the excluded middle (true *or* false) and exclusive disjunctions (either / or operands). This strict rationality underscored a systemic myopia by which, as decried by political theorist Isaiah Berlin, "as in the sciences, all genuine questions must have one true answer and one only, all the rest being necessarily errors."[29] This severe methodology-by-certainty has further been bred into technological innovations.

If Galileo affirmed that mathematics was the 'language of the universe,'[30] a corollary saw engineering and technological innovation base its progress on numerical abstraction. Here, 'useful science' became complicit in the brute, mathematic simplification of 'real-world' situations – a force that edits out peripheral concerns and underscores an impulse to heed to principles of logical certainty. Thus was a stronghold of logic cemented even before the nineteenth century rise of information and computation. As Weizenbaum has perceptively argued**,** humankind "has been seduced into wishing and working for the establishment of an age of rationality, but with [their] vision of rationality tragically twisted so as to equate it with logicality."[31] In this equation, the human virtue of rationality (with all of its ambiguities) is abrogated in favour of a mere disembodied logic. In a twentieth-

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29   Isaiah Berlin, "On the Pursuit of the Ideal," *The New York Review of Books* 35.4 (1988): 3.
30   as he inferred in his 1623 *Il Saggiatore.*
31   Weizenbaum, 13.

century extension of this twist, information was equated with data, and the emerging field of cybernetics called for an unambiguous method of its control. It aimed for the perfection of clean signals, purposeful behavior, and efficiency in navigating flows of information.

Cybernetics: Logic, Flow and Predictability

Cybernetics was termed by the American mathematician Norbert Wiener from the ancient Greek word for *steersman*: the navigator of a ship whose skills involve distinguishing the most efficient—the most rational—course of action in any problem of nautical navigation.[32] The steersman's *modus operandi* is one of determining possible futures and steering the ship toward a single one, based upon the feedback encountered. As a field of study engaged in a range of informatic systems, cybernetics carries forward the steersman's imperative for linear progress, and does so with the forward "influence of mathematical logic."[33] Thus have similar concerns for feedback, predictability and instrumental rationality found their way into the information sciences of the past seventy-five years. A shift has occurred, however, away from the steersman's *knowledge* to the mechanical processing of *information* within a system: from a rational, thinking subject, to a mere logic machine. Within information networks are *data flows* in which feedback loops involve necessary simplification, which thus result in a discreet and unambiguous form of instrumental rationality. i.e. what is parsed as *useful* or *useless* information must conform to a specific logic dictated by the system itself. The digital era has brought about an exaggeration of this watertight treatment of logic, and with it, as new-media theorist Mark Nunes relates, "a cybernetic ideology driven by dreams of an error-free world of 100

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32   Κυβερνήτης: Norbert Wiener, *Cybernetics; Or, Control and Communication in the Animal and the Machine* (New York: M.I.T., 1961).
33   As put by Wiener 1948: Wiener, 12.

percent efficiency, accuracy, and predictability."[34]

Computers: Discrete State Machines

Modern computers—borne of this nucleus of logic and control—fall in line with this disambiguating heritage. They are *discrete state* machines (as one of the computer's first proponents, Alan Turing, put it), as opposed to, for example, the *continuous* nervous system.[35] They are binary systems, based ultimately upon voltage difference: either *on*, or *off*.[36] As critic Jan Verwoert has observed, "it is a system based on the constant repetition of either/or choices."[37] Hence, digital technologies tend generally toward anti-ambiguity, not just through the more complex instances of disambiguating algorithms, but at their most fundamental, Apollonian level. Though they may approximate ambiguity (through fuzzy logic, for example)[38] digital languages are ultimately reliant upon finite units of discrete data. One need not recall the digital computer as a war-machine borne from the 1950s military-industrial complex (as Kittler has emphasized) to sense that subtleties, uncertainties and ambiguities are not permissible within the structures of digital systems.[39]

the Internet: Networked Disambiguation

By the time of the Internet, however, this militaristic basis coalesced with Southern Californian hippie culture. Long-haired engineers and mathematicians borne of 1960s American libertarianism structured the foundations of the Internet along anti-authoritarian

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34   Mark Nunes, *Error: Glitch, Noise, and Jam in New Media Cultures* (New York: Continuum, 2011), 3.
35   "These are the machines which move by sudden jumps or clicks from one quite definite state to another." Alan Turing, "Computing Machinery and Intelligence," *Mind LIX* 236 (October 1950): 439.
36   "All code operations (...) come down to absolutely local string manipulations and that is, I am afraid, to signifiers of voltage difference," Kittler, 15.
37   Jan Verwoert, 'Exhaustion an Exuberance' in *Tell Me What You Want, What You Really, Really Want* (Sternberg Press, 2010): 18.
38   A concept in information science, fuzzy logic (sometimes called probabilistic logic) permits multiple variables where traditional logic will only permit a binary. It does so to approximate partial-truths and to express uncertainties within programmed languages.
39   Much of Kittler's scholarship stressed this point. See Kittler, 1999.

lines: its architecture was free, decentralized, and distinguished by distributed power, limitless constrains, and radical horizontality.[40] It follows, then, that the resulting global communications network is itself a meaningful counterpoint to the centralized, hard-nosed structures readily attributed to digital logic. Technology and critical theorist Alexander Galloway has argued against this more "general assumption that networks have the potential to dehierarchize, disrupt and generally dissolve rigid structures of all varieties."[41] Instead, the Internet's ostensible *freedom*—though oft associated with its open-access and free exchange of information—itself may be a controlling force hostile toward ambiguity. While an 'open' and distributed system, the Internet is nonetheless meticulously ordered. Even before the rampant corporatization of the Net,[42] its structures carried forth the Enlightenment ideals of clarity, utility, and rational certainty. Uncertainty within the realm of networked communication technologies is treated as the effect of the system's incompleteness or technological limitation, contrary to what the philosophers Franco Bifo Berardi and Alessandro Sarti recognize as an "intrinsic ontological feature of natural reality."[43] These thinkers urge a radical re-evaluation of formal scientific systems that rely on certainty and predictability. In structuring a network hostile toward uncertainty and ambiguity, the current state of the global Internet extends the conditions of dominant cybernetic ideologies.

Galloway's notion of *protocol*, developed in his 2004 book of the same name, is the most developed study of such cybernetic control on the Internet. For Galloway, it is the

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40 The Internet's militaristic precursor ARPAnet, for example, featured decentralized architecture through packet switching technologies and distributed data-transfer protocol.
41 Alexander R. Galloway, *Protocol: How Control Exists after Decentralization* (Cambridge, MA: MIT), 2004.
42 The so-called Dot-Com Boom following the 1994 commercial injunction rescission fostered a growth of disambiguation algorithms.
43 Franco Bifo Berardi and Alessandro Sarti. *RUN Morphogenesis* (Kassel: Documenta Und Museum Fridericianum, 2012), 60.

standardized technical protocols that sanction power on the Net. At its most basic form,

protocol is seen in the functioning of informational systems like TCP/IP, DNS, UDP, and

HTML.[44] These communications systems enable interaction between entities online, but

also restrict how and what type of information is shared. By extension, *protocol* may be

appropriately synonymous with the dominant ideological force of the Internet. Thus the

Internet is not a site of freely accessible and transferable information, but a highly

structured field of protocological control within which transmission and communication is

tightly regulated. So much so, Galloway warns, that "the Internet is the most highly

controlled mass media hitherto known."[45] This form of power, as will be evident, hinges on

the exclusion of ambiguity.

Significantly, Galloway's thinking also illuminates this terrain of power to account

for forces of political resistance on the Net. Here, through what he terms *counterprotocol*

activity, flaws and rifts in the makeup of protocological structures can be opened and

exploited for political ends. Protocol, then, is not merely a hegemonic system but a

penetrable zone of power and conflict. As Galloway affirms: "protocol is synonymous with

possibility."[46]

The dominance of digital disambiguation, then, may be an assailable force, and the

very technologies it indwells may contain its own undoing. As Australian communications

theorist Marcus Breen suggests: "questions about Enlightenment values based on

rationality are directly problematized by the Internet."[47] He points to the communication

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44   Transmission Control Protocol (TCP), Internet Protocol (IP), Domain Name System (DNS), User Datagram Protocols (UDP), and Hypertext
       Markup Language (HTML) are foundational languages that structure the dominant uses of the Internet.
45   Galloway, 243.
46   Ibid., 244.
47   Marcus Breen, *Uprising: The Internet's Unintended Consequences* (Champaign, IL: Common Ground Pub., 2011), 110.

network's capacity to upset the boundaries of rationality produced within its own ideological bounds: i.e. to increase "the circulation of irrational aspects of human behavior."[48] Hence, critical practices within these digital structures may offer counterpoints to the rational and disambiguating distribution of power on the Internet. As in Galloway's counterprotocological activity, these are modes of resistance within-but-against protocological structures. They are practices that enable the penetration of a system in order to exploit it. Not the mere *wrench-in-the-machine* of neo-Luddism, counterprotocological activity infiltrates and works *with* 'the machine' in order to undermine and leverage its power. On the Internet this is a discernible mode of operation amongst cyberfeminists**,** hackers, crackers and cyberhooligans.

Ambiguous Digital Imagery

This thesis approaches a concern for their imagery. But instead of focusing on the unambiguously radical work of cyber-activists, it appreciates decidedly ambiguous images produced by artists. Though literature on 'deep,' explicitly critical or activist networked-art practice abounds,[49] much of the 'surface' imagery produced by artists (and amateurs alike) online is sidelined in discussion concerning the politics of digital culture. This thesis rejects a separation between so-called *deep* and *surface*—between hardware and software, and code and screen—to arrive at a view where ambiguous images may too be read as gestures of struggle and platforms for pluralist exchange. In their ambiguity, the images produced within the digital commons may be barbarians at the gate(d community) of digital culture. In their aesthetics is a critical formalization of the frictions that arise when human beings

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48   Ibid. 106.
49   Much in this regard is deservedly written on Critical Art Ensemble, Electronic Disturbance Theater, Jodi, 01.org, and endeavours by the Zapatista Army and Anonymous collective, amongst others.

interface with digital logic. Through five case studies the following section considers

ambiguous digital-aesthetic manoeuvres as tactics of non-compliance within the

disambiguous imperatives of digital culture. These practices represent the latent, radical

potential indwelling the networked commons – specifically as counter-forces against an

Enlightenment-derived rationality that achieve, as Breen posits, the Internet's propensity

for "unbounded irrationality."[50]

The artists included in this discussion make visible what Spanish sociologist Manuel

Castells has called the "unseen logic of the meta-network, where value is produced, cultural

codes are created and power is decided."[51] Such power often goes unseen as a result of the

very interfaces designed to engage with it. The logical complexity of computer

programming leads to an opacity that hides the power it exerts. As critical Internet theorist

Geert Lovink affirms: "cultural awareness of how algorithms function is still a long way

off."[52] Such insights pull into critical focus the modes by which we, as users, see only what

programmers intend us to see. Hidden are the forces that structure the speed of

information flows – and within its current is a loss of human scale.[53]

Two years before his death, in 2006 Weizenbaum called for 'islands of reason within

the cyberflow.'[54] This thesis wades into the murky waters of ambiguous digital imagery, in

search of such islands within the river of Internet data-flows. In appreciating the aesthetic

concerns of contemporary artists critical of digital communications technologies, this study

attempts to account for their varied uses of ambiguity: both droughts and floods—lapses

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50   "The Internet has prompted the reinvention, or even the dismissal of the categories of reason and rationality." Breen, 96

51   Manuel Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2000)*,* 508.

52   Lovink, 134-5.
     This notion has fed a criticism within computer science of "the tendency for software to privilege surface over source" (Galloway, 291).

53   Modern computation stems from a Cartesian coordinate system in which, put bluntly, there seems to be no room for bodies.

54   *Wo sind sie, die Inseln der Vernunft im Cyberstrom,* is the title of Gunna Wendt's 2006 book of interviews of Weizenbaum.

and excesses of meaning—are injected into this realm, alternately enacting a slowing-down of the cyberflow, and its speeding-up.

Slowness and Silence on the Information Superhighway: Constant Dullaart

Dutch Internet artist **Constant Dullaart**[55] has created a series of web-sites that appropriate and re-frame *Google*'s *Web Search* to produce results that silence and slow the information giant's breakneck speed. These reformulations conserve Google's function as a search engine, and thus enable one to access any site and service recognized by the corporation, though they are filtered by modifications that render it nearly unusable. His strategy is a means of aesthetically manipulating the entire Internet through filtering merely one website – the Net's most-used entry-point: *google.com*. Each work in the series features a simplistic modification that doctors the original website within his created ones, so that every subsequent online action is recast as spinning (*therevolvinginternet.com*, 2010), heavy-eyed (*thesleepinginternet.com*, 2011), head-shaking (*thedisagreeinginternet.com*, 2008), creased (*internetspread.com*, 2011), crook-eyed (*thedoubtinginternet.com*, 2010), or erased (*untitledinternet.com*, 2012).

Like earlier net.art pratices of the 1990s, Dullaart's website-specific artworks exploit the specific conditions of the Internet as a medium. In works by net.art trailblazer Mark Napier this exploitation sought to similarly disrupt the conventional flow of the networked-environment. His 1998 *Shredder 1.0* automatically mangles the data of any input URL to produce an 'alternative browsing experience' (fig. 1).[56] The results expose passages of hidden code, and stretch and skew pixels to aesthetically disrupt the intended

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55   Dullaart, Constant. b. 1979, the Netherlands. Lives and works in Berlin.
56   <http://www.potatoland.org/shredder/>.

flow of online information. While Dullaart's online artworks similarly seek to disrupt conventional cyberflows, they take on new bounds in the modern-day networked-environment of the so-called Web 2.0, structured as it is by corporate interests. Not fully *shredding* websites, his works are cheeky conceptual tweaks that render existing sites not-quite fully-functional. In targeting and redeploying Google, Dullaart highlights the modes by which the corporation filters and shares information. While "Google's [purported] mission is to organize the world's information and make it universally accessible and useful," there is much omitted from this purview – namely, Google's own power.[57] Dullaart's series points directly to the culture of silence surrounding practices of media corporations generally, of which Google is an obvious culprit.

In his *thecensoredinternet.com* from 2011, *google.com*'s opening page and subsequent search-retrieval listings are redacted to replace each and every displayed character with an 'X' (fig. 2). The results are reams of whitewashed content; silenced and stunted, an emptied, scrollable field flips the basic logic of the informative Internet. This act of over-sanitization visualizes a slowing down and silencing – an opting-out through farcical censorship of the Internet's information (over)flow. "To embrace latency," Verwoert has written, "goes against the grain of the logic of high performance."[58] In so doing, Dullaart points to what Lovink has identified as "strategies to 'uncool'" corporate control of the Web.[59] Here, "switching offline" has become an operative form of dissent that Dullaart compels his site's users into symbolically enacting through their own censorial

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57   Mission statement taken from google.com/about. Accessed Jan 15, 2012
58   Verwoert, 94.
59   Lovink, 156.

performance on personal computers.[60]

     In adopting the potent ambiguity of silence, *thecensoredinternet.com* recalls art historical precedents. Similar forces have been utilized in theatre practice, from the pregnant silences in the plays of Harold Pinter, to Samuel Beckett's preceding experiments with temporal gaps, and Bertolt Brecht's critically ambiguous *verfremdung* before them both. With imagery cleared of detail and significance, Dullaart also affects a similar throw as Nam June Paik's decidedly silent *Zen for Film* – a sound-less, image-less, 8-minute projection from 1964. *thecensoredinternet.com* perhaps most resembles John Cage's infamously silent instrumental composition *4'33* (which one can now buy on *iTunes* store). Differing from these precursors, Dullaart deploys such silence in the face of today's high-paced, efficient, and noisy corporate Web.

     In a media- and information-saturated environment in which blank spaces are potential capital, attention is vied for and traded as currency. Silence, here, is a meditative zone contrasting dominant tendencies toward sound and speed. Opposing the direct and loud presence of purposeful advertisement and media cultures, silence is abstract, unclear and ambiguous. As aesthetic philosopher Mario Perniola has said, "ambiguity is at its most intense not in words, nor in action, but in silence."[61] Dullaart's web-site realizes this silence, and in achieving this by exploiting the Web's proverbial nerve centre *google.com*, it numbs the Internet's capitalist and cybernetic logic. The project's ambiguous silence engenders a progressive slacktivism – a kind of sabotage through apathy. It is coherent with the words of anarchist Hakim Bey: "refusal of work can take the form of absenteeism."[62] In its

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60   Ibid., 162.
61   Mario Perniola, "Silence, the Utmost in Ambiguity," *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture 12.4* (2010): 2.
62   Hakim Bey, *TAZ: The Temporary Autonomous Zone* (Seattle, WA: Pacific Studio, 2011), Part 3.

stubborn preclusion of content *thecensoredinternet.com*'s subversive negation opts-out of the Net's resolve for clarity and efficiency. It channels the ethos of both dada and punk as Greil Marcus parses it – transgressions of status-quo standards vis-à-vis the radical theatre of negation.[63]

Like an oversensitive, undiscriminating censor, Dullaart's revisionist search-engine gives way to silenced and slowed results – not through direct antagonism of the omnipotent Google, but behind its back in subtle and ambiguous aesthetic gestures. The project calls into being that existential silence that film theorist Leo Charney called the *empty moment*, within which the early cinematic spectator was rendered passive. Inculcating a series of ephemeral points in the photographic medium, such empty moments give way to an ambivalent *drifting* – that epitome of Modernity which prohibits a stable sense of the present moment. Exposing a continual deferral of content and meaning, Dullaart too beckons this experience into critical consciousness with the unspectacular results of bowdlerized web searches. He here makes visible the false sense of connectedness and engagement in the digital present – an "experience of vacancy, the lived sensation of empty moments."[64] Instead we *drift* slowly (but consciously) through nondescript signs in movements diverging fully from Google's quick-paced, efficient facility. In forced acts of (temporary) non-participation, users of *thecensoredinternet.com* are immured into the silence of an empty digital moment. Instead of fulfilling the corporation's promise to quickly connect one with the world, access to content is here restricted, calling attention to

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[63]   We can here recall the censor-barred face of HRH on the cover-art of the Sex Pistols' 1977 *God Save the Queen*, designed by Jamie Reid. Marcus' *Lipstick Traces* links various anti-authoritarian cultural and aesthetics movements, including dada, Situationism, and punk. Greil Marcus*, Lipstick Traces: a Secret History of the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP), 1989.

[64]   Leo Charney, *Empty Moments: Cinema, Modernity, and Drift* (Durham: Duke UP, 1998), 7-8.

the modes by which this connection is made possible to begin with.

 If Dullaart works to undermine the cybernetic ideals of efficiency and speed through the ambiguity of silence and slowness, other artists in contrast show that noise and velocity may offer up further critical ambiguities.

Dirty Channels and Noisy Signals: Rosa Menkman's Glitches

 "Noise is unbounded dissonance; it is Dionysian." Peter Carty[65]

 Within the history of communications technology, in which *noise* represents a deficit in efficient communication, the glitch embodies the potentials of losing control. Glitches signal unknowns and ambiguities within information systems, and may give way to a radical reappraisal of their fundamental principles. With this progressive view, artists exploit the capacities for glitches, error, noise (and similar 'faults' within digital systems) to enact a counter-force within systems that demand clarity, efficiency and certainty. Their images reveal the limitations of technological progress. Here, degradation, compression, and *lossy* images mark the ambiguous aesthetic of digital errors. By engaging critically with the 'dirty' accidents born from new, fast technologies, these images may compel a view past the 'clean' logic of technological speed. They proffer surfaces full of "unexpected information" that literary and technoscience theorist Bruce Clarke has qualified as the "productive ambiguity of noise."[66] Such radical noise has roots within hacker heritage and electronic manipulations in visual art: from datamoshing, pixel-bleeding, image hacking, and circuit-bending, to various tech-interventions by historical, experimental artists.[67]

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65 Peter Carty, "Deep Corruption on the Web," *Mute Magazine* (July, 2004).
66 Bruce Clarke, "Information," in *Critical Terms for Media Studies*, eds. Mitchell, W. J. T. and Mark B. N. Hansen (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2010), 164.
67 These forms of engaging with and disrupting both hard- and software all result in an aesthetics not intended by the technologies'

The perceptible result of an error, a glitch disrupts the pixel-perfect, efficient-signal, Photo-shopped, hi-res, disambiguous imperatives of digital culture. They are useless, textural bugs in the machine: a sputtering and bubbling-up of information onto the clean, rational surface of the digital image. Glitches work against the grain to represent a break within its flow. And like *ambiguity*, ""error"," Nunes relates, "has an etymological root that emphasizes wandering."[68] As such, paths have been cut into the digital landscape with noise, bugs, distortions and jams. While this thesis concerns artists' usage of visual glitches, audio glitches are just as prevalent. Use of glitch-imagery in art historical precedents may conceivably lie in dada and Surrealism, wherein clean *flows* of meaning between sender and receiver were intentionally disrupted with quizzical and evocative imagery. More explicitly, technological glitches have been utilized in film and video works that, like their modern-day counterparts, call attention to the materiality of a medium generally conceived of as immaterial. Works by David Askevold, Stan Brakhage, Joan Jonas and Michael Snow notably have demonstrated this concern.

The brief history of the digital glitch used in visual art spans electronic arts, software-art and net.art, and is evident in the practices of artists Tony (Ant) Scott, Nick Briz, Kim Cascone, Vuk Ćosić, and the Internet-art collective Jodi (Joan Heemskerk and Dirk Paesmans). British artist Ant Scott (alias Beflix) has exploited technology for glitch-creation since the 1980s. His *Glitch Art Blog* ran from 2001-2005 and featured imagery "created from computer crashes, software errors, hacked games, and the visualization of raw data."[69]

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designer. Menkman recalls as art-historical precedents the 1937 *A Colour Box* by Len Lye, and Nam June Paik's *MagnetTV* of 1965, in her "Glitch Studies Manifesto" (Brussels: Video Vortex 20 Nov. 2009).

68   Nunes, 8.

69   "Glitch Art," artist's website, accessed Jan 15, 2012, <http://www.beflix.com/works/glitch.php>.

His works, such as *GLITCH #08 – AERIELETTE SUSPICION* (2002) (fig. 3), are computer-screen-sized images that visualize sections of damaged code in the acrid colours and jagged forms that commonly signify digital errors. For American composer Kim Cascone it is the capacity for such technological failure that has facilitated the evolvement of contemporary music, which he terms the *post-digital*.[70] This state has germinated from Italian Futurism, to mid-century experimental composers, and to techno music of the early 1990s to allow for a critical evaluation of media technologies. "Failure," Cascone writes, "has become a prominent aesthetic in many of the arts in the late 20th century, reminding us that our control of technology is an illusion, and revealing digital tools to be only as perfect, precise, and efficient as the humans who build them."[71] In visualizing technological failures, the glitch compels a view past the controlled surface of the digital image.

Dutch artist/theorist **Rosa Menkman**[72] has developed a comprehensive enquiry into 'glitch aesthetics.' Images within her oeuvre of research-creation are marked by 'lossy' compression quality, in which information is lost, scattered or mutated. Her videos, performances, and visual artifacts exploit the materiality of digital media to bring forth glitches, through which "a negative feeling makes place for an intimate, personal experience of a machine."[73] Hers is a misty, orphic sensibility rendered in the blocky and regularized language of digital images. In works like *TIFF Compression glitch* (2010) (fig. 4), a theatrical sensibility imbues her rigid self-portrait video-still – a shivering graphic that seems to tear at the skin of the young woman and of the image. Like so many pre-teen web-cam-diaries,

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[70] Kim Cascone, "The Aesthetics of Failure: "Post-Digital" Tendencies in Contemporary Computer Music," *Computer Music Journal* 24.4 (2000): 12.
[71] Ibid., 13.
[72] Menkman, Rosa. b. 1983, the Netherlands. Lives and works in Amsterdam.
[73] Menkman, *Glitch Studies Manifesto*, 341.

Menkman faces her audience with a candid-but-controlled demeanour: her veiled eyes scorched in electric chiaroscuro.

Menkman's glitches are process-based images formed through experimentation at the level of code. They invite chance and randomness, and though they are edged into being with human eyes and hands, their textures bear the numerical nature of their constitution. They are a programmable and predictable language used to write aleatory and erratic phrases that yield unexpected imagery. Indeed, as cinema scholar Hugh S. Manon and artist Daniel Temkin establish, unexpected behaviour is the ontology of the glitch: they are unpredictable and erratic, so that "one triggers a glitch; one does not create a glitch."[74]

Inimitable and volatile, the glitch is an ambiguous entity: a kind of half-dead picture in a semi-legible state. Glitches are endlessly producible, but by definition never *re*producible – each a sudden crystallization of a data-flow. They are a unique schisms, but share with all glitches the aesthetic qualities of fragmentation, repetition, complexity, and linearity. This is imagery marked by sharp edges, quadrate forms, and corrupt codes. Each image represents a system that relies on feedback (as in the steersman's) though instead of subsuming unpredicted information within the system's logic it is ungracefully thrust back onto the surface of its imagery. This aesthetic flummoxes the logic of algorithmic flow, and results in the sudden exposure of its coded origin. They are frozen pictures that jar the speed of the digital.

Where digital technologies necessitate particular modes of codified interaction, the critical glitch represents an unwillingness to nourish a control system in which legible

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74   Hugh S. Manon, and Daniel Temkin, "Notes on Glitch," *World Picture* 06 (Winter 2011).

feedback is crucial. Menkman's glitches, outside the rationale of digital communication logic, demonstrate a consistent state of refusal within this system. In light of activity such as this, Nunes has outlined a "poetics of noise" with the understanding that aesthetic errors may offer a critical counterpoint to a rationale of efficiency and predictability.[75] As he writes: "error reveals not only a system's failure, but also its operational logic."[76] In its ambiguity, the glitch disrupts the steadfast logic of digital information systems.

We may question the degree to which these critical glitches, as deployed by artists like Menkman, approximate Galloway's counterprotocol – or, how radical these superficial images really are. One can read a latent radicalism in the glitch's ambiguous surface. Like slashed Lucio Fontana canvases, they may be controlled and refined, but are figurative ruptures of forthright violence. The glitch is a becoming-transparent rendering of the digital: not a clean and intractable surface, but a field of potentiality that speaks truths about the malleable medium. It pulls out of the digital what Paul Virilio calls its "accidental potential."[77] Menkman's glitches permit a view past the rational surface of the digital: a human-scaled interruption into the computer's clean-logic. In its "failure to communicate," Nunes relates, "error signals a path of escape from the predictable confines of informatic control: an opening, a virtuality, a *poiesis*."[78]

This 'path of escape' is commensurate with Rancière's *redistribution of the sensible*. Here, aesthetic acts may rub up against constraints of 'normal' political and social order. In 'redistributing' what is made possible to the senses, radical imagery can be comprehended

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75   Nunes, 4.
76   Ibid., 3.
77   Paul Virilio, *The Accident of Art* (Semiotext(e): New York, 2005), 2. Menkman reproduces this phrase often.
78   Nunes, 3.

as "aesthetic acts as configurations of experience that create new modes of sense perception and induce novel forms of political subjectivity."[79] "When glitches manifest," Manon and Temkin confirm, "they are a sudden phenomenological intrusion, a break in the order of logic."[80] By inviting chance and randomness, glitch aesthetics evoke unknowns and ambiguities not sanctioned within the indexicality of the digital. Through this particular ambiguity, the glitch gestures toward the complexity that lies outside of its own fractured surface, and so gestures toward new representational possibilities in the digital age. If Cubism's avant-garde strategies built flattened, crystalline images as pathways leading out of the semantic restrictions of its day, so too do symbolic alternatives arise from viewing the integral damage of a glitched file.

This destabilizing force, however, has perhaps found a stability in the contemporary digital-aesthetic moment, that which Menkman calls *The Glitch Moment(um).*[81] It is a stability which recuperates and defangs the critical glitch. As Cascone has recognized, we are entrenched in a "*famous for fifteen megabytes culture* in which the glitch "is a tactic of subversion that has become a fashion statement."[82] Here, glitches are merely cultivated fuck-ups—happy-accidents bred for mildly mesmerizing effects—and have possibly lost their radical import. Arguably, they never had it. Campanelli suggests that corrupted media-objects are more likely to result in a viewer's frustration than interpellation into critical media consciousness.[83] Further, as Manon and Temkin argue, "for all the destructiveness in glitch art, it is actually simulated dirt, simulated breakage, simulated risk."[84] Though

79   Rancière, *the Politics of Aesthetics,* 9.
80   Manon and Temkin.
81   As is titled in her 2011 publication.
82   Iman Moradi, *Glitch: Designing Imperfection* (New York: Mark Batty, 2009), 19.
83   Campanelli, 156.
84   Manon and Temkin.

unrepeatable, glitches may be *controlled* errors, resolved when its creator finds the

derangement of a file to be sufficient. With its low-stake capacity to undo, the glitch in fact

commits no irrevocable damage in its apparent iconoclasm; it does not, as Virilio speaks of

uprisings, "penetrate the machine, explode it from the inside, dismantle the system to

appropriate it."[85]

Further, like the bastardized spirit of Punk, glitches have been capitalized and

banalized. "Errors come in many kinds," says Nunes, "but increasingly, our errors arrive

prepackaged."[86] Menkman's glitches may perform a critical rupture only as much as the

commercial counterparts that have subsumed them, as seen in high fashion, popular music,

and advertisement design.[87] "There is no question," Manon and Temkin assert, "that the

glitch aesthetic [has] been co-opted by mainstream media."[88] This assimilation of a radical

art-form is not without precedence. As Mouffe has elaborated, "artistic critique has become

an important part of capitalist productivity... any form of critique is automatically

recuperated and neutralized by capitalism."[89] The institutional taste for commoditized jams

and hiccups capitalizes on the *authenticity* of glitched images. This established style seems

to pulls the rug out from under this subversive imagery.

Indeed, commercial markets have supported a taste for "disturbed aesthetic

experiences."[90] Campanelli has elaborated on these *imperfect cultural objects.*[91] Here, "flaws"

of digital media are written into commercial media objects, taking advantage of the fact that

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85   Virilio, 74 (mentioned by Manon and Tempkin).
86   Nunes, 13.
87   Such as in Kunihiko Morinaga's 2011-12 A/W collection for fashion house Anrealage; Björk's *Vespertine* (One Little Indian, 2001); and MGMT's video for "Electric Feel" (Columbia, 2008).
88   Manon and Temkin.
89   Mouffe, *Artistic Activism and Agonistic Spaces*, 1.
90   Campanelli, 154.
91   Ibid., 150.

noise, interference, pixilation, etc. have "become part of everyday aesthetic experiences."[92]

He writes that despite conceptions of the infinite reproducibility of digital media, its objects

are disposed to degradation– are, hence "impure."[93] This condition has produced a taste for

flaws, interference, and noise, and thus has brought about an "aesthetics of imperfection"

that, as Campanelli claims, "attempt[s] to take possession of the truth of the flaw," such as in

Dogme95 cinema or in professionally-made 'amateur' porn.[94]

Thus the radical potential of the glitch has often been lost within mass media forms.

It is, however, conceivable that the very banalization of glitch imagery facilitates its

participation in a larger political forum. In its capacity to exemplify ambiguity, the glitch—

as a non-rational force—may work against cybernetic control: it may exert a creative force

extending from the confines of digital logic.

As cybernetic forefathers and founders of information theory, Claude Shannon and

Warren Weaver sought in the mid-20th-century to diminish forms of uncertainty in

communication – to send signals with "zero probability of error."[95] Their WWII-era model of

communication is structured into contemporary communications networks, along with its

imperatives of efficiency and clarity. Shannon and Weaver sought to eradicate any

"semantic noise" within electronic communication.[96] This noise represents malfunction: a

disconnect between sender and receiver, and the character of any signal received that was

not present at the sender's origin. In carrying excess meaning atop the digital image's

superficial surface, the glitch thrusts into visibility information that is not clear, predictable,

92   Ibid., 154.
93   Ibid.
94   Ibid., 164.
95   Claude Shannon, "The Zero Error Capacity of a Noisy Channel," *Institute of Radio Engineers, Transactions on Information Theory* IT-2 (September 1956): 8.
96   Claude Shannon and Warren Weaver, *The Mathematical Theory of Communication* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1949), 26.

or controllable. Errors may thus offer a critical counterpoint to technologies and systems of control that rely on efficiency, accuracy and predictability. They may develop, Nunes posits, "unintended trajectories" within-but-against the purposefulness of systems of control.[97] We may describe the unclear, ambiguous images of Menkman's practice as non-rational. At odds with cybernetic ideology, the glitch may further participate in counter-Enlightenment forces. As an innovative language, these critical ruptures represent new subject-positions made possible on the Internet – a new mode of communication, in Poster's words, "outside the pattern of the rational."[98]

The glitch represents a refusal to participate in the flow of digital information. Still others, with similarly radical aims, participate fully as they immerse themselves within this flow.

Drifting in the Cyberflow: The Cyberflâneurie of Jon Rafman and Surfing Clubs

"You cannot prohibit the catastrophe, you must surf it!"[99] Paul Virilio

A by-now widespread metaphor of the Web-user is that of the flâneur, in which the user is spectator, rather than spectacle: a producer of information in their own right.[100] This is a contemporary incarnation of Charles Baudelaire's 19th-century wandering stroller, moving at his own pace, sensing the energy of his surroundings fully, and becoming one with the public he moves within, while still standing out with his style and grace.[101] Within

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97   Nunes, 8.
98   Poster, 57.
99   qtd. in interview with Andreas Ruby, "Surfing the Accident," *The Art of the Accident*, Ed. Andreas Broeckmann (Rotterdam: NAI/V2_, 1998), 30-44.
100   Chun 60.
101   Though contemporary cyberflâneurs do not necessarily follow their historically gendered type, this paper does not develop a corrective terminology to coin the *cyberflâneuse*. The groundwork for this has been laid in Catherine Russell's *Parallax Historiography*: Russell, Catherine. "Parallax Historiography: The Flâneuse as Cyberfeminist." *Scope Online Journal of Film & TV Studies* (2000). In what could be

the 'public' of the Internet, and the 'architecture' of the Web, online flâneur activity is

markedly different than the nineteenth-century model. Enter the *cyberflâneur*, whose public

is the World Wide Web, and whose architecture is the database. The term emerged, perhaps

surprisingly, in a 1998 essay in *Ceramics Today* which touted new, transient forms of

operating in cyberspace.[102] They are what Lovink has called *data dandies*, and Campanelli:

Travellers in the Aesthetic Matrix: wanderers – spontaneously archiving as they surf through

the media landscape. [103] As cities offer abundant choices to the wandering, Baudelairian

flâneur, so too does the Internet foster a type of cyberflâneurie of wandering perusal – a

surfing of databases, hypertexts and posting boards. Their movements can be traced

through their possession, sorting and ordering of found digital material. In making a path

within the networked-media landscape, this practice leads to a collapse of the line between

viewing and making, and within this ambiguity a critical fissure may be opened. Following

the Situationist *dérive*, the cyberflâneur maps a psychogeography of the networked media

environment.

Such paths are blazed by Montreal-based artist **Jon Rafman**.[104] His *Nine Eyes of*

Google Street View manifest as images pilfered from Google's online mapping service.

Drawing from aesthetics of social history painting, traditional landscapes, surveillance

technology and Vancouver School photoconceptualism, his imagery represents hours of

rummaging and compiling screen-shots. Though their source is the copyrighted property of

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a further development of this thought, Canadian artist Mireille Perron's elaboration of the *colporteuse* could be re-purposed as the *cybercolporteuse*: Mireille Perron, "Feminists colporteu(r)ses et pataphysiciennes," *The Culture of Community*, ed. Vera Lemecha (MAWA (Mentoring Artists for Women's Art), 2004).
102   Steven Goldate, "The 'Cyberflâneur' - Spaces and Places on the Internet," *Ceramics Today* (1998).
103   Geert Lovink, "The Media Gesture Of Data Dandyism," *CTheory.net* (1 Jan. 1993); Campanelli, Chapter IV - *Aesthetic Experience and Digital Networks*: *Travellers in the Aesthetic Matrix.*
104   Rafman, Jon. b. 1981, Canada. Lives and works in Montreal.

Google, each image is selected and framed by Rafman, and presented as a document of his performative cyberflâneurie. These are sites from around the world, each viewed from the street and often depicting uncanny events and scenes caught inadvertently by Google's peregrine cameras.

330 R. Herois de Franca, Matosinhos, Portugal (fig. 5) is a fleeting scene of dozens of sunlit seagulls against a bright blue sky. *Бобруйская улица, 11, Россия Санкт-Петербург* (fig. 6) captures an apparent business deal between Russian men, one of whom carries a rifle. In *7 Skweyiya Street, East London, South Africa* (Fig. 7) a group of thrilled school-children chase the Google-Street Car, while in another (*Rv888, Norway-1* Fig. 8), a reindeer bull careens to escape it.

The machinic source of these images implies a distanced and neutral gaze. Through skewed optics, directional demarcations, and the ever-present Google navigation tools, viewers are kept alert to the imagery's primary capacity as an enterprise in new-media cartography. Any discernible human hand in the image is produced not at its creation, but through Rafman's aesthetic choices. Formal aspects are exploited by the artist, as automatized photographic registration gives way to exercises in composition and style to build allusion, intrigue, and social commentary.

Such data-focused practices are pervasive amongst artists, who fixate on the possession, sorting and ordering of digital objects. Theirs is an *archival fever* symptomatic of the online and fast-fingered. The images shared by the cyberflâneur convey what Tara McPherson has called their *volitional mobility*: the sense of agency an individual surfer

experiences within the Internet.[105] Such cyberflâneur activity constitutes what Goriunova recognizes as the "grass-roots, folklore creativity."[106] Here, both artists and 'amateur' cultural producers alike engage a formal vocabulary to produce the sometimes-vulgar, derivative detritus of geeks, hackers and online slackers. The "blurred and 'dirty' forms" produced here are remarkable for their irreverence to precedent conventions of image-making and archiving.[107] These ambiguous forms, furthermore, arise from practices that take particular advantage of the Internet's flow. Within the protean ambling of the cyberflâneur may we see a distinct counter-point to the restricted protocols of online media engagement.

Groups of these artist-cyberflâneurs congregate in **Internet Surfing Clubs** – small leagues of artists engaged in a public exchange of found and remixed digital media. In still and moving image posts, and audio- and text-based discussions, they foster a kind of transmedial conversation through public, chronological postings that mirror or mimic the backcloth of information culture (fig. 9). These are back-and-forth, chat-style networks of media transmission – a kind of party-line of multi-media expression taking place upon a public stage. *544 x 378*, *Computers Club*, *Double Happiness*, *Loshadka*, *Nasty Nets*, *Spirit Surfers*, and *Supercentral* are amongst the first and most notable clubs, each of which assembled between 2005 and 2010. Though the postings housed here often constitute a narrative flow of discrete media-objects, its progression of images is antithetical to the cohesive, linear nature of popular media channels. Like earlier online artistic activity, as

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105   Tara McPherson, "Reload: Liveness, Mobility and the Web," *The Visual Culture Reader*, 2nd Edition, Ed. Nicholas Mirzoeff (New York: Routledge, 2002), 465.
106   Goriunova 3.
107   Ibid., 7.

artist Brad Troemel has summed up, this use of the Internet marks a "break from the one-to-many distributional structure of corporate newspapers or television."[108] Instead, the artists are able to generate imagery and ideas in adaptable and open-ended forums.

Though these collectives address a diversity of subject matter and aesthetic concerns, their modes of image-making are similarly collaborative, generative and unrehearsed. The imagery produced in these spaces—low-resolution, often lowbrow, and arguably ambiguous—is grounded in piracy, plagiarism and appropriation. Within these sites is an aggressive elaboration of Internet aesthetics. Theirs is a playful culture of sharing, and of continual re-signification (fig 10).

The most potent of these online spaces are overlapping fields of geekery: artists, hackers, designers, programmers and surfers contribute to reflections on—and curation of—the information overload of the Net. Data finds a new kind of cultural worth in these discursive spaces, which may or may not resemble traditional public spaces and forms of discussion. Their format promotes spontaneity, and is meant to induce creativity with images shared and spliced from live webcams, one's hard drive, or pilfered from the WWW. They are able to produce real-time self-expression, to organize politically and to develop new methods of communication. Artists' Surfing Clubs are ostensibly something more akin to a Parisian cafe than the porn- and gossip-clad image-blogs which constitute the majority.

If the Internet is a public space, these practices cue larger shifts in *publicness*: no distinct counterpoint to 'official discourse' is mandated here, but instead limitless splinters of clustered subcultures are formed by individuals in front of screens. Their participation

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108   Brad Troemel, *Peer Pressure: Essays on the Internet by an Artist on the Internet* (Brescia, Italy: Link Editions, 2011), 35.

achieves a real-time co-presence extending from a collaborative practice of image-production. Surfing of the web itself becomes a creative and public act. If Situationist-like disruption of the public sphere is possible in this new realm, it may be borne in the flowing imagery produced by wandering artist-surfers. "Today," philosopher Brian Holmes asserts, "the sensory qualities of the *dérive* are mimicked by hyper-linked voyages through the datascapes of the World Wide Web."[109] This mimicking characterizes the playful media-consumption of the pro-surfer.

Still, others criticize the current state of Web technologies as prohibiting the playful practices corresponding to the flâneur. This is what has led Evgeny Morozov to speak of the 'Death of the Cyberflâneur.'[110] Just as the Haussmannization of 19th-century Paris thwarted flâneurie with architectural restrictions, the Internet's penchant for utility and efficiency seems to barricade any possibility of truly wandering. Lovink affirms this incapacity of the cyberflâneur to actually *amble* and get lost, no longer possible in a world where "all information, including any object or experience, must be instantaneously at hand."[111] If their radical potential is one of enacting a flow, its current may be too narrowly predetermined by the Internet's ordered protocols. Lovink rues that our sense of time has been irrevocably altered by the speed of information technology. Here, the movement of the digital commons could never find a similar tempo to the wanderer's footsteps. Similarly does network theorist Wendy Hui Kyong Chun, citing the impossibility for a cyberflâneur (speedy as he is) to be at the center of the Internet (which necessarily has no center) corroborate: "on the so-

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109   Brian Holmes, *Unleashing the Collective Phantoms: Essays in Reverse Imagineering* (Brooklyn, NY: Autonomedia, 2008), 23.
110   Evgeny Morozov, "The Death of the Cyberflâneur," *New York Times* (5 Feb. 2012): SR6.
111   Lovink, 157.

called information superhighway, flâneurs and turtles would be roadkill."[112]

Of the arguable roadkill that is the derivative, poor imagery of artistic surfing, up for question is whether or not their communities prolong an insular discourse indicative of Campanelli's monolingualism. In what may be a diarrhetic procession of dirty images, artist-surfers may occupy a merely shallow mode of engaging with the media landscape. As Campanelli demonstrates: "since the Web is already everything before any action of mine, I no longer interact, I only jump from one flow to the other."[113] Further detractors locate the surfing-subject ultimately as an individualized, passive consumer. They are, as Benjamin said of Baudelaire's poetry, motivated by the habits "of the big city dweller, and of the customer."[114] Though their wandering may amble out of the strict logic of cybernetic ideology, their practice *flows* squarely within imperialist and consumerist bounds. Their activity, though ostensibly enshrined as ironically-distanced artwork, may be symptomatic of a larger consumerist disorder that new-media theorist Lev Manovich has called the "database complex," marked by an irrational desire to store everything.[115] One wonders, though, whether this neurotic tendency to grasp hold of objects passing through the cyberflow may also engender critical practices that undermine that flow itself. In identifying with this *irrational desire*, artist-cyberflâneurs may unlock critical potentials consistent with Breen's unbounded irrationality: they may exhibit new, ambiguous subject-positions at odds with the regimented flow that they surf.

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112   Chun, 61.
113   Campanelli, 97.
114   Walter Benjamin, *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism* (London: NLB, 1973), 106.
115   Lev Manovitch, *The Language of New Media* (Cambridge Mass.: MIT, 2001), 252.

In moving *with* the flow of digital information, the cyberflâneur's imagery and media-objects may be read as critically defiant of the Internet generally, and capitalist production specifically. The ambiguous products of artist-surfers function outside of the semantic structures of an explicitly commercial economy, which rely on a hierarchy of inherent meanings from producer to consumer. These media-objects instead float between users and are susceptible to unstable and ambiguous meanings. The types of discourse emerging from these networked-practices is thus less concerned with intelligible and rational knowledge-forms, and more invested in the production of ideas based on intuition and ambiguity. Such surfer activity notably relies on play and experimentation – "an activity," semiologist Paolo Virno observes, "without an end product."[116] This practice is similar to what art historian Gavin Grindon describes as the performance of "non-normative labour identities" in Surrealist France, revolutionary Russia, and Weimer-Berlin dada, wherein artists took up analogously ambiguous subject-positions that de-realised conventions of a work/leisure split.[117] This constituted a playful "refusal to participate in the production of capitalist values." Such "refusal of work," in its more proactive forms, may break with labour-based structures of economic control.[118] By refusing to be defined as a unitary, exchangeable commodity, these ambiguous images also closely resemble Fluxus modes of play. Art historian Owen Smith explains this practice "as a model for open-ended discourse that stresses relations rather than a linear production and communication of discreet pieces of information."[119] As ambiguous and experimental, surfing club imagery

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116   Paolo Virno, *A Grammar of the Multitude: For an Analysis of Contemporary Forms of Life* (Los Angeles, CA: Semiotext (e), 2004)*,* 52.
117   Gavin Grindon, "Surrealism, Dada, and the Refusal of Work: Autonomy, Activism, and Social Participation in the Radical Avant-Garde," *Oxford Art Journal* 34.1 (2011): 87.
118   Ibid., 85; 83.
119   Owen D. Smith, "Fluxus Praxis: An Exploration of Connections, Creativity and Community." in *At a Distance: Precursors to Art and Activism on the Internet*, ed. Annmarie Chandler and Norie Neumark (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 2005), 128.

approaches these historical precedents as new aesthetic forms that break from conventional economic structures. They do so at least as much as they approximate *LOLcats*, amateur cover songs, and videos of dancing babies that also allow themselves to be useless, non-commodifiable cultural expressions. Beyond this, though, artist-surfers may exert a radical force both through the ambiguous images they create, and through the performative modes by which they *wander*.

Artist and theorist Curt Cloninger proposes a continuum of critical internet surfing practices "ranging from strategic production to tactical consumption."[120] Among his eight surfer-types between the poles of *Producer* and *de Certeauian User/Consumer*, are *Remix Artist*, *Artistic Web Surfer*, and *Anarchist Drifter.* For Cloninger, the critical surfer embodies the radical and creative potentials of the Internet. Criticality within this environment must heed to the increasingly *real-time* nature of the Web**.** If the Internet is a field of protocological power, it is conceivable that artists ambiguate or surf through discreet media objects to leverage or to undermine, or simply screw with its regimented flow. Cyberflâneurs, then, may approximate what Michel de Certeau saw in individuals who skirt ideological control, characterized as "trailblazers in the jungles of functionalist rationality... They trace 'indeterminate trajectories' that are apparently meaningless, since they do not cohere with the constructed, written, and prefabricated space through which they move."[121] We may interpret their prolific creations as gainful results – not discreet moments of media consumption, but evidence of a flowing and embodied practice at odds with institutionalized, rationalized strategies of media engagement on the web. Such gestures

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120   Curt Cloninger, *Commodify Your Consumption: Tactical Surfing/Wakes of Resistance* (Black Mountain, North Carolina, Feb. 2009), 2.
121   Michel De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California, 1984), 34.

may work against the rigid protocols of network interaction that delimit how one moves in and through cyberspace, to suggest alternatives to the restricted options of online media consumption. Within the Internet's high-performance consumer culture, these unlikely and ambiguous practices may form potent anti-capitalist and counterprotocological gestures. To Microsoft's "*Where do you want to go today?*" they answer *anywhere but here*. In a constant, strategic deferral, the critical cyberflâneur ambles against the discreet-state of their machinic interface. As Cloninger postulates: "this move foregrounds ways of reading rather than what is being read."[122] Though ostensibly trite and lacklustre, their ambiguous residual images—cyberjunk—underscore this fluid artistic presence.

If the cyberflâneur's ambling surfs the flow of the Internet, the videos of American artist **Ryan Trecartin**[123] tear down its floodgates.

Surges in the Data Flow: Ryan Trecartin

Trecartin's decidedly millennial-generation art practice combines tawdry cinematic tropes, anti-glamour drag, and chat-room rhetoric into hysterical video works that feed back into a saturated media culture. They give the impression of *surfing the web* on MDMA. *Any Ever*—his body of exhausting video-installations—is a retinal flood of cyberspace Queer that affronts early promises of the Internet to transcend sex, gender, age and race (fig. 11). In their aggressively frenetic flow, Trecartin's videos enact a kind of overidentification with exaggerated behaviours of hyper-saturated cultural consumption. Routinely created with his collaborator Lizzie Fitch, Trecartin's videos feature his garishly cosmeticized friends and child actors modelling an affectation common to public-access

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122   Cloninger 12.
123   Trecartin, Ryan. b. 1981, USA. Lives and works in L.A.

television and stock-photography. They are self-aware performers impelled to ironic

extremes. Frenzied and hilarious, their presentment seems not to correspond to *real* people

nor *real* situations, but are a backlog of postures taken up by online popular culture. Here,

skin-tone, voice and gender are anything but meaningful identity cues.

K-CoreaINC.K (section a) from 2009 centres on a crew of homogenized, international

"Korea" (read career) girls apparently engaged in a trans-national business meeting (fig.

12). Blonde-wigged and white-faced, each character spouts a belligerent monologue in a

peculiar hybrid of corporate lingo and neurotic teenage *txt-speak*. Through air-travel to

teleconferencing, the meeting carries the thematic motif of speed. Though bloated with

detail, it leaves its viewers with little information (as opposed to data) to construct

anything resembling a cohesive storyline. This is a truncated narratology that exaggerates

the logic of digital speed: an artificial *attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder* that replicates

the rapidity of cultural consumption in the digital age. And while this artificial replication of

digital culture is poignant and poetic, it carries through its sense of a jarring and

cacophonous information overload. Its rebellious character resembles what Jaron Lanier

points to as part of the heritage of hip-hop turntablism. He writes, in a moment of decrying

processes of technological standardization, "hip-hop is imprisoned within digital tools like

the rest of us. But at least it bangs fiercely against the walls of its confinement."[124]

Trecartin's videos are oversaturated yet inexplicit: disjointed and open-ended, they

pack superfluous text overlays, multiple exposures, and shifting, splitting images. A

discordant soundtrack accompanies consistent jump-cuts that maintain a lack of continuity

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124   Lanier, 91.

throughout the information-overload. Trecartin's sensibility breeds maximalist rough-cuts that move rapidly through images and ideas, as if scrolling madly through blog-postings.

The unforgiving rapidity of Trecartin's videos echoes the hyper-real-time tempo of the Internet, and moreover works to preserve the psychological agitation of participating in its flow. His artwork does not slow-down the cyberflow, as is the case with Dullaart's web-works, nor does it crystallize it to provide a snapshot of its inner-workings, as the glitch does. Like the cyberflâneur, he embodies the real-time flow of the Net, but he sets out to release its floodgates of information. These are not discreet media-objects, but a deluge of cyberflow.

Each of these contemporary artists has elaborated the state of the digital image outside of its technological constraints. Against the dominant framework of cybernetic logic their new aesthetics subvert uniform and rational sensibilities with the corruption of standardized data-flows, in the perversion of its modular time, and in the creation of ambiguous imagery.

The State of the Digital Image: Oliver Laric

Austrian artist **Oliver Laric**[125] has developed a barbarian opus. His ongoing, evolving artwork *Versions* is "a series of sculptures, airbrushed images of missiles, a talk, a PDF, a song, a novel, a recipe, a play, a dance routine, a feature film and merchandise."[126] In its best-known incarnation, *Versions*' video-essay asks what is at stake for the image in reformed conceptions of authenticity and value after the Internet (fig. 13). Since 2009 Laric

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125   Laric, Oliver. b. 1981 Innsbruck, Austria. Lives and works in Berlin.
126   Qtd. in Domenico Quaranta, *In Your Computer: Or, How I Learned to Love the Art That Comes to You through Your Computer Screen, and Why You Should Learn to Love It as Well* (Brescia, Italy: LINK Editions, 2011), 165.

has amended and re-edited the video several times: what remain consistent throughout each version of *Versions* is its themes of multiplicity, impermanence, and reproduction. It is a generative montage of discrete moving and still images: digitized reproductions of renaissance canvases give way to Iranian Revolutionary Guard propagandist photography, which beget clips of studio-porn onto which Hollywood celebrity faces have been grafted; amateur retooled videos of French footballer Zinedine Zidane lead to split-screens showing the re-use of character animation cells by Disney Studios for *The Sword in the Stone* (1963), *Winnie the Pooh and the Honey Tree* (1966), and *The Jungle Book* (1967) (fig. 14).

With a pan-cultural survey of uses of the remix and the hybrid, in counterfeits, replicas, derivations, fakes, frauds and forgeries, Laric charts a collapse of visual hierarchies within a homogenized information space. In its multiple, fragmented lives, *Versions* asserts a fundamental ambiguity as to the authenticity of the contemporary image. Here, mutable notions of originality and of authority have been brought about through widespread access to and manipulation of digital media. It marks a condition in which the semantic density of a visual experience is captured in the equalizing and fungible medium of the digital. Visual material within the global digital network lends itself to the deflation of meaning into mere data – homogenized in a common technology and language, and to acts that Bifo and Sarti call "a-signifying recombinant processes."[127] This refers not to a flattened, clichéd language, but to a creative zone of malleable and interchangeable signs. It may resemble Baudrillard's simulacral *desert of the real*, but perhaps is better articulated with Rancière's *forest of signs*.[128] Here, aesthetic conditions give way not to a vacuous and arid replication, but to a

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127   Bifo and Sarti, 13.
128   Jean Baudrillard, "The Precession of Simulacra," in *Baudrillard: Selected Writings* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), 350-357; Jacques Rancière, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation* (Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 1991), 16.

fecund creativity, in which a terrain of semantic potential is laid out. For Breen, this condition represents not merely a loss of definition and meaning, but "the emergence of new language(s)" that operate "beyond the boundaries of Enlightenment rationality."[129] Where Rancière encourages one to 'venture forth in the forest' to create one's own pathways of knowledge, the ambling artist structures new meanings and new knowledge-forms through a type of aesthetic wandering.

Gestures like Laric's side-step any finality of signification – any rational, causal relation between a signifier and signified, and instead open up a network of polysemy. The imagery used in *Versions*—some seized from the digital commons; some produced by the artist himself—do not represent acts of appropriation, for the media never leave their primary context. They are instead a recursive manipulation of fodder taking place within the public media commons. This lack of semantic stability recalls what Rosalind Krauss wrote of Picasso's collages, as "a systematic exploration of the conditions of representability entailed by the sign."[130] Laric extends this exploration to a semantic system inflated in the hyper-networked digital age. Endless and flowing in their signification, his works forestall any final, closed explanation – any "bedrock of sense" to be found in its "shifting, changing sands of visual polysemy."[131] The evolving versions of *Versions*—as embodied portrayals of this digital-age condition—recall Eco's description of the 'perpetually incomplete' mobiles of Alexander Calder, and of an unfinished book of Mallarmé's, in which passages were "polymorphous in their indeterminate relation to each

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129   Breen, 110.
130   Rosalind Krauss, "In the Name of Picasso," *October* 16 (Spring 1981): 217.
131   Ibid., 212.

other."[132] In its perpetual incompleteness, *Versions* is an aggressively pluralistic prototype in the face of a disambiguous digital culture.

The video's overlaid narration—stiff and artificial—is seemingly the familiar diction of text-to-speech software. It is in fact the mimetic voice of a hired actress, who quotes snippets culled from a range of textural sources: from many-worlds theory and Protestant history, to words by Bruce Lee, Sun Tzu, Vitruvius, Borges, and Susan Sontag. In rephrasing Sontag, who professed that social 'truths' had been extended through an over-abundance of photographic imagery, Laric's voice-actress affirms that "just about everything has been Photoshopped."[133] By updating Sontag's 1975 assertion of a condition in which we 'see photographically,' Laric here speaks to the modes by which the digital reproduction carries authority in a mediatised and technologized culture. It is the technological image that characterizes, as Baudrillard posited, a 'Divine Irreference of Images.'[134] The digital copy is no longer an aesthetic fugitive. As the disembodied voice proclaims at the video's end: "It's the real thing."

Conclusion

"The old forms were developed for representing an ordered, hierarchal and mappable reality. Inheriting a set of univocal conventions, the artist breaks or subverts the formal language to create work which allows varied interpretations, reflective of a contemporary worldview which is less hierarchal and more pluralistic." Umberto Eco[135]

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132   Eco, 13.
133   Originally: "just about everything has been photographed;" Susan Sontag qtd. by Geoffrey Movius, "An Interview With Susan Sontag," *Boston Review* (June 1975), 3.
134   This is a section title from the chapter "The Precession of Simulacra" in his 1981 *Simulacra and Simulation*.
135   Eco, 95.

What is hidden in the folds of the cyberflâneur's ambling, or in the mutated pixels of a glitch, are unclean and unclear pictures. This ambiguous imagery is barbarian or zombie-like amongst antiseptic and disambiguous logic. While the artists discussed above risk *ambling* within the digital commons, they parade in the architectures of digital culture, in which uncertainty and polysemy is kept at bay. Their images rub against the clean surfaces of mainstream digital imagery.

Countering the logic of the Net's technocracy, these ambiguous artworks embody Eco's ambiguous and pluralist *open work*, illustrating "the imaginative categories necessary to move more easily in this world."[136] In developing fundamentally ambiguous imagery, these artists proffer outlooks not bound by the margins of techno-political standards. As Mouffe says, (in a moment of conjuring Hannah Arendt): "to think politically is to develop the ability to see things from a multiplicity of perspectives," and "requires coming to terms with the lack of a final ground and the undecidability which pervades every order."[137] In espousing ambiguous aesthetics these artworks offer up such open perspectives through opting out (in silence), jamming (glitch), and embodied surfing (cyberflâneurie) of the cyberflow. This range of practices represents both a drifting and interlude in the media landscape; both a riding of the gears, and a stopping the engine; the ghost and the wrench in the machine.

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136   "The new perception of things, and the new way of relating them to each other, promoted by art might eventually lead us to understand our situation not by imposing on it a univocal order expressive of an obsolete conception of the world but rather by elaborating models leading to a number of mutually complementary results, as science does. In this way, even those artistic processes that seem most removed from our immediate concerns may in fact provide us with the imaginative categories necessary to move more easily in this world." Eco, 150.

137   Mouffe, *Artistic Activism and Agonistic Spaces*, 4, 2.

Ambiguity, long a tactic on the artist's palette, has intensified on the Internet, and has become a critical means of facing the threat of disambiguation. This force—itself prefigured by scientific and philosophic precedents—maintains an invisible influence through digital technologies. The critical positions profiled here come about through disruptive artistic strategies. When ambiguity is implemented in the service of rectifying overly-rationalized spaces, this helps to circumvent a homogenous, consensus reality wherein differences, disagreements and contradictions are systemically eradicated. The anti-disambiguous efforts of these artists may be analogous to the hacktivists who dismantle (or *switch*) the technical apparatuses of the Internet, though their dismantling instead targets the semantic apparatuses of ideological power. Like forms of activist tactical media, they perform a "micropolitics of disruption," and "challenge the existing semiotic regime by replicating and redeploying it."[138] Their redeployment—instead of affecting a *deep*, radical disruption—offers instead gestures that are decidedly *surface* and ambiguous.

In adopting an ambiguous aesthetics, these artworks contribute to a critical discourse about the forces indwelling digital culture. These images may be nascent forms of what Vilém Flusser conceived of as 'disembodied surfaces' – spaces in which "many different participants would cooperate to project different meanings on [a] surface...thus taking on a new, higher level of significance."[139] If the new media-forms achieved by the artists discussed in this thesis approach Flusser's *significant surfaces*, they espouse

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138   Rita Raley, *Tactical Media* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2009), 1, 7.

139   "The image would be a "disembodied surface." Many different participants would cooperate to project different meanings on this surface. In this manner, the previous meanings of image would be "negated," thus taking on a new, higher level of significance. The image would remain universally accessible, the way it currently is. It would still be a multiple of itself that is easily transported. It would regain the political, epistemological, and aesthetic potential that it possessed during the time when painters were responsible for its production. And, perhaps, it would regain some of its original sacred character. All of this is technically possible today." Vilém Flusser and Andreas Ströhl, *Writings* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2002), 74.

"political, epistemological, and aesthetic potential[s]" though their highly-flexible, ambiguous images.[140]

In engaging an ambiguous aesthetics, Constant Dullaart, Rosa Menkman, Jon Rafman, Internet Surfing Clubs, Ryan Trecartin and Oliver Laric have put forth a potent critique of digital culture. By developing the new semantic potentials of networked technologies, they sustain new forms of expression despite an environment demonstrably hostile toward the creative force of ambiguity.
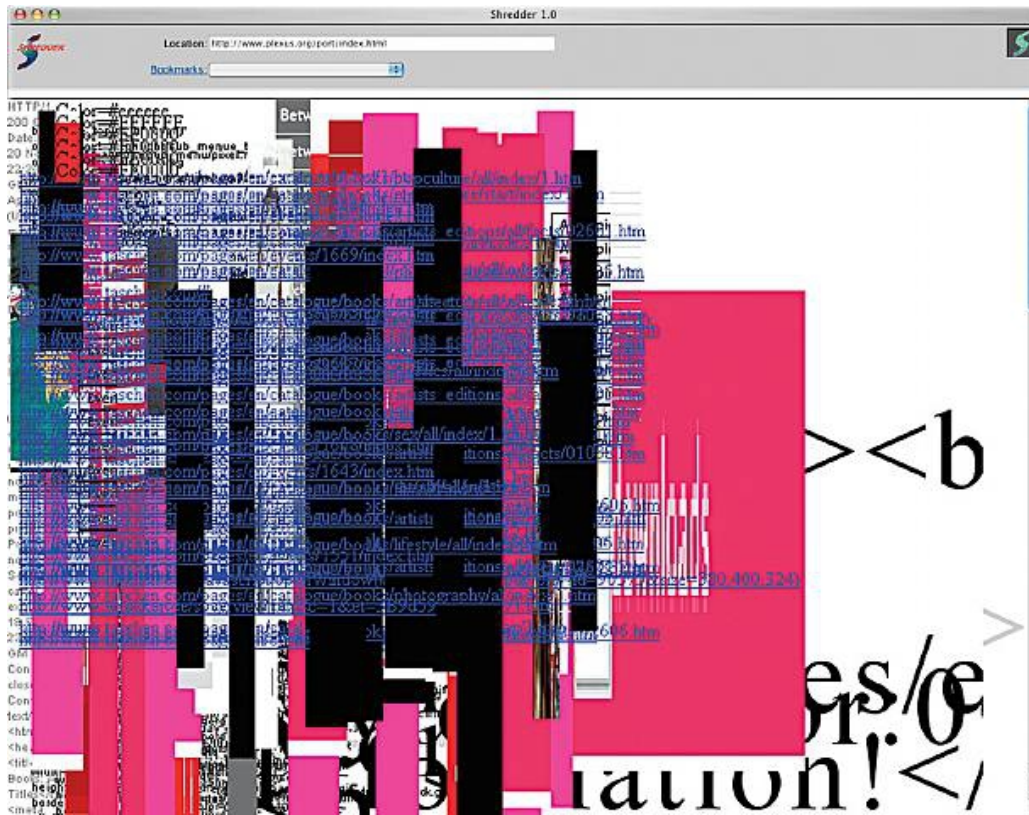
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140   Ibid.

Figures

fig. 1

Mark Napier. *Shredder 1.0.* 1998. WWW domain, HTML, Javascript. [http://www.potatoland.org/shredder/]
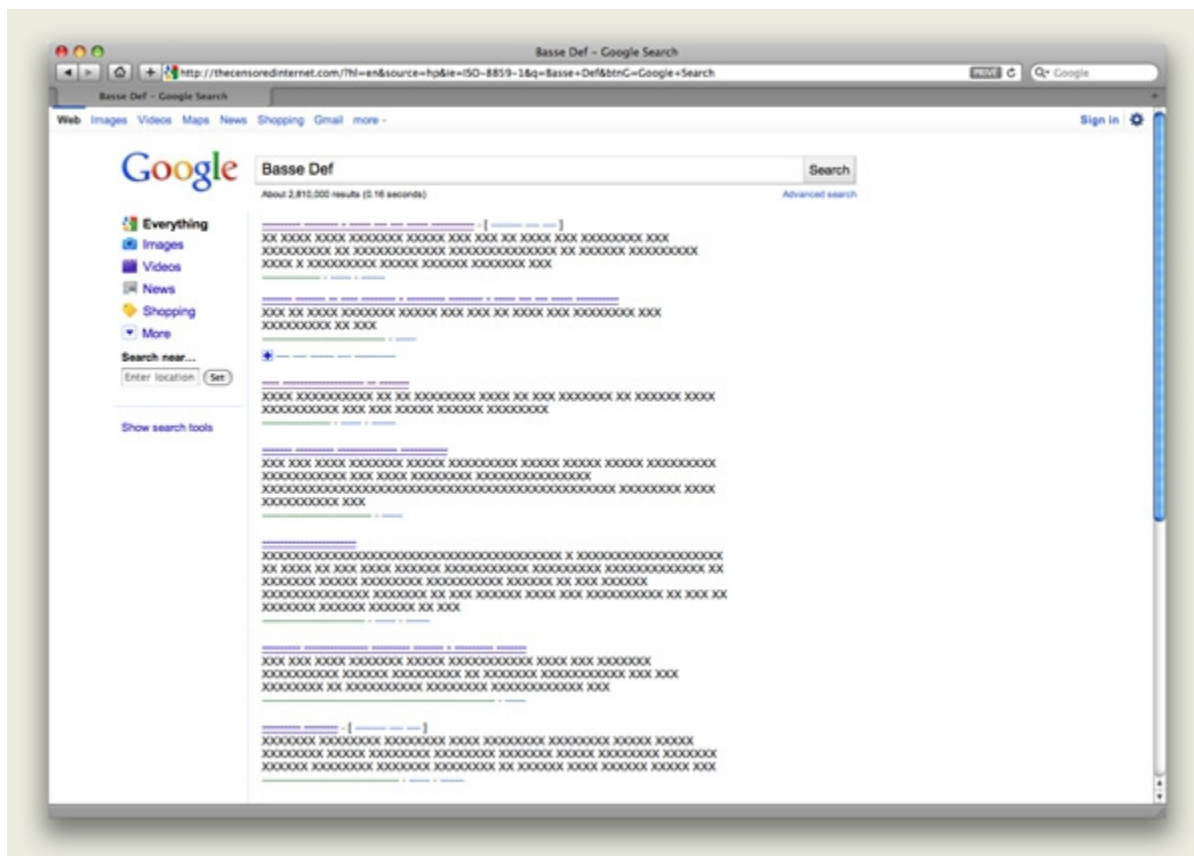
fig. 2

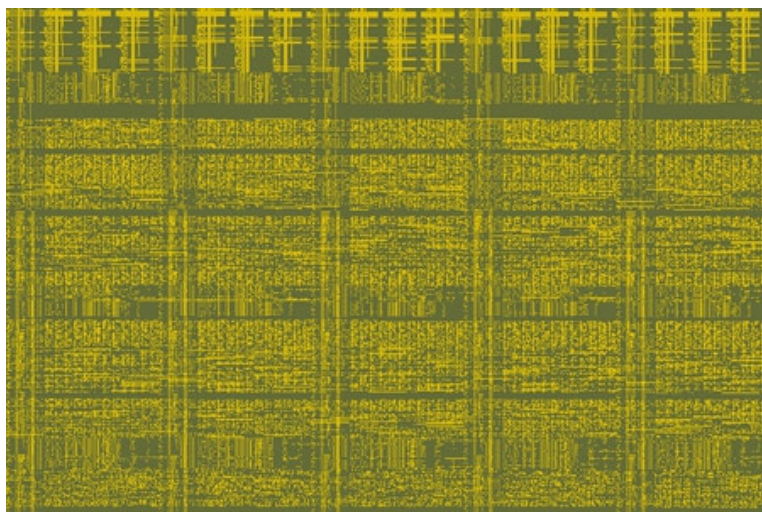Constant Dullaart. Screen-shot of *thecensoredinternet.com.* 2011. WWW domain, HTML, PHP. [http://www.thecensoredinternet.com/]

fig. 3

Tony (Ant) Scott (alias Beflix). *GLITCH #08 – AERIELETTE SUS-PICION.* 2002. Jpeg, 450x300px.

fig. 4

Rosa Menkman. *TIFF Compression glitch.* 2010. Tagged Image File Format (TIFF)

fig. 5
Jon Rafman. *330 R. Herois de Franca, Matosinhos, Portugal.* 2011. Digital image.

fig. 6
Jon Rafman. *Бобруйская улица, 11, Россия Санкт-Петербург.* 2011. Digital image.

fig. 7
Jon Rafman. *7 Skweyiya Street, East London, South Africa.* 2011. Digital image.

fig. 8
Jon Rafman. *Rv888, Norway-1.* 2011. Digital image.

fig. 9
doublehappiness.ilikenicethings.com_slash_question_p=1502. 2010. Digital image from Nasty Nets Surfing Club.
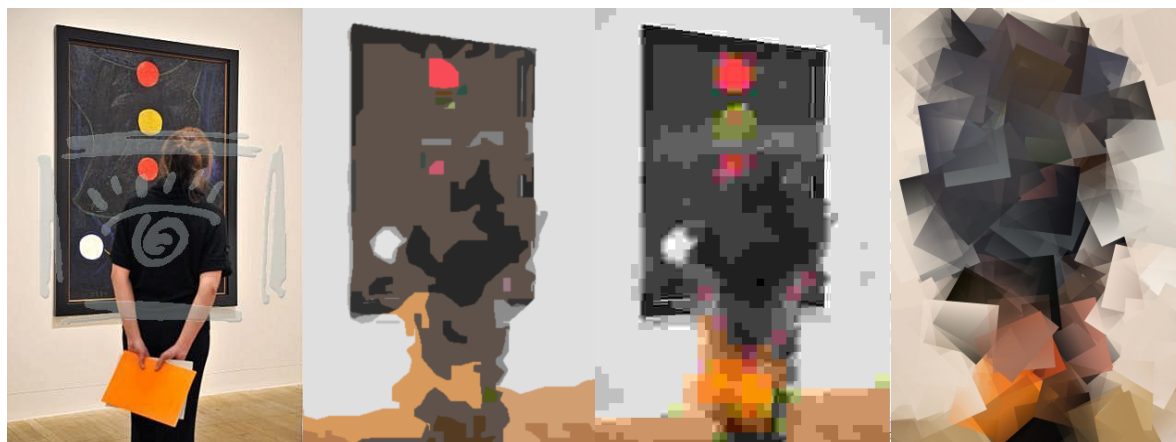

fig. 10
Tom Moody. *late picabia*, 1/22/11 6:07 am; "charles," 11/14/09 11:16 am; Tom Moody, 11/14/09 11:27 pm; "charles" • 11/15/09 5:21 pm. Digital images from conversation on Nasty Nets Surfing Club.

fig. 11
Ryan Trecartin. Installation shot of *Any Ever (K-CorealNC.K (section a)).* 2011. Installation,
MoMA PS1.

fig. 12
Ryan Trecartin. *K-CoreaINC.K (section a).* 2009. HD Video, 30:20, colour, sound.

fig. 13

Oliver Laric. Installation shot of *Versions.* 2012. HD Video, 06:17, colour, sound. Art Basel, 2012

fig. 14

Oliver Laric. Still from *Versions.* 2010. HD Video, 09:06, colour, sound. NIMk (Netherlands Media Art Institute).

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