

Beauty and the Digital Black Swan

LUMINOUS CURRENTS: *Homo Sapiens Technologica* and the Return of Post-Painterly Abstraction, CAA 2012

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The metaphor of the black swan was popularized by Nassim Nicholas Taleb in his 2007 book of the same name that argued that history, invention, and art are shaped less often by the logical outcomes of previous events in progressive cause/effect relationships and more by the unanticipated outcomes - the black swans of history. The black swan has since become a popular metaphor in the discourse of "digital culture", particularly the computer industry that is understandably obsessed with questions of order and randomness. Chris Anderson, Chief Editor of Wired explains the historic origin of the metaphor,

The phrase comes from David Hume, the eighteenth-century Scottish philosopher, who gave it as an example of the complications that lie in deriving general rules from observed facts....(In Europe all anyone had ever seen were white swans; indeed, "all swans are white" had long been used as the standard example of a scientific truth. So what was the chance of seeing a black one? Impossible to calculate, or at least they were until 1697, when explorers found *Cygnus atratus* in Australia.)ⁱ

Digital abstraction - exemplified by the art of Spencer Finch, Jennifer Steinkamp, and Leo Villareal - suggests its own context as being the space between Modernist painting and contemporary new media art. The tension between this work's visual strategies and its techno-social context reveals much about what it retroacts from that earlier moment and what it leaves behind. For instance, this work may revive questions about the relationship between aesthetic meaning and medium-specificity at a moment when other "digital" artists have traded net.art for Post-Internet art (not to mention the earlier, more prolonged break with such concerns.) This work represents something atypical of the general discourse around new media art and, as such, may help us re-frame that discussion. This work has been criticized as being too beautiful; the swan of new media art, but it may turn out to be a black swan.

In this brief essay, I will discuss the historical echoes between Post-painterly Abstraction, as heralded by Clement Greenberg, and digital abstraction, or, perhaps more precisely, I'll position this new media art in relation to the broader mode and discourse of art characterized as new media, using Post-painterly Abstraction as a touchstone. These black swans have an interesting history of their own and they occasion our seeing white swans in a new light.

Before we get to the differences that make digital abstraction exceptional, let us touch upon some of the ways that this art is similar to and part of the broader

field known as new media art. Obviously, the use of new computational and display technologies creates a common field of materiality and medium, but more important than this is the techno-social context in which this art is produced and, initially at least, received. JoAnne Northrup wrote that digital abstraction was kept at arms length by the mainstream art world because, on the surface, it resembled aspects of popular culture from Christmas lights, Las Vegas, Disney, 1960s light shows, lava lamps, screensavers, to Star Trek, rather than referencing the material gestures of the high art tradition, even the Modern tradition. Of course, the use of contemporary industrial materials has become a Modernist tradition, but these glitzy materials - walls of fiber optic and LEDs - have not yet accreted the patina of history the way rusted steel slabs have.

However, just as important as the relationship to industry and popular culture that these works' materiality suggests, and the problems that may cause for the art world, is the actual production and reception of these works within the bosom of popular culture. Minimalist sculpture may have looked like industrial air conditioners, but it was still presented in a gallery setting from the start. Many digital abstractionists, on the other hand, get their start at Burning Man. When their works were reviewed by CNET instead of ArtForum and glowingly compared to MC Escherⁱⁱ, that was all that was needed for the art world to snipe that these artists, and their entire support community, were like unto a ghetto of glass artists, stubbornly bereft of the intellectual rigor of the art world, the best among them a mere Chihuly. The art world has since come to embrace much of this art - albeit with the tacit understanding that we are not to bring up the embarrassment of Burning Man, nor use "New Media Art" to describe anything resembling a genre.

Now let's move to the main topic of what makes digital abstraction *different*. New media art grew to meaty adolescence in the 1990s as outsider art that was, naturally, often political or at least socially aware. Utilizing new popular media (computers) and the greatest social platform every developed (yes), the Internet, artists like C.E.B Reas developed code itself as an artistic platform upon which everyone could create. Reas co-developed *Processing*, a computer language tailored for building visualizations and interactive art. Building on this Beuysian premise, artists like Radical Software Group (who organized themselves into loose-knit societies) showed that the new social sculptures could be built up in layers. They used *Processing* to create an artwork that was itself a platform for yet more artists; the artwork *Carnivore* consisted of decommissioned FBI surveillance software retrofitted to visualize and broadcast network traffic. Since the 1990s some of these artists have moved into the "Post-Internet art" era, creating art that may or may not occur online, but is itself Internet-aware in the sense that it is world-aware. In the "two-channel" YouTube video *Double Bind*, artist Marisa Olsen (who coined the term "Post-Internet art") wraps and unwraps her head in pink bondage tape. The performance brackets her ambivalence about the promise of fan culture and brings post-feminist art into the post-Internet era. The point here is that the concerns of these artworks came to characterize new media art; political because of its own position outside the gates and socially aware because networks and real-time

interactivity lent these media an inherent inter-subjectivity, at least on the surface. Now insert Steinkamp's dancing trees or Villareal's glowing diffused mandalas into this mix. New media art was already ghettoized, but new media art that was primarily concerned with aesthetic issues was in a ghetto within the ghetto.

And the artists under discussion here were not just dealing with aesthetics, they were concerned with beauty. Other early new media artists - the Yugoslavian group Apsolutno comes to mind - were experimenting with a new formalism, but of a brutalist sort that removed the distraction of beauty from the equation of an internal logic. In a public forum at the Gray Area Foundation for the Arts in San Francisco, C.E.B. Reas presented his latest Processing-based artwork, focusing on the aforementioned social and technical aspects. When I asked him why his art was also beautiful, he honestly replied that he did not know. But it was. The audience knew it to see it, the same way you know it when you see an installation by Steinkamp. The difference with digital abstractionists is that they put this question right out front, and they do so at some risk.

Beauty. There is perhaps no concept more closely associated with art in the popular imagination. But beauty has been having a rough time lately. Successive avant-garde movements and each corresponding "anti-art" gesture have deposed the belle of the ball. The art world did not drive out beauty directly; rather it got rid of her partner, the ugly. Decaying ruins became Romantic; banal fixtures became Culture; Film du Soleil made the burned out wasteland a magical counter-utopia. By aestheticizing and canonizing the Gothic, the Industrial, the Abject, and the Uncanny, the art world turned "ugly" into "interesting". And where did that leave beauty? No longer the opposite of ugly, beauty became the opposite of relevant. Similar to Minimalist art that crafted an aesthetic inter-subjectivity that was criticized for being a-political, digital art that put beauty up front was positioned as a-social.

OK. So digital abstraction puts questions of beauty up front. What aesthetic questions do these works raise, whether intentionally or not? One obvious answer is that these works seek a new vocabulary of beauty, updated for the digital age. It is noteworthy that many reviews of digital abstract works begin with the standard detailed description of the work, but almost never follow up with a good old-fashioned formal analysis. It is one thing to dismiss these works as "merely" beautiful; it would be another (and more interesting) to break that down into the various taste operations at work in any given piece that make it beautiful or appear to be beautiful. For instance, are these works attempting to invent an entirely new language in which to speak beauty? Or are they reviving older cues of beauty and casting them in new forms? The harmonious color keys, the softly glowing lights, the undulating lines, the emphasis on field rather than figure; all seem to speak as much of Caspar David Friedrich as of Max Headroom. Does this strategy of retroaction work? Are these taste operations being quoted in some way that is interesting or are they being uncritically utilized for their mass appeal? The question of beauty in the digital age is being posed by these works, but is not being taken up by its reviewers.

These works also raise the question of what abstraction means in the digital age. Computers are called "universal machines" and they are unique in the field of technology because of what is known in the field as the "abstraction layer." Hardware produces series of electrical on's and off's that are represented as 0s and 1s (bits). These bits are represented as strings of bytes that are combined to form, for instance ASCII characters. These characters are used to write software that is used to create files. In any given file, the same phrase of 0s and 1s could comprise a number, letter, or a blue pixel in a picture. In order to get a computer to render anything pictorial - whether referential and illusionistic to the human eye or not - already entails alternating layers of abstraction and representation that would make Ed Ruscha's head spin.

When Finch captures light values at a scene using a colorimeter and reproduces those values in a light installation, is that a representational work? Or, further, when any of these artists fill a large rectangle on a gallery wall with color, isn't that always a representation? Of painting, perhaps, of art? Perhaps this is the field to which Villareal's *Field* of LED lights refers. Modern art has taught us that abstraction is a continuum rather than binary system and "abstracted" is perhaps a more accurate term to use for this art. It has taught us that even visual abstraction is socially laden (think of Stella's *Arbeit Macht Frei*) and that even abstract art never happens wholly between the work and the eye. And we know that abstraction is inflected differently in different media (indexical means something different in painting than in photography, for instance.) My point is that for these digital abstractionists to retroact some of the visual strategies of Post-painterly abstract painting in digital media is for them to ask another set of questions that is not being asked in many other places.

Another question that distinguishes this art from its Post-Internet peers and simultaneously invokes Post-painterly abstraction is that of medium-specificity. In his catalog essay for the 1964 LACMA exhibition, Post-painterly Abstraction, Greenberg relied on Heinrich Wölfflin's formalist vocabulary, describing painterly as broken and loose, while post-painterly, equated to Wölfflin's linear painting exhibiting clear, unbroken fields and sharp definitionⁱⁱⁱ. Digital abstractionists are summoning the essence of computation when they invoke Post-painterly abstraction because computational technologies are inherently linear. Computers use a binary code system (on/off, 0/1), instead of a gradated system (off/half-off, 1/2/3), to achieve precision and guard against error. A pixel (short for picture element) is a solid unbroken field of value and color. One combines thousands of tiny pixels to achieve gradation and variegation, but at its core the visual language of computers is pointillist or color-field; not painterly. Pitting the linear against the painterly is a way of exploring, testing, and honing this medium in the same way that the field of Artificial Intelligence attempts to grow liminality from binary soil. While digital abstractionists eschew painterly visual strategies, they strive to achieve liminal "emergent behaviors" through a different aspect of their work; time.

Steinkamp's tree projections are not static; they wave and shudder along gallery

walls. Villareal's light installations are timed to pulse behind diffusers or flow along a sheet of LEDs and through these time-based actions, Villareal hopes to, "create a rich environment in which emergent behavior can occur without a preconceived outcome." Again, these artists' strategies put them at risk of the disdain of the art world. In an otherwise positive review of Villareal's exhibition at the San Jose Museum of Art, SF Chronicle art critic, Kenneth Baker wrote, "Several of Villareal's works with LED tubes bring to mind the fluorescent light sculpture of Dan Flavin (1933- 1996), which he acknowledges as an influence. I doubt that Flavin would have liked the kinetic qualities of Villareal's art, regarding them as decorative. In the fluctuating hues of a large piece such as "Amanecer" (2010), Villareal seems to set the nuances of color field painting in motion. Again, I suspect the painters evoked would cringe."^{iv} It would be interesting to break down exactly how movement plays against the visual in these works, but I would argue that while digital abstractionists may be visual heirs to post-painterly abstraction, they are just as committed to revealing the specifics of their own medium as were the earlier painters.

I would like to conclude by going back to Greenberg's essay on Post-painterly abstraction in which he asserted that those painters were not the direct descendents of the much earlier Mondrian or Suprematism, though their hard-edged linear works may suggest it. Rather, he said, Post-painterly abstraction came directly from Abstract Expressionism and not even as a reaction against that mode, but rather as a reaction to how AbEx had become, by that time, a mere style, a manner, a standard look for art. In a similar vein, I wonder if digital abstractionists owe something to earlier Post-painterly abstraction, but their work also points back critically to the field of new media art. In positioning digital abstractionists aside the art world, and aside new media art, as we do, as I have just done, I wonder if that creates a bit of a void in new media art; a space where certain questions - those outlined above - are not being asked. The black swan does not have to point out the foibles of the white; she only has to exist.

ⁱ Chris Anderson, *The Long Tail*, (New York: Hyperion, 2006), 120.

ⁱⁱ Daniel Terdiman. When LEDs and math equal high art. CNET. Accessed Dec. 5, 2011.

http://news.cnet.com/8301-13772_3-20017310-52.html?tag=mncol;1n

ⁱⁱⁱ Clement Greenberg. *Post-Painterly Abstraction*. Accessed Nov. 25, 2011.

<http://www.sharecom.ca/greenberg/ppaessay.html>

^{iv} Kenneth Baker. *San Jose museum sheds light on Leo Villareal*. San Francisco Chronicle. Accessed Jan. 8, 2012.

http://www.villareal.net/press/sf_chronicle_sept2010.pdf