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How Aesthetic Engagement with IT is Shaping Digital Society: An Ethnographic Example

Completed Research Paper

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Abstract

In this paper, we discuss an empirical example of the everyday aesthetics of engagement with information systems work practices. Drawing on an ethnographic study, we suggest that the information systems phenomena can be seen as a form of artwork in the practices of a new generation of IT professionals. Using the aesthetic ontology of art, an artwork is conceptualised as something that manifests, articulates, and reconfigures the human practices in a digital society. This paper is intended as an empirical contribution towards advancing the discussion of the aesthetics of engagement in the information systems literature.

Keywords: Aesthetics, Art Theory, Artwork, Ethnography, Digital Practices

Introduction

Despite the significance of information technologies (IT) in the everyday practices, one's aesthetic engagement with them remains under-researched. For example, Baskerville et al. (2018, p. 144) say that information systems scholars have thus far "dedicated little time to [aesthetics]." Avgerou and McGrath (2005, p. 300) also say that "almost never the aesthetic dimensions of human existence are acknowledged" in the literature. A critical understanding of aesthetic of engagement in the literature is much needed. Hence the purpose of this paper is to investigate practical aesthetic engagement with technologies and how such engagement is central to and shaping the digital society.

According to Strati (1992, 1999), all phenomena are essentially aesthetic in the context of everyday practices. Google, along with other leading digital organisations such Microsoft, have long acknowledged the significance of incorporating aesthetic engagement in their digital workplaces (Schmidt et al. 2017). We also observe that in the contemporary digital society, people are increasingly engaging with digital technologies and devices, personal as well as organisational, in their everyday affairs. The ubiquity of IT in the digital society is bringing forth new affective aesthetics such as meditations on moods and feelings in one's engagement with technologies (Bødker 2017) and reflections on the aesthetics of wearable devices (Prasopoulou 2017). While prior studies have primarily focused on the role of aesthetics in the execution of tasks (Coursaris and van Osch 2016; Cyr 2014) and the physical design aspects of the digital technologies (Jiang et al. 2016; Tractinsky et al. 2006), one's everyday aesthetic engagement is rather underexplored in the literature.

Therefore, the purpose of this study is to fully understand the changing nature of aesthetic engagement with IT in a digital society. To do so requires paying critical attention to the contemporary everyday practices. We employ the ontology of art (Heidegger 2001) and follow Dreyfus (2005) to conceptualise IT as artwork to make sense of aesthetic engagement. This conceptualisation goes beyond artefact based understanding and helps to explain the three aesthetic ontological functions of digital technologies and devices in the digital society: a) how new understandings manifest in one's engagement with

technologies in practice, b) how technologies articulate understanding in new ways, and c) how technologies reconfigure everyday interaction. In her seminal account of penetration of new technologies into the work practices, Zuboff (1988) shows the introduction of the new technologies are always more than an encounter with new artefacts. Rather the new phenomena essentially change the way people understand their work practices. As one's aesthetic familiarity is challenged, it also facilitates new ways of working, reconfigure practices and, in so doing, can improve familiarity by revisiting the aesthetic dimensions of one's engagement with new technologies.

The rest of the paper is structured as follows. We first elaborate on our proposed aesthetic perspective and provide basic definitions. Based on the theoretical perspective, we lay out the basic framework which explains three ontological functions of artwork. We illustrate aesthetic using empirical evidence from fieldwork in a technology services organisation. We conclude the paper by discussing implications and significance of aesthetics to the information systems research.

Theoretical Perspective

Defining Artwork

Based on the ontology of art (Berleant 1993, 2005, 2010; Dreyfus 2005; Young 2001), we use the concept of *artwork* to understand one's aesthetic engagement with digital devices and technologies in everyday practices. According to Heidegger (2001), an artwork is an artefact that, when one engages with it, bring forwards new understanding of its contexture that comprises practices, places and things (p. 19, 43). Furthermore, Berleant (2010) says it might be a mistake to interpret an artwork only as traditional craftwork or a piece of fine arts[1] (such as a painting or a musical composition, or a novel). Rather artwork is an aesthetic phenomenon that requires practical engagement and, in so doing, establishes a basis for the intelligibility of the phenomena (Sinclair 2006, p. 168).

"The task of aesthetics," according to Gadamer (1989, p. 84), is to provide a critical interpretation of how we can make sense of our engagement with the world. We note that there are, of course, other points of departure to understand practical aesthetic engagement with digital technologies. For example, formative works of critical aesthetics have dealt with the immediacy of experience or perception (e.g., Danto 1981; Goodman 1978; Santayana 1955), which help explain how one's affective experience of digital technologies can be interpreted using aesthetic theory (Bødker 2017). While experience provides a fertile ground to explore design *characteristics* of a thing (Bardzell 2009; Bertelsen and Pold 2004), it shall also push us into the debate concerning consciousness (Bødker 2017) and particular sensory experiences (Prasopoulou 2017). Hence, we shall remain closer to the notion of artwork and how one's aesthetic engagement with technologies can be seen performing the functions of artwork.

An artefact is also a manifestation of phenomena such as social, information, or technological (Lee et al. 2015). However, artwork understanding goes beyond the artefact in two way. First, the artwork is a practical aesthetics concept grounded in the world of the everyday (Gadamer 1989, pp. 70ff). Second, it is suggested to be something that allows us to see the world in new light, what Dreyfus (2005) interprets as the *style of the world*, or outlook. Berleant (1993, 2010) explains that our engagements with artwork transform the world of the everyday in a historical manner, which is gradual, holistic, and never instantaneous. A single encounter with artwork does not change practices; rather the practices change as an artwork gradually persists in the everyday discourse. Therefore, one must not yield to the temptation to leap to a kneejerk counter-argument that after encountering a painting, say by Picasso,

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[1] Aaesthetics theory is also interested in the interpretations of fine arts and literature as artwork (Danto 1981; Goodman 1978); however, a discussion of the theory of arts is outside the scope of this paper. For our theorising, we develop the argumentation through ontology of artwork and the interpretations of the aesthetics of engagement with artwork (e.g., Dreyfus 2005; Dreyfus and Spinosa 2003; Dreyfus and Wrathall 2002; Young 2001, 2002). In this study, a distinction between craftwork, fine arts, and artwork is upheld.

one does not have immediate insights into their practices (for a similar argument in design science, see Baskerville et al. 2018).

Relevant Work

Recent research in the study of design, human-computer interaction, and practices have been instrumental in bringing forth aesthetic engagement in work and everyday practices (e.g., Sengers et al. 2008; Stolterman and Fors 2004; Strati 2010, 2018). A key insight of these work is that aesthetics matter in performing the everyday and organisational activities. In a digital society, aesthetic is negotiated on the basis of the subtle differing affective engagement with diverse technologies (such as systems, devices, apps and services).

Consider two fundamental everyday examples pervasive in the digital society, the ubiquity of the Internet and the rise of digital gaming culture. First, although the internet was understood as technological innovation and symbolic cyberspace, it is now manifesting in the human practices as an integral part that can be described as an external fragment of human existence. According to Loh and Kanai (2016), in the human practices the "information is distributed within a social group (e.g., couples or families) such that each member is responsible for specific areas of knowledge" (p. 508). They say that internet is now seen as a meaningful member or part of human existence responsible for storage and retrieval of important knowledge structures. As a result, contemporary human practices are increasingly shaped by their aesthetic engagement with the Internet and vice versa (Tully 2014).

Second, digital games have become more than hedonic activities and disclosing as an art-oriented existential understanding of everyday situations. Bogost (2015) says that digital games have changed, and are still changing, the everyday practices and the way we are in the world where,

> [digital technologies] insert themselves into our lives, weaving within and between our daily practices, both structuring and disrupting them. They induce feelings and emotions in us, just as art or music or fiction might do. (p. ix)

Furthermore, although the intended purpose of gaming technologies was pleasure and fun, they have now accepted as a way to positively disrupt healthcare and wellbeing (Thompson et al. 2010), education (Proserpio and Gioia 2007), and management strategies (Shankar and Bayus 2003). For example, Yee (2006) says that the aesthetic engagement with digital games in practice tends to collapse work-life distinction and eliminates any boundaries between the work and play practices (also Petelczyc et al. 2017).

The Ontological Functions of Artwork

According to Dreyfus (2005, p. 407), building on the ontological aesthetics, engagement with artwork can be defined as follows:

> An artwork is a thing that, when it works, performs at least one of three ontological functions. It *manifests*, *articulates*, or *reconfigures* the style of a culture from within the world of that culture. (Original emphasis)

The aesthetic function of *manifestation* refers to the capability of artwork to disclose a practice world (Dreyfus 2005, p. 409). Artwork makes possible which is otherwise seen a remote possibility. A good starting point is to understand the difference between the *indicated* and the *manifested*. For instance, the science fiction literature is full of indications yet very little is manifested in practice. In practice, however, the introduction of new technologies establish new possibilities, which then results in new manifestations and ways of thinking. Danto (1981, p. 150) provides examples from the history of the cinematic technologies; he points out that before the invention of motion pictures the everyday concept of *motion* in images could only have been "indicated" and thus not manifested in practice. That is, it was simply unthinkable and practically unattainable to grasp the concept of movement of and in the picture.

An important example of aesthetic manifestation can be found in design science: skeuomorphism (Blitz 2015). Skeuomorphism refers to the perception and material manifestation of an idea, metaphor or a

thing in the everyday practices. For example, many touch-based reading devices utilise swiping pages that reflect the physical hand gesture of scrolling through a physical book. Blitz (2015) argues that the repetitive historical instances of skeuomorphism often "created traditions maintained by social memories and norms, perhaps even without acknowledgement or knowledge of the original logic of the practice" (p. 675). In the same vein, Wengrow (2001, p. 177) explains that it is "the ability of the artwork to absorb and extend itself" into our everyday practices and, in so doing, also articulate and disclose new ways of understandings.

Articulation refers to the capability of making sense of a manifested phenomenon (Dreyfus 2005, pp. 409-414). That is, artwork enables shared meaning, identities, and practices that are understood by everyone. In a sense, when an artwork articulates, it institutes a style of engagement thus expand our preconceptions and familiarity with the phenomena and, in so doing, expand the scope of our horizons of understanding. Articulation is a complex and elusive function of artwork. It is simply because an artwork does not instantaneously perform a function; it is a slow temporal enterprise that requires significant engagement with the phenomena resulting in a gradual change in the practices (Blitz 2015; Wengrow 2001).

For example, Zuboff (1988) recalls that the introduction of new technologies caused frustration, due to the poor articulation of new technologies, among workers who were used to do work in their set ways with different equipment. In one instance, the workers were found to be 'kicking' and 'cursing' at the work equipment as they could not articulate it (Zuboff 1988, p. 373). She says the workers failed to *articulate* the new technologies from their pre-understanding (p. 42). That is, their existing know-how prevented the new technology to perform the ontological function of articulation. However, once their familiarity with new systems was established, the work systems also established new ways of doing things, new everyday practices, a sense of belonging and identity, a new style of organisation work.

Reconfiguration refers to a shift in the existing practices (Dreyfus 2005, p. 415). It is essentially a historical function. Reconfiguration is only made possible and always "followed by and articulation that focuses, and stabilises the new style" (p. 417). That is to say when artwork becomes part and parcel of the everyday world, and our engagement with it becomes rather intuitive, it leads to the persistence of the articulating function of artwork in the everyday discourse. Hence reconfiguring function may also facilitate perseveration of artwork and set new modes of aesthetics in motion.

Moreover, Schatzki (2013) says that practices emerge, change, and dissolve through our engagement with the phenomena. In the same vein, our engagement with IT allows some practices to become marginal and others to become focal. That is, our prior familiarity reconfigures the future practices. Friedrich Nietzsche was one of the first philosophers to encounter the modern technology; he reflected that his interaction with typewriter reconfigured his writing practices and reflected that "our writing tools are also working on our thoughts" (Kittler 1999, p. 200). Similarly, Zuboff (1988) provides many examples explaining how new digital technologies and devices can "reconfigure patterns of conduct," indeed, her whole enterprise can be seen as a study of historical reconfiguration of a practice world (p. 159). She points out that the new ways of engagement often "reconfigure the nature of work" and our everyday practices (pp. 10-11). We can say that the reconfiguration might result in the dissolution of old practice due to the new familiarity and the differences in the modes of engagement.

Practices in a digital society are changing as the familiarity is developed through aesthetic engagement with the new technologies. By conceptualising IT as artwork, it might be possible to disclose multiple otherwise hidden perspectives, grasp different affective modes and sensibilities and develop richer understandings of how to engage with technologies in a digital society.

Research Method

The empirical material used here is drawn from eighteen months in-depth ethnography of everyday practices, conducted between 2013 and 2014, at a digital services organisation which we shall call ORGTECH. Elsewhere we have reported in detail on our fieldwork (Chughtai and Myers 2017). The field research broadly dealt with the changing nature of engagement with technologies in an organisational setting using critical interpretive ethnography (Clifford and Marcus 1986). The

participants of the study were young software engineering professionals including developers, analysts, quality assurance engineers and managers.

Data Collection

The participants were part of ORGIT, a software development team, and they were working on ORGTECH's flagship enterprise system. Sustained access to the research site was maintained by joining the organisation as a part-time software engineer, working three days a week with at least two full days. Being a part of the team allowed us to employ multiple modes of data collection (engagement, participation, observation) during the fieldwork (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007).

Consistent with the ethnographic methods, primary data collection method was participant observation. Field notes were taken daily. Primarily, the field notes were taken on work computer or smartphone. Each field note was approximately one to two pages long, single-spaced, and using size ten font. In addition to the field notes, we also documented meeting minutes, project documentations, audio and visual data in the form of photographs, some videos, and audio notes. A record of all internal messaging, chats and email was also kept (where permitted). Finally, ten ethnographic interviews were conducted with select participants (Myers and Newman 2007). The interviews lasted between an hour to two hours. All interviews except one were recorded digitally and transcribed immediately. The unrecorded session was constructed following the interview, using handwritten observation notes including important direct quotes, and verified with the participants for any errors.

We began data analyses while we were still in the field (Van Maanen 2011). In our analyses, we adhered to the principles of interpretive field research and paid special attention to the principle of hermeneutic circle and contextualisation (Klein and Myers 1999). The interviews were analysed and reported from the multiple perspectives as suggested by Myers and Newman (2007). We also employed the strategies of documenting ethnographic research convincingly, and a first-person approach is taken to document the ethnographic narrative (Clifford 1988; Golden-Biddle and Locke 1993).

Evidence of Aesthetic Functions

The ethnographic examples are used to illustrate and engage with the three ontological functions of IT as artwork rather than demonstrating the particular digital or general strategies for designing or using the software systems in an organisation. All interpretations are written from the first person perspective of the field researcher as suggested by Clifford (1988) and Golden-Biddle and Locke (1993).

Function 1: Manifestation of New Work Practices

We begin by recalling a rather everyday episode in the life of ORGIT: a project meeting. Despite the highly professional and very technical nature of work, there was a recurring anomaly: young engineers sometimes engaged in playful activities such as playing games (Fig 1). Mark once brought his iPad to a meeting and continued playing as well as working with other team using the same device. A cursory reading of the episode might lead to a conclusion that either Mark lacks professional maturity (social issue) or him attempting to do multitasking (cognitive issue). While both interpretations might be plausible, here we limit our interpretation to the appropriate level that is the everyday aesthetics.

In an aesthetic sense, what we see as an anomaly can be understood as manifesting new style of work practice: young developers understood their interaction with various technologies as aesthetic engagement with artwork whereas the senior managers treated it as an artefact with a specific mode of engagement. In this vein, playing games during meetings often created confusion among the senior members, as they were not sure what to make of it. Further, the managers tend to dismiss what I have referred to as the 'anomaly' in their work practices, as being playful. However, it does not mean that senior managers' interaction with IT is not aesthetic in nature. Quite the contrary, senior managers may have other ways of aesthetic interactions (at least to them, those are their own ways of disclosing a practice world). Although it might be fruitful to study, an examination of differing aesthetics in the field practices was outside the scope of this work.
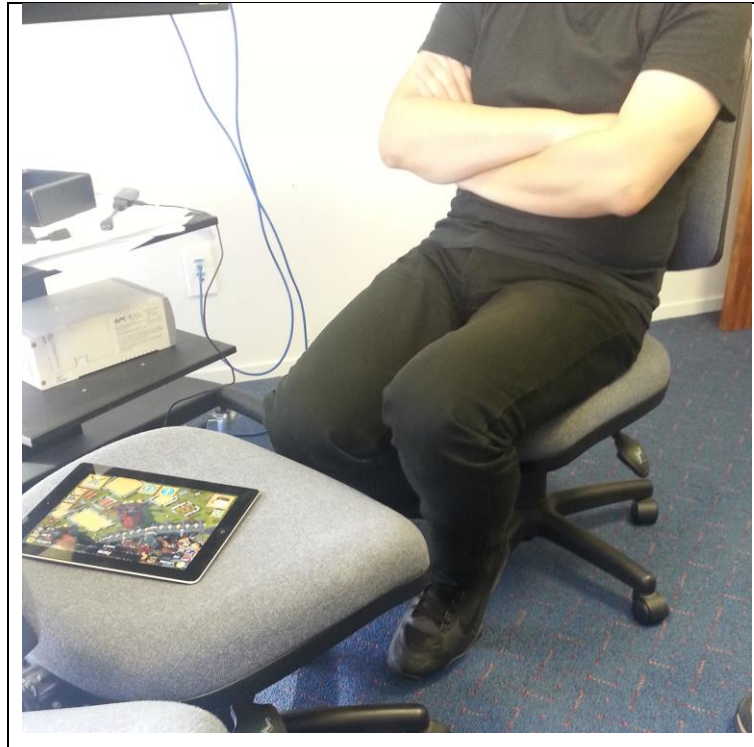
Figure 1. Artful work practices

The manifestation of new style work practices is also reported by organisations such as Google's playful workplaces (Schmidt et al. 2017) and Microsoft's playful work practices (Smith 2011). The manifestation function of digital technology is also supported by the generational scholarship, which suggests that new generation of users introduces new practices (e.g., Smola and Sutton 2002; White 2013). The manifestation of play in work practices was simply not an actuality a few years ago (Meisiek and Hatch 2008). Hence we find that the manifestation of new everyday practices closely relates to the emergence of a "new generation of users" in digital society (Yoo 2010, p. 217).

Furthermore, the above example indicates that aesthetic engagement with artwork matters to people. It became concrete as another manifestation came to the fore when the social experiment game 'Twitch Play Pokémon' (TPP) went viral in 2014 (Fig 2). An estimated 1.16 million people participated in it, as reported by Twitch (2015). During TPP, most of the ORGIT was deeply immersed in it. They were also participating and keeping track of the updates while working on their project work. Mats remarked that engagement with the online phenomena was, in a sense, working with a "work of art" and that "there is something amazing going on." The management, however, took little notice of the manifestation, as documented in a field note:

> James [a manager] came to Max and asked about the progress on [the current project]. Max was deeply immersed in the [play]. James looked at the screen and, as he was standing behind him, then murmured, "you are not even playing, you are just watching." This caught the attention of Mats on the other side of the room, and he shouted, "*we are contributing*," and at the same time Max turned back and concurred, "*we are part of a community*."

> James shrugged and said that it is not a *community*, but "just some people playing" and added that they had "nothing else to do."

> Max protested that [right now] "there are 92000 people playing," and how could he say that they have nothing to do. Max said that it was very intimate and engaging. There were "so many tight moments," he said passionately, "so many hearts broken."

> James shrugged and left. (An excerpt from the field notes)

Figure 2. A Screenshot of the Twitch Plays Pokémon

From the periphery, it might appear as just a minor conflict in different points of views toward the work practices, or even a generational issue concerning the understanding of contemporary issues. Of course, both might be true if we take the symbol at its face value. However, it is not just indication of hidden meaning but also aesthetic of engagement (Berleant 1993, 2005). In this perspective, our participants' digital practices are seen as comprising of aesthetic fields, and their immersion in a field facilitates the perceptual experience of the phenomena (Bogost 2015).

Function 2: Articulation of Digital Practices

The aesthetic articulation of IT in everyday practice can be seen in recurring interaction with different technologies. ORGIT worked with different digital tools and systems that ranged from legacy software to support older systems to the new generation of mobile development on smart phones. Some new technologies were seen as beautiful (Baskerville et al. 2018), or to say in aesthetic terms, an articulated artwork. For example, Mac once explained the difference between two Java programming concepts and remarked that the concept that seamlessly worked in contemporary design is "pretty." On another occasion, he related a web service to something "so beautiful" as it articulated the task transparently. From his perspective, we note that the aesthetic articulation of artwork lied in the facilitation of the intuitive sense-making in his practice world.

Our observations are consistent with Light and Smith (2013, p. xi) insofar as the "everyday things have a beauty that is present only when the things themselves are little noticed." Throughout our fieldwork, we observed that the language of beauty was more than superficial or physical beauty; rather, the participants used aesthetic rhetoric to illuminate the systems and technologies that were *beautifully articulated* in their workplaces and work practices (Baskerville et al. 2018).

On the other hand, the use of legacy IT solutions at ORGTECH was a constant source of anxiety due to failed articulation. Aesthetically speaking, many participants understood the outdated technologies were not articulating the practices. Nonetheless, they acknowledged the utility functions of the obsolete digital artefacts. The evidence suggests that the key problem was that the people could not make sense of their contemporary digital practices through them. Consider the following field note that documents the engagement of the two test engineers, Alec and May, as they respond to 'an ugly technology':

> Alec points to May's screen about a [user interface] Tree component.
>
> May interrupted him and said, "*Trees are ugly*," and said that the user interface is not designed the way it should be as it is "not consistent with the rest."
>
> Alec agreed and said that "Yeah it looks *very messy*." (An excerpt from the field notes)

Here, we can attempt to interpret the aesthetics engagement at two levels. From the surface, it might appear as an issue of aesthetic design and one can argue that the episode refers to a simple problem concerning the inconsistency of UI component or the use of legacy components in a modern system (Baskerville et al. 2018). One can provide a tentative solution to update the UI with more appealing visual components; one can also take a utilitarian approach toward using tools despite their aesthetic value. Again, the problem and the solution might work. However, it can blind us from the deeper layers of aesthetic engagement. From the practical aesthetics perspective, the tree UI component was seen ugly as it did not resonate with their everyday familiarity with the digital work technologies (Strati 2010, p. 881). Of course, just a decade ago the tree components were quite popular among software teams and seen as part of modern and beautiful software design. In this case, the use of a legacy component in modern design caused a skeuomorphic failure. That is, an unfamiliar design was used to reflect something familiar; consequently, the technologies stop articulating the practices.

In the light of above, we can say the articulating artwork not only establish a style of engagement with practices, but it also reflects and illuminates it (Strati 1999, p. 42). When technology is working intuitively, we can say it is articulating practices; it is aesthetically beautiful. This interpretation is closer to what Zuboff (1988, p. 351) interpreted as "the beauty of arrangement" of various artefacts and practices to understand the automaticity of organisational systems. Indeed, to achieve this beautiful articulation, the organisations and everything in them, systems, technologies, and people must be taken as an aesthetic whole (Strati 1992, 1999).

Function 3: Reconfiguration of the Everyday Aesthetics

Reconfiguration can take many forms such as the emergence of new practices and norms. Only toward the end of the fieldwork, we began to detect some signs of reconfigured practices. As stated earlier, reconfiguration is usually followed by *articulation*, so the latter is perhaps the best way to illustrate the former. Following the last discussed ethnographic episode, many people expressed their distaste toward *ugly* technologies, and their practices disclosed a different or reconfigured, path toward sense-making. For example, Mats and Max gradually became distant to the legacy technologies. In a software demo, Mats displayed his design with enthusiasm, but when a legacy sign-on screen appeared, an evidently legacy UI design, he quickly jumped to note: "this has nothing to do with me." He then went to explain how he took great pain to work around the sign-on process since it did not *fit* in his familiarity of the contemporary IT design. On another occasion, Mats expressed his frustration that "*the world has moved on*" and he wondered why ORGTECH still insisted so firmly on following old practices. Others referred to old ways of engaging with digital tools as *discarded practices*. Senior management however never changed their approach. Despite the clear signs of reconfiguration in their digital work and workplace, they continued, with sustained resistance from ORGIT, with the inclusion of legacy components.

The example also explains that by performing an act, one helps to persist associated practices. Such acts are what Dreyfus (2005, p. 416) refers to as the "preservers" of artwork. That is to say, as we perform a digital practice (such as digital technologies using the new style of design) we also persist digital technologies in our everyday practices. As a result, the previous generation of IT is no longer preserved and eventually gets uprooted from one's practices. Without meaningful engagement, a preserved historical artwork ultimately risks becoming merely physical material. That is why obsolete technologies become unintelligible and appear as mere physical, historical artefacts with no place in contemporary society.

The aesthetic reconfiguration of technological space also came to the fore in a rather concrete skeuomorphic manner. After a certain change in the office space, most of the walls became whiteboards; more than a writing place, they were seen as another 'screen' to work on project tasks: the physical wall acted as a digital screen. Such use of office space is a relatively new phenomenon and arguably related to the rise of IT and knowledge work. It became an opportunity to examine the reconfigured digital work practices by investigating people's engagement with space. The response was strong, immediate and mixed. The software developers took less than a day to paint the walls with their ideas as well as the drawings of internet memes and comical things. The managers, however, intended a fixed use of the walls; that is, it was primarily dedicated to project progress and architecture diagrams. This clash of interpretation of space became critical when one of the managers decided to "clean that mess" and

wiped everything that was deemed "not work-related." Indeed, from the surface, the office image depicts a messy place.

May reflected on the incident in her response, as documented in the field note:

> May said (referring to the remaining drawings on the wall) "*it is a piece of art, it is magnificent.*" She looked at the other wiped out side of the wall and continued, "What else you expect?" Nodding her head, she added, "You have put a white board, people are going to draw." (An excerpt from the field notes)

To fully appreciate reconfiguration function, we need to reflect further on the above episode. A naïve interpretation would tempt us to grasp it as mere office governance issue related to disagreements about desired characteristics of a workplace; indeed, it was also the management's perspective. However, from the human practices in new contemporary workplace perspective, the wall was a meaningful and artful part of their reconfigured micro world in the workplace (Alexandersson and Kalonaityte 2018). For example, Mac once referred the corner space as "our home." The aesthetics of engagement in one's *home* is something that one cares about, something that matters to the people in their everyday practices (Hurdley 2010). For the participants, the action of wiping some text or images off the wall was akin to the partial destruction of their practices, which comprised more than digital technologies but also everyday things and places. The management, however, had a different agenda despite seeing the reconfigured practices coming to the surface.

Discussions and Conclusion

The case of ORGTECH shows how aesthetic transformations is happening in digital society. A key lesson is that we need to re-examine the affective engagement with technologies rather than investigating IT using the legacy understanding that might result in conflict, frustration and anxiety in practices. As IS researchers, we are sitting on the threshold of future and in an excellent historical position to observe and investigate how new ways of being in the world are becoming possible, and the new ways in which we might approach technology in the everyday and work practices.

The significance of this work, therefore, is that, for the first time the ethnographic evidence is provided to identify and illustrate the aesthetic nature of engagement with IT in the everyday sphere (Dourish 2017; Noë 2015). One insight of this study is that members of digital society, especially the tech-savvy younger generation, approach and engage with IT in a different way that is more immersive and aesthetic oriented. Of course, people have different opinions of the way of using IT; thus, there might be other aesthetic interpretations of engagement with IT that requires further investigations. For example, a study of indigenous people's artful use of IT might require indigenous aesthetics oriented interpretation of engagement with technology (Leuthold 1998, p. 115). It is suggested that artwork understanding of the digital phenomena can help explain that more than mere tools or artefacts, organisational and personal information technologies are everyday things that matter to us in our everyday situations; they manifest new possibilities, reconfigure our understandings, and allow us to make sense of the world and, in effect, change the way we are.

There are some specific contributions of this study. The first contribution of this work is to expand artefact based understanding to incorporate aesthetic understanding. While the artefactual or artefact based understandings are still useful for sensuous and experiential interpretations, an artwork approach is required to grasp the rich complexity of the everyday engagement with the digital technologies and devices in a digital society. The second contribution is of conceptual nature. An aesthetic understanding of engagement is developed to make sense of the influence of digital technologies on everyday practices using three ontological functions namely, articulation, manifestation, and reconfiguration. We believe the conceptual lens of artwork can further push the conceptual boundaries of the artefactual interpretations of IT (Alter 2015; Orlikowski and Iacono 2001). In particular, it can help identify how digital practices evolve over time and space. Finally, although this study has challenged the reductive view of IT artefact, the findings are supported by critical design studies (Malpass 2015) and aesthetic of design science (Baskerville et al. 2018). In line with Dourish (2017), artwork based understanding also recommend interpreting and investigating digital technologies as everyday technologies in the contemporary digital society.

There is also a specific limitation of this work. While this study was conducted at a digital organisation and focusing on engineers, the findings are primarily concerned with the digital work practices and the significance of IT as artwork in work places. Still, we believe it is possible to generalise the insights within cases and relate those generalisations. For example, it would be interesting to examine what managers can do to take advantage of IT as artwork, not merely artefact. Future studies can also examine and establish more specifically how ordinary persons may interpret aesthetic engagement with IT in the ordinary affairs of life.

An aesthetic understanding of our engagement with digital technologies might also help us explore and understand our otherwise taken for the granted familiarity with the digital technologies in ordinary situations as well as workplaces where we encounter various artefacts, devices, and systems. For IS research, it is timely and relevant to engage with the aesthetics of the contemporary and study the implications of aesthetic engagement and differing sensibilities as people are increasingly engaging with various technologies, creating a complex range of the everyday and work practices.

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