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Instrumental Relations: Software as Art, Art as Software

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INTRODUCTION

Contemporary software art achieved its first notable recognition in 2001 when a prize for 'artistic software' was awarded at the Berlin *Transmediale* media arts festival. Subsequent key events included the 2002 Read_Me 1.2 Software Art/Software Art Games festival (Moscow) and the Whitney Museum's 2002 CODEeDOC exhibition (New York). The jury for the *Transmediale* festival define software art in terms of its difference from new media. Software art, they argue, shifts the focus from the visible surface of digital art to the constitutive space of code. Unlike traditional media, code, in their view, is not a passive intermediary; it does something, it is executable, it performs actions (Transmediale.01 festival jury 2001). Programming represents a new condition of writing, in which the terrain of written abstraction obtains powers of curious literal agency. On this basis, the jury rejects the conventional notion of software as a tool. They argue that "digital code is virulent" (Transmediale.01 festival jury 2001), that it can only appear as a tool by disguising its actual operations. Software art has the potential - and crucial aesthetic responsibility - to expose the machinations of code, to make code visible. It represents an effort to reassert human, critical aesthetic agency and to counter the motions of hiding and disguise that are characteristic of code processes. In this manner, it imagines a direct opposition between software art and instrumental software – projecting an aesthetic alternative of manifest and critically reflective code.

My aim in this paper is to question the viability of this approach, to suggest that the issues are more complex and uncertain. This issue takes shape for me in relation to the uncertainty of one of my own works. I describe it as a software art work, but with some hesitation. The work lacks an adequate aesthetic manifestation – either as code or as visible interface. It is a set of tools and an engine. It is concerned with the representation of time and the pragmatics of enabling a temporal display. The title of the work is *Cropper/Propper/Gridder*. If the work is of any interest, it is because it pursues a poetic idea through instrumental means - or better, it struggles to discover a potential for poetry in the aesthetic estrangement of software. While software art conventionally resists the instrumental character of software - struggling to make software aesthetically, reflectively appear - *Cropper/Propper/Gridder* deliberately engages with the aesthetic blindness of instrumental functioning.

This paper begins by addressing the general issue of the relation between the aesthetic and the instrumental – considering how the self-definition of critical software art adheres to a very conventional aesthetic scheme and how, in contrast, Heidegger's notion of technology (1978) and Plato's notion of *poesis* (330 BC) suggest an alternative relation that is characterized by dimensions of affinity, resemblance and undecidable difference. I then discuss *Cropper/Propper/Gridder* as a specific instance of the risking of the aesthetic within the terrain of non-identity and displacement that the instrumental represents.

RETHINKING THE INSTRUMENTAL

Within the tradition of critical theory, the notion of the instrumental is associated with a specifically modern mode of rationality that is oriented towards the purposive accomplishment of tasks, in the process deliberately bracketing questions of human value. Instrumental rationality addresses issues of efficiency and running, ignoring wider ethical, political and cultural concerns. The sociologist Max Weber argues that this mode of reason takes characteristic form in the mechanisms of modern bureaucratic administration and industrial capitalism (Weber 1946). This broadly social conception of the instrumental is predicated on a more fundamental notion of the nature of an instrument. An instrument is a device that moves but lacks free being. It produces results but without any awareness of cause or result. It functions unreflectively. It proceeds blindly. In this sense, despite its status as a technical contrivance, an instrument - in its motion, in its running - comes to resemble the deterministic processes of nature. At the very outset of his discussion of art in his 1790 *Critique of Judgement*, Kant explains that "*Art* is distinguished from *nature* as making (*facere*) is from acting or operating in general (*agere*); and the product of the result of the former is distinguished from the latter as work (*opus*) from operation (*effectus*)" (Kant 1980, .523). In the same manner, an instrument can be regarded as performing operations which produce effects rather than performing actions which shape (aesthetic) works. This indicates the obvious dilemmas that confront any attempt to chart an association between the instrumental and the aesthetic. Conceived as intermediary, mechanical and unreflective, the

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