

Looking for an identity in digital art practices

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ABSTRACT

Can we be creative without an in-depth understanding of the tools we use? It is unlikely, I argue. In relation to digital art practices, the tacit assumption that technology enables a creative practice without a problematisation of its inner mechanics, e.g. code, leaves the door open to forms of epistemological positivism in which technology is left leading art discourses in an auto-referential manner - subjugating the self to the objectifying forces of technology. In this article, I propose that a way forward to the re-appropriation of the self in relation to technology and our own creative practice is offered by interpreting digital art practices as a Foucaultian problematisation of the self through an ethos inspired by the Greek precept of the care of the self. Net.Art, as will be shown, has already engaged with such ethos (likely without knowing it). An outline of such an approach and a critique of some of the consequences it bares is offered. A controversial one (to some) is probably that digital art practitioners must also be, or become in the process, confident technologists (e.g. coders).

There is no efficiency, no elegance. Very few masterpieces are ever written these days. Contemporary, off-the-shelf software is not inspiring at all. (Bentley 2003)

The premises of this article, I fear, are grounded on frustration, enslavement and the silent death of creative energies. Such is, for the most part, my personal relationship with technology as an artist, or, if you concede me, as one whose creative efforts are made through the use of technological tools. Formerly a student of classical guitar, I have approached the realm of art and technology to free myself from the limitations imposed by traditional instruments (initially in relation to sounds), moved by a desire to expand and explore the, or rather what back then appeared to be

"the many" possibilities offered by technology. With some variations, this rather short autobiographical account is likely to be familiar to the many who, like me, failed to resist at some point in their lives a fascination for technology and its extraordinary ability to expand one's tool palette.

Almost two decades have passed and I can now proudly claim to be a confident technologist. Not only I can use a wealth of specialised software for audio and video manipulation, but can also code in almost any language that would best serve my purposes. And yet it feels as if these technical skills acquired, albeit not developed in the absence of rigorous artistic and humanities studies, did not contribute to the development or discovery of real (personal) artistic interests. Neither do I intend to imply that I have finally gained a knowledge of technology in its entirety - rather, that the knowledge of technology achieved so far, of whatever magnitude it may be, appears to have added little to my true and honest artistic ends and outcomes.

In concise terms, the main issue at stake can be summarised as a power struggle between objectifying forces and subjective necessities. The former exerted by technology while the latter can otherwise be said to be the artist's urge to find his distinctive character, aka "signature", without which the entire personal life-art-project is destined to fail.

2 Premises

For us, software art is opposed to the notion of software as a tool; not because we would want to differentiate some kind of high art from some kind of low craftsmanship of programming. Instead, software art has the potential to make us aware that digital code is not harmless, that it is not restricted to simulations of other tools, and that is itself a ground for creative practice. (Cramer 2001)

Technology's domain knowledge has become so vast that in its entirety it is out of grasp for a single person alone. The coding involved in the development of an operating system, for example, requires such a diverse collection of highly specialised knowledge that the results, composed of millions of lines of code, become unreadable even to their own creators; Users of any software are not extraneous to this problem either. The staggering number of functions and dependencies making up a software, built to appeal to the largest number of consumers and their different needs, collides with the inevitable tendency of individuals to remember only those few that they use more often. As users, we become rubbish scavengers in search of the very few things we do really need and understand. From this point of view, the distinction between a user and a creator of technology is useful but, nevertheless, weak since establishing at which point this separation occurs is difficult. The complexity of the IT sector forces anyone to rely on, and therefore use, the work of others

because IT itself is built on, and sustained by, the results a of societal effort accumulated over time (and space too). No matter what we do with technology we always rely on, and therefore use, the work of someone-else (whether dead or alive). This fact precludes us systematically from an understanding and full ownership of the tool we use.

In this context, and more specifically within digital art practices, one may wonder how could anyone be creative without knowing-owning the tools through which one's creativity is channeled. With 'knowing-owning' I mean not exclusively the knowledge concerning the use of a software but also an in-depth understanding of the underlying mechanics that makes the software's existence possible as artifact/tool (i.e. code, hardware, abstractions etc.). The doubt is a reasonable one. Consider the following: does a painter need to know how a brush is made or just how to use it? The accustomed thinker would promptly answer "both!" and I would agree too. Knowing how a brush is made implies knowing about the materials required for its construction, the shape and form that allow for good hand grip and balance. This knowledge, in turn, enables informed choices that facilitate the achievement of individual objectives through personal styles and methodologies (i.e. the realisation of the art object). Leonardo da Vinci, for example, started his apprenticeship in the studio of Andrea del Verrocchio by first devoting himself to simple housekeeping duties but soon engaging in the making of paints, brushes and canvases. This type of training, practically mandatory to all artists for centuries, was therefore preparatory, and fundamentally so, to their later work as painters.

Allow me to digress momentarily with a further example concerning the making of the colour blue ultramarine for Leonardo's Vergine Delle Rocce. This colour was obtained by manually grinding lapis lazuli and mixing it with waxes, resins and oils on a lye solution (Cennino 1500 ca., 36-39). That was generally the work of the apprentice. Except for the lapis lazuli, the ingredients were

ready available from the local druggist (a precursor of our modern pharmacist). In turn, the druggist had his own network of suppliers. Wax, resins and oils were easily obtainable and we can imagine that the supply chain did not extend too much further beyond. Lapis lazuli, instead, was a stone imported from the middle east or far east. It was less available, in high demand (used by jewelers too as precious stone) and thus very expensive. Slaves, miners, traders, sailors were all part of this supply chain. Overall, relative to the complexity of today's ones, the supply chain was quite simple and while the process of making the blue ultramarine was quite standardised (Cennino 1500 ca.), the artist, his studio collaborators and apprentices needed to own that knowledge which ultimately forced them into what today would be called a research and development process: druggist A had a better pine rosine than druggist B who is furnished by farmer C; increasing slightly the quantity of wax would create a shiner tone; this lapis lazuli stone is richer in blue than the others; so on and so forth. This process lead to personalisation, virtuosity, distinctiveness of the artist and reflected immensely on the final artwork.

In modern times, artists/painters are very rarely the makers of their own colours, for the artists simply go to their local shop to buy ready-made colour tubes. The experimentation process happens subsequently in that pre-made colours (a finite list of them created by market's demand) can be mixed. Beneath the apparent simplicity of this supply chain lies a huge degree of complexity. The colour industry is a highly sophisticated sector requiring specialised engineering and chemistry knowledge. Most colours are nowadays produced synthetically in dedicated facilities (including the blue marine). Facilities that are, in turn, connected with a vast and intricate web of suppliers and subcontractors each owning specialised knowledge concerning a little but necessary step of the overall process. Yet, this complexity is foreign to the artists who simply select from a list of ready-made colours offered by a multitude of brands. By being

relegated to the sole role of consumers, it is easy to see how in comparison to Leonardo's times, the room for in-house experimentation is greatly reduced. A similar comparison can be brought about in the music domain where the 'distance' between the luthier and the musician has increased to the point of often disintegrating as we get closer to present times.

Drawing from the above account, the relationship of the digital artist with their tools seems to match more closely the modern painter than the renaissance one. However, the complexity of the supply chain is, in this case, by-far greater than any other (or at least than the ones we have been concerned with here) and of a magnitude that forces anyone to depend on a great deal of knowledge by others over which personal control/ownership, argued to be necessary to the achievement of subjective necessities, is difficult to achieve (especially in the case of proprietary/close-source software). One should consider hardware in addition to software. Behind the making of a computer there is a large number of actors each contributing to the development of input devices (e.g. mouse, keyboard and microphone), output devices (i.e. speakers and monitors), primary storage devices (e.g. CPU, RAM, video card) and secondary storage devices (i.e. hard disk). Considering the amount of parts required for each of the above devices, the final number of variables to choose from for a do-it-yourself computer project starting from the making of each component would be immense and almost impossible in its endeavour. Should we each time question how the inner mechanisms of a transistor shape of our relationship to technology? Of course not. The point is that a constant management and reworking of such large number of variables is not logistically nor financially viable for the industry itself neither and that is why the information technology sector is particularly prone to standardisation processes.

It is indeed within this standardisation processes that technology exerts its objectifying force. Standardisation becomes a means to subjugate individuality. A means to the fulfillment of

technology's objectives and not individual ones. By doing so, technology creates homogeneous landscapes that erode from adventurous and dangerous treks where creativity and individuality are more likely to be found and fostered. In doing so, technology displays a way of loving and hating art similar to the way in which it has been loved and hated by any authoritarian regime. It displays love if it helps promoting and perpetrating technology (that is, the regime); it display hate for anything else, and most especially towards potentially non-aligned practices.

Bense's information aesthetic (Bense 1965), for example, serves technology's objectives well by considering aesthetic values as measurable quantities; a perspective that that brings art closer to principles on which technology is grounded: rules and measures. Most art inspired by artificial intelligence algorithms presents similar problematics in that it is often interpreted with perspectives that adulate technology and its processes rather than anything else. To draw from the previous example, it would be as if brushes would occupy the entire aesthetic discussion in relation to painted works.

On the other hand, we have aesthetic approaches that focus on the effects or results of an object of art. Stage is taken by discourse on the ways audience is affected, interact, responds, dialogue with the work. Yet, I argue, in this case too the discussion appears to be oblivious of technology's ability to mask individuality in order to redraw attention onto itself. It is as if there is always one unnameable author for every digital artwork created: technology. An oblivion, I argue, suffered first and foremost by the artists themselves, no matter if competent technologists or not. It is indeed not the artist to avail of technology as a technical resource but, quite the opposite, technology that makes artists a technical resource for itself by reducing them to rule followers or, as Kant would have said, "a cog in a machine". This is "obedience to technological reasons" (Mules 2012, 2).

3 Proposal

Out of this bleak scenario I wish to suggest one way, albeit I do not claim it is the only one, in which, as digital artist, we can revert our own subjugation to the objectifying forces of technology. This path entails a conduct inspired by the Foucault's aesthetic of the self.

3.1 Aesthetic of the self and freedom

In general terms, Foucault's work can be described as concerned with an analysis of various power relations (religious, economical, social) and how we, as individuals, can confront these through an everlasting dialectic inspired, for the most, by two main concepts: the care of the self and freedom.

Informed by an intense study of the systems of thought of the antiquities, the precept *epimelesthai sautou*, "the care of the self", refers to a modus vivendi first appeared in the Greco-Roman philosophy of the first two centuries A.D. and re-interpreted in various manners until the Christian philosophy of the fourth and fifth century B.C. Originally, this precept was an invitation to speculative practices that helped in situating oneself in relation to others (the Greek city-State). Later, through Christian philosophy, it became a rule for asceticism, guilt and penitence, an attitude that, Foucault says, has informed Western societies until present times.

It is the early interpretation of the precept, I argue, that presents interesting points of reflection in our discussion.

The *care of the self* "constituted, not an exercise in solitude, but a true social practice"(Foucault 1988, 51), a mode of being to which every citizen of a polis (the ancient Greek

polis) should commit to shape their conduct. It is not, however, a social rule or law to which everyone should submit to become a good citizen. The practice is primarily instigated by an autonomous initiative. To some, such as Socrates, it is a mission given by the gods. To others, such as Plato's Alcibiades, it is a prerequisite to embark on political activities. For the Romans it is a practice to embark on only after having abandoned politics.

In all cases there is an emphasis on educating oneself. To use Foucault's words: "...there is the inducement to acknowledge oneself as being ill or threatened by illness. The practice of the self implies that one should form the image of oneself not simply as an imperfect, ignorant individual who requires correction, training, and instruction, but as one who suffers from certain ills and who needs to have them treated, either by oneself or by someone who has the necessary competence. Everyone must discover that he is in a state of need, that he needs to receive medication and assistance"(Foucault 1988, 57).

In these terms, the care of the self becomes an ethical reflection on individual freedom (Foucault 2000, 284). It is a way of problematising one's freedom that results in visible ways of being and acting in a society. Thus, a person of admirable ethos was one who was admired for the way he practiced freedom (Foucault 2000, 286). A practice perfected through the care of self. Within the historical context in which this precept first appeared, the speculative struggle of defining freedom consisted of finding a balance between avoiding to becoming subject to the power of others (i.e. becoming a slave) while also taking care not to abuse one's power over others (i.e. despotic attitude) (Foucault 2000, 288).

Foucault's analysis of the care of the self appears first in relation to a broader discussion concerned with the "problematization of aphrodisia" (Foucault 1988, 38) but the philosophising ethos of the precept is presented in his other

works too. In his essay titled "What is Enlightenment", Foucault uses Kant to problematise the complex relation between "the theme of humanism with the questions of the Enlightenment (Foucault 2000, 315) and states that this problematisation is necessary "to bring some measure of clarity to the consciousness that we have of ourselves and of our past"(ibid, 315). The philosophical ethos required by this process should consist of "a critique of what we are saying, thinking and doing through a historical ontology of ourselves" and "characterised by a limit-attitude"(ibid, 315).

As for the problem of freedom then, the critical attitude towards the formation of an ontology of the self is not achieved by the knowing of formal universal or metaphysical transcendentals but through a reflection that, using speculative limits and possible transgression, aims at recognising ourselves "as subject of what we are doing, thinking and saying"(Foucault 2000, 315).

All this, I argue, is useful for a problematisation of digital art practices to investigate one's relation to a creative activity constantly threatened by the objectifying forces of technology. Forces that, as explained in the previous chapter, nullify efforts towards an ontology of the (artistic) self that searches for individuality and authenticity.

It is through the limit-critiquing-attitude of our relationship with, and use of, technology that we practice an exercise of freedom ultimately allowing for the formation of an artistic consciousness and a conscious artistic practice. Borrowing and recontextualising Mules' words, who carries a similar analysis of Foucault's work in general terms, "this exercise of freedom is the working through of the problem of having to be free posed in the practices that make human beings subject to their own objectification by technology"(Mules 2012, 2). Problematizing digital art practices under this light bears numerous consequences. Some, I admit, extreme. I will mention three of them.

I. Artistic practices relying on technology and inspired by the ethos of the care of the self become a problematisation of the concept of freedom.

Problematising one's relationship with the practice of digital art entails a problematisation of the self and freedom. Technology is not to be considered a mere tool for our artistic ends but a socio-technical landscape, one we have created and one we relate to. Technology is to be intended primarily as that landscape created and delimited by the work of the many people involved in its making. In that, technology is a space filled with psychological, sociological, ethical, political and technical elements, with which we unavoidably mix, by which our actions are conditioned. One, then, must reflect on the place they occupy within this *technological polis*. One must engage in a critique of its rules by reasoning on the otherwise possibility of being in relation to it. It is within this practice of the self, not ascetic but speculative, that the social function of digital art (if you acknowledge one) is to be found.

At this point, it is useful to explain the modalities through which the care of the self can take place. In his historical research, Foucault identifies four modes of engagement: the test of poverty, *speculator sui*, *diakrisis* and the principle of conversion to self.

a) The test of poverty is "a way of measuring and confirming the independence one is capable of with regard to everything that is not indispensable and essential" (Foucault 1988, 59). For the Epicurean this meant fasting, for the Stoics depriving oneself from habits and opinions. In the digital domain it could be translated to a test seeking to find out how little technology we do need and how much superfluous technology we actually use. In simple terms, one could ask oneself: Is software X, its newest or older version, indispensable to my creative ends? Do I need a computer with 32GB of RAM? Or in more technically sophisticated

terms: is memory allocation management an indispensable feature? What are the indispensable features in a language for the proper construction of one instruction? What are the bare minimum requirements to control a single LED? Or furthermore, in more theoretical terms: what kind of constrictions do imperative languages bring on creative practices? what are the psychological implications of functional programming? to what extent randomness represents a creative element within computers?

b) "Speculator sui" refers to a reflective practice on the self. This practice is done not in imitation of a judicial procedure on infractions and it does not lead to self-castigation. Rather, it is a purely speculative work aimed at improving oneself (Foucault 1988, 62). If in the antiquities this meant reflecting on the conduct of the self, with respect to digital art practices the precept could be interpreted as an invitation to reflect on the way we use (or are used), or abuse (or are abused), (by) technology. For example, one could ask how much bias or logical constraints from others do we knowingly accept and use? How much of it is instead abusing us?

c) Diakrisis consists in a work of discrimination of those mental representations that helps establish what does and what does not depend on us. It is a control point that enables us to accept that which comes under our understanding and reject that which does not depend on us.

Foucault calls it a "test of power and guarantee of freedom" (Foucault 1988, 64) that helps us to not become attached to things not coming under our control and "to assess the relationship between oneself and that which is represented, so as to accept in the relation to the self only that which can depend on the subject's free and rational choice" (Foucault 1988, 64).

In digital art practices, one must assess what to accept or reject from technology. One must accept or reject the biases given by the

community involved in the making of it. Anything escaping this checkpoint is a threat to individual freedom and individuality.

II. If the care of the self entails the self affirmation of the otherwise possibility of being in relation to technology then a close relationship with, and an understanding of, technology is essential. This entails not a sole grasp of the general principles governing it and its effects (undoubtedly important) but also an understanding of its mechanics in its most meticulous details, that is, code and the physical laws that governs it. digital art practices becomes then a gnoseological process (...)

This does not mean that a comprehensive knowledge of technology is an priori requirement for the undertaking of an artistic practice. Rather, it means that through the practice of technology an insight into its mechanisms provides the fertile grounds for artistic endeavours. It is through this gnoseological/explorative process into technology that a reasoning of the otherwise possibilities of being in relation to it can take place. Thus, artists must speak the computer language, i.e. code, and possess an ability to make, assemble, tweak and talk to hardware. In other words, artists must also be expert technologists or, better, become one in the process.

What defines the kind of digital art practice depicted here entails a deep-dive into the realm of technology. Technology is not to be looked at and analysed from a distance in its generalities and effects, nor simply used as it is given to us. Technology must be explored in its intricate roots. One must embark on a journey through its maze of complexity, understand and problematise its ways of being in relation to the self.

III. An aesthetic of the self and freedom, as described so far, becomes an aesthetic of and for digital art. Contrary to

aesthetics for which the artistic merits of a technological object of art lie primarily on some qualities to be found on the finish product (e.g. colourful, mesmerising, dreadful, hypnotic) or in the expressive relations it creates and affords¹, an aesthetic inspired by the ethos of the care of the self is concerned with the relation that one has to oneself to the creative processes originating it. It is concerned with the self-affirmation of the otherwise possibility of being in relation to technology. The evaluation of the artists' work will therefore be directed towards an analysis that highlights the gnoseological processes underlying the problematisation and re-consideration of the self in relation to technology, to others and to the creative process itself.

This may lead us to think of digital art as a form of art different from others.

Computer music, for example, is not to be considered a form of digital art if its goal is the creation of music. If so, computer music is simply music which uses a computer rather than a traditional instrument (both thought as tools while, as argued here, technology is to be seen as a *polis*) and as such the subject can be dealt with through traditional aesthetics concerned with forms, grammars and perception. If we problematise instead the way in which technology enables us to generate sounds and we begin reasoning on the otherwise possibilities of being in relation to it, we begin exploring a territory other than music and we may be compelled, if inspired, to the generation of digital art that use sounds and yet, nevertheless, we may not be at ease in calling it music. Similar state of affairs could be said of computer visual (e.g. VJ performance) where the concern should not be the generation of graphics of certain proportions, beauty, ugliness or other qualities but a problematisation of the relation between the

¹ For example, interactive art is often discussed in terms of the modalities and qualities of the relations established in the interaction between human and machine: propositive, imaginative, prosaic, narrativistic, gamic, enigmatic and so on.

self and the technologically-mediated practice informing their generation.

4 A Case-Example - Net.Art

One would think that such an ethos informing digital art practices would belong to a distant utopian, possibly dystopian to some, world. A world in which everyone (artists, audience, curators and critics) is deeply acquainted with the technology's inner mechanics. Instead the reality is that many elements, past and present, suggest that there is a convergence towards this world. Critical code studies, for example, is a recent field of study that attempts to extract the socio-historical elements of coding practices. Art movements such as Futurism and Situationist International, to mention but a few, have dealt directly with the power of technology. The former by glorifying it and the latter by opposing it as source of alienation and commodity fetishism. There is however, one art movement in particular that, in my opinion, has come closer than others to the Foucaultian's ethos described here. This is Net.Art.

Net.art is an art movement born in the early 90's and that remained active until the early 00's when, swallow up by the same mainstream artworld (i.e. art galleries) who initially it fought against, slowly ceased its activity with each artist pursuing their individual interests. In Net.Art, a Foucaultian's ethos emerges through two features in particular: its mode of work and its ideology.

With regard to the modes of work, the relevant literature concerned with an historisation of net.art agrees on one point: net-art uses the internet browser as its primary tool of work and consumption. Indeed Net-art lives only on the Web and, as correctly pointed out by Greene, "any net.art project seen out of their native HTML, out of their networked, social habitats, (is the) net.art equivalent of animal in zoos" (Greene 2000). While it

is true that net artists were expressing themselves through this medium, I think their approach to its use went beyond considering it as a mere tool. Rather than using it, net artists explored networked technologies and the browser in particular. This exploration was both speculative and practical (i.e. conducted through the act of coding). Developed for reasons other than artistic, Internet was not a tool found and used but a new opening to a new technological world/space dense with possibilities. In line with the ethos of the care of the self and disinterested in the purely functional features of the medium, net artists interrogated the medium in its expressive capabilities in relation to the self. Their inquisitive attitude led them to an exploration of the internet structure and its coding syntax, re-structuring and re-imagining other possibilities of being in relation to it. Jodi's use of HTML code is, in this case, emblematic in that code is used as ink to a canvas rather than as a set of instructions for the display of web pages. The resulting viewable page, then, is only a curtain hiding the real work and an invitation to unveil what lies behind it. Form Art by Shulgin re-imagines the use of prototypical HTML's element such as buttons, text area, tables and check-boxes as drawing shapes (rather than purposeful objects for the navigation of webpages). Such approaches required net artists to be acquainted with coding grammar first and foremost with some of them, such as IOD, going as far as developing a web browser from scratch to bring attention to the dangerous and fast-moving standardisation processes in action.

With regard to its ideology, net.art proclaims itself as a continuation of anti-establishment movements such as Dada and Situationist International. In common with those, net.art has an enemy: the high-brow art gallery world. Against it, net.art uses two features enabled by the browser: immediacy and immateriality (Greene 2000). The former is exemplified in the browser's ability to provide immediate access to the artwork in any location connected to the web (i.e. the house as opposed to the gallery). The latter, immateriality, refers to the difficulty in controlling

the spreading of the artwork because of living in a medium, the internet, whose control is distributed (at least it was so in its infancy). While this is certainly true, the anti-establishment sentiment of the movement moved quickly beyond the art gallery world and on to more general political territory. In this context, net artist problematised Internet as a technology destabilizing societal relationships and disrupting societal hierarchies. What emerges is a desire to investigate the operational modalities of a specific technology in relation to the self and existing power hierarchies. Similarly to the philosophers of the Greek polis then, who engaged in a speculative practice that helped situating oneself in relation to others, net artists problematised the new dynamics and roles established by the new web-polis. In doing so, recurrent themes were online identity (Vatican.org by 0100101110101101.ORG), hackerism (Documenta Done by Vuk Cusic), cyberfeminism (Cyberfeminist Manifesto by VNS) and political activism (Name.Space by Paul Garrin, Link X by Shulgin and Bounting, Heritage Gold by Mongrel).

In light of the considerations above, I offer the following definition of Net.art: Net.art is an art movement problematising the relation between the self, others and networked technologies through online detournements most often created for, and experienced through, a web browser.

A Foucaultian ethos emerges in the non-acceptance of the internet medium for what it is and in the reasoning of the otherwise possibility of being in relation to and through it. In doing so, the merit of net.art is the recognition of technology not as a set of tool freely given but rather as a space dense with power struggles (very human ones) threatening freedom and individuality - powers that must be challenged and problematised through the very use and exploration of the tools through which they emerge, i.e. code.

5 Considerations

...the essence of the *Tekne* is by no means anything technological (Heidegger 1977, 4).

Reconnecting with the short autobiographical account of the opening, how then would a Foucaultian ethos offer relief from frustration, enslavement and the silent death of creative energies in digital art practices?

It can do so because:

a) it interprets digital art practices as a gnoseological journey into technology intended as a world of power relations that needs to be problematised in order to speculate on the otherwise possibility of being in relation to it and the creative practice through it. Most importantly, the very essence of digital tools as facilitators and medium of self expression is to be problematised. It interrogates a widespread epistemological positivism informing digital art practices that, by interpreting technology as a mere tool, subjugates art to technological reason. A lack of such problematisation leads art discourses closer to positivist paradigms, more than what is probably desirable.

b) it interprets creativity as a practice through which we ponder how to escape technology's tautologies and objectifying forces. Being creative, then, means to think about the otherwise possibilities of being in relation to something (e.g. technology in our case), and one's practice.

I would like to conclude with two reflections: one concerning the modalities in which we can approach this practice and one concerning the similarities and differences that digital artists share with one group that appears to already be engaging in such practice: hackers.

#1 - the entry point to the journey

In the preceding sections, it was discussed how digital artists concerned with a problematisation of freedom in their own practice should engage in a work of discrimination, diakrisis, that enables for the acceptance of only what comes under their control. Such an approach bares two consequences. The first is that diakrisis, if intended as a propaedeutic phase to an art practice, would lead to a complete paralysis of action. Should this scrutiny be applied to each aspect of technology before embarking on digital art practises? Of course not. For example, net artists problematised the web browser without extending their scrutiny to the infrastructure enabling its existence (cabling, displays, RAM, memory, ports etc.). To do otherwise would mean to engage in a problematisation of technology as a whole, an attitude that, at large, already informs postdigital aesthetics (Berry Dieter 2015). Instead the entry point to this gnoseological journey is a narrow question regarding specific technologies and one's relation to them. What this initial question should be can only be dictated by subjective interests or necessities.

The second consequence of the precept concerns the mode of engagement. It is proposed that the conduct of this practice should not be solely speculative but also practical. It invites to work directly with technology and to engage in a research to the understanding of the relation between the self and some of its aspects. Thus, we must use and immerse ourselves in a technological world without exclusively engaging in speculative practices that requires us to distance ourselves from it. If we are to think in terms of users and creators of technology (a dichotomy said already to be weak), our practice would see us siding with the latter. How, though, can this be achieved? On this matter, I argue that the preferred (if not the only) entry point is offered by the open source community. It is within this community and its ethos that a large database of knowledge is collated, cherished and made publicly available. Its counterpart, close-source technology, precludes dialogue and enforces art

practices onto the same standardisation processes characterising technology as a whole. Preferring it would mean to delegate the responsibility of defining one's relation to technology over to others who, in turn, are not open about the decisions that they made for us. In other words, if art is dialogue, is there any point in inviting to the table someone who has openly declared to be not interested in sharing opinions?²

#2 - hacker or artist?

Hackers' work can be described as a problematisation of the otherwise possibilities of being in relation to technology, when the work is political, or as a speculative work on the otherwise possibility of being for technology, when the work is playful. From this perspective hackers are artists as much as artists engaging in the practice proposed here are hackers. If differences exist, or sought, they are likely be found in a) the way in which each group identifies itself b) the way in which the work of each group is discussed by third parties.

In relation to identities, socio-historical elements play a major role. Traditionally, a hacker is thought of as an introverted, "geeky" individual interested in gaining the respect of their peers. An artist, on the other hand, is thought of as an extroverted individual, little inclined to rational thinking and driven by egotistical desires of fame. These generalisations are of course wrong on many fronts but, nevertheless, still play a role in forming two diverse group identities.

More interesting is the way in which each group contextualises their own work and how this contextualisation interacts with third parties interested in its analysis (i.e. point b). In that respect a distinction between hackers and digital artists is that the former lacks the ability, or will, to contextualise their work within an aesthetic framework and dialogical discourse pertinent

²other than of course trying to convince them to act otherwise.

to the arts. In that regard, the work of the Esoteric Programming Languages community (Esolang) is an interesting case. Their work is centered on a speculative discourse around the nature of programming languages. The purely provocative and purposeless nature of their work would provide excellent material for art critics. And indeed a first attempt is seen in Temkin's recent paper titled 'Esolangs as Experiential Art' (Temkin 2015). Undoubtedly, more conversations/exchanges would be highly desirable for the future.

All in all, it is through an osmosis of both hacker and digital artists' communities that a creative practice inspired by the ethos of the care of the self can emerge. Towards this end, it may be useful to highlight how both communities already have a key element in common - that is the urge to fight against different forms of agnotology, intended as "the way in which computation facilitates a systemic production and maintenance of ignorance" (Berry and Dieter 2015, 5). A fight for the re-appropriation of subject status in relation to technology. A fight that for me, as a digital artist, represents an opportunity to foment creative energies, to understand my practice and a good chance, not a certainty, to find my art signature.

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