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THE BEAUTY OF AGENCY ART¹

Around 1980, a fundamental change took place in art, without the art historians and critics noticing. As a consequence, the artists who had effected the transformation were forced to develop a theory for it themselves. They couldn't fall back on the tried and tested terminology of art history or the academy, because they didn't consider what they were doing primarily to be art. They had found a new answer to the chief problem of modern art, and they formulated their thoughts in technical-scientific jargon, in a language derived from cybernetics, system theory and media theory. It displayed enthusiasm but not aggression, and militancy, but of a practical rather than an idealistic kind. Modernist aesthetics, French linguistic philosophy, 1960s and 1970s critical discourse's sociopolitical framing of art – none of it mattered to these artists. They tried to read it but soon gave up. The discourse of contemporary art continued to develop in one direction, that of postmodernism and then of the multitude, while the discourse of the new technological art progressed in another direction, one of self-organization, emergence and form-finding in matter and of unstable media and artificially intelligent systems. In the new art, in contrast to mainstream contemporary art, the artistic aspect was the result of an investigation and not its starting point.

“We're making art,” the technology artists of the 1980s insisted, and with that, the discussion was closed. They sometimes used the word “art” because the protagonists of the movement had all more or less been to art school. And what they were making was indeed art, but it was art of an unfamiliar kind. Long after the machines that featured in this form of art had become commonplace consumer goods, these artists were still using them in ways that surprised even insiders. The whole 1990s discussion around high and low culture and how mixing the two would lower one and elevate the other was lost on this group, who referred to themselves as machine builders, researchers, experimenters and interpreters of unstable media and operated in a zone beyond the reach of either elite or popular culture. They considered culture merely as part of the innumerable phenomena technology could bring forth.

Here, I will attempt to analyze the discourse of technology or media art and test its power and limitations. I will seek to find out where the discourse of what we can call contemporary museum art touches on and intersects with the discourse of technology art. I will give this art a name of its own and describe its two-sided structure. And I will then try to formulate what this art is looking for, what the purpose of all this effort is, which province of the mind this art is exploring, and what makes it art. I believe these questions are urgent ones, because all the signs indicate that technological art will succumb to current social pressure and become design, something useful to people and the economy. In the process, we will lose part of what I will call the intellectual life of our times: the extent to which we are able to be conscious of the present. Artists are not creative in the sense of constantly coming up with new content. Rather, they change the form, the medium, the framework. In their hands, form is elevated to method, media become cocreators, and blueprints turn into diagrams. But I do not wish to get ahead of my conclusions.

The trouble with cybernetic, systems and media theory is that while these technical areas of study are able to describe, analyze and, often, make manageable the information content, self-organizing capacity and psychological and social effects of a communicative act, they say nothing about its meaning. What iconology and semiotics call meaning is described in the technical jargon as processes that interfere with each other, feedback loops that generate order and organization, specific media environments (telephone, radio, electronics), islands in the web,

and interference between soundwaves, not as exchanges that have significance. The reality that people feel and express via technical media is assumed to be known, for it is happening right now. Art is about something, but it does not say what.

The new technological art was not based on a trauma that needed to be healed, as modernism had been, or a tragic awareness of the brokenness of the world, as postmodernism had been. Instead of feeling crushed and experiencing themselves as nonentities, cogs in a machine or chips in a supercomputer, these artists took technological tools into their own hands: they were not afraid of or intimidated by them. And they still aren't. The tragedy of technology is not about human beings, as it was for modernism and postmodernism, but about machines and devices. Machines are able to enjoy themselves and, in their autonomy, willing to cooperate, but they are increasingly being forced into roles that are alien to them and for which they are inadequate. Dick Raaymakers has said, "Technology is designed to solve problems that are caused by technology itself."² At the same time, the sphere of technology offers human beings a goldmine of virtual behaviors and feelings waiting to be explored and actualized: all technology carries the promise of a new landscape of feeling, a kingdom of emotions, sensations, cognitions, agency and ability to act that is yet to be discovered and developed.

Meaning is part of the empire of illusion. Of course, a photograph doesn't look like what it's depicting, but the gap is bridged through the assignment of meaning. Meaning arises out of a lack, out of absence, distance, loss or grief. Things that are present, complete and willing to interact do not need meaning. What is referred to as meaning in contemporary art discourse is called agency in the language of new media and technology art. A work of art's meaning consists of the feelings it evokes and makes analyzable via aesthetic distance. The finding of meaning requires investigation into original source material. This is why psychoanalysis, which probes for underlying motivations, is still useful in art theory in spite of having been more or less forgotten most everywhere else. Agency, by contrast, does not ask how the creative process works, where it comes from or what characterizes it but rather what we can do with it, what it is capable of bringing about, and where the choice points lie.

Agency lies along the same vector as meaning but works in the opposite direction. Alfred Gell argued that the fact that art showed agency – or merely appeared to possess it – is what distinguished it from all that was linguistic and thus meaning-bearing: "I propose that 'art-like situations' can be discriminated as those in which the material 'index' (the visible, physical, 'thing') permits a particular cognitive operation which I identify as *the abduction of agency*."³ In *Art and Agency*, he defined agency as follows: "Whenever an event is believed to happen because of an 'intention' lodged in the person or thing which initiates the causal sequence, that is an instance of 'agency'."⁴ The technology artists and their theorists, however, did not read Gell. The idea that the fine and technological arts do things as if they have a will of their own, and cause behaviors in response to their willful actions (rather than in response to the transfer of information and/or meaning), reached them by a different route.

The cyberneticist Donald MacKay was the first to argue, in his soon-forgotten 1960 article "Meaning and Mechanism,"⁵ that a relationship existed between meaning and agency: a message's meaning consisted of the acts it called forth and made possible. If a man walks into a bar dripping wet, the other people in the bar will extract the meaning, "it's raining." This meaning will be retained as what MacKay sums up as a "conditional readiness" to a certain behavior – in this case, taking your umbrella with you next time you go outside. In *The Mathematical Theory of Communication*⁶, Claude Shannon excluded meaning from his definition of information, so that meaning no longer posed a problem for technicians and engineers. Information was value-free. There was a measure that could be applied to a message's information content, a unit of choice – the bit – but none for its semantic content.

According to MacKay, which part of a message contains meaning and which part is dead weight is just as easy to distinguish as what contains information and how much noise accompanies it. This living meaning expresses itself in the message's effect: the behavior it provokes. The twofold research question, therefore, is: which conditional readinesses does a particular meaning create, and which of those are put into practice? MacKay's discovery was that meaning could, in fact be measured – through its effects – and every marketing study today is still based on this. Agency differs from meaning in that it is a form of information processing that does not refer back to the sources of behavior – the commanding officer, the psyche, the culture, the political economy – but to its possible applications. Agency does not ask “Where does this message come from, and is it morally pure?” but “Where is it going, and is that what we want?”

It was not until the 1990s that N. Katherine Hayles rediscovered MacKay's concept of "conditional readiness."⁷ The concept of agency only became generally fashionable after 2000 through the science-in-action research of Bruno Latour and his colleagues. Until then, the discourse of the technological arts had treated information as a purely technical quantity, not a semantic one. In his introduction⁸ to Shannon's *Mathematical Theory*, Warren Weaver had already distinguished a “semantic level” of communication, alongside an “informative,” technical one and a “social,” effective or political one. But for him, “meaning” implied that a message had come through and could be obeyed, or rejected, in a yes-or-no logic. MacKay combined the semantic and social levels in his concept of "conditional readiness," and Gell, with his anthropological background, rediscovered it as the “social agency” of things and people, the messages they radiate and transmit.

The fact of a thing having meaning is very different from what that meaning entails. I suspect that the semantic content of Manet's *Olympia* has not lessened since its first, scandalous exhibition in 1863, but if you look at it now, you no longer see a prostitute waiting for a customer but a sovereign woman looking you straight in the eye in the present, indicating that her questions remain unanswered – perhaps every generation must find its own. Shannon and Weaver were unable to say anything about meaning, because they intended their information theory to be applicable to every message, regardless of its content or its psychological and social effects. Meaning is mere content; information lies on a higher level of abstraction, that of the form, the operating system. It is the contemporary manifestation of Plato's idea, the code that prescribes and sets everything.

Donald MacKay's concept of a conditional readiness to behave in a particular way offers the message receiver freedom of choice. You can decide to go out without your umbrella and get wet without complaining, or to go out and sing in the rain. Claude Shannon's communication model is one of command and control. The sender issues an order, and the receiver obeys. MacKay broke away from this model: the message is not obeyed immediately but processed into conditional readiness, so there is time to consider different responses. He made Shannon's command become a gateway to a virtual behavioral space, a potential to act, focused and refinable.

Unlike Shannon, Norbert Wiener, the other founder of cybernetics, was a genius. He came up with the concept of feedback.⁹ The outcome of a process affects its course, he argued; communication involves two-way traffic. A feedback loop is a chain of interactions between equal elements or partners; no orders are issued or followed. Interaction causes organization and coherence to arise, material forms itself into a system. There is circular logic, multilinearity. Norbert Wiener broke the spell of rectilinear cause-and-effect thinking that had haunted Western philosophy for 2500 years.

According to systems theory, a system is any greater whole that derives coherence not

from outside pressure but from the interaction between its components. A potato is a system; a sack of potatoes is not. A work of art – whether it is a painting or an interactive installation – is also a system. When we look at a painting, we see that it is not a flat and inert surface; it contains movement. The picture has been brought into being, made, by means of strokes and dots. The lines contain time, and the shapes and colors contain space. The three unities of lines, shapes and colors hold each other in suspension, in an unsteady balance. They can be used to create illusions or real experiences. Cézanne was not exaggerating when he claimed that if he were to change a single brush stroke in a painting he would have to paint the whole thing over again. This is how systems work. An interactive installation is also a system, partly technical, constructed and programmed – its “thing” side – and partly interactive and modifiable – its relational side. The audience and the work form a single system, and that makes it interactive art. They challenge each other and create focus.

A photograph or film is not a system, for coherence is imposed upon it. A photograph forces space into a flat surface; a film forces a temporal continuity. Each produces an illusion of stillness and/or movement, hence semiotics’ success and necessity in photography and film studies. Film comprises the content of digital media; the images thus have meaning but no agency; they are not operable. The format in television equates to the interface on a computer; unlike the format, the interface is active and two-sided and allows many-to-many play. The images are not part of the network, which extends far beyond them. A computer, terminal, laptop or iPad is a transport medium: it concretely links people, objects and machines instead of just representing their signs. The subjectivity produced by the digital media is different from that of all the analog media of the past. “Mass man” has turned into a network profile.

Marshall McLuhan developed a third model of communication and information processing.¹⁰ A medium does not transmit messages, he argued: it is itself the message. It is not a neutral conduit for information but an organizer and modifier of it, a social programmer, a mental prison. But media also constitute means of having new feelings and thoughts: we can’t experience anything new without them. The message – meaning in the classical sense of the word – is only the medium’s content, and that content is always an older medium, according to McLuhan. In the Internet age, people may worry about televisual images and their effects on the social fabric, but they enjoy the networks that make up life today, although grumbling is also heard. Every medium, whether as stable as book printing and film reels or as unstable as radio and live streams, calls forth its own environment: a mental and social attitude within which the meaning of the messages transmitted through it can be understood. If you’re not wearing the glasses, you won’t see anything. The medium activates communication; content only slows things down.

If modernists at the turn of the 20th century felt overwhelmed by technology, this was an effect of the introduction of new media that meant printed text no longer had the last word. In book culture, people created work intended to last for eternity; in media culture in the early 21st century the proud possession of books became a storage problem. Narratives that ended without a payoff, symbolic acts as opposed to motivated actions, conversation rather than dialogue, epiphanies born of grand overviews and microscopic examinations – they all fell away in the face of the new electronic technologies, replaced by a network of feedback loops in which, at best, patterns could be recognized: there was no essence anymore, no core, no substratum. The intellectual ground was swept away, and the modernists felt themselves falling. The critic Donald Kuspit diagnosed the situation in *The Cult of the Avant-Garde Artist*: “Deep down, and not so deep down, individuals feel old, unhappy, and dispensable – left behind emotionally – the more materially new and advanced society becomes.”¹¹

Shannon’s concept of information robbed all human knowledge, as stored in books,

works of art and material culture, of its meaning. Media merely transmit information, send messages from a to b; that information can be used to create other effects besides meaning-making. These other effects include computers and their networks – the entire digital environment in which we are immersed. But there is also a historical side to Shannon’s concept of information: it asks which part of the message sent from a has arrived at b. Thus, it places the sender in the position of the all-knowing source and the recipient in that of the imperfect subordinate, who must be leaned on as hard as possible. Real-time communication is not the solution to a technical problem but the imposition of a regime of command and control. There is something dictatorial about Shannon’s notion of information; it’s a little creepy. Wiener’s more active conception of information as a producer of improbabilities is more cheerful: the feedback loop is also an encounter.

Marshall McLuhan added his own twist to Shannon’s and Wiener’s concepts of information. He saw information as a tool for the production of attention and inattention. If you provide scant information, the reader or viewer will use his or her imagination to fill in the gaps and thus become involved in the message; if you offer lots of information, the receiver will uncritically go along with what you’re presenting. Immersion or anesthesia – the distinction between “cool” and “hot” media is still used in contemporary design practice. Cybernetics provided the terms and material with which McLuhan constructed his new science of mediathory. And thus he, too, was unable to talk about a message’s content. No book, he asserted, was as important as printing itself.

Among the general public and within the socioeconomic formation that called itself “the media,” all this was summed up in assertions that information was “not about anything” and that media possessed no content, only “effects.” The same reproaches had long been aimed at technology art. But this art was indeed about something, though that something could not be expressed in the purely technical language used by its makers and theorists. Cybernetics, in its three-part manifestation of information theory, cognitive science and control chain management, allows us to manage any process of information distribution or storage and control its effects, but what it cannot explain why it would be worth the trouble to do so. Likewise, media theory reveals the abilities and limitations of particular media and what options you have if you seek to experience or express a certain awareness – but what it can’t do is explain why you’d want to. A form is a form is a form: the content of any new medium is, for McLuhan, always an older medium – and for Bolter and Grusin, increasingly often a newer one – and never reality itself, objective and subjective, thinking through feeling and feeling through thinking. The very first message, roared or mumbled by a naked *Homo erectus* in a dripping cave, was that there was a message. That’s communication.

There is another source of new media theory: Ernst Cassirer’s and Alfred Whitehead’s philosophies of symbolic forms, which has come to penetrate various discourses, including that of contemporary dance, by way of Susanne Langer. In *Feeling and Form*,¹² Langer introduced the concept of “virtual feeling,” which each individual art medium evokes, manipulates and investigates in its own way. A painting calls forth virtual depth with lines and colors; a sculpture constructs a virtual volume around itself; a novel constitutes virtual memory, tracked through virtual time. Dance follows virtual forces of attraction and repulsion. All the experiences that are part of this “feeling” are spaces of possibility, virtual feelings waiting for actualization; their nature, allurements and dangers must be studied, and art is where this investigation takes place. It is form, not content, that is the transmitter of feelings; symbolic forms are models for the different modalities of our emotional world. Feeling lies in the form, the medium, which both carries meaning and produces agency, but it resonates within us. “The aesthetic experience is

experiencing the otherness of objects as force fields reverberating with one's own body,"¹³ as Suelly Rolnik writes.

According to Ernst Cassirer, the first words were gods.¹⁴ The first layer of human consciousness consists of the mythical realization that every word, every carrier of meaning, is not of this world but part of another, richer reality behind the visible one. All communication is allegorical and bears witness to this other world – drawings on cliff faces, the earliest music, the Venus of Willendorf. They are all condensations in the all-pervasive life force, or human cognitive power, signs for what we cannot see. This idea is called animism, but it is pantheism. Communication is divine. Through the rhizomes and networks that link the natural ecology with the social and mental ones, there flows a life force – the creative breath of God, who wishes to see that reality is rightly explained, as Hölderlin would have it. Everything that truly exists should be well interpreted and made experienceable – by the arts. Carelessness is forbidden; precision is the highest good. There are three symbolic forms of knowledge acquisition: the mythical, the mathematical and the scientific. Art is part of the mythical and must always remain suffused with it, even when it addresses itself to codes and material processes. Art always refers to that other, richer reality. If it did not, it would cease to be art.

New media have no iconography, as hard as the field of visual studies has tried to give them one. Nor is there a semiotics of new media: in the electronic and digital media, index, icon and symbol can no longer be separated. Lev Manovich's "language of new media," too, was somewhat premature. The hallmark of new media is that we cannot analyze them as if they were old media. We can end in one stroke the confusion over whether we should be talking about media art, intermedia or interactive art, participation art, or (more childishly) play art, or (more intellectually) assemblage art by naming this form after its primary distinguishing characteristic and strategy: Agency Art. Besides Agency Art, there is also Meaning-Based Art. Between meaning and agency, there is a dialectic, but there are also complementarity and continuity. The boundaries are fuzzy, and, historically speaking, the expansion from meaning to agency proceeded slowly and dramatically, yet Agency Art is very different from Meaning-Based Art.

Agency Art is art that makes it clear to the receiver via his or her body what is at stake, where opportunities for action lie, and which virtual behaviors he or she can actualize. It demonstrates how choices work, and how to create patterns that retain their coherence while you remain part of them and transform when you move within their field of action. Agency Art is generally fun, often interesting and sometimes aesthetically moving. And very occasionally, it shoots you straight into an imageless future. The Art Formerly Known as Media Art – a main attraction these days at art and pop festivals – is an art that, in a sense, doesn't care if it's art. If you ask a media artist whether his or her work is art, he or she will say, "It works that way in certain contexts." That answer is fine if you want to leave the institution of art behind, but now that Agency Art has long had its own institutes and ceased to eschew classical museums and exhibition spaces, this attitude only creates imprecision.

Of course, every art form or activity has its own problems with matter, concepts, electronics and software. But this is never an excuse. Agency Art allows us to experience and analyze that which our bodies must know before we can do something. And once we know it, what are our behavioral choices? How many degrees of freedom or lines of flight are at our disposal? It calls for careful research and precise execution. Agency Art must remain art, not design or entertainment or experiment, for only in art can we relate to the layer Cassirer and Langer were referring to; only in art can we do maintenance and explore new terrain in the mythical first layer via symbolic forms or living media. Art's virtual component, its investigation of virtuality, is often awkwardly defended as something that is not functional but is interesting. What's the difference between an effect and a living experience? Theo Janssen's gigantic PVC-

pipe *Strandbeesten* dance along the beach with a ponderous grace, and Walter Langenaar and Danya Vasiliev's *Web 2.0 Suicide Machine* (2009) deletes every detail of your digital life. Agency Art is functional; it truly has an effect. So which feelings does a work of Agency Art cause to vibrate in your body? Agency Art acts on our intellectual intuition; this is the sense that is extended, in the McLuhanian definition of the word.

Sometimes the elegance of its investigative behavior is enough to move us aesthetically. Sometimes the complexity of the installation is what creates aesthetic distance. Sometimes it is the intimacy of sounds amplified to resonate outside our bodies. Sometimes it is the sophistication or confrontationalness of the interface. If a film image spontaneously divides up into dozens of small, identically moving square pictures, as in Mari Sopella's *Family Files* (2002), it evokes a disconsolate feeling: the image falls apart into an interface. Sometimes the technological sublime – as in the loud cracks and flashes of Edwin van der Heide's *Evolving Spark Network* (2011) – has a healing effect, conquering fears and giving rise to a new tenderness. Sometimes it's stunningly beautiful.

“The interface is not only the point and the moment at which one acts and experiences but also the medium through which subjectivity is brought about and the world is given form,”¹⁵ Knowbotic Research has written in one of its better essays. Why do we do what we do instead of something different? And how could we do something different? Agency Art is focused not on prehistory but on the unknown, the currently unknowable. Dante's *The Divine Comedy*, in spite of its journey through hell, ends happily in heaven. The ability to act is not tragic, not a crippling defect but an exciting surplus. It is productive; in the language of Deleuze and Guattari, it is a desiring machine. Their *Anti-Oedipus* (1972) dismantles classical meaning-making, while *A Thousand Plateaus* (1980) explores levels of agency. Whatever you do, every action traces a track through a virtual space of behavioral possibilities, a landscape of potential feeling. That track has previously been traced by others, but you can decide to make it go in a different direction if you want to. Lines of flight are active.

The intensity of feeling, or plateau, that Agency Art explores is one of boundless optimism. As much as we already know, we hardly know anything. There is artistic research to be done into the distant future. The cynicism of the postmoderns is completely alien to Agency Art. It cheerfully explores a world of feelings that reminds us of that of the “abstract life” of Mondriaan's “modern, cultured man” – someone who no longer looks at objects but at the relations between them.¹⁶ Agency Art is also concerned with those relations, but this time, they are activated; the viewer or receiver can intervene in them, as Mondriaan's modern man cannot. The feeling evoked in those who immerse themselves in Mondriaan's post-1930 works is a feeling of breaking through to another place, transcendence, great happiness, an abstract religious consciousness, a throbbing core of life that pervades the straight lines and make the rigid shapes vibrate. Agency Art is more earthly, more corporeal, ephemeral.

Gego turned Mondriaan's vibrating lines into steel rods. She linked them together to form networks that stayed upright in the air, enclosing a space, with no external support. Gego's 1969 *Reticularia* create lines of force; this enables them to take on a concrete form, link by link. Matter has agency, and Gego materializes it. Her flowing and hanging constellations of steel lines that form squares and polygons refer to nothing, serve as models for nothing other than themselves, and they therefore exhibit the symbolic form of the new era that was dawning in Gego's time: that of the network. At the dawn of the information age, she saw that networks were autonomous, structures in the void, and that they made up the fabric of the world on every scale, from winding paths to global cities.

In the art of network culture, the mythical original stratum that Ernst Cassirer insists on in art is the living earth, the web of relations between bacteria, fungi, plants, animals, geologies,

technologies, media, works of art, human beings and that which transcends them. There are three ecologies, according to Félix Guattari: a natural, a social and a mental one.¹⁷ Our bodies are open systems, able to communicate with rocks, trees and everything that lives on Gaia. We are concentrations in an all-pervading life force, capable of experiencing everything that is not us by feeling frequencies, vibrating with them, causing interference, initiating a process. I am what I am not. The mythical original stratum of networks, rhizomes and connectivity, that other, richer reality behind the visible world of systems and organisms – this is the plateau of the engineer of feeling.

Continuity is usually ascribed to 20th-century Western art through more or less this narrative: through their abstract works, Kandinsky and his ilk forced a definitive break with 19th-century art – itself a late continuation of Renaissance art – which was followed by the formation of numerous groups, schools and movements, which were later classified by academics under the general term “modernism” but which organized themselves from one year or decade to the next into avant-gardes that went by self-invented names, such as cubism, vorticism, suprematism, Dada, Bauhaus, de Stijl, surrealism, situationism and pop art; and then came “postmodernism,” also known as the neo-avant-garde, which during the 1980s undermined the assumptions of the classical avant-gardes with simulation and irony, took away their sting and commercialized them, causing the evolution of 20th-century art to fizzle out and leaving only individual artists and their curators, who make their names in group exhibitions and biennials and then move into their own niches in the art market as brands – virtuosos, mystics and professionals, original and creative. No longer avant-garde, the institution of art has become a well-oiled commercial organization.

Kandinsky had already evoked the idea of the avant-garde in abstract art’s first legitimization of itself, *Über das Geistige in der Kunst*: “The life of the spirit may be fairly represented in diagram as a large acute-angled triangle divided horizontally into unequal parts with the narrowest segment uppermost.”¹⁸ The diagram is dynamic: “The whole triangle is moving slowly, almost invisibly forwards and upwards. Where the apex was to-day the second segment is to-morrow; what to-day can be understood only by the apex and to the rest of the triangle is an incomprehensible gibberish, forms tomorrow the true thought and feeling of the second segment.”¹⁹

The apex was, of course, the artistic avant-garde, but Kandinsky avoided military language. The avant-garde drove out the now-down-at-heel aristocracy of the 18th century and the wealthy bourgeoisie of the 19th, who until then had kept the artists who resided at the front point of the triangle in power. Art became autonomous and came to stand on its own two feet. The support of criticism and theory proved necessary for maintaining this situation. Mondriaan constructed his own language to explain neoplasticism; like Kandinsky’s, it was multidisciplinary, derived from Goethe’s color theory, theosophy and “plastic mathematics.” None of these were ideal discourses for what the artists were trying to put into words, but their theories allowed them to conduct precise criticisms of the things they were making and to appreciate their fellow artists, even when they were following very different paths.

Artists are critical when they call their own working methods into question and account for them and thus manage to preserve an appropriate aesthetic distance from their own “practice.” When you call a relational object or an interactive act art, you’re not suddenly turning it into a good investment; you’re exposing it to the most rigorous possible critique. That critique comes not from a mean or stupid outside world but from you yourself. Every work of art attempts to leave art behind and become life – living memory or living future. This is not an easy task. Criticism means locating the impediments and growth potential in the living core or

field of experience that your art is investigating and maintaining. Art keeps the uncoded uncoded as long as possible, so that it can continue to develop, spread and divide instead of fossilizing or slackening into overcoded “solutions.” Living art offers propositions: you and I are going to enter into this adventure now, and we will communicate with each other via the work of art. Agency comes from two sides.

McLuhan’s discovery that contemporary art functioned as an antenna or early warning system for future media effects accurately described what took place from the 1950s on. The neo-avant-garde began to study the new environment of television and mass culture and saw, to its surprise, that the old avant-garde had turned into a collection of attractive art objects equipped with price tags and the requisite glamour quotient. Andy Warhol understood this early on. The avant-garde had become the content of a new channel, fame, and Warhol investigated this matter. He was superficial when everyone else was still deep. He let go of meaningful content, but he did not replace it with a new agency. This was a narcissistic act; Kuspit’s accusation seems justified to me. Warhol surfed others’ images and used them to create his own image: a powerful brand. The neo-avant-garde was the first to observe that the past was ceasing to be a giver of meaning; it derived its pleasure, its rage and its passion from this fact.

Gego’s *Reticularia* were also an early warning, but one aimed at the future. She tested networks’ formal power, exhibited their autonomous abilities, their playfulness and rigidity, their magic and materialism, decades before networks became the dominant model for every human activity and every exchange everywhere. Link by link, Gego built an image of the world and the living network. She and Lygia Clark were the greatest female artists of Agency Art’s first phase. These two South American women opened up the new paradigm of interactivity to further artistic research, not as a technical problem but as a sphere of feeling.

As cool as Gego and her iron rods were, Lygia Clark and her *Objetos Relacionais* were hot. Her goal was to unfurl a total experience in the receiver – “the empty-full,” as she called it – and this is what the work does. Several times, I have performed “O dentro e o fora” (“The Inside Is the Outside,” 1963), a relational object from the *Caminhando* series. You cut a long strip of newspaper, twist one end and attach it to the other end. Now you have a Möbius strip, a loop whose inside flows seamlessly into its outside and back. With the sharp point of a pair of scissors, you make a hole in the strip and begin cutting to the left or right. That’s the first choice: how to begin. You cut the whole strip lengthwise and return to the point of birth, and again you must choose: go left or right? The ribbon hanging from your scissors becomes longer, the paper strip you’re cutting ever more fragile.

The first time I carried out this work, alone in my study, I stopped cutting when the strip became too fragile, and I looked for the place where I originally began. Then I cut in the other direction. The dangling loop achieved an astonishing length as I cut around the whole Möbius strip twice more, and again I stopped before I had to finish the cut. The end did not interest me. I saw the strip of my lifetime getting longer and longer. What the work revealed me was that you’re not finished after one cycle; you can go around three or four times. What are you waiting for? Get to work! I saved the cut loops for a long time, as a relic, a warning, a sign of hope.

The second time I demonstrated “O dentro e o fora,” it was for an audience of art students. I was giving an historical overview of interactive art and trying to explain a slide showing Lygia Clark cutting a strip. One of the students got some scissors, cut and taped a Möbius strip, and gave it to me. I was a bit nervous; the scissors were thick. In the long loops that dangled toward the floor, this time I began to see the long course I had taken in my life, missed opportunities on the other track, and the fulfilled desires on the strip I was still cutting. A great despondency came over me. We drag so much around with us through life, and there’s only one way to free ourselves of it: cutting the strip in two, and dying. What made the experience

somewhat disconcerting was that it had nothing to do with what my young students were seeing and experiencing. And it did not concern them. The third time, I carried out the work during a lecture on media theory. This time, I had brought a newspaper, scissors and glue. And again I had a disturbing experience, a repeat of the second time. Clark's piece works as a show – just not on me.

The fourth and last time, a year and a half later, I enacted “O dentro e o fora” for a group of master's students. I was concentrating hard. This time, I did not look at the lengthening strip I was making but only at the ever-narrowing track before me. From the start, I did not cut through the middle of the strip of paper but more to the right, making room for future choices. The naivety is gone, I thought, and then suddenly I cut through the strip and to my astonishment I saw that I was standing there holding a hangman's noose. “Ah, Lygia Clark,” I murmured, “is this the final insight?”

I realize that I have made a performance out of “O dentro e o fora.” I don't know how else you could do it: in stead of consuming the piece like a YouTube video you are presented with a live, hands-on opportunity for experience, a step forward in your self-knowledge. It's not really possible to play the ham; the relational object trembling in your hands keeps you focused. And at least you can still enact this great work of art. Another classic masterpiece of Agency Art, Erik Hobijn's legendary suicide machine, *Delusions of Self-Immolation* (1990), is no longer active. The artist no longer performs with it, though the heavy machine with the high gas jet on one side and the long water shower on the other, built out of rusty iron and flaking pipes, stands as an impressive memorial to an experience. The accompanying video showing the machine at work, the whole ritual of undressing and covering someone's body with fire-resistant paste, the ascension of the scaffold, the countdown, the blazing flame, the spray of water, the release – supplemented by interviews and technical explanations – only serves to enlarge the work's aura even more. *Delusions of Self-Immolation* is an initiation machine. The initiate breaks through the barrier of her greatest fear, the fear of fire, and becomes conscious of her own, corporeal existence. The confrontation with death confirms the body's autonomy and invulnerability. At least, this is the promise the work radiates when at rest. Genuine experiences have been had here.

At its most fundamental level, Clark's and Hobijn's Agency Art is therapeutic in nature and intent. If Erik Hobijn had not been sufficiently precise in the preparation and execution of the performance, taken care with every screw in the installation, initiates could have been incinerated, incurred traumatic injuries, had their lives ruined. The *Delusions* machine seeks out the technical sublime, but it does so in a setting of technological love: I trust you, I give myself over to you, I accept the consequences. And it is mutual. The artist and the initiate guided each other through the experience. This therapeutic approach was connected to the program of the 20th-century avant-gardes. One of Lygia Clark's works involved holding an inflated plastic bag between your hands with a rock balanced on top. And in *Tensions* (1966), two heavy pebbles were onected by powerful rubber bands; you took hold of one and pulled it toward you to see what the other one would do. Clark got art viewers and students to test and explore these relational objects – her audience was the same as that of the neo-avant-garde – and then used them in art therapy to make contact with psychotic clients outside language and intellect.

Clark's art had the same goal as the modernists': healing emotional life. But the modernists sought to do this through recovering lost time. Clark focused on the future. She played with the body's own agency, the steadiness of the hands, the muscles', tendons' and nerves' search for a new balance and less constrained conditions. She left behind painting and sculpture and also the conceptual art of Duchamp and his associates: Lygia Clark's relational objects were meant as actions and not statements or denials, not signs or symbols. Each work is

an act, a choice, insight into the choices one has. A relational object itself, according to Clark, is worthless, a proposal for an artwork and not itself a work with artistic value. And this is why it is not unethical to destroy the object during the performance of the work. Its value resides in living action. The relations Clark's Caminhandos create have been thought through to the end yet, at the same time, sprout from the intuition as gestalts. They possess the perfection that a new art form achieves only in its very first expressions.

The new form of art founded by Gego and Lygia Clark, which I have christened Agency Art, flourished around the world from 1980 onward in squats, self-managed art spaces and those institutions referred to as artists' initiatives and festivals. And it continues to evolve there today. At precisely the point when the neo-avant-garde had deteriorated into mere simulation and was dying out, Agency Art was flourishing. The new form matter-of-factly took possession of the newly vacated spot at the tip of Kandinsky's future-pointing triangle of the life of the spirit, at least in the view of its participants, those artists who did not seek to make art since they had more interesting things to do. Only when the audience took action did their new art become interactive art, the Agency Art of the 1990s. The interactive artist does not create a work of art but the possibility of creating one.

Two forms of Agency Art exist. In one, the work itself is active and performs actions. Driessens and Verstappen's *Factory* (1995) is an excellent example. It is a wooden miniature factory about five foot square that produces a series of uniquely shaped lumps of candle wax in an endlessly repeated cycle. Each lump is placed on a conveyor belt, moved past a clicking camera, and then moved back along the conveyor belt to the boiling vat of wax, in which it melts. And the factory installation scoops up the next portion of boiling wax, cools it and transports it along the conveyor belt. This is not a metaphorical work but a performative one: it actively carries out the process it illustrates. As process art, it makes us reflect on what object art is and what variation is. It is not the lumps that are the art but the entire mechanical system and the digital camera, in action.

Video artists in the 1970s were surprised that they could turn their art off – what was it then? One hand clapping? Something similar is true of independently active Agency Art when it is at rest. In full operation, *Factory* is movingly beautiful, in the precision with which the process of lump formation and transport is carried out; the grace of the miniature crane; the light that falls into the factory through a few square holes in the wooden box; the measured, remorseless quality of the recycling process. The more cycles you witness, the more terrible is the prospect of the impending melting of the beautiful current lump of wax. The appearance of a new variation afterwards provides no consolation.

Factory's raw material is the sublime, the formlessness out of which all forms arise and to which they return, the Ungrund. Out of this, it draws variation, transience and irreplaceability. Time after time, a new beauty appears, constructed by physical forces and not-entirely-controllable factors during the hardening process. It has no content, only pure form. But as a series, a repeated process of formation and destruction, viewed on a meta level, *Factory*, with its constant construction and demolition, is an allegory of the history of the arts, the sciences and technology. It shows that repetition does not have to equal copying; variation is possible in a feedback loop, though development is not. This is how the creative industry works: always more of the same, but better every time. *Factory* is an acquired taste, and it instructs the viewer. The process affects us because of the products it presents us with; these products constitute an homage to the process, and this is why the digital camera photographs them, one by one. Object and process in relation to each other: that is independently active Agency Art.

The other form of Agency Art is interactive art in the broad sense of the word, i.e., not

the work of a group of artists from the 1990s but a genre that encompasses all artistic forms of interaction, including the non-electronic and non-digital. These range from Felix Gonzalez-Torres's candy spill works, from which the participant takes a piece of candy and allows it to melt in his mouth, to complex electronic installations like Ulrike Gabriel's *Terrain* (1994), in which an interface of brainwaves and lights is positioned between the participant and an army of flat robots with solar cells on their backs, and works like Angelo Vermeulen's *Blue Shift [LOG.1]* (2005), in which the visitor unwittingly guides the biological evolution of a population of water fleas.

As you approach the row of aquariums in *Blue Shift*, a yellow light above it changes to blue. In nature, blue light occurs mainly in open water, which is dangerous for water fleas, and yellow light is more often found at the water's edge. The fleas react to the blue light by sinking lower in the water, but this sometimes causes them to pass through holes in a partition and into a compartment containing fish that will eat them. Only the fleas that stay above the partition survive. With a generation time of five days, after a few weeks, a tendency toward unnatural behavior – staying at the surface when there is blue light – becomes visible in the population.

Is this ethical? Should you make visitors responsible for the deaths of innocent, living fleas? Yes, they are merely tiny biological machines, but they are also part of a work of art. They embody the concept of evolution. If you want to play God and guide another creature's development, fine; if you don't, this installation has nothing to offer you. It is another yes-no situation. The most frequently heard criticism of interactive art is that it investigates the creative potential of its receivers, which the creative industries can then later exploit in increasingly clever forms of "relational design." Today, the people just behind the point of the triangle, in the second section, are no longer lethargic citizens but eager designers, engineers and investors constantly on the hunt for a profitable idea. Digital art is actually legitimized as a form of interface and interaction design research. Are the people at the point of the triangle pulling forward or being pushed?

The modernist idea of art being "autonomous" offers a way out here. It applies not only to object arts, like traditional painting and sculpture, but also to process arts, such as video art, interactive art, sound art and all the other disciplines, fields and platforms that can be distinguished. Autonomy means you determine your research program yourself and decide for yourself what is good and what works. If you allow others to do this for you, then you are in the second section; you are second-rate. But if you're the artist up at the front, how do you know if you're going in the right direction? How do you guarantee that your early warning system is relaying information and not just noise?

If a work of art is formally well constructed, the viewer-participant will trust that it also functions properly in terms of meaning and/or agency – although even I sometimes do not realize until years later which behavior an independently active or interactive work has given me conditional readiness for. I can assemble a personal canon of works I could continue to think about for years. What makes Agency Art art? Where is all this self-organization of mechanical, electronic, digital and biological systems leading? What is the result of the experiments, what merits further work, and what should be pushed down into the the second section?

And yet we must not allow ourselves to become obsessed with a work's formal effectiveness. In formal terms, Geert Mul's extensive interactive installation *Horizons* (2008) was a marvelous work, just like the 150 landscape paintings from the collection of the Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen in Rotterdam that it projected on a surface, one after the other, with their horizons at the same height. When visitors approached the projection surface, the painting slid open like a stage curtain, revealing the next work. The colors were fresh and intense, and the stately pace at which the clear digital images broke apart and slid away made the piece exude a

monumental attentiveness and grace befitting an homage. In 2010, however, Mul made another version for an event in a church in the town of Deventer, using photographs pulled live from the Internet. They had horizons, too. So did the children's drawings Mul permitted to be placed in his database for a third version, a commission for a school building. And thus, what started out as a grand work of art became a cute interface, a clever organizer for large numbers of images. What had been art became design, and now try to explain what's so unfortunate about that.

Here, again, the need for a discourse of Agency Art arises. What do Agency Art's Shannon, Wiener, MacKay, McLuhan, Cassirer, Langer and Gell have that Meaning-Based Arts' Heidegger, Derrida, Badiou and Rancière do not have? Behavior is not a statement, and the sense of touch generates no pictures. In *Understanding Media Theory*,²⁰ I dared to argue that what was at stake in Agency Art was – do not be alarmed – “love,” defined as a relationship between you and me out of which a third space can arise, a shared future. For a long time, I shied away from using the word “beauty,” because I considered such an assessment applicable only to independently acting Agency Art working with images and sounds. Film is the environment of absolute beauty; Agency Art is relational, and thus its beauty is relative. The beauty of the systems in which Agency Art takes shape lies in the way they become “exceedingly complex” – Stafford Beer's term for social and artistic constructions that contain so many factors affecting each other that the overall system's behavior is fundamentally unpredictable and thus uncontrollable, uncoded.

In *The Abuse of Beauty* (2003),²¹ Arthur C. Danto distinguishes between beauty that is external to a work of art's meaning and beauty that contributes to its meaning and is therefore internal. Beauty can be an attractive wrapper or an essential component. For Danto, the reason Andy Warhol's *Brillo Boxes* remain so fascinating is that the artist made the wrapper the essence of his art. If you follow Danto's argument, a work of Agency Art would have to have beauty that was either external to its agency, internal to it, or both. This would lead to criticisms such as “The images in that piece are beautiful, but its interactivity is one-dimensional” or “The interaction is compelling, but the work isn't much to look at.” Like all beauty, though, the beauty of Agency Art cannot be reduced to anything other than itself, since it is, in Whitehead's term, “the most fundamental category.” A work of Agency Art is effective as a system not because of the images or sounds it generates but because of the method or strategy it uses to generate attention and agency – feeling space.

The “artistic” or “aesthetic excellence” of art has always been a matter of craftsmanship, the artist's vision, and formal characteristics. This is also true in Agency Art. But its beauty lies in the conditional readiness to behavior it calls forth, the agency it makes possible, the behavior or gestures it actualizes. It is the beauty of dance as opposed to that of paintings. Any work of Agency Art can be turned into choreography, into a diagram for action. Agency Art plays a game with virtual forces rather than virtual space or the virtual experience of time. Beauty has a function: it is the engine of the creative process. Beauty is the creative force, not the starting point or ultimate goal. Beauty is a process of exchange between one who finds something beautiful and the person or thing he or she finds beautiful. Manet's *Olympia* looks back at its viewer. Beauty as agency: this is the crucial innovation that Wendy Steiner introduced within the concept of beauty.

In *Venus in Exile: The Rejection of Beauty in Twentieth-Century Art*,²² Steiner does not interpret beauty as a quality or characteristic of a thing or person, as Danto does, but explains it as an interaction between two equal partners in a process. Beauty is a form of communication, not a contemplation of a one-way message sent to an audience from a work of art or a living other. Beauty is what makes agency worth the effort. I want to develop a particular behavior

with you – call it love, tenderness or attention – and to allow it to express itself in revolt, criticism and precision. Beauty does not show us what we should want but why we would want, what is fine about wanting. It is a conduit, not an order or a sentence. Beauty was the most important trait used by Kandinsky and his avant-garde friends to identify living art in 1910. The primitive Bavarian reverse-glass paintings in the *Der Blaue Reiter* catalogue prove it.

If you're in the avant-garde, how do you know for sure that you're racing forward on the bowsprit of the Titanic and not toiling away in the engine rooms at the back? Technological developments have left no sphere of life unchanged over the last 30 or 40 years. Computers and computer networks have caused a rupture in world history beside which McLuhan's metaphor of the global village pales. Vilém Flusser's vision of the dialogic society came closer to describing the situation but sounds nobler than its neoliberal version can live up to. What is the task of Agency Art in the era of the commercial exploitation of social networks and media? Disruption? It can be helpful if one wishes to discover what their creative potential is, what is good about them and what is insignificant. Jodi were the great pioneers here, but they never drew any final conclusions from their experiments, though they did develop their own style. What is the Jodi feeling? I couldn't say precisely, for their work refuses to become art, even when it was counted as part of net.art. The experimentation continues.

Beauty is what broadens and deepens feeling. It is the surplus that pulls you beyond yourself. It gets you moving out of the inner citadel and into the outside world and keeps you moving. It comprises the fourth cornerstone of McLuhan's Laws of Media: obsolescence, retrieval, enhancement and reversal.²³ This last, a process of transformation into something new and unforeseen, is what beauty is. It is a pivot point, an activation of matter, not a viewing hole or a mirror, or a wall you run up against. Beauty is that which keeps the system of art open. Beauty is a task, not a stamp of approval. Beauty is the "intention lodged in the thing" in which Alfred Gell recognized the social agency of an artwork or "art-like situation."²⁴ Beauty is the point of both Agency Art and Meaning-Based Art. They end in the same place, though they come from opposite directions. *O dentro e o fora*: the inside is the outside, content and form coincide, the medium is the body, meaning = agency, and beauty is the metamorphosis of a feedback loop. Beauty is what keeps artists critical and audiences receptive.

I want to see more beautiful Agency Art. I want to be affected and to understand what is affecting me. I want to feel conditional readiness arising in me, and my inner self and the world reorganizing themselves in new configurations. I want to experience and observe the new feelings and patterns of understanding that appear. Agency is what we have in common with machines and every living being, all of them part of the network of reality. I want Agency Art that makes its own conditions of existence the subject of debate, and is not only clever but also profound – poetic would be a better word. I have given a few examples, but my personal canon is not terribly extensive, though I have visited many exhibitions – only a fraction of those that have been held, of course. I want to be affected as deeply at Agency Art exhibitions and festivals as I am at museums for postimpressionist and modern art.

Agency Art must draw conclusions from the vast amount of research carried out in the last few decades, choose a position, and become art once and for all, with all the attendant consequences. The Internet makes many possible, in any case. I want an art of self-organizing matter, an art that springs from the agency of the nonhuman and opens up new agency for us human beings, its receivers. I want Agency Art to liberate me from my fear of the future and my aversion to the present. I want an Agency Art that makes me responsible instead of entertaining me, and shows me what's great about living responsibly. Call it ecological beauty – that's what I want.

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Notes

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