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The Inherent Unfinished:
The Infinite Nature of the Postmodern Masterpiece

Digital art is infinitely malleable. Like information itself, it is capable of perpetual recombination, dissolution and re-contextualization—denying traditional, static completion. One might even (hyperbolically) suggest that the finished, touch-of-genius masterpiece is dead—torn apart by the infinite, unfinished Postmodern¹ approach. Even our understanding of what constitutes a ‘finished’ work has changed, parallel to an increase in technology and information, as artists now generate interactive, contingent, cross-medium work. The idea of a closed work of art, neatly wrapped in Modernist ‘eternal’ legibility, is dismantled by the discourse of new media, rewired by its pluralistic and interactive nature. Infinite malleability warps predictable completion, enabling new media to interact dynamically with viewer, environment and itself. By working with mutative sequences and negating traditional notions of the ‘complete,’ contemporary artists like Nam June Paik and Cory Arcangel produce work that is constantly subject to addition and reduction; an inversion of the Modernist model of the finished object and its perfected message. This upheaval parallels not only the endless hypertext of contemporary life, but also the inherent nature of digitality itself: work can take on countless forms, functions, versions and revisions, adapting to each project, installation and moment. This flux is essential to many digital practices,

¹ And/or the Post-Postmodern / Digimodern approach. Theorist Alan Kirby identifies this condition as a fundamental paradigm shift, a rupture of existing cultural relationships: “Digimodernism identifies as the critical event in contemporary culture the profound and shattering encounter between computerization and the text. Its most recognizable form is a new kind of digitized textuality—onward, haphazard and evanescent—that disrupts traditional ideas about authorship and reading, and is found on Web 2.0...” (“Successor States...” Kirby). I would argue that it explodes the broader concept of “text” itself, re-orienting the idea of the original (Jarvis) and the strange collapse of information, image and geographic location into a binary-based, digitized space-time environment (or, deep digital space).

including my own *Cascade* project, where the literal and conceptual landscape of Southern California is remixed and reframed as part of a narrative-resistant, unfinished sequence.²

Formalist convention suggests that a finished, effective masterpiece³ is a self-enclosed work of art, containing everything necessary for the viewer to understand and appreciate it. The last lick of paint applied to the *Mona Lisa*, thus, secures DaVinci's genius⁴ (and message) on canvas and such a 'timeless' masterwork would supposedly allow universal understanding, outside of culture and era (Dowling).⁵ Art historian/philosopher Georges Didi-Huberman suggests that "we expect a masterpiece to be finished. It never occurs to anyone that there might be a missing snake in *Laocoon*, a missing person in Rembrandt's *Night Watch*, or a missing light source in Georges de la Tour's candlelit *Madeleine*" (Didi-Huberman qtd. in Paul 32). What

² New media (including all manner of digital and technological influence) make variable works not only possible, but referential to broader shifts in social behavior and data interaction. The 20th century saw tremendous change in the way information was understood and disseminated—changes that ripple through interconnected fields. Theorist Christiane Paul suggests "the re-contextualization of information in various relational combinations is inherently connected to the logic of the database, which ultimately lies at the core of any digital art project" (Paul 70). With database structure, information is accessed and contextualized by the individual viewer, as they submit a query. Limitless queries offer individualized experience, as in new media art.

³ The debate surrounding "masterpiece" qualities is a complex, subjective web of considerations—often formalist—which shifts over time. Qualifiers are often based on the assumption that an effective work of art is self-contained, or unchanging. Art historian Margot Lovejoy suggests that "electronic media challenge older [Modernist] modes of representation. New Media have changed the way art itself is viewed" (Lovejoy qtd. in Paul 23). Perhaps it has not only changed how art is viewed, but what it even means to define "masterpieces" at all.

⁴ The author-viewer relationship is challenged, even inverted, in Postmodernism and Post-Postmodernism ("Successor States..." Kirby). Previous eras might have "fetishized" the genius of the individual artist, but Postmodernism and Digimodernism (Kirby's term for "Post-Postmodernism") diminished the authority of the individual author in favor of a technology-boostered fetishization of the viewer, or "recipient," who becomes essential to the work in an interactive way ("The Death of Postmodernism..." Kirby).

⁵ This is essentially the Formalist, Modernist and Structuralist view—that "everything necessary to comprehending a work of art is contained within the work of art" (Wikipedia)(Rose 196). As theorist Clive Bell asserts, "great art remains stable and un-obscure because the feelings that it awakens are independent of time and place, because its kingdom is not of this world. To those who have and hold a sense of the significance of form what does it matter whether the forms that move them were created in Paris the day before yesterday or in Babylon fifty centuries ago. The forms of art are inexhaustible; but all lead by the same road of aesthetic emotion to the same world of aesthetic ecstasy" (Bell qtd. in Dowling). It should be noted that Bell's attitude toward aesthetic universality has been widely dismissed and few scholars still hold it to be a 'universal' truth itself.

happens, then, when the medium (or structure) asks the viewer to question a work's level of completion? What happens when technology begs the viewer to interact, or to envision/confront variations?

Didi-Huberman turns to montage, ancestor of digital recombination, as a fountain of “infinite reworking,” an approach that renounces the “eternity value” of traditional art (Didi-Huberman 32). When confronted with mid-20th century work like Bertolt Brecht's⁶ media montage, *War Primer* (1955), the idea of a finitely resolved, static masterpiece dissolves. Brecht's emergent, collagist forms “[imply] a break with the very notion of the artwork as something closed in upon itself...” (Didi-Huberman 32). Media sampling and reproductive technologies provide a distinctive, open-ended recombinant approach. Brecht's newspaper snippets collide (but never merge), forming surreal, suggestive plates.⁷ Drawn from mechanical printing, the plates reference the endless mountains of printed material ripe for analytical mining—suggesting that the primer is ongoing, capable of infinite reworking, as excerpts would simply get reconfigured with each new atrocity, each additional (future) plate. Therefore, “Brecht's work, masterly as it is, has this unfinished quality, which is inherent in the montage process that made it. Because a montage can always be assembled differently, it renounces all eternity value...” (Didi-Huberman 32).

⁶ Though Bertolt Brecht's photo-epigrammatic *War Primer* (1955) is neither digital nor new media, there is a traceable (and academically acknowledged) lineage from collage and photomontage to technological, digital and new media works—especially in the realm of sequencing, sampling, remix and the unfinished, ongoing accumulation (and arrangement) of material (Shanken 17)(Darley 116). The fact that Brecht assembles found cultural material, remixes it to suit conceptual ends and produces a body of work that feels endlessly unfinished speaks to the sampled media itself—the newspaper. Though not digital, we could argue that by clipping images and text from mechanically mass-produced sources allows Brecht's work to fall into a media-driven category, allowing it to speak to the unfinished nature of techno-remix in general.

⁷ Brecht juxtaposes found images with captions, suggesting that each panel could be subjected to endless-recaptioning—even encouraging the viewer to consider their own captions.

The unfinished personality of montage escalates with technology, becoming digital collage, sampling and interactive remix. Like Brecht's free-associative clippings, forming and re-forming critical responses to war—Nam June Paik's *Random Access* (1963) (figure 1) uses media technology to provide a never-ending audio-visual experience, central to Postmodern remix. The installation combines assembled strips of audiotape, an open-reel audio deck, a specialized playback head and speakers (Guggenheim). The viewer is invited to interact directly with the work, running the playback head against the tape, generating personalized sequences, repeats and variations. *Random Access* is truly that—a limited database with limitless query combinations (Paul 15), chosen by the artist but unendingly manipulated by the access-user. Additionally, the work varies with each installation, resisting the idea of a finite, 'official' version, while fracturing linearity: the original song is sliced and diced, destabilizing the expected structure just as different installations destabilize the work as a sculptural object (Ippolito).⁸

New media embraces this kind of constant (future) change and resists the convention of a singular-complete, making pliability the real game-changer. Digital artist Grahame Weinbren suggests "the digital revolution is a revolution of random access" and the data pool is a kind of global information jukebox—a virtual archive of material ripe for sampling and re-contextualizing (Weinbren qtd. in Paul 15). This paradigm shift is "based on the possibilities of instant access to media elements that can be reshuffled in seemingly infinite combinations" (Paul 15). New media artists Jennifer and Kevin McCoy, like Paik, make use of these reshuffled, infinite combinations by subverting linear television narratives with interactive installations.

⁸ Paik also produced additional versions of the installation, further challenging the idea of a single, static 'original.' Not only is the work subject to endless audio manipulations by the viewer, there is no one *true* version, no single masterpiece. The Guggenheim itself owns the 2000 version (Guggenheim).

Every Shot Every Episode (2001) excerpts *Starsky and Hutch*, separating moments from the original narrative and suspending them in a virtual database where viewers can choose sub-categories to view (such as “Every Stereotype” or “Every Gunshot”) (Paul 101-102). User agency allows personalized exploration of the culturally revealing categories in a wall-mounted CD library. There are no ‘proper’ ways of viewing the work, no official sequence. Users can watch as little, or as much as they like, in any self-determined order. Though drawing on finite source material (the 1970s TV series), re-contextualization through digital media changes the static nature of the original episodes and the formality of the no-touch museum object, forming new cultural associations within a digital perspective.⁹

Cory Arcangel is also known for manipulating media meant for different modes of consumption, chiefly games. Arcangel reinvents video game aesthetics through reverse and cross-engineering, transcending (and re-contextualizing) the original media by folding it into the discourse of virtuality and transience (Paul 200). Like Brecht’s pool of periodicals and Paik’s audiotape, Arcangel uses a media base to produce pieces like *Clouds* (2002) and *Super Landscape #5* (2005), which draw on Western landscape conventions, without traditional resolution.

For *Clouds* (figure 2) Arcangel modified a *Super Mario Brothers* Nintendo game cartridge, eliminating all graphics but a seamless landscape backdrop. The modified code is interpreted by the Nintendo console and output on a monitor. The result is a sparse, side-scrolling sequence of pixelated clouds which march across an intense blue sky—a flattened, unending

⁹ Like Cory Arcangel’s medium ambiguity in *Clouds* (figure 2), *Every Shot Every Episode* presents the appearance of a static video installation, but is really a dynamic, interactive meta-library made available by the “digital medium’s possibilities for the classification, reproduction and reconfiguration of existing materials” (Paul 102). The installation’s reference to database query allows the viewer to develop a new understanding of cultural tropes at work in pop culture, as well as the relative nature of narrative itself—moving away from TV drama to cultural dialogue.

virtual landscape. The most important aspect of Arcangel's *Clouds* is the disguised spontaneity. *Clouds* is not simply a video recording, or a projected, pre-made looping animation. The shapes are invented and re-invented by the actual console processor as it reads the modified game cartridge, thus the visuals are generated in *real time*, even as they suggest pre-recording (Knudsen). This allows for glitches and variations, providing new perspective on repetition and medium ambiguity. While it may exhibit familiar sequences, it is not a static, looping playback, preventing the entire work from reading as a finished unit.¹⁰

Clouds and *Super Landscape #5*¹¹ (figure 3) also change depending upon whether the observer views them on a small-format screen, or as large, ethereal projections. Enclosed in a cathode TV, it speaks most directly to its original use, reminding the viewer they are witnessing video game mechanics (rendering clouds in real time). When projected onto a museum wall, the landscape suggests a broader cinematic experience—an atmospheric panorama, or the large-scale physicality of sky itself.¹²

¹⁰ The seemingly static *Clouds* loop suggests video playback, animation or other pre-made, endlessly looping video material. In orientation and content, it also suggests the endless stream of landscape that rushes past the window on a road trip—a continuous, often monotonous, separated engagement with nature. In this case, nature is even farther removed by the obvious, cartoonish quality of the clouds and sky. Re-wiring digital information meant as a game leads to various interpretations of its structure, content and meaning, in fact, it blurs the boundary between game, video, animation and real-time performance. As theorist Christian Paul says of the digital approach: “this medium allows for multiple kinds of manipulation and a seamless combination of art forms, which can lead to a blurring of the distinctions between different media” (Paul 27).

¹¹ *Super Landscape #5* is actually a combo installation piece in which Arcangel projects *Clouds* and *F1 Racer* (2004) into the same relational space. Arcangel himself says of the work, “this wasn’t supposed to be a new thing, but after installing two of my projects together, *Super Mario Clouds*, and *F1 Racer*, I liked it so much, I decided it was a new project” (Arcangel). The flexibility with which each work adapts to each other, or can be viewed separately, again defies the singular-complete. It suggests that future landscape mods could unashamedly end up in the same mix. Arcangel is not afraid to allow new versions to materialize.

¹² The gap between virtuality and reality is bridged by scale.

It is also interesting to note how dramatically this work actually changes with scale. Critic Stephen Knudsen comments directly on the scale-shift: “unfortunately for the 2012 “Masters” survey exhibit, the theatre ambience of *Clouds* was dumbed-down into a small monitor placed next to the monitors mentioned above. *Clouds* put in the context of simplistic recorded video gags made *Clouds* like a video recording as well. Thus, the key aspect of the

Subversion of the traditional author-viewer relationship offers another conceptual shift, based on whether or not the viewer observes an Arcangel-made version, or a self-made version of *Clouds*. Arcangel freely distributes instructions, allowing viewers to create their own version, again preventing the singular-perfect.¹³ With access to the impetus that first created the work, the viewer can either view an Arcangel, or *be* an Arcangel, generating a personal variation of an already inconstant installation. This gives the work a specialized variability tied deeply to new media.¹⁴

In creating digital hybrid work for my own series, *The Cascade*, I sample, integrate and manipulate stills from television shows filmed in southern California,¹⁵ allowing cross-medium

work was lost: that *Clouds* was not recorded data but was being created in real time from an actual altered Nintendo gaming system. To see *Clouds* on the much-more-effective big screen in a darkened room (with long cords tethering the gaming system), I had to go to a concurrent group exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, NY” (Knudsen). I would argue that the smaller format version does not necessarily “dumb down” the work, but performs simply as a variant. It references the original 1980s gaming format—a smallish television screen with attached console; an intimate, convex viewing experience, and is therefore important.

¹³ Arcangel’s portfolio website provides the source code alteration, instructions, photo diagrams and advice on reproducing the work yourself, using an actual *Super Mario Brothers* game cartridge and your own Nintendo (Arcangel). Arcangel essentially ‘de-games’ the game, decenters the landscape and destabilizes the idea of an original, single masterpiece. If the masterpiece is repeatable and the instructions made available to anyone, at any time, it changes our understanding of what it means to be an author and viewer, and of experiencing traditional ideas of the masterpiece. Like Paik’s numerous versions (physical and installation) of *Random Access*, there is no one *Clouds*—and no single version needs to exist for it to be an effective exploration of new media concerns.

This is the root of Post-Postmodernism/Digimodernism: the continued erosion of the “Author-God” and their singular authority (Barthes 146). Though speaking from a literary context, theorist Roland Barthes identifies the shift from author/reader to uncharted territory where the reader becomes access-agent, as a condition of unending, open-ended possibilities: “the reader is the space in which all the quotations that make up the writing are inscribed without any of them being lost; a text’s unity lies not in its origin, but in its destination” (Barthes 148). Likewise, Kirby suggests that in Digimodernism, “the ‘viewer’ feels powerful and is indeed necessary; the ‘author’ as traditionally understood is either relegated to the status of the one who sets the parameters within which others operate, or becomes simply irrelevant... the ‘text’ is characterized both by its hyper-ephemerality and by its instability” (“Death of Postmodernism...” Kirby)

¹⁴ Almost romantically, “electronic media facilitate the liberation of art from conventional stasis [by providing] a means for it to consist of light itself” (Shanken 16). Not only is it a matter of turning the idea of completion on its head, the use of new media transforms art into information, light and electricity itself—elements which are never completely stagnant.

¹⁵ Rooted in a personal connection to the landscape of Southern California which permeates American television from the 1960s-80s, I excavate fluid instances of the Los Angeles County landscape (and semi-narrative scenarios)

experimentation to reflect the project's central concept: that landscape is a permeating condition—a collage of interpretive macro and micro understandings, always in a physical and socio-political state of flux. Like Paik, Arcangel, Brecht and the McCoys, I work with media out of its original context, remixing elements in a variable scheme. The project is composed of digital stills, projections and morphing sequences,¹⁶ referencing their own variations in true meta-scape fashion.¹⁷ The manipulated environments inhabit the real, the imagined and the transient, referencing the collapsing space between personal history, geologic reality and cultural production. The folded 'digiverse' and the unfinished, variable stills also suggest the way information is endlessly re-framed in popular culture (and the way physical changes affect micro landscapes). Information is reinforced, investigated and even amplified through repetition and manipulation (Spieker 66). Each still, therefore, has multiple incarnations that lead to new associations, by way of familiar, meta-reference moments. Color combinations, mountains,

from the data feed of popular culture. The transitory landscapes that punctuate the original television narratives get mutated, endlessly re-shuffled, deconstructed and re-built. My life landscape is knitted into a shared, macro-level cultural understanding of time, location and American culture.

¹⁶ As of April, 2014, there are over 300 stills, multiple video projections, animations and a number of moments output physically on paper. Motifs get recycled, sampled from earlier stills the way Arcangel samples visual information from *Super Mario Brothers*, or the way Brecht re-captions photos from varied sources—except in *The Cascade*, I allow my own original marks to enter that global celestial jukebox. I sample from my own work as if recycling snippets from other sources. This allows various incarnations to develop, which respond uniquely to each set of viewing circumstances.

¹⁷ Pablo Picasso re-worked a lithographic image of a bull numerous times, experimenting with color, sequence, layering and other formal considerations. He was especially interested in the way a static image could undergo deconstructive measures—and how this process affected the various state proofs along the way: “[Picasso] saw the stages of this process as a metamorphosis of the image—a record of its development and progress” (Cohan 11). The stone had almost infinite, variable possibilities—shattering reliance on a static impression. Thus, “the variation of the matrix allows for expressions that move beyond the duplicate and its expression of uniformity” (Cohan 11), allowing us to discover the kinds of new associations between elements referenced in *Digital Art* (27).

highways, vehicles and specific characters, like Johnny (figure 4), resurface, suggesting new variations are constantly being formed.¹⁸

Variability, instability and repetition allow the digital-unfinished to exist in a joyful space, rife with potential. It allows for endless re-contextualization and meta-cycles, where works reference themselves (and larger conditions), uprooting the Modernist idea of the eternally legible masterpiece. The inherent mutability of information is the matter of Post-Postmodernism itself, the crux of contemporary digitality, speaking to the flexible nature of media and the ever-evolving, intertwined reality of information culture. Contemporary artists, therefore, challenge ‘finality’ by developing work that makes use of an open-ended formula, inverting the author-viewer relationship and allowing variation and interactivity to re-mix their own work.

¹⁸ It also suggests that the virtual landscape is unstable, perhaps unreliable. Mountains, roads, vehicles and people ‘live’ precariously, even tenuously, in an environment that never seems to stay put. The viewer is unsure which still came first, setting the melody for the riffs to follow—and in fact, is invited to decide the sequence for themselves.

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Figure 1. Nam June Paik, *Random Access* (1963) – 2000 version (Guggenheim).

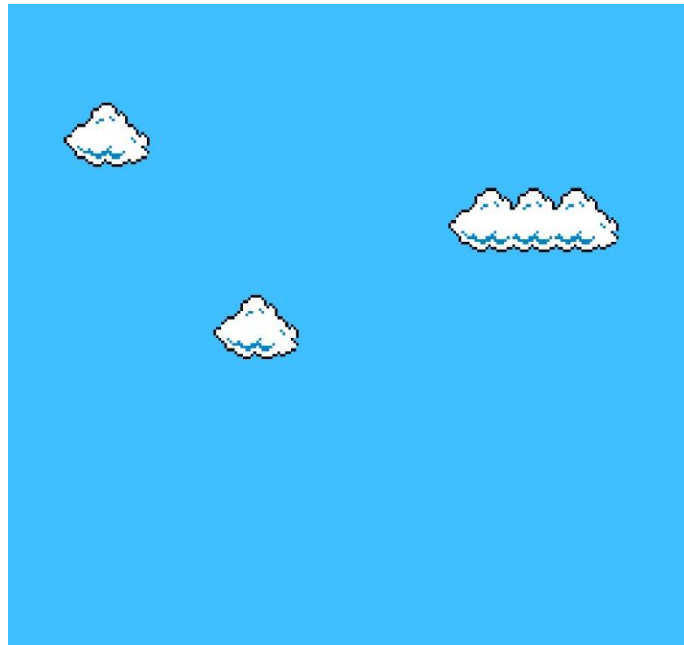


Figure 2. *Clouds* (2002). Cory Arcangel. Modded Super Mario Brothers cartridge and projection Top – detail (Arcangel). Bottom, installation shot at the Whitney Museum (Knudsen).



Figure 3. Cory Arcangel. *Super Landscape #1* (2005). Installation / projection of NES mods (Arcangel).



Figure 4. Ren Adams. Variation set from *The Cascade – Horizons in the Digital Desert (or, How Johnny Discovered the Secret Air Base)*, 2014. Digital hybrid media.