

ARTISTIC PRACTICE IN THE AFTERMATH OF POSTMODERNISM:
A CASE STUDY

A Master's Thesis

by
İLKER ÇELEN

Department of
Communication and Design
İhsan Doğramacı Bilkent University
Ankara
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To
My dear wife, Ezgi

ARTISTIC PRACTICE IN THE AFTERMATH OF POSTMODERNISM:
A CASE STUDY

Graduate School of Economics and Social Sciences
of
İhsan Doğramacı Bilkent University

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İLKER ÇELEN

In partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of
MASTER OF ARTS
in
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January 2017

I certify that I have read this thesis and have found that it is fully adequate, in scope and in quality, as a thesis for the degree of Master of Arts in Media and Visual Studies.



Asst. Prof. Dr. Ahmet Gürata
Supervisor

I certify that I have read this thesis and have found that it is fully adequate, in scope and in quality, as a thesis for the degree of Master of Arts in Media and Visual Studies.



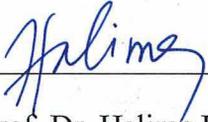
Asst. Prof. Dr. Ersan Ocak
Examining Committee Member

I certify that I have read this thesis and have found that it is fully adequate, in scope and in quality, as a thesis for the degree of Master of Arts in Media and Visual Studies.



Prof. Necla Rüzgar Kayıran
Examining Committee Member

Approval of the Graduate School of Economics and Social Sciences



Prof. Dr. Halime Demirkan

ABSTRACT
ARTISTIC PRACTICE IN THE AFTERMATH OF POSTMODERNISM:
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Çelen, İlker

MA, in Media and Visual Studies

Supervisor: Asst. Prof. Dr. Ahmet Gürata

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Postmodern discourse is still the dominant factor in the 21st century art production. On the other hand, there have appeared a number of alternative concepts which suggest that the influence of postmodern tendencies on art is diminishing, becoming unable to meet today's realities, or transforming altogether. The common ground among these new concepts is that they postulate a partial return to modernist tendencies such as creativity, originality, and/or uniqueness, without denying the achievements of postmodernism such as deconstruction, open-endedness or interaction, thus creating an oscillation. The thesis aims to examine a selection of recent new media works which are all connected with these new tendencies in one way or another, based on their conceptual backgrounds and/or their aesthetic approach in relation to the evolution of new media. While investigating these artworks by case study approach, the thesis claims that these artworks can be taken as indicators of a new understanding in arts.

Keywords: Art, Metamodernism, Modernism, New Media, Postmodernism

ÖZET
POSTMODERNİZM SONRASI SANATSAL PRATİKLER:
BİR VAKA ÇALIŞMASI

Çelen, İlker
Yüksek Lisans, Medya ve Görsel Çalışmalar
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Postmodern anlatım, 21. yüz yıl sanat üretiminde halen en baskın unsurdur. Diğer bir yandan, bu eğilimlerin etkilerinin azaldığını, günümüz gerçeklerini karşılayamaz hale geldiğini veya topyekün değişime uğradığını öne süren alternatif kavramlar da ortaya çıkmaya başlamıştır. Bu yeni kavramların temel ortak noktası postmodernizmin yapıbozum, açık uçluluk veya etkileşim gibi kazanımlarını yadsımadan, yaratıcılık, özgünlük ve/veya biriciklik gibi modernist eğilimlere kısmi bir geri dönüş yaşandığını, dolayısıyla modernizm ve postmodernizm arasında bir salınımın oluştuğunu iddia etmeleridir. Bu tez, kavramsal geçmişlerini ve/veya yeni medyanın evrimi ile ilgili estetik yaklaşımı temel alarak, bu yeni eğilimlerle bir şekilde bağlantılı, yakın zamanda üretilmiş yeni medya çalışmalarından bir seçkiyi incelemeyi amaçlamaktadır. Sözü geçen eserleri, vaka analizi yaklaşımı ile incelerken, bu sanat eserlerinin sanatta yeni bir anlayışın göstergeleri olarak ele alınabileceğini iddia etmektedir.

Anahtar kelimeler: Metamodernizm, Modernizm, Postmodernizm, Sanat, Yeni Medya

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

Whether they are grounded on the level of wishful thinking or serious confrontation, various concepts related with postmodernism's 'future' has been around for quite some time. David Rudrum and Nicholas Stavris (2015), in their book *Supplanting the Postmodern: An Anthology of Writings on the Arts and Culture of the Early 21st Century*, describe these concepts as “a number of offshoots of the postmodern” which, they claim to have been “striking out in a multitude of new directions from it, and some of these directions seem to run athwart the main postmodern currents.” For these concepts, they use a metaphor, 'delta effect' as they claim that postmodernism which was once a 'mighty river,' in time, slowed to a halt, then diverged and splitted into multiple channels along different courses. Cultural theorists, critics and artists gave these different concepts different names such as metamodernism, digimodernism, or altermodernism, etc. in order to “diagnose or champion ways in which the art, literature, and culture of the twenty-first century involve important differences and new departures from the mainstream of postmodernism” (Rudrum & Stavris, 2015: 3). Therefore we can claim that it is more likely a matter of diagnosing the flaws of postmodernism, rather than an objection. Even though these allegedly diverse concepts seem far from conclusion, they are, however, signs of a transformation period – of postmodernism – and it seems to me that this period can be marked with the struggle to justify the claims

of these so-called alternatives. On the other hand, postmodernism itself is also a subject of such transformation which, in this case, is that of modernism. For Lyotard (1984: 79), postmodernism is “not modernism at its end but in the nascent state, and this state is constant.” He describes modern aesthetic as an aesthetic of the sublime which is fundamentally nostalgic, and this mode of nostalgia – although it offers to the viewer or the reader a matter for pleasure – eventually can not constitute the real sublime sentiment which is an essential mixture of pleasure and pain, whereas postmodernism – by reducing the influence of the mode of nostalgia and replacing enjoyment with presentation of the unrepresentable – can reach the real sublime mentioned, and this shift eventually offers new conditions for the artists and in this regard, Lyotard explains:

A postmodern artist or writer is in the position of a philosopher: the text he writes, the work he produces are not in principle governed by preestablished rules, and they cannot be judged according to a determining judgement, by applying familiar categories to the text or to the work. Those rules and categories are what the work of art itself is looking for. The artist and the writer, then, are working without rules in order to formulate the rules of what will have been done. (1984: 81)

This can be regarded as a prime example of a paradigm shift and the co-existence of two inherently different discourses within each other: “A work can become modern only if it is postmodern” (Lyotard, 1984: 79). So, within this trajectory, the new contemporary conceptions mentioned above can be claimed to be the symptoms of the fact that it is now postmodernism's turn to be questioned: “What lies beyond postmodernism? Of course, no one knows; we hardly know what postmodernism was. But questions have a way of inveigling an answer” (Hassan, 2003). In this regard it would not be surprising that recent contemporary practices in the art have been contested and criticized, especially in a time when contemporary tools of

communication are claimed to have already been internalized to a point where “software has become a commonsense shorthand for culture and hardware a shorthand for nature” (Chun, 2005).

As we have already argued, the struggle to understand the transition periods and their outcomes has always existed. Famous American visual art critic Clement Greenberg's remark on the emergence of postmodernism in art is revealing as much as it is archaic, considering the fact that it was written in 1980, a relatively early stage of postmodernism in art:

Postmodern is a rather new term. It's a catchy one and has been coming up more and more often in talk and writing about the arts, and not only about the arts. I'm not clear as to just what it points.... A friend and colleague had been to a symposium about postmodern last spring. I asked him how the term had gotten defined at that symposium. As art, he answered, that was no longer self-critical. I felt a pang. I myself had written twenty years ago that self criticism was a distinguishing trait of Modernist art. My friend's answer made me realize as I hadn't before how inadequate that was as a conveying definition of Modernism or the modern. (Greenberg, 1980)

More than two decades after Greenberg's rather pessimistic – even sentimental – credit, Baudrillard's remark on contemporary art clearly illustrates the substantial change in the apprehension of postmodernist art and (in comparison with the former) the extent it reached:

The adventure of modern art is over. Contemporary art is only contemporary of itself. It no longer transcends itself into the past or the future. Its only reality is its operation in real time and its confusion with this reality. Nothing differentiates it from technical, advertising, media and digital operations. There is no more transcendence, no more divergence, nothing from another scene: it is a reflective game with the contemporary world as it happens. This is why contemporary art is null and void: it and the world form a zero sum equation. (Baudrillard, 2005: 89)

What is essential about these statements, regarding their historical significance, is that they both point out a certain type of crisis – one is of modern and the other, of postmodern – or an ambivalent resolution, which renders existing discourse somewhat unsustainable or jeopardized. For instance, obscurity in the art of Marcel Duchamp is a good example as an indicator of crisis and of being a precursor to what was to come after it, as if modernism, though involuntarily at those times, had already foreseen its own dissociation (Jameson, 1991: 4). Thus, the paradigm of the arts, inevitably, ended up in a transformation process in which methods of 'creative act' was once again put in question. This contradictory condition itself almost became the very defining characteristic of then-existing art aesthetically, yet again the discourse of contemporary art today, with all of its complexity, is, by all means, no exception. In my opinion, it is this exact moment of confusion from which the new conceptions are claimed to be emerging.

The current thesis hereby aims to examine a selection of new media works which are all connected with these new tendencies in one way or another, based on their conceptual backgrounds and/or their aesthetic approach in relation to the evolution of media. While investigating these artworks by case study approach, the thesis claims that these artworks can be taken as indicators of a new understanding, and at times, can be considered as a seemingly romantic departure from postmodernism, if not substantially utopic. Their theoretical basis in common is their somewhat unclear yet tangible struggle to deal with postmodern concepts like irony, nihilism, relativism,

deconstruction and rejection of the grand narratives, and converge (or dare to replace) them with hope, sincerity, affect, romanticism and the potential for grand narratives and universal truths, however, they are not in a state of total denial of what has been learned from postmodernism (Turner, 2015). Ultimately, these new alternatives are not rejecting the notions of postmodernism, but rather putting an effort into the possibility of an oscillation between the postmodern and the modern in order to create a new condition in which this oscillation would remain constant. Personally, I find this alleged gradual transformation period unique in terms of its historical relevance, and therefore worth analyzing.

The thesis consists of three chapters. The first chapter aims to conceptualize the crisis of modernism and, in turn, of postmodernism in art, thus provides a contextual background for the movements, or tendencies in general, which are claimed to have signaled a recent departure from postmodernism. The second chapter examines the evolution of media and art by establishing a relationship with the theoretical aspects of these new tendencies such as metamodernism, digimodernism, altermodernism. However, the primary emphasis will mostly be on metamodernism because it has been the most widely used term among others. The validity of conceptual art in the postmodernist sense will be questioned at times. Additionally, discourses from several other disciplines, which contextually follow the same so-called departure-from-postmodernism pattern, will be briefly explained just for supplementary purposes. In the third and the final chapter of the thesis, recent contemporary inclinations and several

new media artworks which can be regarded as the indicators of this so-called post-postmodern condition will be examined. Firstly, the effect of computer code on art and aesthetics in contemporary culture will be covered, and then, the chapter will introduce a relatively recent phenomenon called The New Aesthetics, by which a new state of visual perception unique to our time will be justified. Following that, it will examine a new media artwork titled #INTRODUCTIONS, a collaboration between self-proclaimed metamodern artists Luke Turner, Nastja Säde Rönkkö and actor Shia LaBeouf, revealing its ties with new movements and extensive participation. The next sub-chapter will be explaining Holly Herndon's music video titled Chorus, focusing both on its visuals (primary) and sound (secondary). The context will be constructed upon the deliberate use of failure in computer aesthetics as a creative method, and eventually, Herndon's way of constructing sound. Moreover, the last sub-chapter will cover association of virtual reality technology with art and how it widens the already existing possibilities. The first one is a video game called REZ, and the second one is a virtual painting/illustration software, called Quill. Their ties with the promises of these new concepts will also be questioned.

CHAPTER II: CONCEPTUALISATION OF CRISES: MODERNISM AND POSTMODERNISM

2.1. Crisis of Modernism

Jameson (1991) distinguishes postmodernism from postmodernity (historical phase), and defines it as a cultural dominant rather than a style, a conception which jeopardizes the notion of difference – like Baudrillard's 'zero sum equation' – and by doing so, “allows for the presence and coexistence of a range of very different, yet subordinate features” (Jameson, 1991: 4). Existence of such homogeneity is by no chance incidental, as it can be traced back to the first half of the 20th century, namely, to the Avant-Garde in general and Dada in particular, and in turn, as the most anticipated figure of the Dadaism, to Marcel Duchamp, since his art – and attitude towards art – is considered as a precursor to postmodernist art (1991: 4). Being considered as the 'kick-starter' of what is known as the expanded arts, he is associated with “crossing of borderlines between media, the interdisciplinary approach that blurs the distinctions between painting, sculpture, artistically designed spaces (“installations” or “environments”), and object” (Ruhrberg, Honnef, Schneckenburger, Fricke & Walther, 2000: 131). In this respect, I consider Duchamp's reflexive attitude as an early stage of awareness which is symptomatic of an imminent crisis – that of modernism. In fact, his

ready-mades, which also influenced conceptual art on a fundamental level, can be seen as a natural outcome of such crisis. His most famous ready-made sculpture, *The Fountain* (1917) can be considered as a prototypical example of conceptual art “because of the way in which it challenged the rules of what a work of art could be” (Malpas, 2005: 31). Moreover, Duchamp's separation of retinal and conceptual is equally important to grasp contemporary artistic discourse today – conceptual art in particular:

From too great an importance given to the retinal. Since Courbet, it's been believed that painting is addressed to the retina. That was everyone's error. The retinal shudder! Before, painting had other functions: it could be religious, philosophical, moral. If I had the chance to take an antiretinal attitude, it unfortunately hasn't changed much; our whole century is completely retinal, except for the Surrealists, who tried to go outside it somewhat. And still, they didn't go so far! In spite of the fact that Breton says he believes in judging from a Surrealist point of view, down deep he's still really interested in painting in the retinal sense. It's absolutely ridiculous. It has to change; it hasn't always been like this. (Cabanne, 1987: 43)

By observing his statement, it can be claimed that, although partly, the crisis of modernism seems to be stemming from the fact that comprehension of art – and painting in particular – is reduced to a point where 'retinal' is primary. Accordingly, Kosuth (1991) criticise that the context beyond the visible – or beyond the canvas – is either ignored or put in a secondary/inferior position, thus makes it impossible for the viewer to 'understand' what art really is or might be, thus formalist approach is indeed problematic:

Being an artist now means to question the nature of art. If one is questioning the nature of painting, one cannot be questioning the nature of art. If an artist accepts painting (or sculpture) he is accepting the tradition that goes with it. That's because the word art is general and the word painting is specific. Painting is a kind of art. If you make paintings you are already accepting (not questioning) the nature of art. One is then accepting the nature of art to be the European tradition of a painting-sculpture dichotomy. (1991: 18)

Within this direction, making an effort to break its bonds with the dichotomy, crisis of modern art – and modernism in general – resulted in what is known as the deconstruction of formalism and, in turn, gave way to intermediate forms by blurring the line between high-art and low-art (Desmond, 2011: 149). To put it simply, for many critics, postmodernism marks the exhaustion of modernist projects and the belief that art has a single functional purpose or can change the world altogether (Malpas, 2005: 20).

2.2. Crisis of Postmodernism

What McLuhan remarked almost 50 years ago is essential to grasp today's exhaustion as he suggests that “the instantaneous world of electric informational media involves all of us, all at once. No detachment or frame is possible” (McLuhan & Fiore, 2001: 53) and additionally, in the same respect, we should look into the involvement of electronic/new media in arts simply because it is fundamentally related with how we currently experience arts – and culture: “...development of new media and communication networks, and the collapse of religious and political traditions and beliefs across the world all appear to point towards a culture that has rapidly become fundamentally different from that experienced by earlier generations” (Malpas, 2005: 34).

In the arts, older/modernist modes of representation have been challenged by electronic media, as new media tools such as video and computer, played a major role in creating postmodern conditions which have changed the way art itself is perceived. These conditions can not be perceived well enough, without moving beyond the paradigm of

arts and understanding the effects of technological advancements on the discourse of modernity. Lovejoy (2004) defines this significant change as shifting of cultural paradigm “from the concept of a single Eurocentric cultural stream dominated by white male privilege to one which recognizes diverse identities and voices interacting in a complex web of ideological and behaviorist associations” (2004: 8). How this shifting occurred is of importance. Within this trajectory, firstly, video – broadcasting – as the ultimate tool for transmission of mediated images (and sound) over long distances, was adopted as a new and powerful consciousness-transforming form of representation, and as of today, it has “become part of an expanded multimedia territory where it is combined with the interactive capabilities of the computer, as in CD and DVD production, and in virtual reality and interactive installation works”, nonetheless, in arts, “real break with the paradigm of representation we have followed since the Renaissance” (2004: 8), is believed to be the digital simulation capabilities of computer:

A digital image does not represent an optical trace such as a photograph but provides a logical model of visual experience. In other words, it describes not the phenomenon of perception, but rather the physical laws that govern it, manifesting a sequence of numbers stored in computer memory. Its structure is one of language: logical procedures or algorithms through which data is orchestrated into visual form. (Legrady, 1990)

What is problematic about this mode of representation “made through logical, numeric based mathematical language structures” (Lovejoy, 2004: 154) or in other words, computer logic, might be the very reason behind the established indifference: “Although both may look like the same on the surface, a digital image may be said to differ from its analogue counterpart in terms of verifiable past and possible future” (Legrady, 1990). Consequently, it becomes a matter of somewhat ambiguous convergence: “Digital

technologies have [thus] become the catalyst for tendencies in the convergence of disciplines, for the universal computer is both a tool and a medium” (Lovejoy, 2004: 157). Moreover, just as video encompassed photographic and cinematic forms of representation, computer superseded video and its previous counterparts. Just like television, the internet allows the audiences to share real or imaginary experiences from great distances while sitting in front of a screen. Nevertheless, participatory experience renders the internet entirely different from television. According to Lovejoy (2004) this is rather a revolution of communication, than of computer but unless we define a direction for it, we can find ourselves in an uncharted territory which presents great challenges:

As a new form without fixed entry points and narratives, the Internet challenges us to explore fundamental aspects of representation that have acquired new meaning and significance such as content and context. While, up to now, we have understood how context can change the meaning of an artwork, the Web creates extremely different conditions where the two are interchangeable. (2004: 223)

This substantial shift is, in my opinion, is the very proof of modernity transforming into postmodernity and, therefore, what seems to be the crisis of the outcome of postmodernity in the arts, namely the crisis of postmodernism, is presumably this interchangeability, because it puts the separation of content and context (accordingly, of high art and popular culture) in jeopardy on a fundamental level. According to Malpas (2005: 35) there is a dispute over this issue, as for some postmodernist critics, this is an emancipation of artistic practice from the old systems and rules of taste and judgement thereby leads to new forms of critical practice which are able to analyze art with different goals and categories, whereas for other critics who are more critical of

postmodern thought, the loss of these systems of taste makes it impossible to distinguish the good from the bad, the context from the content, the progressive from the reactionary, and, eventually “leaves us with a culture in which 'anything goes' so long as it is capable of generating profit.” To grasp this contemporary confusion – crisis – better, one could look into the breakdown of the promise of modernism.

Modernism as an aesthetic style could be explained with an emphasis put on the value of being original and innovation in general, hence it was regarded as rather autonomous and this autonomy gave the artists the opportunity to shape their art upon their individual vision, with almost scientific precision in context and content that every single artist was treated as if she/he was a theoretician on her/his own. Modernist art in this sense was a reflection – and a natural outcome – of modernity and a discourse of originality (Krauss, 1981). Consider, for example, the paintings of Pablo Picasso and Wassily Kandinsky. They were both regarded as modern painters, yet their paintings look entirely different from each other because of their unique theories on art. On the other hand, regardless of their artistic decisions, there is an unmistakable consistency in their art (as well as many other artists who belong to the modernist mode of thought) in terms of the correlation between their content and context. It is as if every autonomous position proposes its own grand narrative individually, therefore constructive in its own respect. On the other hand, demarcation of the transition from modernism to postmodernism in art still seems like a complex issue since there are various theories as to how, why and when such shifting occurred. Nevertheless, the most viable idea as to

what postmodernism asserts is that it rejects or reacts against modernist values such as authenticity, originality or universality and replace them with irony, parody, chaos or deconstruction, thus creating a complex cultural condition in which criticism is demythologized, the basic proportions of modernism is being liquidated by exposing their fictitious condition: “It is thus from a strange new perspective that we look back on the modernist origin and watch it splintering into endless replication” (Krauss, 1981). As far as I am concerned, it is this ambiguity which results in the aesthetic confusion mentioned above. However I find this confusion fruitful, as it forces us to search for alternatives.

CHAPTER III: A PROPOSAL FOR THE AFTERMATH OF POSTMODERNISM: ALTERNATIVE CONCEPTS AND THEIR IMPACT ON ART

3.1. Alternatives In Theory: Metamodernism

Metamodernism, as artist Luke Turner (2015) has pointed out, “is a term that has gained traction in recent years as a means of articulating developments in contemporary culture.” Prior to its more common recognition in the early 2010s, the term metamodernism remained somewhat less apparent in a variety of contexts for almost four decades following its first appearance in 1975, coined by American scholar Mas'ud Zavarzadeh in his critical essay *The Apocalyptic Fact and the Eclipse of Fiction in Recent American Prose Narratives* (Abramson, 2015b). In the essay, through which then-current contemporary – American – fiction is discussed within paradigms concerning the criticism on modernism, Zavarzadeh (1975) uses the term 'metamodernist' – in his own words, for the lack of a better term – to describe the emerging aesthetics within which the dichotomy between 'life' and 'art' is blurred by the fusion of fact and fiction, and indeed “the sharp division between the two does not exist” (Zavarzadeh, 1975: 75). At this point, implying the notion 'the lack of a better term' is of significance since he places 'Metamodernism' somewhat distanced from, yet

in conjuncture with conceptions such as Anti-Modernism, Para-Modernism, and Post-Modernism and, in this regard, he notes:

I am using this term to refer to a cluster of attitudes which have emerged since the mid 1950s. I shall use the term 'metamodernist' in conjunction with three others to describe various aesthetic and ideational approaches to the art of narrative in the present century. I retain 'Modernist' for the ideas associated with Joyce, Woolf, Faulkner and their followers. The reaction against their poetics in 1950s by such writers as Kingsley Amis, John Wain and C.P. Snow I label 'Anti-Modernist'. The modified and sometimes radicalized continuation of the Modernist aesthetics in the works of Samuel Beckett, Vladimir Nabokov and others I shall call 'Para-Modernist'. Some critics use the single term 'Post-Modern' to describe these new developments. However, the term is too general to catch all the nuances (Zavarzadeh, 1975, p: 75)

As of today, one can find Vermeulen and Van Den Akker's (2010) definition of metamodernism similar in the way it distances itself from postmodernism (and in this case also from modernism) as they argue that “this form of modernism is characterized by the oscillation between typically modern commitment and a markedly postmodern detachment” (Vermeulen and Van Den Akker, 2010). They call this structure metamodernism. Their proposition suggests that metamodernism “oscillates between a modern enthusiasm and a postmodern irony, between hope and melancholy, between naivete and knowingness, empathy and apathy, unity and plurality, totality and fragmentation, purity and ambiguity.” However, they claim that this is a pendulum swinging between innumerable poles, rather than a balanced oscillation. “Each time the metamodern enthusiasm swings toward fanaticism, gravity pulls it back toward irony; the moment its irony sways toward apathy, gravity pulls it back toward enthusiasm” (Vermeulen and Van Den Akker, 2010). Another more refined view on metamodernism is as follows:

metamodernism is not just a simple reaction to postmodernism and does not remain only at the stage of conflict, of ongoing denial or question about concepts or theories. Metamodernism is that trend which attempts to unify, to harmonize and to settle the conflict between modern and postmodern by supporting the involvement in seeking solutions to problems and the desirable positioning towards existing theories, not only combating or questioning them. (Baciu, Bocoş & Baciu-Urzică, 2015)

The relationship between postmodernist and metamodernist discourse can be understood more clearly in the following table:

Table 1. Comparison of postmodernism and metamodernism in view of challenges of the social sciences (Komańda, 2016)

Criterion	Postmodernism	Metamodernism
Description of reality	Lack of meta-narration; there is only the individual perception and comprehension of reality	Search for narration based on intersubjectivism
Method	Deconstruction	Reconstruction
Organisation of social behaviours	The lack of formal organisation, possible spontaneous and temporary bottom-up organisation	Deliberate, bottom-up and, first and foremost, informal organisation which may turn into other forms

The comparison in the above table should also be explained further, in order to understand what metamodernism claims to offer against/instead of postmodernism. In the table, we can see a division between postmodernism and metamodernism on the subject of narration, and correspondingly, the methods which these two separate concepts claim to depend on – deconstruction versus reconstruction. Meta-narrative is a term Lyotard brought into prominence and for Lyotard (1984), because of their totalizing nature and their tendency towards universal and transcendent truth, they should be approached skeptically:

Simplifying to the extreme, I define *postmodern* as incredulity toward metanarratives. This incredulity is undoubtedly a product of progress in the sciences: but that progress in turn presupposes it. To the obsolescence of the metanarrative apparatus of legitimation corresponds, most notably, the crisis of metaphysical philosophy and of the university institution which in the past relied on it. The narrative function is losing its functors, its great hero, its great dangers, its great voyages, its great goal. It is being dispersed in clouds of narrative language elements narrative, but also denotative, prescriptive, descriptive, and so on. Conveyed within each cloud are pragmatic valencies specific to its kind. (Lyotard, 1984)

Here, from this statement, we can clearly get the idea that, metanarration – specific to the modernist project – is now decentralized, or simply deconstructed, and it is not surprising, as mentioned earlier, that deconstruction is playing a central role in postmodernism. On the other hand, the main concern of metamodernist sensibility, as previously outlined, is to reclaim what has been deconstructed – as if it hopes to fix it – without committing a total decline of the traits of postmodernism – the oscillation. Additionally, searching for a narration based on intersubjectivism is of essential value as to understand the promise of metamodernism, because intersubjectivity, in general sense, is an interpersonal phenomena, a shared understanding “that helps us relate one situation to another” (Bober & Dennen, 2001), moreover, it is also “central to everyday functioning; only through shared meanings can we work and build knowledge together” (Bober & Dennen, 2001). In my opinion, this mode of thought, by taking empathy seriously, can be regarded as a rather naive one, compared to the harsh, deconstructive nature of the postmodern condition, and this contrast, although not so conclusively, illustrates the claimed difference between the postmodern and the metamodern to a certain degree.

3.2. Alternatives in Theory: Common Grounds

It is also possible to see that the definition of Altermodernism (as a manifestation embedded in the context of 2009 Tate exhibition with the same name: Altermodern; curated by Bourriaud himself) has a strong resemblance to the notion that metamodernism is an 'oscillation.' Nicolas Bourriaud (2015a) suggests:

Altermodernism can be defined as that moment when it became possible for us to produce something that made sense starting from an assumed heterochrony, that is, from a vision of human history as constituted of multiple temporalities, disdaining the nostalgia for the avant-garde and indeed for any era - a positive vision of chaos and complexity. It is neither a petrified kind of time advancing in loops (postmodernism) nor a linear vision of history (modernism), but a positive experience of disorientation through an art-form exploring all dimensions of the present, tracing lines in all directions of time and space. (Bourriaud, 2015a)

Mutuality in the 'dynamics' of metamodernism and altermodernism, however, is not exclusive and, it is not surprising to come across similar attitudes in the cluster of definitions regarding the alternatives and/or (claimed to be) successors to postmodernism. In this respect, another major approach in the cultural landscape is Alan Kirby's Digimodernism – which is, in other words, digital modernism. Kirby (2009), by situating the digitization as default, argues the traits of digimodernism:

There are various ways of defining digimodernism. It is the impact on cultural forms of computerization (inventing some, altering others). It is a set of aesthetic characteristics consequent on that process and gaining a unique cast from their new context. It's a cultural shift, a communicative revolution, a social organization. The most immediate way, however, of describing digimodernism is this: it's a new form of textuality. (2009: 50)

Nevertheless, this new form of textuality refers to a complex set of relationships between digimodernist and postmodernist texts. According to Kirby, peculiarity of

digimodernist textuality lies somewhere deeper than that of postmodernist whose function is to represent “a textual content or a set of techniques employed by an antecedent author, embedded in a materially fixed and enduring text” whereas the former “describe how the textual machine operates, how it is delimited and by whom, its extension in time and space, and its ontological determinants” (Kirby, 2009: 51). These 'deeper traits' of digimodernist text are in fact a number of dominant features which, in Kirby's definitions, are onwardness, haphazardness, evanescence, reformulation and intermediation of textual roles, anonymous, multiple and social authorship, the fluid-bounded text and electronic-digitality (2009: 52-3). Traits of the digimodernist and the metamodernist intersect and, often at times, complement each other. Digimodernist text, for Kirby – unlike postmodernist text – “seems to have a start but no end” (2009: 52). The claim is that onwardness is evident and its traits can be found in such domains as online blogs, thus, referring to the digimodernist textuality found in the blogs, he explains:

It is a textuality existing only now, although its contemporary growth also guarantees the continued life of its past existence (archived entries): it's like some strange entity whose old limbs remain healthy only so long as it sprouts new ones. (Kirby, 2009: 112)

Likewise, Vermeulen and Van Den Akker (2010) defines metamodern 'wo/man' as someone whose destiny is “to pursue a horizon that is forever receding” and, further claim that “metamodernism moves for the sake of moving, attempts in spite of its inevitable failure; it seeks forever for a truth that it never expects to find.” Endless scrolling feature implemented in a variety of web pages (i.e. Tumblr blog feed) is a good example of onwardness in practice.

Ambiguity in this sense is a major trait in all cases and, consequently, it causes the haphazardness mentioned above: The qualities upon which the text is built are as yet unknown because the future progress of the text is undecided, and this coincidental situation creates an illusory effect. One might consider it as power or freedom, whereas another may find it futile. “If onwardness describes digimodernist text in time, haphazardness locates in it the permanent possibility that it might go off in multiple directions: the infinite parallel potential of its future textual contents” (Kirby, 2009: 52). It seems that haphazardness is also present in metamodernist domain and sets the ground for justification of exploration. Emphasizing its progress rather than its promise, Turner (2015) defines the discourse of metamodernism as “descriptive rather than prescriptive; an inclusive means of articulating the ongoing developments associated with a structure of feeling for which the vocabulary of postmodern critique is no longer sufficient, but whose future paths have yet to be constructed.” Bourriaud (2015b) in his manifesto, also remarks a new type of globalized perception and “a cultural landscape saturated with signs” that artists traverse and thus “create pathways between multiple formats of expression and communication” (Bourriaud, 2015b: 253). In his 2012 book, *Approaching The Hunger Games trilogy: A literary and cultural analysis*, Tom

Henthorne explains:

The open-endedness that marks many contemporary texts also seems to contribute to their haphazardness: because they lack defined boundaries, digimodernist texts have the potential to continually grow and change, reflecting new ideas and circumstances. It is not that digimodernist texts lack structure but rather that the structure itself is subject to change....Although some readers may find such haphazardness disconcerting or even troubling, to others it increases the sense of verisimilitude since life itself can be chaotic and develop in way that cannot be easily predicted (Henthorne, 2012: 147)

Open-endedness is treated as a major property in all cases above and requires further explanation, especially in terms of its practice. At this point, the role of authorship in digimodernist text appear significant as it is claimed to have become “multiple, almost innumerable and is scattered across obscure social pseudocommunities” (Kirby, 2009: 52) Henry Jenkins (2006) gives one of the adequate examples of how these pseudocommunities function, which, in this case, fandom in online discussions, since convergence allows 'users' or 'fans' (or, in a broader/digimodernist sense, readers of digital text) to socially produce, circulate and revise the television meanings and become 'a part' of the text:

Within moments after an episode is aired, the first posts begin to appear, offering evaluations and identifying issues that will often form the basis for debate and interpretation across the following week. Because this process is ongoing, rather than part of focused and localized interview sessions, computer net discourse allows the researcher to pinpoint specific moments in the shifting meanings generated by unfolding broadcast texts, to locate episodes that generated intense response or that became particularly pivotal in the fans' interpretations of the series as a whole. (Jenkins, 2006: 118)

Hence, the possibilities for active participation of the audience to the open-ended text also tends to be an illustration of how Vermeulen and Van Den Akker summarize metamodernism by defining metamodernist sensibility as “rhizomatic rather than linear, open-ended instead of closed. It should be read as an invitation for debate rather than an extending of a dogma” (Vermeulen & Van Den Akker, 2010). Accordingly, in the practice of art, reducing an artwork to a presence of a single final object is no longer sufficient since it is subjected to fragmentation: A work of art, now “consists of a significant network whose interrelationships the artist elaborates, and whose progression in time and space he or she controls” (Bourriaud, 2015a). And if so, the

notion of 'artist as an autonomous master of his/her product' (Bourdieu, 1984: 3) has diminished, if not disappeared entirely. In other words, it is the process of creating an artwork through participation. Participation on the level of interaction with an artwork is by no means something new, yet creating the whole body of an artwork exclusively through participation is something else.

On the other hand, these contemporary tendencies are not exclusive to new media texts, but, for instance, also to a traditional discipline which, in this case, is painting. While remaining relatively conventional in practice and seemingly distant from those more dependent on digital mediums, Stuckism and Remodernism (the two are in fact written by same individuals and fundamentally interrelated) also make a good example of 'the yearning for the new.' Ontologically, they have a similar pattern with metamodernism, digimodernism and altermodernism in their claim of searching for something new, despite Remodernism/Stuckism embraces a rather strict paradigm and dictates one particular art-making discipline over another: "Artists who don't paint aren't artists" (Childish & Thomson, 1999). Behind this philosophy, two British artists reside: Billy Childish (real name: Steven John Hamper) and Charles Thomson announced The Stuckist Manifesto, a harsh criticism on tendencies in contemporary art at every level, addressing the practice of painting as the source of the authenticity in art, they presuppose that painting "engages the person fully with a process of action, emotion, thought and vision, revealing all of these with intimate and unforgiving breadth and detail" (Childish & Thomson, 1999). This engagement is claimed to be crucial in its

purest sense. Thus it gives way to the pronounced detachment from postmodernism and renders conceptual art overdue:

Post Modernism, in its adolescent attempt to ape the clever and witty in modern art, has shown itself to be lost in a cul-de-sac of idiocy. What was once a searching and provocative process (as Dadaism) has given way to trite cleverness for commercial exploitation. The Stuckist calls for an art that is alive with all aspects of human experience; dares to communicate its ideas in primeval pigment; and possibly experiences itself as not at all clever! (Childish & Thomson, 1999)

In its very essence, Remodernism's motivation seems to be stemming from the loss of spirituality, or in other terms, the loss of the 'holistic' vision in contemporary culture in general. The proof of this claimed-deadlock is also evident in the title 'stuckism' as it was said to have derived from arguments between Billy Childish and his former girlfriend, one of the most famous British contemporary artists and a member of the infamous Young British Artists, Tracey Emin. Thomson, in this regard, notes that:

On more than one occasion he (Billy Childish) had recited part of one of his poems to me, which recorded Tracey's invective that he was 'stuck' with his art, poetry and music. Apparently to make sure he didn't miss her drift, she reinforced it with: 'Stuck! Stuck! Stuck!' (Thomson, 2004)

The controversy revolving around the contemporary art world -and around Young British Artists as a triggering point in the case of stuckism- gained publicity when Stuckists held a demonstration on the opening of the Stuckism International Gallery. Figure 1 shows the demo and the coffin with the slogan 'The Death of Conceptual Art' written on it, along with pictures of Damien Hirst's infamous shark sculpture *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living* (1991) and Tracey Emin's *My Bed* (1998) embedded on top of the coffin which was to be left in front of the famous White Cube Gallery – which is on the same street with the Stuckism

International Gallery – on the day of July 25th, 2002.



Figure 1. Stuckist demo outside White Cube Gallery.

On the other hand, the struggle between the Stuckists and the contemporary art world is not an argument only about formal aesthetics (which in Stuckists' case is their position as an “international art movement for contemporary figurative painting with ideas”), but also a political one since they relentlessly attacked foundations like Tate Modern, Saatchi Gallery, and Turner Prize: “Brit Art, in being sponsored by Saatchi, mainstream conservatism, and the Labour government, makes a mockery of its claim to be subversive or avant-garde” (Childish & Thomson, 1999).

At first glance, it might appear that Remodernism/Stuckism fails to fulfill its promise to promote something 'new' due to its harsh nature and loosely-compulsive dictation. But if one digs deeper into its fundamental traits, she/he can see that a certain amount of oscillation relevant to other 'new' forms of modernism is present: “Stuckism is anti 'ism.’ Stuckism doesn't become an 'ism' because Stuckism is not Stuckism, it is stuck!” (Childish & Thomson, 1999). It is a perfect example of what Vermeulen and Van Den Akker (2010) calls “a typically modern commitment and a markedly postmodern detachment.” In fact, metamodernist discourse and Remodernism share a common ground where a new type of sensibility lies: While remodernism identifies itself with “a new spirituality in art” (Childish & Thomson, 2000), metamodernism situates itself closely associated with a new type of romanticism: “...Romantic sensibility has been expressed in a wide variety of art forms and a broad diversity of styles, across media and surfaces” (Vermeulen and Van Den Akker, 2010). Romanticism here refers to a type of artistic sensibility which resembles the 'original' romanticism originated toward the end of the 18th century, in other words the feelings and the emotions of the artist – once again – important within the context of the work she/he creates. For instance, paintings of Scottish painter Peter Doig has been said to contain ideas associated with metamodernism or directly regarded as a metamodern painter in several resources (Kadagishvili, 2013; Vermeulen & Van Den Akker, 2010). How art critic Jonathan Jones describes Doig's art is as follows:

Doig’s art will last because it embodies a unique, beguiling vision. His paintings take the mind to new places, far-off places, forgotten places. He paints landscapes but it would make no sense to call him a landscape artist. Rather, like the early 20th century metaphysical painter Giorgio de Chirico, he creates spooky fictional places

inhabited by bizarre outcasts.... Doig is the painter of the global age, a traveller without a destination, between cultures, between jobs, looking for paradise and finding a prison on the horizon. His art portrays the dreams we share, the freedoms we crave... (Jones, 2015)

Here, when Jones defines Doig as the painter of the global age, a traveller without a destination, a romantic individual who is looking for a paradise, he attaches a somewhat melancholic yet conscious value to Doig's art, a kind of melancholy and awareness which creates the oscillation metamodernism asserts, as it fulfills the inclination that “Metamodernists are as aware of political, economic, climatological, and other forms of chaos as is anyone else, but they choose to remain optimistic and to engage their communities proactively even when and where they believe a cause has been lost” (Abramson, 2015a). On the other hand, Doig's determination is claimed to match with an early 20th Century painter with his way of soul-searching vision and this claim then refers to what Stuckist Manifesto notably declares: “Painting is mysterious. It creates worlds within worlds, giving access to the unseen psychological realities that we inhabit” (Childish & Thomson, 1999).

Also, the notion of New Old Masterism by art historian Donald Kuspit is as distinctive in terms of its modality of fusion of old and new. Unlike Stuckism, New Old Masterism does not impose necessary amateurism. Yet, it promotes adoption of the techniques of Old Masters and transcend them into new meanings as a way of creating a fresh contemporary understanding, and on the other hand, like Stuckism, New Old Masterism is by all means critical about conceptualism and minimalism – it is also possible to find the traces of the oscillation (as in metamodernism) between the old and the new:

The New Old Masterism [then] restores everything Conceptualism devalued and repudiated. It struggles to repair the serious connection to tradition broken by avant-gardism. At the same time, it does not discard avant-garde aesthetics, but integrates it with Old Master aesthetics. The New Old Masterism involves a return to the personal craft of object making, and, more crucially, to the human object and human condition, art's perennial themes. (Kuspit, 2006)

Though being rather strict – with the absence of open-endedness, multiple authorship, haphazardness or electronic-digitality – compared to former '-isms' explained above, this brief example of paradigm shift within the conventions of so-called fine arts and/or painting is also symptomatic to our current cultural climate today, at least in terms of their 'romantic' departure.

However, it should be noted that, despite having noticeable amount of commonalities among new conceptions, contemporary experience in art practice is far from conclusive.

Within this context, such complexity can be portrayed as:

This is actually an inquiry into the mentality of contemporary society. Attempting to define the current cultural climate is difficult at best, but it also raises concerns about society's aspirations. Having journeyed through modernism and postmodernism, we wish to travel to the theory beyond, before this elusive new culture has even had time to solidify. In fact, today's ism, if indeed there is one, appears to be an amalgamation of previous theories. (Lyons, 2015)

What remains is that these contemporary ideas and movements seem to coexist and can not be interpreted outside the context of their relationship with each other. With their complex, progressive nature, they all go hand in hand when it all comes down to approaching existing structure critically and, regardless of the medium, these attributes eventually dissolve into a ubiquitous pattern which seems to be in search for an alternative, a new structure of feeling, a new context: “Nonetheless, there is (dare I say)

a hankering after modernist notions of artistic practice making a difference to the society within which it circulates” (Downey, 2007). One of the very insightful comments about this 'hankering' perhaps belongs to Manovich, as he explains:

I am not advocating a revival of modernism. Of course we don't want to simply replay Mondrian and Klee on computer screens. The task of the new generation is to integrate the two key aesthetic paradigms of the twentieth century: (1) belief in science and rationality, emphasis on efficiency and basic forms, idealism and heroic spirit of modernism; (2) skepticism, interest in “marginality” and “complexity,” deconstructive strategies, baroque opaqueness and excess of post-modernism (1960s-). At this point all the features of the second paradigm became tired clichés. Therefore a partial return to modernism is not a bad first step, as long as it is just a first step towards developing the new aesthetics for the new age. (Manovich, 2002)

At first glance, it might be mistaken that all of these assumptions resolve into a 'mixed bag' of consecutive theories, which might turn into a haystack of indistinguishable thoughts, but the reality is not as complicated. In this regard, the following chapter will investigate if such conditions, one way or another, exist.

CHAPTER IV: CASE STUDIES

4.1. Computer Code and The New Aesthetics as Index: A Glimpse of Future and Now

Manovich (2002) made a definition for a generation of artists who emerged in the late 90s, namely, the Flash Generation (deriving the name from the software Macromedia Flash – now owned by Adobe); artists who created their own cultural systems by writing their own software codes instead of using samples derived from the commercial media – as their 'post-modern' predecessors did: “Thirty years of media art and post-modernism have inevitably led to a reaction. We are tired of always taking existing media as a starting point. We are tired of being always secondary, always reacting to what already exists” (Manovich, 2002). He explains the historical trajectory by putting three distinguishable artist figures in picture. First one is the romantic modernist artist who – as a genius – creates art right from scratch, imposing the 'inner-self' and her/his imagination on the world – which is now a thing of the past. Next is the new figure of a – post-modern – media artist who rejects the notion that possibility of an original, unmediated vision of reality exists:

Their subject matter is not reality itself, but representation of reality by media, and the world of media itself. Therefore, these media artists not only use media technologies as tools, but they also use the content of commercial media.... The media artist is a parasite who lives at the expense of the commercial media – the result of collective craftsmanship of highly skilled people. In addition, an artist who

samples from/subverts/pokes at commercial media can ultimately never compete with it. Instead of a feature film, we get a single scene; instead of a complex computer game with playability, narrative, AI, etc., we just get a critique of its iconography. (Manovich, 2002)

Finally, a type of artist, which is also relevant to our study, emerges: The software artist who makes her/his mark on the world by writing her/his original code, regardless of what this code does at the end. Software artist is claimed to have steered her/his art-making process away from applying figuration and using the language of commercial media, to re-using the language of modernist abstraction and design: in other words, the new romantic who reappropriates computer as a programming machine – like the empty canvas of the modernist – instead of computer as a media – collage – machine, and in this respect, what these new romantics are said to have offered was a new type of sensibility which is, in Manovich's (2002) term, soft, elegant, restrained and smart: “If images of the previous generations of media artists, from Nam June Paik to Barbara Krueger, were screaming, trying to compete with the intensity of the commercial media, the new data artists such as Franceschini/Merg whisper in our ears” (Manovich, 2002). Significance here is that, over a decade ago, long before the so-called fresh, contemporary alternative formations of postmodernism were even conceptualized, indications of a certain discomfort towards existing cultural and political structure became apparent, as in the case of those Manovich described as new romantics; they had already existed long before the conception of neoromanticism in metamodernism emerged (Vermeulen & Van Den Akker, 2010).

On the other hand, it should be noted at this point that one should not confuse the

enthusiasm of the new romantic with that of the prolific Internet Artist of the 1990s and late 1980s, since they both regard software as their medium but implementation of software by the former resembles the enthusiasm of a modern artist (the act of code writing – subjective view of the world) whereas the latter is mainly concerned with using the software – also as a programmer – almost as a self-referential tool for media criticism (Manovich, 2002). Nonetheless, if we rule out the contextual differences of these two tendencies, we can see that they were both criticized in the same manner, due to their common reliance on computer language:

For those who do not support it, net art is often thought to lack the craft and direct impact of work in painting and sculpture by privileging commercial tools, veering too close to graphic design, or exploiting cheap, 'whizz-bang' programming tricks (to which authentic, meaningful art should naturally be opposed). Furthermore, net practices such as software art do not align with existing gallery, museum and discursive systems, and these institutions often want to differentiate themselves from commercial fields. (Greene, 2004: 12)

This is the proof that software, plausible or not, has become one of the major distinguishing features of the discourse of contemporary art – and thus of contemporary culture – since mathematical abstraction in the visual arts has been dramatically accelerated by computers (Lovejoy, 2004: 152). However, even further, what we experience today is a kind of prolific transcendence of computer language which exceeds the limits of artistic (or any relevant practice) and evolves into an aggressive, ubiquitous reality.

First, it should be noted that the subject that will be examined in this part, basically, is neither an artwork nor an art movement, but rather an index which is consisted of the

excessive outcomes of our ever-growing relationship with humans and computers/digital tools, or simply, the visual clues of audiovisual language/logic of computer code merged into material life or vice versa, an archive of incarnations. On the other hand, it is a descriptive term which can be applied to these incarnations that result in an ambiguous aesthetic phenomenon.

To be understood more properly, paradigms related to this phenomenon furthermore requires their corresponding patterns of aesthetic concepts to be seen, despite their theoretical negotiations with somewhat loose uncertainty – ironically, this uncertainty roughly refers to an infinite number of 'romantic' possibilities – ubiquitous realities. Here, characteristics of one particular formation called The New Aesthetics fits into this pattern. How London based artist James Bridle (the one who coined the term as a concrete definition) defines The New Aesthetic is worthy of note as he claims it to be the “new ways of seeing the world, an echo of the society, technology, politics and people co-produce them” (Bridle, 2011a). It can be found in the “material” that he has been collecting – and exhibiting – since 2011, and he further suggests that “The New Aesthetic is not a movement, it is not a thing which can be done. It is a series of artefacts of the heterogeneous network, which recognises differences, the gaps in our distant but overlapping realities” (Bridle, 2011a). Bridle's Tumblr feed is a massive collection of exclusively collected imagery, a resourceful documentation which aims to exhibit the “evidence of the increasingly symbiotic relationship between man and machine, revelling in the often-unexpected beauty that arises when the human-digital

divide is ruptured” (Turner, 2012). For Bridle, trying to grasp what happens in the realm of snapshots, online videos, screen captures, still images and alike, is not only consequential but also inevitable:

It is impossible for me ... not to look at these images and immediately start to think about not what they look like, but how they came to be and what they become: the processes of capture, storage, and distribution; the actions of filters, codecs, algorithms, processes, databases, and transfer protocols; the weight of data centers, servers, satellites, cables, routers, switches, modems, infrastructures physical and virtual; and the biases and articulations of disposition and intent encoded in all of these things, and our comprehension of them! (Bridle, 2013)

In addition to this, Bourriaud's rather romantic notion of 'artist as cultural nomad' is based on the assumption that nomadism, as a way of learning about the world, “enshrines specific forms, processes of visualisation peculiar to our own epoch” (Bourriaud, 2015) and this formulation of nomadism, in turn, can be considered analogous to Bridle's enthusiasm towards 'objects' of the New Aesthetics:

I started noticing things like this in the world. This is a cushion on sale in a furniture store that's pixelated. This is a strange thing. This is a look, a style, a pattern that didn't previously exist in the real world. It's something that's come out of digital. It's come out of a digital way of seeing, that represents things in this form. The real world doesn't, or at least didn't, have a grain that looks like this. But you start to see it everywhere when you start looking for it. It's very pervasive. It seems like a style, a thing, and we have to look at where that style came from, and what it means, possibly. Previously things that would have been gingham or lacy patterns and this kind of thing is suddenly pixelated. Where does that come from? What's that all about? (Bridle, 2011b)

Obviously, it is not by chance to see such modality pervasively while the characteristic of the new system of communication is based on digitization and networked integration of multiple communication modes, and all cultural expressions are subsumed by this new system of communication itself (Castells, 2011: 405). Within this system, as can be seen in Figure 2, coming across this pixelated imagery and objects – intentional or not –

more often as a natural outcome of the blurriness between the real and the digital, the physical and the virtual, the human and the machine (Bridle, 2012) can be interpreted as a major consequence of digitized electronic production, distribution and exchange of signals (Castells, 2011: 406). Based on this phenomena, one explanation as to reveal the intention behind the effort in Bridle's blog is as follows:

The particular sense this collection documents is a concerted effort at realizing and acknowledging the digital nature not only of the immaterial 'space' produced by computers and algorithmic systems (the results of digital automation), but the transfer of these autonomously produced artifacts into the physical realm. The automated machine labor revealed by this project is a symptom of the emergent autonomous production it documents, revealing the paradox of automation, labor, and value production: the cultural, historical, and aesthetic ruptures between automation and the (traditional) conceptual mappings of human society. (Betancourt, 2013)



Figure 2. Pixelated chair design by Japanese designer Kunihiko Morinaga

Accordingly, visual representation of integration of 'the virtual' into 'the real' is not primarily “concerned with beauty or surface texture. It is deeply engaged with the politics and politicisation of networked technology, and seeks to explore, catalogue, categorise, connect and interrogate these things” (Bridle, 2013). Furthermore, such complex engagement requires close attention because “it is ferociously attached to modish, passing objects and services that have short shelf-lives” (Sterling, 2012), objects which compels one to be “involved with some contemporary, fast moving technical phenomena” (Sterling, 2012). The Tumblr feed mentioned above is an enormous collection of the contents related to this phenomenon and a clear indication of what Berry (2012) describes as the mediation of our experience (and engagement with the world) by digital technologies and computation. The consistency of the blog, for the most part, stems from the fact that it functions as an archive of collected/re-posted technology-related material rather than a collection of personal opinions or self-promotional content. The archive is consisted of several overlapping categories of material, such as, autonomously generated images that contain markers of the digital such as glitches of various types (encoding errors, algorithmic misidentifications of faces, pixelation / scan lines / digital noise, etc.), physical constructions employing signifiers of digital forms (blocky pixel-imitating construction, scanlines, etc.), translations of digital forms into a visual style (QR codes, low resolution bitmaps, etc.), dynamic, interactive data visualizations (art installations, biometric scanners, and augmented reality) (Betancourt, 2013). According to Betancourt (2013), “these groupings are neither exhaustive nor mutually exclusive. While there are points of

contact and degrees of overlap between them, they articulate general tendencies in the formal appearance of digital technology, and document an apparent paradox: immaterial physicality.” This paradox is, indeed, said to be the very essence of the new aesthetics, immaterial physicality, as an illusory feature, renders the 'aura' of information perceivable and almost physically present but, at the same time, lessens the effect of immediate engagement:

Objects collected by Bridle reflect digitally-derived features displaying the existing capacities (both current and historical) of digital technology: the illusion they produce is one where what was immaterial, penumbral, crystalizes from the air into solid, tangible form: reification becomes realization... (Betancourt, 2013)

According to Chun (2005), “software and ideology fit each other perfectly because both try to map the material effects of the immaterial and to posit the immaterial through visible cues” (2005: 44) and if this is the case, then it can be speculated that these 'objects' of immaterial physicality, or in other words, the objects of the new aesthetics, function as a major visual cue of our contemporary ideology and this might explain why we see such modality pervasively. Respectively, this pervasiveness makes it possible to approach new -isms from the perspective of the new aesthetics, and vice versa.

4.2. Metamodern Art: Turner, Rönkkö & LaBeouf

Having said that, one particular art project relevant to the issue was realized in 2015 titled #INTRODUCTIONS, a multi-layered collaboration arranged by self-proclaimed metamodern artists Luke Turner, Nastja Säde Rönkkö and Hollywood star Shia LaBeouf. It is a recent example of how open-endedness and participation affect the

perception of artwork/text, and ultimately gives us the insight into the ways in which the meaning of the text is reproduced within these new discourse. The project was to serve as the pivotal part of Fine Art Bachelors' graduation show at Central St. Martins and consisted of a set of 36 half-minute long films performed by LaBeouf against a green screen, as seen in Figure 3.



Figure 3. LaBeouf against the green screen in the raw footage of #INTRODUCTIONS

For the films, the students were asked by the artists to send a piece of text to introduce each of their graduation works, to be presented during a live stream broadcast at the degree show opening. They were then tasked with filling the green screen with whatever background they saw fit, closing the circuit of the collaboration. However, this is the first layer of 'multiple authorship' of the text as it has been circulated only among

the graduating students and the artists in the first place. Moreover, the boundaries of the text become more blurry as LaBeouf, Rönkkö and Turner released the raw footage under non-commercial creative commons license on Vimeo and made it available for the public to use it as they see fit. From that moment on, as seen in Figure 4, the footage quickly went 'viral, ' and dozens of new material were generated from it:

It seems that LaBeouf and his collaborators knew very well what they were doing. The video art, in this case, wasn't just what LaBeouf performed or what the Central Saint Martins students created from it — in the end, the performance art also included a whole Internet full of inspired, witty, and impressively quickly made videos. (Pogue, 2015)



Figure 4. Manipulated footage of LaBeouf at the graduation show, mimicking a salesman on a TV sale commercial

In this way, thanks to more advanced version of hypertext systems “which provides its

users with the ability to create, manipulate, and/or examine a network of information-containing nodes interconnected by relational links” (Halasz, Schwartz, Grønbaek & Triggthe, 1994), the advanced network system itself becomes a part of the content and the text becomes available for reformulation on a relatively massive scale. For instance, as of June 2016, on social news and entertainment platform Reddit, it was possible to find approximately over five hundred and fifty online videos under the topic “motivashian” ranging from loosely edited reaction videos and absurd digital manipulations to almost-professional, multi-layered complex sets of images. Though #INTRODUCTIONS is being defined as metamodernist by the artists, its outcome overlaps the traits of digimodernism by its definition. According to Kirby, the textual functions of reader, author, viewer, producer, director, listener, presenter, and writer are radically redefined by the digimodernist text: “Intermediate forms become necessary in which an individual primarily the one acts to a degree like another” (Kirby, 2009: 52). In this project, the original video clip in circulation is thus central; a digital content available online for the use of the public. Thus it creates a context within which roles of the participants can be redefined in a similar way it is described in digimodernism: As soon as the viewer decides to download, manipulate and upload her/his own interpretation of content, the original author (artist), in turn becomes the viewer. Because of the existence of content, the exchange of contextual roles between individuals becomes possible. Therefore, the whole concept of #INTRODUCTIONS seems to depend on the intermediation of forms; thus it also falls into the category of digimodernism. That was just one example of how the traits of these contemporary

movements mentioned above complement and overlap each other.

4.3. Holly Herndon's Chorus: Aesthetics of Failure

Cascone (2000) describes the new tendency as “an aesthetic that revels in seeing the grain of computation, or perhaps better, seeing the limitations or digital artefacts of a kind of digital glitch, sometimes called the aesthetic of failure” (2000: 13). This form of failure is, by all means, visible in a post on The New Aesthetics blog, the music video of Holly Herndon, titled Chorus which “sets out to explore our relationship with the internet through a series of distorted 3D renders of her friends' messy desks” (Hobson, 2014). To create the video, Herndon and, the creator of the video, artist Akihiko Taniguchi asked their friends to take panoramic photographs of their working spaces – mostly cluttered desks – which Taniguchi then converted them into scrappy 3D models by seemingly using the digital photogrammetry technique – which is visible in Figure 5, with an intentional failure twist, hence the distortions and irregularities in the 3D render are claimed to have been “designed to create a sense of unease” (Hobson, 2014).



Figure 5. Video still from Holly Herndon's music video "Chorus"

Perhaps, it would be proper at this point to explain photogrammetry from a technical standpoint to understand how distorting a photogrammetric image purposefully affects its interpretation as an artistic object. "Photogrammetry is the science of making measurements from photographs, especially for recovering the exact positions of surface points" (*Photogrammetry*, n.d.) or simply it is the "science of measuring in photos" (Linder, 2013: 1). The basic principle to get three-dimensional information in photogrammetry is to use stereoscopic viewing:

If we have two (or more) photos from the same object but taken from different positions, we may easily calculate the three-dimensional co-ordinates of any point which is represented in both photos. Therefore we can define the main task of photogrammetry in the following way: For any object point represented in at least two photos we have to calculate the three-dimensional object (terrain) co-ordinates. (Linder, 2013: 1)

A type of photogrammetry which is known to be frequently used in areas such as mining/metallurgy, land surveys, and archeological research is called Aerial Photogrammetry. Basically, it is used to create topographical maps by utilizing “large-format imagery and ground coordinate information to effectively recreate the geometry of a portion of the earth in a virtual environment” (Matthews, 2008: 5). The reason why these obtained overhead shots are widely used in architecture and land development is that examining a vast portion of land by foot is very time consuming and costs too much (*What Is Aerial Photogrammetry?*, n.d.). The other, 'non-topographic' version of photogrammetry is called Close-range Photogrammetry in which, as its name suggests, the camera is closer to the subject and is typically hand-held, occasionally on a tripod or suspended from a light sport aircraft such as a drone (Matthews, 2008: 11). Correspondingly, the output is in the form of such products like drawings, 3D models, measurements and point clouds, instead of large terrain models or topographic maps. In this technique “everyday cameras are used to model and measure buildings, engineering structures, forensic and accident scenes, mines, earth-works, stock-piles, archeological artifacts, films sets, virtual video game environments, etc. This type of photogrammetry is also sometimes called Image-Based Modeling” (*What is Photogrammetry?*, n.d.). Using photogrammetric 3D mapping – conjointly with 3D laser scanning at times – in crime scene reconstruction (on both academic and professional levels) is one such example of the spectrum of this technology. Figure 6 shows professional grade photogrammetric software iWitness, which is globally adopted by many institutions, including over a dozen US state police forces, government agencies, several

international police organizations, hundreds of engineering firms, private accident reconstruction practitioners, multinational corporations and a number of universities. What this particular piece of software allows its users is to build an accurately detailed 3D map of a crime scene generated by using close-range photogrammetric reference points based in two-dimensional digital images taken on the actual scene.

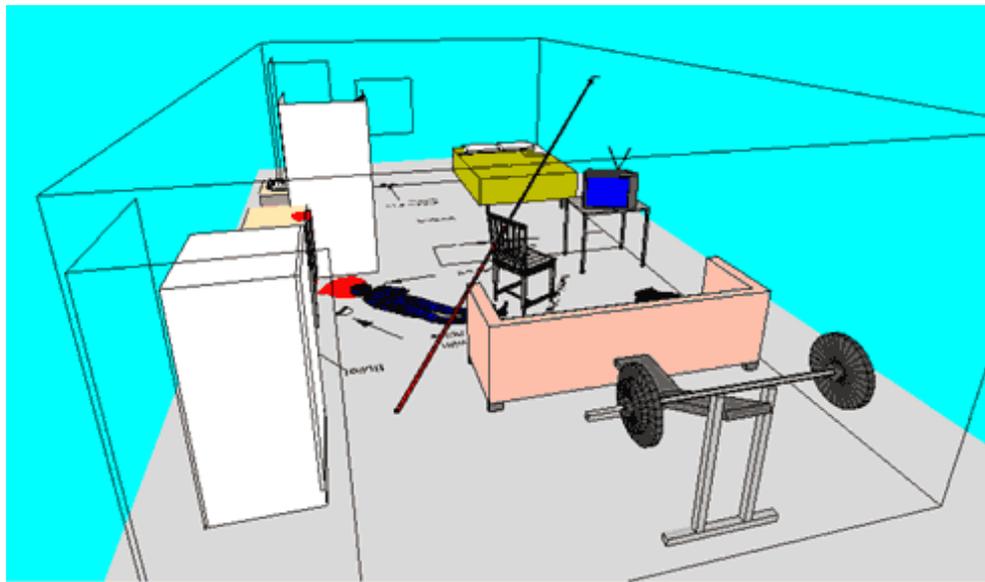


Figure 6. Screenshot from iWitness

Nevertheless, widespread use of this technique does not only render such technologies professionally more favorable, but, in combination with rapid advancement of optical technology and user-friendly software, it also allows 'non-professional' users to access it easily and use it however they see fit, e.g., for entertainment purposes or, in our case, as an artistic tool. Today, it is possible to download easy-to-use photogrammetry

applications on many smartphones and tablets, whose processing speeds and integrated camera capabilities have increased dramatically over the last few years. As of 2016, such devices can run powerful applications such as 4K resolution video editors, augmented reality software, complex CAD based software suites and the like.

Respectively, this widespread use of photogrammetry turned out to be an opportunity for artists to establish new contexts through which new forms of expression can be explored. It is this opportunity Taniguchi – among many other artists – is exploiting in Herndon's music video, but with a special twist. Normally, even mobile versions of photogrammetric software, by default, guide their users – as to how many pictures are at least ought to be taken, from which angles the pictures are suggested to be taken, or which lighting conditions have to be met – to avoid digital defects and to get the best possible results in final 3D output. But in the case of Chorus, with a contradictory attitude, Taniguchi purposefully creates distorted images with an aesthetic concern. Herndon (as cited in Hobson, 2014), in this sense, remarks the paradox that getting more comfortable with our digital devices comes with the price of becoming more vulnerable, and she further explains the intention behind the video:

We are learning more and more about the NSA revelations; I think it is really interesting that we have never been more intimate with these machines, and at the same time have never had such cause to be suspicious of them. We wanted to capture both of those sides. (Hobson, 2014)

From a technical standpoint, it seems that the defect in Chorus is, basically, caused by deliberately commanding the software to generate photogrammetric 3D output by using very few or only one panoramic image as reference (Hobson, 2014), instead of using sufficient amount of multiple images (stereoscopic viewing) to get more accurate

results. Ideally, when you rotate the generated virtual object or environment, you should be able to see every angle accurately, as you normally would in real life conditions. In Taniguchi's virtual environments (they can be accessed on his online portfolio in which visitors can view and interact with those environments¹ via modern web browsers), you can also rotate the object/environment but you instantly notice that the parts which are not visible on two-dimensional reference photographs are absent and automatically replaced by digital anomaly because of the insufficient amount of visual input data mentioned above. Figure 7 clearly illustrates this anomaly: On the left, distortion is not visible as the position of camera is close to the alignment in original referential image whereas image on the right shows the anomaly behind the notebook.



Figure 7. Comparison of different angles in *Chorus*.

It is this 'distorted' mode of feeling (Parisi & Portanova, 2012) out of which a portion of

the new aesthetics is claimed to have emerged, and it creates a discourse which has a tendency to affirm 'error' as favorable:

The debate on the aesthetic of digital code has been predominantly focused, on the non-representational and non-functional performativity of coding and its infinite possible infractions (errors, glitches and noise), emphasising that it is precisely these infractions that give code its real aesthetic value. An example of this 'post-digital' tendency towards error is the so-called 'aesthetic of failure.' (Parisi & Portanova, 2012)

The technical imperfection in the visual output seems to be anticipated from the very beginning of the project, as something not to be avoided, on the contrary, unavailability of error is greatly appreciated. Thus, from a visual standpoint, the inclusion of Chorus in Bridle's collection is by no means coincidental.

On the other hand, there is also the auditory aspect of Chorus, since Herndon's reputation as an artist – and as a musician – is not only limited to the means of her collaborations with visual artists whose works fit into the characteristics of the new aesthetics but also her contextual – musical – association with metamodernism. Abramson (2015c) defines Chorus – both visually and musically – as a world “seen through the eyes of a computer, superimposed atop music composed of incidental human sounds. The elevation of the ordinary to the sublime is quintessentially metamodern, and is Herndon's calling card musically.” Sounds, which typically could be qualified as null, or even erroneous, are now treated as the building blocks of Chorus' musical structure. Unlike typical – postmodern – remix culture “in which existing elements are routinely cut, pasted and blended into new works” (Mirapaul, 2001), Herndon gathered her musical material by recording and re-situating daily activity on

her laptop:

Unlike much electronic music, where the laptop is primarily a means to synthesise sound, in Herndon's, her laptop is also the 'hardware'; its physical sounds in combination with the sounds made by Herndon as the user form the fabric of her compositions. Herndon's central preoccupation is precisely the exploration of the symbiotic and fluid relationship between the corporeal and the digital. (Džuverović, 2016: 91)

In metamodernist sense, this paradoxical tension – simply, using self-fabricated sounds (a rather modern attitude) in a digital audio workstation (a modular postmodern medium) – in combination with its visual incoherence, creates a type of hesitation, and in turn, an oscillation from which “the Romantic inclination toward the tragic, the sublime, and the uncanny stem” (Vermeulen and Van Den Akker, 2010). Chorus, both visually and musically, by replacing irony and pastiche with romantic audiovisual experimentation and oscillation, might be considered as a good example of a metamodern artwork as well as an object of the digital phenomena called the new aesthetics. A new form romanticism in this sense is not only partially present but exist fundamentally gives the work its real aesthetic value.

4.4. Virtual Reality as a New Medium

Discourses related to virtual reality, both in terms of theory and practice, have been around for quite some time, namely, for as long as over half a century, as the term itself was first coined by Antonin Artaud (1958) and, as of today, the emergence of new technologies being utilized at an unprecedented rate allows the term virtual reality to be no longer a part of science fiction literature, but of the scientific and academic corpus –

and also practice, and thus its immersive nature has profoundly penetrated into artistic practices as well. For instance developments in the recent years have not only made virtual reality headsets officially available for sale as end-user products whose selling strategy is primarily based on game enthusiasts – promoted as a significant addition to home entertainment systems – and turned the technology into “an entertainment fairground ride” (Rieser, 2002) but also made it easier for artists to approach such technology more frequently. Figure 8 clearly compares two different kinds of VR headsets which belong in two different times. On the left, a view of NASA's Virtual Interface Environment Workstation headset (1990) and on the right, a contemporary and relatively very accessible consumer level device, Oculus Rift, being used as a relatively more accessible installation gadget in a gallery show (2015).



Figure 8. Comparison of two different VR headsets from different eras.

It is not to say that artists were not experimenting with virtual reality technology in the

near-past with relatively limited access to the technology, but the access to such advanced technology was relatively limited and a 'contemporary' artist having her/his own virtual reality headset – along with its peripherals – in her/his private studio today indeed dramatically multiplies the possibilities the artist can have, especially if she/he has programming skills. Margot Lovejoy (2004) gives us a glimpse of this trajectory – from twelve years ago – as she mentions important level of government support for the artists to reside in technology and art centers in countries such as Austria, Germany, France, Canada and The United States which were offering opportunities to artists “to design and produce works with the help of programmers” (2004: 213). When this is compared to the technological realm we are facing today, it becomes impossible to miss the substantial increase in the ease of access to such technology: The times when the technology was almost purely technical and significantly expensive that it could only be used for scientific purposes (Cornall, 2015) are now over and you do not need the 'government support' anymore to access virtual reality technology today, since all you need to do is to order an Oculus Rift headset, “one of the first VR systems that will produce a realistic sense of immersion at an affordable price” (Cornall, 2015), from an online retailer store (or find someone who already has it) and start exploiting the technology for her/his artistic purposes. Nonetheless, commercial use of the technology overrides the artistic purpose: “Wherever I look in the virtual reality arena, commercial enterprises and technical wizards are racing towards ideals of faster computation, perfect simulation and lifelike stimulation. In art, things are somewhat different...” (Buick, 2002). On the other hand, it is also possible to find significant amount of artistic

inspiration/expression – formally, a heritage of modern art – in commercial products, especially in video games whose gameplay mechanics are solely based upon – almost – purely abstract or geometrical elements and thus, it can be seen as a merit even for a finished non-modifiable industrial product.

The following sections, from this point of view, will cover several uses of virtual reality technology within the context of its relationship with art and other contemporary art forms, ultimately revealing its potential and connection with new -isms, as the framework of this study dictates.

4.4.1. REZ: Implementation of Art into the Mainstream

Rez is a 'rail shooter' music video game – originally – released by Sega in Japan in 2001. How the game's significance is explained on Wikipedia is as follows:

The game is notable for replacing the typical sound effects found in most rail shooter games with electronic music, with sounds and melodies created by the player as they target and destroy foes in the game, leading to a form of synesthesia, enhanced by an optional Trance Vibrator peripheral. (*Rez*, n.d.)

The story takes place in K-project, an futuristic computer supernetwork where Eden, an artificial intelligence, controls much of the data flow. Overwhelming amount of knowledge gathered on the network bothers Eden, making her question her existence and causing her to initiate a shutdown sequence which would be a catastrophic event. Within this scenario, the player initiates as a hacker protagonist whose mission is to log into the system of K-project to reboot Eden, and in order to gain access to Eden's

location, the protagonist has to destroy firewalls and viruses which happens to prevent the hacker from reaching Eden. Because these viruses or firewalls are made of data that has no particular shape or form, they are represented as abstract geometrical shapes.

This is where Rez gets involved with modern art:

The K-Project name and much of the game's visual and synesthesia inspiration comes from the Russian painter Wassily Kandinsky, whose name is mentioned at the very end of the game credits,... (Rez, n.d.)

Unlike representational games which “strive for photorealism” (Wolf, 2003), Rez, as an experience, blurs the line between audio/visual feedback and user input, thus creates its own unique sensory experience, which, for some, “defies simple classification, even to the point of transcending the idea of what a video game can be” (Hawkins, 2005).

Moreover, in addition to the constant non-diegetic music, visual association of this transcendence with Kandinsky's art is unmistakable, as a matter of fact it can be claimed to be fundamental, since the game's visual design show parallelism with and Kandinsky's theoretical writings and quotes on art and in this respect few of them could be examined.

In one of the most famous theoretical quotes of Kandinsky he is said to have stated that everything starts from a dot, in fact, Kandinsky defines 'point' as one of the core elements of painting – along with line and plane. According to Kandinsky (Kandinsky & Rebay, 1947: 23-55), a point is a small but fundamental bit of colour put on the canvas and it is neither a mathematical abstraction nor a geometric point; it is rather an extension, a form and/or a colour. This form can be a triangle, a square, a star, a

rectangle, a hexagon or something more complex. It is the most concise form but, with reference to its placement on the basic plane, it inevitably will take a different tonality. It can either be isolated or resonate with other points or lines (Kandinsky & Rebay, 1947: 23-55).

In parallel, the first 'struggle' of the game, literally, starts with 'shooting' a dot on the horizon, which is also the very first musical command executed by the user. After the first input is given, the plot is virtually triggered, and the first active participation of the user to the abstract narrative takes place, just like a modern painter's first 'dot' on canvas.

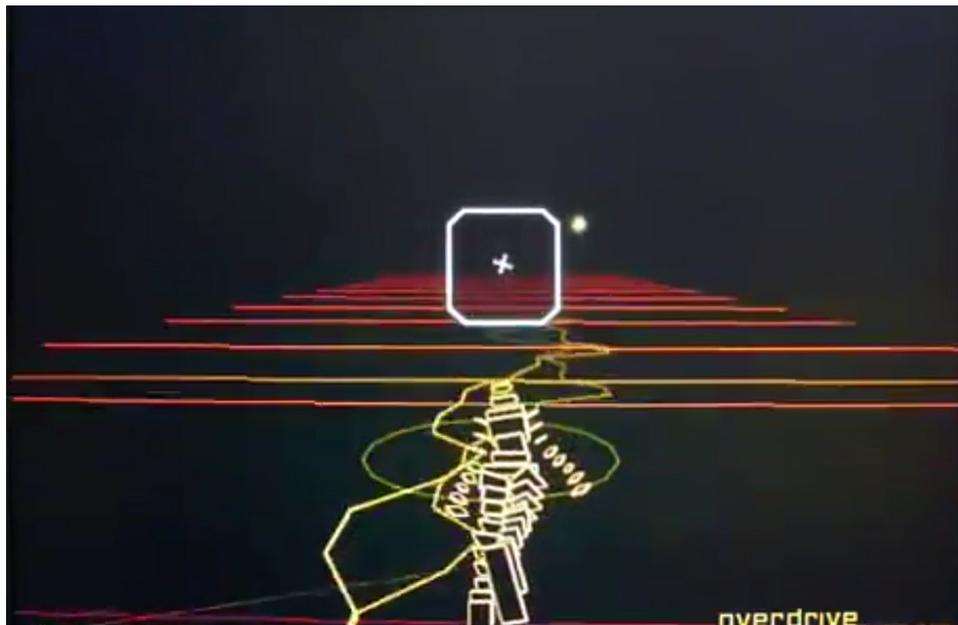


Figure 9. The first musical input in REZ is represented as a 'dot'

In another notable quote, Kandinsky states that the more frightening the world becomes,

the more art becomes abstract. That is what happens as one proceeds in the game. Everything, from shooting foes to the audio-visual complexity, in the early layers (levels) of the game, is obviously calm, simpler and easier to compete with. But as you make progress throughout the game, algorithm gradually gets more and more complicated to keep up with.



Figure 10. A screenshot from the early 'layers' in Rez

What is significant about Rez is its emphasis on 'dealing with' highly unstable foes (which are none other than visual representations of musical notes) which the user has to interact with in order to make progress. Thus players are forced to engage with this twisted audiovisual chaos. Nonetheless, it is not a chaos in which the player gets lost.

As it can be seen in Figure 11, the user is tries to keep the musical structure 'intact' (as it is imposed) to keep the music seamless (and to make progress) and she/he does it via responding the 'fractions' of the visual chaos at the right time in an orderly fashion. In other words, trying to make meaning out of chaos. But one still can manage to do so since it's not an impossible task to achieve, thanks to its fun factor. On the other hand, because the game is also based on music, the stages of the game are, contextually, described as 'layers,' instead of levels. Thus, more layers of chaos, or in our sense 'fright' means more complexity and audiovisual abstraction. From this point of view, the chaos/fright paradigm of Kandinsky seems directly analogical to that of the game itself, fulfilling its promise as an experience.

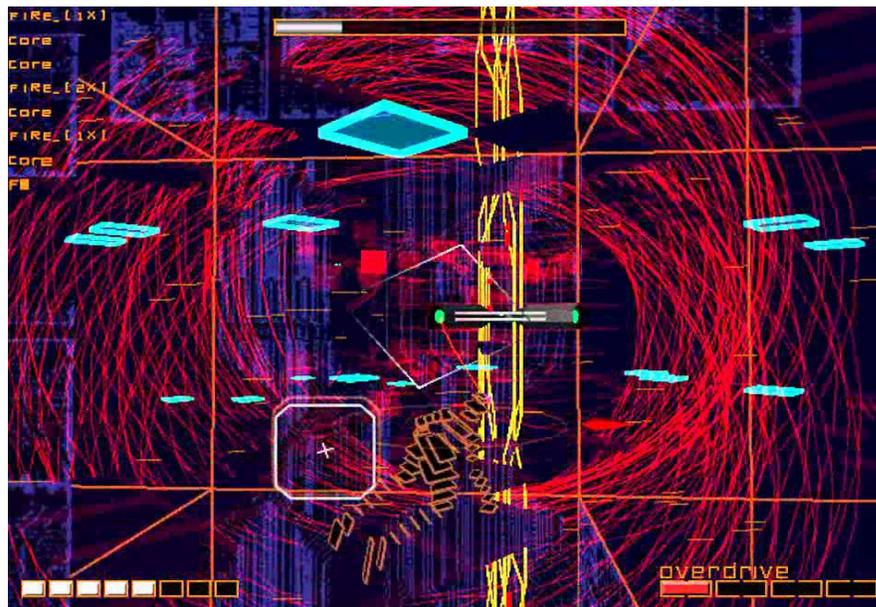


Figure 11. A screenshot of more complex advanced abstract layers in Rez.

Last, but not the least, a summarizing paragraph is of significance as Kandinsky (1977) brings a rather 'romantic' – or as the title of the book suggests, spiritual – explanation to the influence of color over the body as a physical organism and the association between them:

No more sufficient, in the psychic sphere, is the theory of association. Generally speaking, colour is a power which directly influences the soul. Colour is the keyboard, the eyes are the hammers, the soul is the piano with many strings. The artist is the hand which plays, touching one key or another, to cause vibrations in the soul. (1977: 25)

The game has everything that Kandinsky mentions: Colour has an essential role in the game as it functions in conjuncture with certain types of assigned sound patterns and algorithms, giving information to the player about the 'layer' by which the protagonist is surrounded. Secondly, the notion that the “eyes are the hammer” is also essential because players are forced to keep track of the colors as stimulants popping up all around the screen space (almost even simultaneously at times) and give fast responses to keep the gameplay flowing and not to fail. As for the soul, it is possible to claim that the whole gameplay might be considered as the soul itself, something to be vibrated by engaging this colorful and ludic experience. In any case, it is impossible to miss the resemblance between the game itself and the modernist idea that influenced it. The strong familiarity between Kandinsky's one of the most famous paintings, *Circles In a Circle* (1924) and the official box art of *Rez*, in my opinion, seems to reveal this openly stated influence. The influence is evident in Figure 12.



Figure 12. In comparison: On the left, *Circles in a Circle* (1924) by Kandinsky, on the left, international box art of *REZ* (2001).

These assumptions, however, are rather conducive than conclusive, as to reveal how (and in which ways) the engagement between complex and highly consumable postmodern mediums such as video games and the strict notions of an-almost-a-century-old modern art theory occurs. Such engagement is, in fact, another example of metamodern oscillation that is “an unsuccessful negotiation between two opposite poles” (Vermeulen and Van Den Akker, 2010) and it is this very tension on which intensity of such experience is based: Neither content nor context can dominate over one another. It is neither a video game nor an art piece, yet at the same time, it is both. Because of this, it transcends into a unique, abstract and self-referential sensory

experience which aims to reconstruct meaning out of abstraction. On the other hand, from the metamodernist point of view, one can speculate that it is 'romantic,' not only because – in theory – it attempts “to turn the finite into the infinite, while recognizing that it can never be realized” (Vermeulen and Van Den Akker, 2010) but also – in practice – reveals itself as a formal agent which makes us realize that “abstraction can expand and explore the great potential that the video game medium has to offer” (Wolf, 2003). In fact, these possibilities are now turning into realities, considering the dramatic increase in numbers of times whenever a game – or any other application exploiting the same immersive experience – is designed specifically for virtual reality headsets. It is 2016 already, and this is exactly where Rez is reborn, under the name Rez Infinite. Unlike other current generation games which are designed exclusively for VR systems from the scratch, Rez Infinite is an upgraded version of the original game with newly remastered sound and graphics, supporting up to 4K resolution and virtual reality – optimized for one of the newest generation of game consoles, Playstation 4, hence compatible with Sony's affordable virtual reality system called the PlaystationVR. The original content is by all means preserved, yet it has been reconfigured for the immersive VR experience; and with the addition of an entirely new mode called Area X, in which players have the ability to roam freely throughout a 3D space, this already-intense and timeless game, once again, is said to have transcended into a fresh and exquisite immersive experience. Fifteen years after its initial release, thanks to the implementation of VR technology, the game can still manage to renew its reputation by once again being regarded as a classic, as if it is an entirely new game:

Rez Infinite feels like it was meant to be in virtual reality all along. Its pulsing geometric landscapes and buzzing electronic beats already felt as if they were somehow all around me, and now that they literally are, Rez has transformed into the absorptive experience it always aspired to be.... While beautiful on its own, VR elevates this experience dramatically, creating the sensation of flying through a vibrant fireworks display. (Ingenito, 2016)

Rez – especially the most recent VR adaptation - is, by all means, a prime example of how art in its purest and the most abstract sense fuses into a commercial medium and transforms it into something way more complicated than 'pure' entertainment. And in my opinion, it would not be an exaggeration to claim that such fusion is rare, yet promising in terms of its potential as an artistic opportunity which reserves metamodernist oscillation: In the official promotional launch video of Rez Infinite, we can see people who presumably plays the game for the first time in a rather sterile gallery-like space with minimal setting – which perfectly resembles an installation. After playing the game in VR mode, they all summarize their experiences in ways which make us think that they experienced something like they never experienced before, as they all give quite vigorous reactions. Regardless of whether it is a deliberate attempt or not, it leaves the impression on us that it is as if 'diving' into a modern painting via exploiting a postmodern medium, similar to Herndon's approach on a fundamental level, giving way to a dense uniqueness – a structure of feeling – which can be regarded neither as modern nor postmodern, analogical to what metamodernist Turner (2011) ferociously suggested: “We must liberate ourselves from the inertia resulting from a century of modernist ideological naivety and the cynical insincerity of its antonymous bastard child.”

4.4.2. Quill: Potential of Oculus Rift as a Creative Platform

Nevertheless, it should not be missed that, though it blurs the line between gaming and art by exploiting its transcendent qualities and creating the illusion of a certain amount of freedom for players, Rez is still a video game with a linear, non-modifiable content. Two very recent examples of virtual reality applications from the company Oculus VR, however, have features contrary to what most games (which are intrinsically limited with narratives) can offer. Basically, Quill and Medium are two very recent virtual reality programs existing on the Oculus platform, specifically designed for artistic content creation from the scratch. Quill is an immersive three-dimensional illustration/painting program in which users are virtually free to navigate in every direction within the cyberspace, walk – or fly – in and around their creations and engage them as they wish, Medium, on the other hand, as Figure 13 shows, is specifically designed for virtual sculpting.

Quill, in this sense, resembles Photoshop – equipped with total immersiveness – whereas Medium can be said to look and behave like professional-grade, industry standard digital sculpture software, Zbrush. Although digital sculpting has been around since 3D modeling programs first appeared in the consumer market, the level of complexity in such programs can be said to have prevented the democratization of the process of creating 3D art in terms of its mainstream adoption, thus the goal of Medium is to make 3D sculpting accessible even for those who does not have any professional

background in modeling (Bye, 2016). Achieving this in a fully immersive virtual environment is, naturally, the key selling point of the software – and consecutively, of the hardware, since it is exclusively designed for the Oculus VR platform. Its ease of use makes it a credible piece of software both for professionals and amateurs:

Medium is an incredibly easy way to make real 3D content in VR, even for people who have never used any 3D modeling tools. Being able to ‘sketch’ in 3D to convey ideas is going to be awesomely helpful in the right contexts; I could easily see concept artists and level designers flocking to the tool to rough out concepts and collaborate on design. (Lang, 2016a)



Figure 13. Screenshot from Oculus Medium. A digital sculpture made out of virtual clay.

Respectively, Oculus VR's latest installment, Quill (as of December 2016, it remains as a beta release) allows its users to 'paint and illustrate' in a 3D virtual environment with

the help of a simple yet considerably rich user interface. Unlike Medium, in Quill, users are introduced to a familiar, 'back to basics' style interface which is, basically, an adoption of already existing interface layouts, such as color palettes, brushes, layers, layer effects, etc. which can be found in previous 2D based industry-standard digital art tools such as Adobe's Photoshop, Corel's Painter or the archaic wonders like MS Paint or MacPaint: “Sketching is an extremely accessible medium, and that’s recreated by Quill. But just like the same pencil & paper can make a stick figure or a detailed human body, in the right hands, Quill can do amazing things” (Lang, 2016b). But beyond its mind-catching technical capabilities, in my opinion, there is a discreet, artistic potential hidden beneath these qualities, which might set a ground for new contextual paradigm as to how an artwork can be created and experienced, even simultaneously at times.

At this point, highlighting Quill instead of Medium should be explained by comparing their internal logic, simply because they are simulations of two different real-life practices. To put it simply, the audio-visual sensation caused by three-dimensional immersive simulation of 'sculpting from clay' – which, in real life, is also a three-dimensional practice – can be considered essentially different from the sensation of translating two-dimensional practice – painting and drawing – into three-dimensional simulation. Analogically, it is also possible to see that division between 2D and 3D media also exists in mainstream media 'products' since three-dimensional computer animation has been enormously successful as a medium due to the realism that is made

possible by 3D rendering:

With 3D rendering, the viewer can relax their interpretative effort somewhat, as what they see more closely matches real life. The immersive seduction is more real. Sometimes proponents of 2D animation criticise 3D animation as a showy method that relies on its “looks”: that 3D does not need to try as hard to generate the illusion of life. With 2D animation, because it is really just a drawing that moves, the power of that movement, and the power of the narrative must be strong in order to gain immersion and believability. (Hodgkinson, 2009)

The apparent 'artistic' (or stylistic/formalist) effort to make the final product, in the latter case, seems to depend on a dynamic uniqueness which is present in Quill: The whole process starts with and constructed upon the 'movement' of lines or brush strokes, and use of color. For example, what looks like a virtual sculpture (if that is the intention) at the end, is actually not a 'proper' sculpture made out of virtual clay (as in Medium) but actually, a three-dimensional painting. Perhaps, having a look at an artwork made with Quill would provide a better understanding of how virtual reality technology might cause a change in our perception of art and the way we communicate with it.

The first example as such belongs to Colombian illustrator Carlos Felipe Leon, who previously worked in the animation film industry – currently working as a visual development artist at Oculus story studio. His two-dimensional digital landscape illustrations are quite distinguishable, with bold brush strokes and idiosyncratic use of light/color.



Figure 14. Digital landscape illustration by Carlos Felipe Leon

The stylistic properties in these two-dimensional illustrations refer to a set of formal qualities. Aesthetically, they can be considered as the contemporary counterparts of impressionist paintings, and implementation of these formal qualities in the realm of virtual reality creates a fresh sense of uniqueness. Building a case scenario would be useful to grasp this uniqueness: For one, who compares the digital landscape in Figure 14 with the interior study of a grocery store in Figure 15, it is impossible to miss the aesthetic likeness in given images, additionally, if one is not given the information that

the second image, simply, is not a digital painting, but a still image of a fully immersive 3D painting with brush strokes hanging in the air, she/he might easily be convinced that it is a 2D digital painting.



Figure 15. Screenshot from 3D illustration of a grocery store made with Quill, by Carlos Felipe Leon

As to why it is called a 3D painting rather than a 3D model, for instance, can be explained by several factors: First of all, the 3D space/canvas is virtually infinite and the lines are vector-based, thus it enables the user to put as many brush strokes as possible in any scale preferred. Secondly, unlike Medium and most other 3D programs in which the lighting cues are an important part of conveying depth, there is no

integrated lighting or shading engine. If one wishes to indicate shadows or highlights, she/he has to paint them manually by assigning the proper color which would mimic light and shadow, just as she/he would paint in real life. That is, in my opinion, is the most distinguishing feature of Quill.



Figure 16. Screenshot from the same 3D grocery store from a different angle.

In this case, translation of two-dimensional logic into three-dimensional one is of the greatest significance: Being able to define every single brush stroke and the attributes such as width, opacity, color, line direction, brush type, layers, layer effects, line directions and all other existing variables – which we are familiar with, in professional two-dimensional image editing/painting applications – in three dimensional virtual

space is not only unusual but potentially promising. Roaming through a 3D painting, let alone creating one, does not only let the viewer/artist change her/his perception on ways which she/he communicates with art in general, but also gives the artists the ability to turn every single screenshot into an individual digital painting. Figure 16 shows the same 3D grocery store, captured from a different angle. As a fixed still image, it appears as if it was natively painted in a 2d program.

Though it can not be fully equated to a modernist art movement with all of its aspects, since it is primarily based on technical innovation rather than a total substantial cultural shift, it is nonetheless worthy of note, simply because technological innovations may eventually trigger a substantial change in the course of the history of art – and of communication – just like the invention of paint tubes in 1841 dramatically changed the way painters approached painting. Also, in another instance, it can also be perceived somewhat analogous to Cubism in ways how new decisions in formal qualities generate contextual shifts in apprehension of art:

As a modern art style, cubism created a unique approach to representing reality. Nearly all linear perspective was abandoned in favor of portraying an object, not from one artist's or viewer's perspective but from multiple views simultaneously. To complicate things, this technique was carried out on a two-dimensional surface. The result of looking at all sides at once and consolidating those into a combined, single view is a distorted, unrealistic image that sometimes reduced the subject to a combination of geometric patterns, such as cubes. (McNeese, T., & Picasso, P., 2006: 47)

The pivotal role of the mutual relationship between form and function indeed is the very discourse of Cubism, as well as many other modernist movements before postmodern/conceptual art. My claim is that making – or just simply viewing – art (or

painting in particular) in an immersive virtual environment might create a new condition in which the rupture caused by postmodern deconstruction is being challenged by a new set of reconstructive values which have the potential to mimic modernist painting practice, yet at the same time they co-exist. This fits into Turner's (2012) description of the metamodern condition which “allows us to face all directions in time at once, oscillating between the promises and pitfalls of the past, present, and future.” Picasso's light drawings might offer us an analogy.

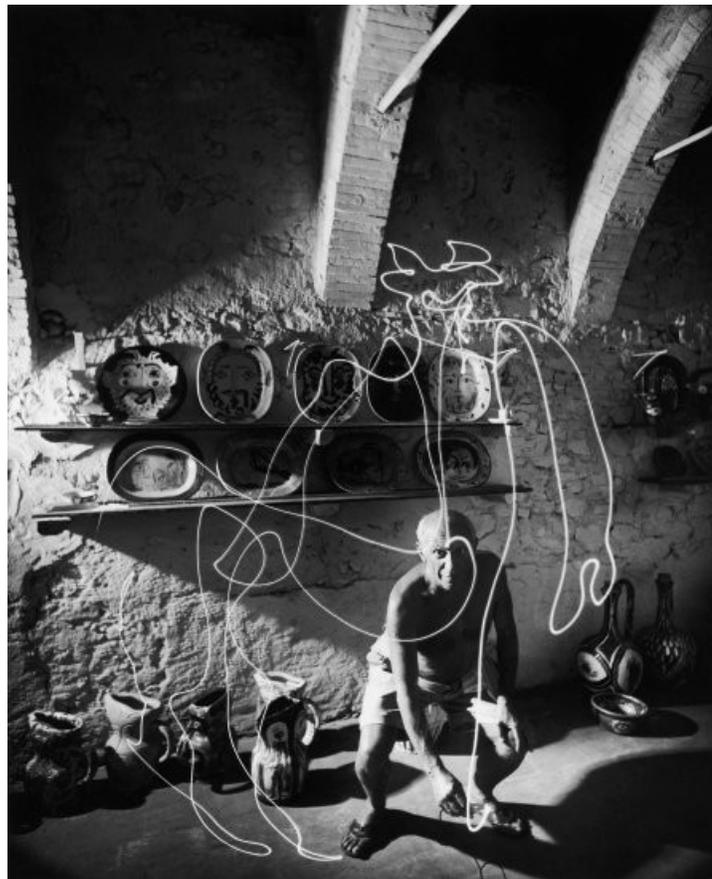


Figure 17. Pablo Picasso "draws" a centaur in the air with light, 1949

Imagine Picasso could draw in virtual reality and then 'save' or 'export' or 'share' his virtual paintings in a cloud storage, then imagine yourself downloading his 3D painting and walk through it, even manipulate it and send it back to him. The oscillation is, again, present as we have a programmable new media platform (Manovich, 2001: 27) in which 'manual' practice of painting is simulated within a virtually infinite immersive space. On the final remark, we could claim that the whole experience gives us a glimpse of a partial return to modernism, because the whole VR experience itself is primarily retinal.

CHAPTER V: CONCLUSION

Putting a final remark to these complicated set of discourses is as much challenging as explaining it, especially if we consider how problematic the postmodern climate we are living in today is. However, it does not necessarily mean that the outcome would not be rewarding as long as we try to distance ourselves from the deadlock of almost constant restraints the pessimistic aura, specific to postmodernism dictates us. Mark Fisher (2009) explains the cost of being subjected to the exhaustion caused by this postmodern (or capitalist) deadlock, in a rather pessimistic way, as he briefly speaks of the devastating phase which led Kurt Cobain to commit suicide, a tragic situation which cannot be fully understood without its social and cultural context:

In his dreadful lassitude and objectless rage, Cobain seemed to give wearied voice to the despondency of the generation that had come after history, whose every move was anticipated, tracked, bought and sold before it had even happened. Cobain knew that he was just another piece of spectacle, that nothing runs better on MTV than a protest against MTV; knew that his every move was a cliché scripted in advance, knew that even realizing it is a cliché....Here, even success meant failure, since to succeed would only mean that you were the new meat on which the system could feed. (Fisher, 2009: 9)

Although he claims that defeat of the utopian promise of rock music was confirmed by Cobain's death, at one point, he admits that success of Nirvana (and Cobain) was based on something truly credible, namely, the high existential angst that belongs to an 'older moment.' Thus he defines their music as “pastiche-rock which reproduced the forms of the past without anxiety” (2009: 10). It might seem contradictory at first, but from the

perspective of our framework, it is possible to claim that, as of today, the values of 'older moments' or 'the forms of the past without anxiety' can still be integrated into the contemporary creative act. Maybe, Nirvana and Cobain were too frustrated with the deadlock itself that they might not have been able to comprehend the potential behind such co-existence (that of the modern and the postmodern), but thanks to the recent theories and developments (and consequent attempts) we can, at least, romantically talk about the oscillation between two opposite poles of modern and postmodern, hence we can be in search of its practical counterpart, let alone the possibility that we might already have found that in practice. For instance, precision in Wes Anderson's implementation of one point perspective as a very well-studied component in *The Grand Budapest Hotel* (2014) is, in my opinion, so transcending that it elevates the whole film to an aesthetically autonomous level. This is a kind of uniqueness that can be found in modern art, yet many other features of the film are inherently postmodern. It is a good example of an either-or/neither-nor situation, unique to metamodernism; therefore I claim, the aura of the film is like a pendulum swinging between modernism and postmodernism. Uncertainty in this sense is somehow promising and open-ended, as it can be speculated that from the crisis of postmodernism a unique mode of romanticism emerges. A point which, in Cobain's time, might not have been noticed and appreciated as a 'way out.'

Additionally, convergence, intertextuality, and interactivity have all become fundamental aspects of contemporary art practice, almost exclusively in new media.

Any digital combination between the studied cases above is possible. From the purely postmodern perspective, it might sound terrifying – or even dystopian – but regardless of the condition, one day, the transition phase will be over and done with. For now, the exhaustion remains and from this exhaustion, new ideas relying on a new type of sensibility are rising, as the discourse of postmodernism is now being questioned more frequently:

Electronic technology and globalization, respectively, have transformed how we experience the language we use and the social world in which we live....But what if we considered these as the first signs of what will come after the postmodern? The intertextual, interactive aesthetic suggested by hypertextuality is related to the postmodern, to be sure, but is it the same thing? What if postmodern parody were merely the preparatory step to a 'Net' aesthetic, utopianly defined as a 'nonlinear, multivocal, open, nonhierarchical aesthetic involving active encounters'. (Hutcheon, 2015)

In the sense of artistic integrity, if “the relationship between realism, modernism, and postmodernism is seen as a gradual progress from the restrictions of the first to the freedom and experimentation of the last” (Malpas, 2005: 28) then it is worth looking into today's paradigm as a natural part of this gradual progress. Inevitably, these new paradigms can be said to have been asserting their modes of representation – and of communication – for a while now, promoting a new understanding of aesthetics, in which a partial return to modernist notions are evident.

In this regard, the reason I chose my case studies is that they, maybe indirectly, are substantial outcomes of an indirect effort to offer a solution to the deadlock of postmodernism, by adding the partial return to modernist notions of art in the equation. Within this equation, I claim, convergence, intertextuality, and interactivity are used as

the basic tools in order to create the oscillation between modernism and postmodernism. In the guidance of these assumptions and ideas, I believe that, in the future, the cultural climate we are experiencing today will be marked as a time of substantial struggle against, in Fisher's terms, "pre-emptive formatting and shaping of desires, aspirations, and hopes by capitalist culture" (Fisher, 2009: 9). What all these tendencies mentioned above are, in a way, indicators of a somewhat ambiguous yet highly perceivable challenge as to give modernist values like authenticity, originality, the superiority of grand narrative, autonomy, etc. a second chance. Convergence, intertextuality, and interactivity thus become agents for imposing such values (back) into the postmodern realm. In other words, it is an effort to 'reconstruct' what has already been deconstructed by postmodernism, although this attempt seems almost impossible to succeed in a world where desires, aspirations, and hopes are claimed to have been formatted and reduced to a zero-sum equation. My claim is that, despite the anticipated impossibility, insistence on this particular attitude is the very reason which forces new conditions of sincerity and romanticism to emerge and evolve within the contemporary artistic discourse – this is also what I mean by the 'departure from postmodernism' all along, even if it does not mean a total separation.

As the study suggested, it is possible to see that a new type of sensibility, among the cluster of concepts depending on a similar tendency, championed by the metamodern oscillation between modernism and postmodernism has recently become more visible, and with the evolution of technological tools – hardware and software – I presume we

might witness the incarnations of such concepts more frequently. For instance, the retinal/visual sensory experience in the modernist sense seems to be regaining its value, since it is no secret that immersive technologies have already been increasingly used in contemporary art, however, it is not to say that contemporary art in its postmodernist sense could or should be abandoned, on the contrary, just like the cases studied above, it is – willingly or not – being undergone a transformation period in which neither modern nor postmodern values are ruled out. Turner (2011) describes this period as a “mercurial condition” which can eventually be marked as a phase where artists – at least in theory – have started to make an effort to fuse otherwise conflicting notions like “irony and sincerity, naivety and knowingness, relativism and truth, optimism and doubt” (Turner, 2011). Although “metamodernism (and research into metamodernism) is still in its very, very early stages” (Abramson, 2015b) in general sense, metamodern artistic practice, as the study indicated, has already started to establish a domain within which the former notions of 'creative act' have been put into question. Therefore, this thesis was an attempt to investigate art pieces which are claimed to have already inherited these new notions, especially the oscillation. From the findings, we can suggest that the studied cases, both in theoretical and practical terms, contain the claimed oscillation in their own unique ways as they all possess a ubiquitous reality which renders them neither typically modern nor typically postmodern, but rather a fusion of them.

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