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Accidental Aesthetics: Philosophies of the Artificial

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This paper will examine a range of philosophies surrounding aesthetics and begin to speculate on a metaphysical framework surrounding artificial aesthetics. Tracing earlier arguments from Hegel and Kant and extracting significant developments in newer variants of speculative realist philosophies, this paper seeks to critically engage the realm of aesthetics and computation from a metaphysical viewpoint. These metaphysics touch on issues of non-human agency, inter object relations, and aesthetic theory in relation to computational entities and autonomous systems. The ability of these systems to operate outside of human cognitive limitations including thought patterns and constructions which may preclude alternative aesthetic outcomes, afford them in some ways limitless potential in relation to aesthetics. Aesthetics here are not narrowly constrained by a human ability to recognize or appreciate these outputs. The designation of the accidental or provisional is utilized as an alternative approach to the production and assessment of aesthetic occurrences.

1 Introduction

An exploration into accidental aesthetics posits that outcomes, products, thoughts and recognitions of the aesthetic are related to an unfolding and singular relation or encounter which is not expected whether in behavior, form, affect or outcome. This is in line with existing conceptions of human aesthetic breakthroughs requiring novelty in some regard whether it occurs through medium, point of view or technique. We can designate that this is a persistent feature of the realism of the present moment. In a certain sense every unfolding encounter could be described as accidental, namely that there exist probabilities in relation to effects from past causes but not absolute certainty as to the exact effects. My assertion here of the pervasiveness of the accidental as an underlying feature of the aesthetic stands in opposition to the more commonplace view of the term accidental as a throw away or pejorative designation. Here it is interpreted as a desirable and affective feature, one that is both ubiquitous and yet under examined philosophically. The accidental alludes to perceptions, interactions, causes and effects not entirely premeditated or conceived, nevertheless yielding effects both discernable and registered. This would apply to both human and non-human instances. Imagining the potential for a drastically diverse range of aesthetic instances and affective capacities will provide us with an expanded concept of the potentials for artificial entities in both form and behavior.

2 The Poetics of Conventional Aesthetics

The vantage point of the accidental stands in contradiction to outdated ideas that the aesthetic resides in a distinctly human approach which can be seen throughout historical philosophical focuses on aesthetics. The aesthetic as a term and an area of philosophical inquiry has posed significant challenges due to the elusive nature of capturing and locating the aesthetic. Hegel in his *Lectures on the Introduction of Aesthetics* in the 1820's recognized that, "a study of this kind becomes wearisome on account of its indefiniteness and emptiness and disagreeable by its concentration on tiny subjective peculiarities" (Hegel, Knox transl., 1979). This indefiniteness and emptiness can be identified as a pertinent feature of the aesthetic. When we are dislodged from our default mode of interpretation and cognition, when the present moment unfolds with unexpected variability, a disruption of our cognitive expectations occurs and we experience a sort of indefiniteness. This disruption and its affective capacity can be predicated in one's own aesthetic encounters with any number of phenomena which may then be translated into aesthetic products

or simply remain in a singular aesthetic experience with oneself. The question then becomes, can artificial systems embody indefiniteness? This question could return to the sensual realm the artificial embodies. Autonomous systems and artificial entities have continuously evolving inputs be they informational or physical and they are capable of registering each new composition of sensory inputs as unique and singular encounters. The structuring and legibility of this registration is highly variable and could be expressed through generation of an aesthetic activity, output, artefact or relation. The way these entities register disruptions when encountering something novel and the outputs they may enact in response is an area that warrants greater metaphysical attention in relation to aesthetics.

The one consistent feature in discussions of the aesthetic involves the presence of an aesthetic void which eludes precise description or location, both cognitively and materially. The advent of computational processes calls into question this unnamed process which has been referred by numerous evocative yet vague adjectives and nouns including cloudy, the essence, the rift, the remainder, etc. It is clear that aesthetics pose significant challenges in delimiting and describing what exactly they are. Steven Shaviro discusses Kant's statement that there is, "no science of the beautiful" (2009). The aesthetic realm has traditionally been understood to arise out of such mysterious workings in addition to summoning contemplation or recognition of such mysteries through an affectual quality. The aesthetic process and its related affects cannot be located to one key mechanism whether physiological or material. It eludes specific definition and resides alongside other mysterious and opaque processes relating to emergent phenomenon in human and nonhuman complex systems. This aesthetic void removes itself from direct contemplation or description and is a persistently fuzzy and elusive entity. Examining approaches to translation, metaphor and symbols are often helpful as they also coincide with considering how the realm of the aesthetic meets the binary.

3 Non-human Aesthetics

In order to move from a traditional approach to aesthetics which hinges on human subjectivity and issues of taste, and discernment, an examination of current approaches to non-human aesthetics provides a potential way forward. There have been several recent works that attempt to reconcile non-human aesthetics. Recent influential work includes David Rothenberg's compelling book, *Survival of the Beautiful* which locates beauty as a fundamental part of evolutionary processes and discusses non-human

aesthetics in a compelling manner (2011). Recently Tom Sparrow has put forward a compelling argument that we are at the end of phenomenology charging that it is, “no longer apparent how phenomenology is to be carried out or how it differs from, say, thick empirical description or poetic embellishment” (2014). Phenomenology has concerned itself with the sensual realm and has frequent overlap with the aesthetic. Poetic embellishment is often a symptom of this work. When faced with this gap (rift, chasm, unknown, the remainder...) poetics and their affective quality act as an intermediary plane of communication. In their affective abilities they utilize this not quite here, not quite there, dislocation. Poetics belonging to the aesthetic realm allow us to probe and hint at the sense we may gather from the “real” but cannot be described or located in any specific way. The ability to transport, disrupt and point attention to a dislocation from established patterns, identities and constructions aligns with my conception of the accidental as a fundamental feature of all aesthetic phenomena recognizable or not. Therefore, although the phenomenological method in its insistence on the subject/object distinction is admittedly flawed, the phenomenological realm, that of sensation still has much to offer in our contemplation of this void. In their affective communications, poetics and other aesthetic communications may rub up against and glimpse the “real” much more accurately than metaphysical descriptions.

There is something to be discovered through deploying phenomenological methods to speculate on computational embodiments. This would include thinking about how these entities see, feel and comprehend the world through a variety of hardware and software including advanced sensing capabilities at extreme scalar ranges eluding human perception. In addition there is a staggering variety in the way these systems could eventually operate in terms of both input and output capacities. Ian Bogost’s book, *Alien Phenomenology* puts forth a compelling account of how various machines and devices “see” (2012). This sort of phenomenological approach is not meant to be an anthropocentric reading of how machines will be like “us” but rather a means to speculate on the variety of ways they will be quite different. Their potential for a more diverse range of outcomes could present us with new understandings of what embodiment looks like from radically diverse points of reference. This in turn hints at new potential aesthetic outcomes. It is only when we limit our phenomenology to human embodiment do we close off any potential access or insight into artificial aesthetics.

4 Speculative Aesthetics

A speculative realist philosophy is well suited to contemplating aesthetics of the artificial. By operating outside of the traditional anthropocentric lens, these philosophies are primarily interested in examining what lies outside of our traditional perceptions and assumptions. The endless proliferation of objects or things is a main focus of Tristan Garcia's *Form and Object*. He states the problem at hand:

...there are more and more things. It is increasingly difficult to comprehend them, to be supplementary to them, or to add oneself to oneself at each moment, in each place, amidst people, physical, natural, and artefactual objects, parts of objects, images, qualities, bundles of data, information, words, and ideas – in short, to admit this feeling without suffering from it. (2014)

As more and more things are connected and networked the number of instances, objects and thoughts that can arise in relation to these multiply and intensify. Our ability to name, identify and verbalize these becomes tricky. How many phenomena do we even have words for? The aesthetic develops, accentuates and manufactures its own set of unique relationships between its internal elements, its external relations and any phenomena it invokes or brings into being. These remain in the gap. Hard to describe and name, yet real in every sense. Timothy Morton in *Realist Magic*, describes one particular type of disruption in perception through the experience of jet lag: "... things are strangely familiar and familiarly strange – uncanny. Then it hits you: this is the default state of affairs, not the world in which regularly functioning things seem to subtend their aesthetic effects...The smooth world is the illusion! The clown-like weirdness of the uncanny situation you find yourself in..., is the reality" (2013). The presence of the uncanny is one specific type of aesthetic encounter which announces itself without any direct intention.

From a speculative realist point of view any so called designation of *realism* itself is irrational and uncategorized. Autonomous systems instead of being modelled after our views, aspirations, goals or "feelings" could instead operate from a deliberate stance of irrationality. Novelty is a distinguishing feature of my argument of the accidental. In this sense an artificial system seems primed to substantially contribute to aesthetic production. Once we begin to formulate that interactions however slight are a part of the aesthetic dimension we can begin to imagine new approaches to aesthetics and affective instances through the production of novelty through inducing any number of relations or interactions.

Morton devotes substantial attention to examining relations between objects and he asserts that any means by which we perceive and access other entities (objects) through sight, touch, sound, thoughts etc. are all fundamental to reality. There is a particularly compelling argument he makes in regards to aesthetics, stating, “It might be better to think of a transfer of information – it might be better to think that causality is an aesthetic process” (2013). If we take aesthetics to be a fundamental feature of reality and intimately bound with causality (Morton, 2013) then computational systems are just as capable if not more, at accessing the “real”. The flat ontological designation he assigns to information, intimates that data has a particularly unique role in that it can manufacture and enable the proliferation of novel interactions between any manner of entities both real and imagined. In this way computational or artificial approaches may operate around the aesthetic in less mediated and by extension more accidental ways. So a computation that engages irrationality, that is not seeking to mimic or please but rather one which is looking for and is capable of generating novelty in interpretation, representation and translation may produce far superior aesthetic encounters. Hegel stated that, “Art has at its command not only the whole wealth of natural formations in their manifold and variegated appearance; but in addition the creative imagination has power to launch out beyond them *inexhaustibly* in production of its own” (1979). The computationally creative imagination has the power to launch *inexhaustibly* beyond. Most human aesthetic production involves the recognition, selection, filtering and re-presentation of phenomena. Computational entities are also capable of these tasks and can be thought of as possessing more of an inclination towards the accidental rather than less. The potential for these systems to surprise us and present us with novel results is incredibly underappreciated.

The implication that chance or randomness is entwined with creativity is not a new insight. Hoffstadter in *Gödel, Escher, Bach*, explained, “it is a common notion that randomness is an indispensable ingredient of creative acts. This may be true, but it does not have any bearing on the mechanizability – or rather programability! – of creativity” (1979). But conventional designations of the aesthetic and by association creativity rely on an observer. The human is able to recognize, appreciate and locate aesthetic qualities and outcomes and even program these capabilities artificially. But these activities have still been interpreted in fairly conventional terms. A new metaphysical approach to aesthetics seeks to step outside of the rift or gap that eludes description. Rather than any sort of clear distinction or description, a focus instead on the pervasiveness of the accidental as a fundamental

feature of reality allows us to begin to reformulate our conceptions of artificial aesthetics and instead look towards the ability to generate a multiplicity of novel interactions of varying spatio-temporal specificities.

Speculating upon aesthetics is but one approach by which we may engage future computational ecologies. Their speeds, specificities and interactions could easily be unrecognizable to us. Their rapidly proliferating complexity produces an opacity in relation to exact processes or methods of generating information and relations. The accidental or provisional should not preclude us from recognizing the vast potential these systems have for generating novel relations. The expectation of complete comprehension is not in place for the variety of other numerous entities we interact with daily, or even ourselves for that matter. Opacity is a persistent feature of our experiences. We might begin by acknowledging that our current approaches to aesthetics whether through metaphysical analysis or creative practice may be highly limiting. Computational systems, with their ever expanding abilities, relationships and entanglements may offer untold potentials to affect and be affected in unrecognizable, accidental and yet highly aesthetic ways. By reframing the ways in which we designate, produce and assess the aesthetic we can begin to engage the synthetic, the accidental and the computational in wholly novel ways both philosophically and creatively.

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