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The (New) Accident of Art

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Abstract

Accidental encounters in the art gallery occupy a critical space that moves visitors beyond established behaviours and expectations. Accidents are crucial to everyday encounters with art objects and tend to occur in the interval between images. The emergence of the 'New Aesthetic' in March 2012 contributed to a more generalised interest in spotting and documenting moments where the digital intercedes in the everyday. The New Aesthetic suggests that it is possible to see accidental spaces of machinic vision. But what happens when the viewer is also not human? Does the robot machine employed by GoogleArtProject to patrol the major galleries of the world suggest new methods for engaging with art? If, as has been argued by both Aristotle and Virilio each machine contains a concept of accident, encounters that recognize the creative potential of failure and instability will introduce a new model for machinic aesthetics within the gallery space. In reality any unexpected encounter in GoogleArtProject is more likely to be with a blurred virtual force that something framed and labelled as art. In using Aby Warburg's "iconology of the interval" to discuss GoogleArtProject I suggest it is the accidental encounter that marks the vibrancy of the space, time, bodies, machines and architectures that make up the art gallery and perhaps contributes a critical prehistory to the New Aesthetic.

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The (New) Accident of Art.

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ABSTRACT

Accidental encounters in the art gallery occupy a critical space that moves visitors beyond established behaviours and expectations. Accidents are crucial to everyday encounters with art objects and tend to occur in the interval between images. The emergence of the ‘New Aesthetic’ in March 2012 contributed to a more generalised interest in spotting and documenting moments where the digital intercedes in the everyday. The New Aesthetic suggests that it is possible to see accidental spaces of machinic vision. But what happens when the viewer is also not human? Does the robot machine employed by GoogleArtProject to patrol the major galleries of the world suggest new methods for engaging with art? If, as has been argued by both Aristotle and Virilio each machine contains a concept of accident, encounters that recognize the creative potential of failure and instability will introduce a new model for machinic aesthetics within the gallery space. In reality any unexpected encounter in GoogleArtProject is more likely to be with a blurred virtual force than something framed and labelled as art. In using Aby Warburg’s “iconology of the interval” to discuss GoogleArtProject I suggest it is the accidental encounter that marks the vibrancy of the space, time, bodies, machines and architectures that make up the art gallery and perhaps contributes a critical prehistory to the New Aesthetic.

KEYWORDS

Art Gallery, Accident, GoogleArtProject, New Aesthetic, Aby Warburg

A robot machine walks through an art gallery. Slowly over one evening it views the entire contents of an art gallery, not just the major art works, but everything: the fire hydrants, the exits signs, the washbasins. To the robot, everything it sees is the same. It forms images that bear relationships to other images, that together will make a network of more images, that will connect to other networks of images formed in other galleries, and then to viewers. Humans, not allowed into the galleries at night spend their evenings watching and reviewing what it is that the machine sees. The images the machine draws are the result of a long process, they are stitched together by machine and checked for anomalies before humans can view them, some are astounding but sometimes errors occur. The machine encounters unexpected objects, and forms images of things that are not art, yet inhabit the spaces of an art gallery. These accidental encounters in the art gallery occupy a critical space that moves

viewers beyond established behaviours and expectations. The accidents both caused and caught by the machine are crucial to everyday encounters with art objects in the art gallery. These misunderstood moments offer up shared and transformative experiences, and like any encounter they set things in motion. An art gallery claims to be a public space, somewhere where almost anyone can walk off the street and experience something. But there are limits. Galleries are social and transformational, but what if we no longer need to step through their doors? What if we let a machine do the walking, looking, and experiencing on our behalf?

GoogleArtProject has now been live for just over a year and has been met with general applause, particularly by curators of the galleries it has documented. For example, Beth Harris (in Proctor, 2011) from the Museum of Modern Art says that GoogleArtProject “allows visitors to avoid the crowds, physical fatigue, and self-consciousness” that she sees museum visitors struggling with. However, StreetView technologies when moved inside create jittery and grainy images. Trundling through art galleries opened specially for it in the early hours of the morning, the Google camera has the space to itself and watching from our desktops we follow the eye view of a machine standardised to an average human height of 170cm as if it is tracking an invisible adversary. It watches and scans the interior environment. The jerky movements replicate the hand held video camera footage favoured in horror movies from the late 1990s such as *The Blair Witch Project*. As Alastair Sooke (2011) commented in *The Telegraph*, this is ‘a “look” that is surely anathema to the carefully orchestrated clarity of the galleries in reality.’ Every exhibition is viewed at an equivalent scrolling pace, works are apprehended from the same distance, video works are freeze framed, and there are moments where the camera zooms forward producing a rapid movement into the next room, when fragments are glimpsed out of the corner of the eye, yet stepping back renders them invisible. In reality any unexpected (horrific) encounter in GoogleArtProject is more likely to be with a blurred virtual force than something framed and labelled as art. Occasionally it is possible to catch glimpses of things reflected in mirrors and windows, objects that seem to have shadows but not presence. These documented accidental works become highly speculative objects within the gallery.

The major public galleries of the world are now inhabited by these robot machines that are capable of looking closer and in more detail than their human companions. With their noses pressed against the glass, the robot machines document the invisible, allowing anyone anywhere to see more and access more via the digital networks that now connect galleries and their collections to each other. But with this new aesthetic must come a warning. To use Rancière’s term, not everything a machine sees is “sensible” (Rancière, 2009).

In the late Eighteenth century it was the leisured classes who had time to hone their aesthetic judgements at public art galleries. Twenty years before Kant wrote “Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime” the swiss watchmaker Pierre Jaquet-Droz built a series

of automata. Surviving today are a pianist and a writer; both are occupied with skilled activities that mimic those of a knowledgeable creative human individual. Jaquet-Droz's automata were magical figures that stood in for humans, and undertook aesthetic tasks. The concept of a robot as a slave or servant did not emerge for a further 150 years. In 1920 Czech playwrights Josef and Karel Capek imagined a group of robots originally intended for servitude, who develop desire and resistance and rise up to destroy humanity. Early in Act 1 of *Rossum's Universal Robots* the possibility of robot aesthetics is raised by Helena Glory, a representative of the Humanity League. She suggests that the robots might receive wages in order to "buy ... what they need ... what pleases them." Helman the chief-psychologist for the Robots replies: "That would be very nice, Miss Glory, only there's nothing that does please the Robots. Good heavens what are they to buy? ... They've no interest in anything, Miss Glory ... No passion. No soul" (Capek, 1961, pp.22).

The Capeks did not record robots looking at or making art. These kinds of developments in machine aesthetics were left for later generations. In the early twenty-first century machines do a lot of looking on our behalf. Recently, questions have been asked: what happens when machines make art? (Dohm and Stahlhut 2007). Are we amidst an image revolution? (Scholz 2012). What is it like to be a bonobo or a satellite or a pixel? (Bogost 2012). If Jaquet-Droz's machines began making art in the Eighteenth century, in the twenty-first they seem to have shifted towards the generation of machine aesthetics. This is more than a general cultural condition, but a combination of digital machines and the humans who watch and experience these machines and their outputs over time. It would be possible to continue this paper with a genealogy of moments in which machines have looked, or look: a camera obscura flipped the world into an upside down colour shadow of itself; as soon as the photographic camera was invented it was taken up into the sky so it could see from above; and, in St Petersburg Dziga Vertov became one with his movie camera. "I am kino-eye, I am a mechanical eye, I, a machine, show you the world as only I can see it ... my path leads to the creation of a fresh perception of the world I decipher in a new way unknown to you." (Michelson, 1984, p.17) However this kind of listing does not offer much more to think about the robot we left exploring art galleries. For this we need to return to the aesthetics of the sensible and human relationships with the machinic environment.

The cataloguing of machine aesthetics reached obsessive proportions in April 2012, when Bruce Sterling wrote an article in *Wired* both critiquing and celebrating the work of James Bridle and the notion of the "new aesthetic" (Sterling, 2012.). Although Sterling labeled the New Aesthetic a "glitch-hunt" Sterling's article lead credence to the tumblr log and the activities of its collectors. The collection of images gathered together under the new aesthetic seemed to imply that there is a level of decision making, if not consciousness, to machines as they look. Dan Catt (2012) summarises the new aesthetic as the inspiration behind computer vision; because the "digital and the physical are moving closer together." Kyle Chayka describes the new aesthetic as not a revolutionary art movement out to shock society, but

something operating in reverse. He says, it responds “to a shocked society” (Watz, 2012). Chayka continues “We will not just observe how machines act and perceive, but integrate how they act and perceive into our own sensory experiences and creative processes.” Chayka begins with something that sounds like an argument for digital materiality, but quickly slips into utopian imaginings for the future. Catt continued: “As the digital and the physical move closer and closer, that combination will eventually look less like a hybrid and more like a united whole, the new aesthetic reality.” Crowd sourcing moments of digital ephemera and convergences where glitch overlaps with the everyday, made for a new and somewhat spectacular, cabinet of curiosities. Three months later, the new aesthetic remains a fast moving collaborative catalogue, made up of a twitter feed, a now closed tumblr log, and a collection of blog entries that circulate around each other.

It seems easy enough to dismiss. Except, that as we look at the ongoing influence of Walter Benjamin’s unfinished *Arcades Project* or Aby Warburg’s also unfinished *Mnemosyne Atlas* it is worth considering if the image based gathering practices of the new aesthetic are more than an accidental convergence. In the catalogue for his recent exhibition at Reina Sofia in Madrid and ZKM that examined the influence of early art historian Aby Warburg, Georges Didi-Huberman (2011) argued for a return to earlier methods of art history that involves piecing together “visual forms of knowledge” without teleological narration. Warburg’s *Mnemosyne Atlas* brought together thousands of images to demonstrate the “iconography of the interval”. From 1924 to 1929 Warburg constructed seventy-nine wooden panels that he covered in black fabric, each with groupings of reproductions, totalling over two thousand images. The panels themselves are now lost, but Warburg’s final arrangement of the Atlas survives, however, as a series of 79 photographs (Dillon, 2004). Between and across the panels were movements. In focusing on emergent points where ideas could be found to appear in-between the images on his panels, Warburg generated a diagram of gesture and energy. His methodology is described by Giorgio Agamben (2000) as “an art of remembrance that shows the development of forms of expression.” And in this manner, Warburg’s practice is often cited as core to the new discipline of art history. However, his own work was not focused on the interpretation of the meanings of the images, but on their complex and autonomous interrelationship and arrangement (Michaud, p.252). Agamben continues: Warburg’s “‘atlas’ was a kind of gigantic condenser that gathered together all the energetic currents that had animated and continued to animate Europe’s memory, taking form in its ‘ghosts’”. In between each image is a black field that serves to both isolate and frame the images. In the interval Warburg saw faultlines, these irregular black spaces separated and isolated the images at the same time as organised their relationships. Rather than links and nodes, Warburg produced a cartographic relief upon which the images floated, as if constellations of thought (Michaud, 2004, p.253). The panels are formed from reproductions that do much more than juxtapose; they are productive and generative.

Warburg described this relationship with images as a confrontation either lethal or vitalizing. The atlas itself was a freeze frame of these relationships. Brian Dillon (2004) describes it as images held “in a paradoxical pose of frenzied immobility.” Art history was understood as a network of images within which there are stored enormous energies. For Warburg the art historian was someone who conjured up this energy from the past to give it a new life. Warburg activated dynamic properties, and following on from his research with German psychologist Richard Semon he argued that it is in these spaces in-between that memory functioned (Michaud, 2004). Is this in-between activation of memory what is happening on the new aesthetic tumblr log? And is this new life also now caught in the gallery spaces of the GoogleArtProject?

We cannot yet remember the new aesthetic. For now, a machine collects and logs, and people are the contributors but not the keepers of the images. In some cases spaces in-between generate new aesthetic moments as different pages spring up either in response to Sterling or to Bridle. But these are not yet dynamic or accidental (although many contain a superficial aesthetics of the accident as glitch or error). Philippe-Alain Michaud says that “The conception of the images in Mnemosyne, [is a] silent conception based in pure dynamic relationships and phenomena of visual attraction and repulsion (Michaud, 2004, p.246)” And here the inadequacies of the new aesthetic logs become apparent. In short, the log is an archive not an atlas. The tumblr log of the new aesthetic collects without mapping, without drawing relations. In describing his exhibition Atlas, based on Warburg’s work, Didi-Huberman says that the atlas is a visual tool, the links it makes are “not a link of similarity, but a secret link between two different things” (museureinasofia, 2010). The images in an atlas are not located in time, as they are with an archive, instead there is a “confrontation and a co-existence of different times” (museureinasofia, 2010). This confrontation is central to a journey through a gallery formed through images of images that do not discriminate but include the accidental as encounter. In letting the machines loose in the gallery, GoogleArtProject allows viewers to form their own attractions and repulsions. This is a different form of reproduction, and a different process of accumulation to that undertaken by Warburg, but as viewers we find ourselves making decisions, identifying similarities and revising details.

Greg Borenstein was among the first to suggest that the new aesthetic resonates with other recent trends in speculative thought, and in particular with the philosophical momentum called object-oriented ontology (ooo):

The New Aesthetic is a visible eruption of the mutual empathy between us and a class of new objects that are native to the twenty-first century. It consists of visual artefacts we make to help us imagine the inner lives of our digital objects and also of the visual representations produced by our digital objects as a kind of pigeon language between their inaccessible inner lives and ours. (Watz, 2012).

There is a tension here. The new aesthetic seeks to make digital objects visible, to suggest that within the accident or the glitch there are overlooked moments of literal and aesthetic ‘beauty’. OOO suggests that objects have ways of apprehending the world that are not necessarily human, or defined by the human, and thus do not really need us to recognize them, but that we should leave them to their own nonhuman ways. I’m purposely reducing large and complex arguments here, because if the new aesthetic is to be a useful method for understanding nonhuman (and in particular *digital* objects) its objects need to remain invisible, they need to transform into the pieces of black linen peeping between Warburg’s reproductions, and remain un-romanticized. Even un-aestheticized. To trace the (new) accident of art we need to return with much more certainty to Warburg’s unnamed science, and rather than proclaim the visibility of machine aesthetics too quickly, spend some time looking at the intervals.

Aristotle suggested that the accidental “does not inhere in the constitutive essence of a thing, being, or event” (Schwartz, 2011, p.547). The accidental is more a case of its relationships with other things, beings or events. This accident as relationship revealed the substance of something, what it could do. It is through the accident that the thing, being, or event presents itself to others. In the contemporary world, machines bring their own accidents with them. Paul Virilio (2005) says that the accident of art results from a proliferation of images that has led to complex relations between seeing, knowing, and imagining a world: the accident is now generalized. In identifying a shift from the accidental as caused by essential yet mistaken relations between bodies (the specific accident), towards the intended affects of that body, Virilio’s generalised accident also elides the difference between accident and attack. The contemporary mediated accident of art is the eradication of these distinctions. The lurking presence of catastrophe became the focus of Virilio’s ‘Museum of Accidents’ project at the Cartier Foundation in Paris in 2002 in which the aestheticising of the events 9/11 resulted in a romantic sheen over the horror produced by accidental encounters between machines and architectures (Cubitt, 1999).

In Virilio’s ‘Museum of Accidents’ images are placed together and archived in order to discover some kind of essential connections; links between the nodes. The problem is that the nodes are not in themselves positioned as transformative, but become fixed images. In harvesting machines or media into the service of accident, there is the risk of aestheticising extreme harm. The imaging machine cannot acknowledge the accident and despite what ooo offers it still seems a mistake to attribute some kind of agency to the machine independent of the human. In Virilio’s museum as well as in the new aesthetics tumblr log, the intervals become invisible rather than visible.

Ranciere’s aesthetics of the sensible and Warburg’s iconology of the interval suggest a different kind of accident, what Agamben calls the “unnamed science”. An accident where

there is a coming together of the aesthetics of the sensible and machinic aesthetics, in the art gallery.

The robot that roams the galleries at night is not unlike the fox in Francis Alÿs' *Night Watch* (2004). The robot follows paths, maps routes and does the walking for us. The fox is a creature out of place, reminding us that we are always being watched, and suggesting new forms of movement within gallery architecture. As I have said the GoogleArtProject depends on a robot looking machine. This aesthetic machine is a totally different form of digital material that has entered into what have for a long time been quiet still spaces for human, and not machine, contemplation. The digital matter the machine is formed from is flawed and what it sees is potentially error-ridden. If, as has been argued by both Aristotle and Virilio, in its relations each machine contains an accident; encounters that recognise the interval between the image and instability might actually introduce new affective productions within the gallery space. This means that rather than archive and document the gallery, the GoogleArtProject is constructing an atlas of the spaces in-between. GoogleArtProject picks up objects that misbehave and maps the transformation of both machines and architectures. Agamben describes the spaces between the images in Warburg's Atlas as "the dark demon of an unnamed science whose contours we are only today beginning to glimpse (Agamben 1999, p.90)." There is a difference between Warburg's careful atlas of relationships where accidents emerge in the interval, and GoogleArtProject's gathering together of invisible interferences, visible only to those who choose to look. Rather than collate and archive images, the new accident of art traces the unnamed science of the interval with more care. Warburg called his atlas a "ghost story for adults" (Michaud, 2004) the images produced by GoogleArtProject are also a ghost story: a machinic aesthetics formed in accidental intervals.

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE:

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