

The Artificial, the Accidental, the Aesthetic...

Nicole Koltick

Director, Design Futures Lab, Department of Architecture + Interiors,
Westphal College of Media Arts & Design, Drexel University,
Philadelphia, PA, USA

nrk37@drexel.edu

ABSTRACT

How do we define, discuss or assess aesthetics within a contemporary philosophical framework? The indefiniteness that accompanies attempts to formalize a definition of the aesthetic is a primary focus of this paper. This lack of a definition has occupied philosophers for hundreds of years in attempts to delineate the boundaries of an elusively formless concept. This formlessness speaks to the incredibly evasive character of such a pervasive feature recognized in both natural and artificial systems, agents and artefacts. With the rapid growth of artificially intelligent systems and an astounding diversity in computational creativity, in what ways may we approach aesthetics? How is the aesthetic recognized, determined and produced? This paper seeks to critically engage 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. The designation of the accidental or provisional is utilized as an alternative approach to the production and assessment of aesthetic occurrences of the non-human.

KEYWORDS

Artificial Aesthetics; Philosophy; Speculative Realism; Computational Phenomenology.

1 | INTRODUCTION

How do we define the aesthetic today? I am not writing here about a specific codified beauty or rarefied sublimity. Rather these subjective definitions and attempts to delineate boundaries, result in vastly incomplete, exclusionary criteria that do little to further the discussion of this aspect of creative experience. Using the designation of the *accidental* in relation to 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 behaviour, form, affect or outcome. My assertion here of the pervasiveness of the *accidental* as an underlying feature of the aesthetic, stands in opposition to the use 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 discernible and registered. Imagining the potential for a drastically diverse range of aesthetic instances will provide us with an expanded concept of the potentials for artificial entities in both form and behaviour.

2 | ELUSIVE 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 (1979, *pp.* 5, 25, 33) 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." Most historical approaches to the topic identify the presence of an aesthetic void, which eludes precise description or location, both cognitively and materially. 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 may return to the sensual realm the artificial embodies. Autonomous systems, non-human agents 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 historically manifests in a continually elusive definition, description or location, both cognitively and materially of these phenomena. The void or vagueness in description has been alluded to with numerous evocative yet vague adjectives and nouns including cloudy, the essence, the rift, the remainder. It is clear that aesthetics pose significant challenges in delimiting and describing what exactly they are. Philosopher Steven Shaviro (2009) reiterates Kant's statement that, "there is no science of the beautiful." The aesthetic and its related effects cannot be located to one key mechanism. It eludes specific definition and resides alongside other mysterious and opaque

processes relating to emergent phenomena including human and non-human 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. In order to move from a traditional approach to aesthetics, which hinges on human subjectivity, taste and discernment, current approaches to non-human aesthetics provide a potential way forward.

3 | NON-HUMAN POETICS

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* (2011) which locates beauty as a fundamental part of evolutionary processes and broadly investigates non-human aesthetics. Recently Tom Sparrow (2014) has put forward a has argued 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." Ian Bogost's book, *Alien Phenomenology* (2012) put forth a compelling account of how various machines and devices "see". This was 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. This work offers a speculative realist approach to machine embodiment, yet it also carries with it the hallmark features of phenomenological philosophies which are concerned with the sensual realm and frequently overlap with the aesthetic.

Poetic language is a common feature and or symptom of phenomenology. When faced with phenomena that are imprecise and incredibly difficult to define, poetics and their affective quality act as an intermediary plane of communication. They use 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. Poetics may rub up against and glimpse the “real” much more accurately than metaphysical descriptions. But still we are left with an utterly formless framework to approach these phenomena.

4 | ACCIDENTAL RELATIONS

Poetic language uses a relational strategy and we could thus explore and identify the identification and production of novel relations between entities of all manners, as one framework for locating and generating aesthetic phenomena. Computational systems offer us the ability to generate and analyze an infinite number of novel relationships varying in form, output and legibility. Bogost (2012) began by thinking about how these artificial entities feel and comprehend the world through a variety of hardware and software. We could further extend this work and explore more thoroughly computational phenomenology including advanced sensing and imaging capabilities at extreme scalar ranges, eluding human perception. There is a staggering variety in the way these systems surprise us. Their potentials are already providing us with new understandings of what embodiment may look like from radically diverse points of reference.

Google’s recently released images from the inner layers of their neural networks are but one example (Mordvintsev, Olah and Tyka, 2015). The images, widely circulated, are relatable in that they are comprised of many features that are recognizable to humans with slightly strange perturbances and surreal differences. While these are incredibly compelling they have been interpreted and presented from a highly anthropocentric vantage point. They have been trained by humans and “learn” from human generated imagery. The neural networks’ ability to riff on these inputs and the deviations it can produce at any level of its internal layers display quite clearly how many

novel relations it can generate in rapid order. These systems possess infinite capacities to generate accidental relations.

Several prominent speculative realist philosophers examine relations in a vastly inclusive manner to include all manner of objects living, non-living, mineral, animal, biological, imagined, and so on... The endless proliferation of objects or things is a main focus of Tristan Garcia’s recently translated text, *Form and Object* (2014, p. 1). 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.

Our ability to name, identify and verbalize these quickly becomes tricky. How many phenomena do we even have words for? The aesthetic develops, accentuates and manufactures its own set of unique relationships and phenomena. Timothy Morton (2013) devotes substantial attention to examining relationships between objects. 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.” 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 that is looking for and is capable of generating novelty in interpretation, representation and translation may produce far superior aesthetic encounters and by this I mean more unexpected.

5 | CONCLUSION

The implication that chance or randomness is entwined with creativity is not a new insight

(Hoffstadter, 1979). But conventional designation and production of the aesthetic and by association creativity rely on a narrow and ill-defined set of judgements. The human is able to recognize, appreciate and locate aesthetic qualities. Humans have made great strides in programming creativity artificially. But these activities have still been interpreted in fairly conventional terms. The Google images referenced above suffer from these types of assessments.

A focus instead on the pervasiveness of the accidental, and the embedded infinite permutations of accidental relations, allows us to begin to reformulate our conceptions of artificial aesthetics. We can instead look towards the ability to generate a multiplicity of novel interactions of varying spatiotemporal specificities. Speculating upon aesthetics is but one approach by which we may engage future computational ecologies. 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 entirely novel ways, both philosophically and creatively.

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BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Nicole Koltick is an Assistant Professor in the Westphal College of Media Arts & Design at Drexel University and the founding Director of the Design Futures Lab where she leads a graduate research group in critical design practices investigating the intersection of artificial intelligence, ethics and empathy in robotic systems, design and non-human aesthetics. Nicole writes extensively on the philosophical and theoretical implications concerning concepts of the “natural”, the “synthetic”, aesthetics, the rapidly evolving digital landscape and implications of emerging computational ecologies. She has recently completed papers on dark data, aesthetics of emergence, materiality and agency in the future. Her research lab develops full-scale design objects for the future, most recently producing a large-scale synthetic ecology with a new species of robots entitled NESL (Nurturing Emergent Synthetic Life). www.designfutureslab.com