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Article Type: General Article. Article Title: Being Formal Without Being a Formalist

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ABSTRACT

This paper argues for the value of using formal models within the (digital media) artwork. Eschewing the anti-formalism common to much of postmodernism, it argues for a more active engagement with formal concerns. Without embracing the totalizing theories of late modernist formalism, or discarding the idea of “the concept,” I argue for a more formal approach to the making of the (digital media) artwork. The goal is to point to models that can be used to intimately connect form and concept, rather than treat them as separate or warring entities. The paper critically explores three very specific digital media artworks that endeavor to bridge the gap between formalism and conceptualism, each pointing to indicative (but not exhaustive) methods for reuniting form and concept.

WORD COUNT

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FORMALISM IN CONTEXT: LATE MODERNISM AND ITS CRITICS

“Modernism... was the medium through which the artist discovered himself outside the concerns of the world at large.” [1]

While there are numerous cracks in this divide, the artistic artifacts (visual art, music, etc.) of modernism (and particularly self-styled “high” modernism) are generally associated with formalism, and the artifacts of postmodernism are with conceptualism. Digital media art sits in an odd place between these two poles. Due to its unique state of both being concerned with the medium of the digital and/or the technological, as well the wider external ramifications of that technology, digital media art problematizes the distinction between formalist late (“high”) modernism and conceptualist postmodernism.

While conceding that the term ‘formalism’ has complex uses and definitions depending on the artform discussed (i.e. visual art versus film versus music, etc.) and the era referred to, this paper generally considers the use of the term as applied to strict forms of late modernism, aptly described by Robert Genter as “barren formalism.” [2] More precisely the formalism of late “high” modernism, particularly in visual arts and music, can be broadly described (though perhaps not exclusively) as the reduction of art production to the basic material of its internal concerns (e.g. note selection, harmony, rhythm, dynamics, overall structure in music) in order to reveal and expand on the formal possibilities of the artform, with little or no reference to the external world. In short, in much late modernist work, form became the only preoccupation, and the only matter worthy of critical discussion and analysis.

In the late 20th Century, these notions of formalism in the arts were deconstructed by theorists and artists who were reacting to the rigidity of late modernist formalism. [3] Kendall Walton, while hardly a postmodernist, represents a critic who rejected the drive towards totalizing formalism. In his broadly influential paper “Categories of Art” he argues that the artwork always has aesthetic properties that extend beyond the formal: “A work's perceptual properties include "aesthetic" as well as "non-aesthetic" ones—the sense of mystery and tension of a painting as well as its dark coloring and diagonal composition; the energy, exuberance, and coherence of a sonata, as well as its meters, rhythms, pitches, timbres, and so forth; the balance and serenity of a Gothic cathedral as well as its dimensions, lines, and symmetries.” [4]

The rise of conceptualism in art ran roughly parallel to this anti-formalist criticism, and engendered a larger body of work that was more or less anti-formalist. A good example of this tendency is evidenced in Cindy Sherman’s conceptual photographs. In her *Untitled Film Still* series (1977-80) she deconstructed the portrayal of women in film history, self-consciously referring to the external world of fashion and celebrity culture, representing herself as a fictional screen siren. This work plainly broke with the late formalism of the American post-war art world and exemplifies conceptualism’s concern with identity, pop culture and the political, all matters anathema to late modernist formalism.

In the 1970s and the years following, a large body of both theoretical criticism and conceptual artwork reflected the anti-formalist notions of Walton, Sherman and many others, so that by the mid-1980s formalist late modernism had been almost completely displaced by postmodernism in architecture, visual art and criticism. Music was perhaps later to react, but by the 1990s contemporary music was also dominated by concerns beyond the limits of pure form.

DIGITAL MEDIA ART AS OUTLIER

In the 21st Century, formalist notions are now being re-evaluated by New Formalist theorists such as Marjorie Levinson, Jonathan Loesberg, and others. [5] This paper expands on that work, arguing for a robust reconsidering of the formal aspects of the artwork, while resisting a full-fledged return to the absolutist formalist theories that, as discussed above, were common to much of late modernism. As a general rule digital media art remained somewhat formal throughout the late 20th and early 21st Centuries, particularly in comparison with the wider contemporary art world (and certainly in comparison with conceptual art). Perhaps due to its technical and technological nature, digital media art has been (and remains) more generally concerned with the

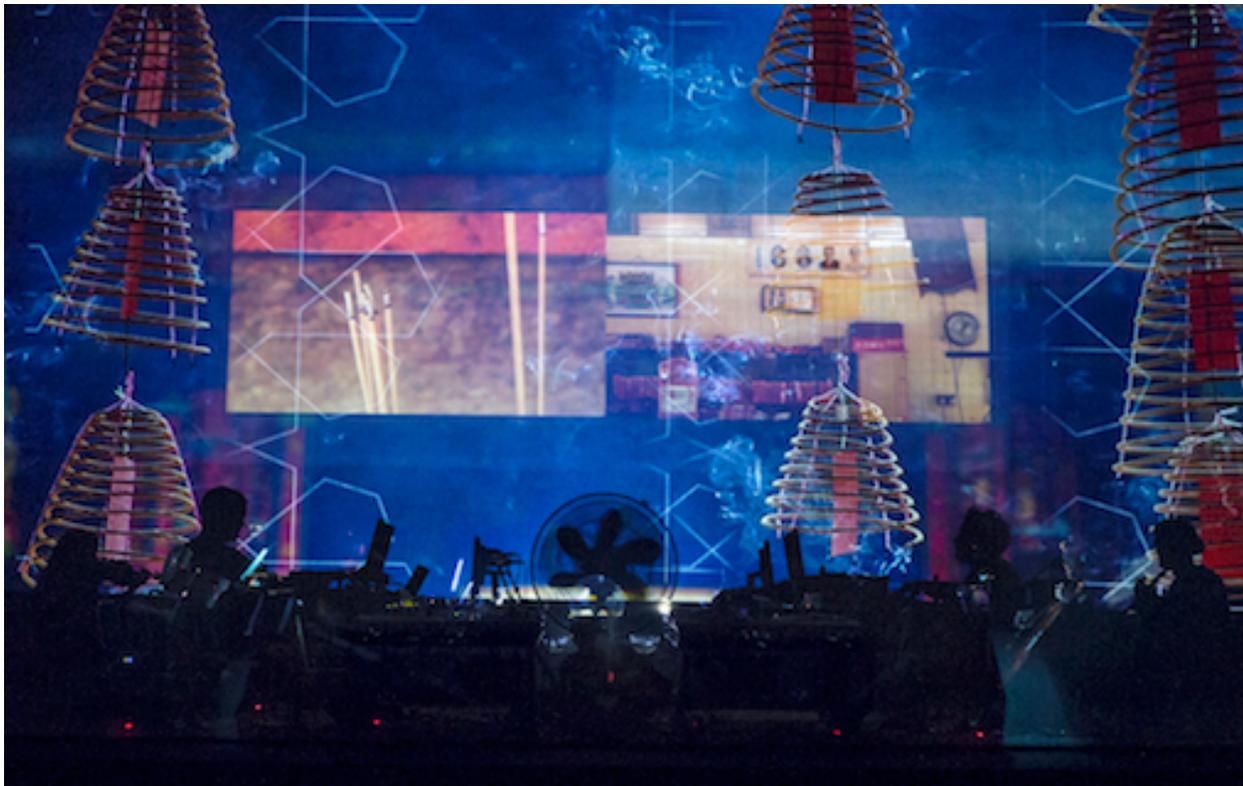


Fig. 1. The Light Surgeons, *SuperEverything**, 2013. Project commissioned by the British Council Malaysia. (© Christopher Thomas Allen. Photograph by Christopher Thomas Allen).

processes, models and structures that for much of the past 40 years were considered passé by the contemporary art world. This is particularly evident in the work of audiovisual performing artists (e.g. The Light Surgeons, see Fig. 1), as well as interactive artists who rely on narrative structures for their work (e.g. Donna Leishman).

The Light Surgeons describe their live cinema work as responding to a “brief”, often based on either a narrative strategy for a performance, or as a means of directly integrating media elements such as live music, computer graphics, lighting and live cinema. Chris Allen from The Light Surgeons describes their intention as distinct from improvised live audio-visuals in order “to create more structured work that could convey a narrative and work in the more formal, seating situation of a cinema or theatre.” [6] While it is unlikely that The Light Surgeons would describe their work as formalist, they use formal strategies in work such as *SuperEverything**, in which a structured narrative journey through Malaysia (as a result of a one-month residency there) holds together a semi-improvised audio performance with acoustic and electronic music and live visuals. A travelogue script provides a time-based means of organizing the work in a formal manner, while the content reflects on the experience of life in SE Asia from a variety of perspectives. The work of The Light Surgeons can be described as being formal without being formalist, and *SuperEverything* represents a work that overtly rejects the false dichotomy between form and concept.

FORM AND CONCEPT IN LATE MODERNISM, POSTMODERNISM AND DIGITAL MEDIA ART

As outlined above, one of the primary criticisms of late modernism levelled by various postmodernist and anti-formalist critics, is that it was primarily concerned with formal matters, to the detriment of the concept of the work and its wider social context. [7] While this notion is perhaps over-simplified, there are certainly examples in late (and again, in particular, “high”) modernism, from serialist composer Anton Webern to modernist art critic Clement Greenberg, wherein the work of art is reduced to its basic formal principles. While these two figures may seem quite distant from each other, they are united by one primary concern: that art mediums should focus on their own internal concerns, rather than on any aspects of the external world. This is evident throughout the work of Webern, in which all note choices are predetermined

mathematically using the serial technique, and any reference to narrative or external culture is strictly limited. [8] This reaches its extreme pitch in the musical work of total serialists such as Pierre Boulez in his *Structures I and II* (1952 and 1961), in which the primary meaning of the work is held in its formal mathematical properties and totalizing structure. [9]

While there are complex reasons for late modernism's formalist reductionism, and some divergent approaches that went against this tendency, it is generally evident that formalist late modernism divorced form from concept to such an extent that material content was considered irrelevant and even retrograde in some cases (i.e. Greenberg, Harold Rosenberg). Given the particular focus on "l'art pour l'art" that was common to many late modernists from Pollock to Boulez, it is unsurprising that postmodernism sought to flip this on its head and focus primarily on concept, and later on direct social engagement. There are of course cracks in this generalization: Rothko, despite being clearly a late modernist formalist, declared that the subject matter of his work was deeply important. [10]

Similarly, postmodernism, despite its general focus on "the concept," shares with all artforms a need for formal principles. This can be seen particularly in film (which may be considered a "special" artform because of its domination by narrative form). Peter Greenaway, while not strictly a formalist, is a good example of a filmmaker who embraced postmodernist notions of non-linearity and historical discontinuity, but yet produced works that are profoundly formal (e.g. *Prospero's Books*). Similarly, the photographic collages of Jeff Wall, while conceptually indebted to postmodern notions of hyperreality and temporal fissures, are produced with evident formal processes.

DIGITAL MEDIA ART AS BOTH FORMAL AND CONCEPTUAL

Despite the above listed exceptions, as suggested at the outset, it is fair to re-assert that late "high" modernism is predominantly associated with form, postmodernism with concept, and digital media art sits in an odd place between these two poles. While again there are exceptions, digital media art as a rule is simultaneously both formal and invested in the notion of the importance of the concept. There are degrees to which digital media artists balance form and concept (live audio-visualist Alva Noto would lean towards the formal, whereas Lynn Hershman

Leeson would lean towards the conceptual); however, digital (and hybrid) media art from the early 80s work of Laurie Anderson, to the 90s and early 00s work of Rafael Lozano-Hemmer, and on to the contemporary work of artists such as Alan Kwan (see Fig. 2) all have formal aspects, but do not necessarily divorce these from the concept of the work.

While the (re-)union of form and concept in digital media art is related in some ways to the post-conceptualism of 21st Century contemporary art, the fundamental difference is that digital media art never entirely discarded formal ideas, even in the height of postmodernist dominance in the 80s and 90s in which most contemporary artists from Barbara Krueger to Jeff Koons were focused on (admittedly varied) approaches to content that emphasized social critique, irony and disjuncture.



Fig. 2 – Alan Kwan’s *Bad Trip*, Screenshot, 2012. *Bad Trip* takes recorded events from his life and structurally embeds these in a game-like narrative that emphasizes the surreal connections between different aspects of his life. (© Alan Kwan).

Kwan’s *Bad Trip* (2012) is a particularly illuminating example of an extremely long-form process that informs the structure of a digital media artwork: “For over one year every moment of my life has been documented by a video camera mounted on glasses, producing an expanding

database of digitalized memories. Using custom virtual reality software, I created a virtual mindscape where people could navigate, and experience my memories and dreams during this period of my life.” [11] In *Bad Trip* the database of Kwan’s memories becomes the means of establishing the overall structure of the work, which is then experienced on screen or in a headset as a set of surreal memories linked through user selection. The strict formal idea of recording his whole life for a year is married with a conceptual notion wherein viewers and users can experience “the other” in a dramatic and immersive way. The work is clearly formal its strict recording process, but also conceptual in its surreal presentation of the artist in dream form. In a strange way *Bad Trip* can also trace back to Sherman’s *Untitled Film Stills*, though instead of reflecting on fashion and celebratory culture, it reflects on the occasionally banal, occasional strange mind of a particular type of technologically-immersed person in the 21st Century.

As argued at the beginning of this paper, the continuous (at least partial) focus on the formal in digital media art may be connected to its digital nature, in which experimentation with the materials of its creation are key. The use of new technologies often requires a directly systematic approach in order to understand the best ways to approach these as the tools to produce work. This is also evident in early photography and film, in which much of the work produced explicitly addresses the new techniques engendered by these technologies. Similarly, because much of the content of digital media art is narrative in nature (borrowed from and/or relating to gaming, film or video, or architecture) a focus on the conceptual is therefore often a given, particularly in works that use a story or a history as background to the project. A good example of this is Rafael Lozano-Hemmer and Will Bauer’s *Displaced Emperors* from 1997 (see Fig. 3).

The project references the colonial history of Austria as it relates to Lozano-Hemmer’s Mexican heritage (by transposing the interior of a Hapsburg residence in Mexico City over a Hapsburg Castle in Linz). [12] At the same time the piece uses a precise mapping system for placing images on the façade of the Hapsburg castle in precisely the same locale as the copy in Mexico. The user controls the placement of the projected image by using a hand-controlled tracker, thus allowing them to caress the building and reveal the rooms of the sister building. *Displaced Emperors* is an excellent example of a digital media art project in which form, concept, political observation and technological means are conjoined in very observable ways.

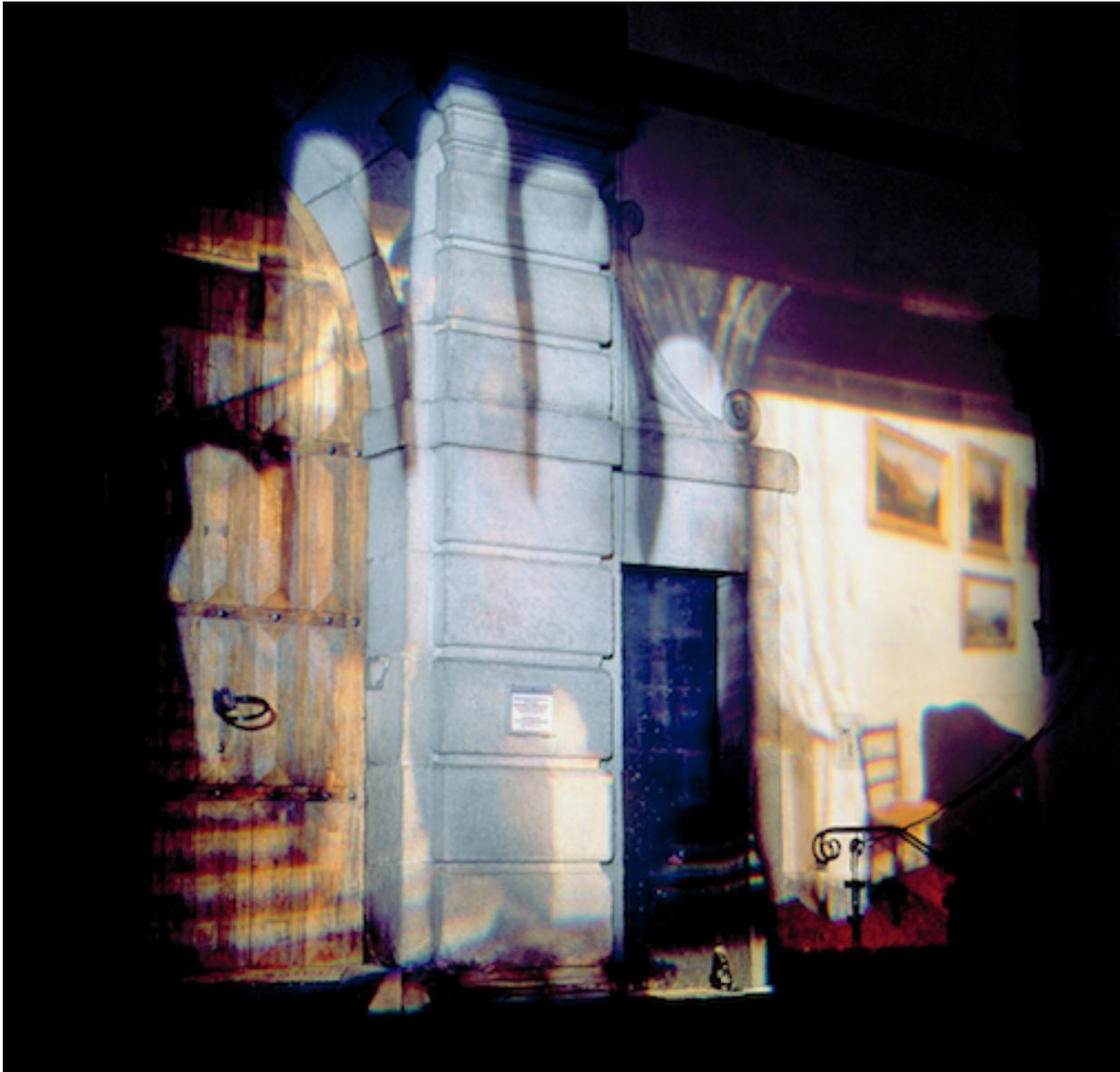


Fig. 3 - Rafael Lozano-Hemmer and Will Bauer, *Displaced Emperors, Relational Architecture 2*, 1997. Habsburg Castle, Ars Electronica Festival, Linz, Austria. (© Rafael Lozano-Hemmer and Will Bauer. Photo by Antimodular Research – Rafael Lozano-Hemmer and Will Bauer).

BEING FORMAL WITHOUT BEING A FORMALIST

What are the benefits of being formal without being a formalist? While formalist rigidity might have been overly absolutist in some late modernist art, it is equally true that the anti-formalism of much postmodernist-influenced culture is fundamentally unsatisfying as both exemplar and artifact. Discussions of craft skill and formal rigor have often been displaced by an over-focus on the personal and political. As stated at the outset, digital media art has to some degree avoided

this descent into conceptual excess (though there are certainly some notable exceptions to this). Craft and technique have almost always featured at every major digital media art event, either as a topic of discussion or as evidenced in the works shown. In digital media art theory, it could also be argued that seminal texts such as Lev Manovich's *The Language of New Media* are deeply concerned with the formal. For example, Manovich's references to "database cinema" place him in a trajectory from Russian montage film theory to present-day media theory. [13] A re-focus on craft and form, without insisting on the totalizing rigidity of some forms of late modernism, has the obvious benefits of allowing for work with deeper rigor, more complex readings, and more lasting appeal as artifact, while simultaneously acknowledging the deep human need for conceptual and personal content in any artwork.

FORMAL STRATEGIES THAT ARE NOT FORMALIST

It is possible to be formal without insisting on the need for totalizing formalist models. Many digital media artists have created and/or adapted individually-applied models for structuring their work, including models based on synesthesia (audio-visual performance), non-linear narrative (e-lit and game art), montage (live cinema), among many others. While there is a commonality in how these models are employed in the creation of work, there are very few (if any) digital media artists arguing for a totalizing theory of formalism for art production.

The ways in which the above strategies are employed are obviously varied, but there are some similarities to their approaches: for example, in audio-visual performance the condition of synesthesia is often used as a metaphor for creating binding links between audio and visual materials. In this case a database of relationships is often built-up between audio and visual parameters. This database is used to give structural coherence to the work, and to create a sense of both formal unity and aesthetic meaning for the audience. Table 1 shows a simple, indicative, standardized database for audio-visual mapping.

This and other such systems have the advantage of creating a logic for both the artist and the audience, and can also be tied to how content is conceptually made sense of in a work. For instance, using Table 1 as an example within an interactive installation, reverb could be applied to the audio and blur to visuals when audience members are at a distance from each other. As

they move closer together, the sound would become drier and the visuals would come into focus. In this simple case, the formal use of these synchronized audio-visual effects would assist in the users' interaction with each other, but would also conceptually reflect on the notion of distance within digital space. The technology and the form would therefore reinforce the concept of the work in an observable and aesthetically satisfying manner.

Table 1 - Steve Gibson, "Indicative Audio-Visual Mappings," 2019. This table speculates on a mapping strategy that could be used to match audio and visual actions in an audio-visual performance or a mixed-media installation. The parameters are paired according to their related characteristics and could be used as a tool for generating micro interactions and macro formal structure.

Audio parameter	Visual parameter
Volume	Opacity
Pan	Horizontal (x) screen position
Note On (note 0-127)	Clip select (clip 0-127)
Distortion	Noise
Resonance	Saturation
Reverb	Blur
Low-Pass Filter	Brightness

BEING FORMAL AND CONCEPTUAL ARE NOT MUTUALLY EXCLUSIVE

As I have illustrated in the most basic manner, form and concept are not mutually exclusive. This was never really in doubt, but the false choice presented by the extremes of rigidly formalist late modernism and agenda-driven postmodernism now seem archaic and ultimately pointless. In addition, the means of (digital or material) production need not be divorced from a discussion of the (digital media and fine) artwork: those means can provide fertile ground for both formal organization and conceptual insight.

This paper has touched on only a few examples of how the (digital media) artwork can be (or has been) made formal without being formalist. In the future we can expect to see examples of works that use ever more advanced schemes for organizing the (digital media) artwork, including those grounded in AI behaviors, simulation theory and audio-visual synchronization. Simultaneously we can expect that those formal theories can and will be united with the conceptual insights

created through their use. This can only have the effect of creating work that is deeper in terms of lasting meaning, richer for the audience and more satisfying as a long-term method of production for the artist.

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BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Steve Gibson is Associate Professor in Innovative Digital Media at Northumbria University. He is a digital media artist, interface designer, and electronic musician. His work has been presented at many world-leading venues including Ars Electronica, the Whitney Museum of American Art, Banff Centre for the Arts, the European Media Arts Festival, ISEA, and Cabaret Voltaire, Zurich. His published work has appeared in Leonardo Electronic Almanac, Springer, St. Martin's Press, and MIT Press. His co-authored book *Live Visuals: History, Theory, Practice* will be published by Routledge in 2021. He is currently working with Northern Dance, Newcastle on a large-scale movement-based audio-visual project, *Ephemera*.