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THE ONTO-AESTHETICS OF CODE: ART, TECHNOLOGY AND THE QUESTION OF THE REAL

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Abstract: The rapid expansion of algorithmic systems, artificial intelligence, and immersive media has fundamentally reconfigured the relationship between art, technology, and reality. This article develops the concept of the onto-aesthetics of code to examine how digital systems no longer merely mediate artistic production but actively constitute the conditions of aesthetic experience and being. Drawing on the philosophical frameworks of Heidegger, Baudrillard, and Stiegler, the author argues that code operates as an ontological structure that reshapes perception, authorship, and materiality in contemporary culture. Through a critical analysis of generative art, virtual reality, and AI-generated imagery, this research demonstrates how digital aesthetics displace traditional categories such as aura, originality, and embodiment, replacing them with processual, recursive, and interactive forms of engagement. Rather than marking the end of aesthetic philosophy, these developments demand its renewal and transformation. The article concludes that digital art inaugurates a new ontological regime in which simulation, affect, algorithmic processes, and computational environments redefine the nature of the real and expand the possibilities of artistic creation today.

Keywords: *Affective Interfaces, Algorithmic Creativity, Digital Art, Onto-Aesthetics, Philosophy of Technology, Posthuman Aesthetics, Technological Aesthetics, Virtuality and the Real.*

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1. Introduction

The accelerating integration of algorithmic systems into cultural production has profoundly unsettled traditional assumptions about art, creativity and reality. From AI-generated images to immersive virtual environments, artistic practices are no longer confined to human intentionality or material form but increasingly emerge from computational processes, data flows and interactive systems. This shift raises a fundamental philosophical question: what happens to aesthetics when code becomes the primary condition of artistic creation? This article advances the concept of the onto-aesthetics of code to address this question. It argues that digital technologies do not simply extend artistic practice but reconfigure its ontological foundations. In this context, code is not a neutral tool but a structuring logic that shapes how reality is produced, perceived and experienced. Aesthetics, therefore, must be reconsidered not as the study of representation alone, but as an inquiry into the conditions under which forms, affects and meanings come into being within computational environments.

To develop this argument, the paper engages three major philosophical trajectories. First, drawing on Heidegger's concept of *technē*, it situates digital code within a broader history of world-disclosure, arguing that contemporary technologies transform the very mode through which reality appears. Second, through Stiegler's notion of technics and Baudrillard's theory of simulation, it examines how algorithmic systems blur the boundaries between representation and production, giving rise to new forms of hyperreality. Third, it analyses contemporary digital practices—including generative art and virtual environments—to demonstrate how aesthetic experience is increasingly processual, participatory and system-driven. The central claim of this research is that digital art does not merely represent the real but actively produces new ontological regimes. In doing so, it challenges inherited distinctions between human and machine, original and copy, and reality and simulation. Rather than signaling the exhaustion of aesthetics, this transformation calls for its redefinition as a critical engagement with the technological conditions of contemporary existence.

2. *Technē*, Art and the Being of the Digital

The proliferation of algorithms, neural networks and immersive simulations necessitates a renewed examination of the philosophical category of *technē*. In classical Greek thought, *technē* denoted a mode of knowing oriented toward making—a form of *poiesis* through which something emerged into presence. However, in a computational environment where code not only supports but autonomously generates, transforms and reproduces aesthetic forms, the meaning of *technē* undergoes a fundamental shift. The question is no longer whether technology assists artistic creation, but how digital code reconfigures the ontological conditions under which art comes into being. To address this transformation, it is essential to analyze how *technē* mutates under computational logic and to trace its implications for authorship, materiality and aesthetic disclosure. A crucial point of departure is Martin Heidegger's essay, "*The Question Concerning Technology*", where he analyses technology as a mode of revealing. For Heidegger, *technē* in its original sense is inseparable from *poiesis*, a process of "bringing-forth" through which truth is disclosed. Art, in this framework, is not merely an object but an event of revelation—a site where worlds are opened and meaning emerges. However, modern technology departs from this model. It operates through what Heidegger terms *enframing* (*Gestell*), a mode of ordering that renders the world as *Bestand*, or standing reserve—something to be calculated, stored and controlled. This shift is not merely technical but ontological: the world no longer reveals itself but is structured in advance as something manipulable (24).

Digital code exemplifies this transformation. As a system of executable instructions, it does not simply mediate artistic production but structures the very conditions of aesthetic emergence. Art, in this context, becomes increasingly programmable, reproducible, and detached from singular human intentionality. Crucially, this is not a matter of tools alone. As Heidegger insists, the essence of technology lies in its mode of disclosure, shaping how beings appear and how reality is understood. Digital technologies must therefore be conceived not as neutral instruments, but as ontological frameworks that co-

determine perception, representation and creation. The contemporary artist working with generative systems or virtual environments does not merely use technology but operates within a regime defined by recursion, simulation and abstraction. This ontological shift is particularly evident in the transformation of materiality and presence. Traditional artworks are embedded in specific spatial and temporal contexts, and their material presence is central to their aesthetic experience. Digital artworks, by contrast, are characterized by immateriality and infinite reproducibility. They exist not as singular objects but as distributed processes across networks and computational systems. In this regard, Walter Benjamin's account of the decline of aura acquires renewed significance. The digital object not only loses its uniqueness but challenges the very notion of originality, as it exists only through indistinguishable copies without a fixed origin.

Yet this loss does not necessarily entail aesthetic impoverishment. Rather, it signals a relocation of aesthetic experience from object to process. Digital artworks are increasingly procedural: they unfold through execution, iteration and variation. The work is not a fixed entity but a generative system that produces different outcomes under varying conditions. In such cases, aesthetic value resides not in the final form but in the logic of becoming. This is particularly evident in generative art, where algorithms produce outputs through probabilistic models, emphasizing emergence over completion. Consequently, the role of the artist is redefined. Instead of producing a finished object, the artist becomes a designer of systems—a "meta-creator" who constructs the conditions under which artworks emerge. This shift destabilizes traditional categories of authorship, intentionality and aesthetic judgment. It raises fundamental questions: can beauty be attributed to the output, to the underlying code, or to the interaction between system and observer? Such questions point toward an expanded understanding of aesthetics, one that accommodates distributed and non-human forms of creativity.

Bernard Stiegler's theory of technics provides a critical framework for interpreting this development. In his *Technics and*

Time, Stiegler contends that human existence is always already technical, constituted through externalized systems of memory, perception, and desire. This process, which he terms *epiphylogenesis*, suggests that human evolution extends beyond biological limits through technical prostheses (175). From this perspective, digital code is not a rupture but an intensification of this condition—a form of exosomatic memory that extends not only cognition but creativity itself. Artistic production thus becomes inseparable from technical systems that shape its temporal and ontological structure. This transformation also reconfigures the temporality of art. Whereas traditional artworks unfold within linear time—from creation to reception—digital works operate within recursive and dynamic temporalities. Generative systems evolve continuously, often in response to real-time data or user interaction. Virtual environments produce feedback loops in which the spectator becomes an active participant. Time is no longer a passive framework but an operative dimension of the artwork itself. As a result, the artwork shifts from object to system, raising a fundamental ontological question: what does it mean for art to exist when it is defined by continuous variation rather than stable form?

Jean Baudrillard's theory of simulation further illuminates this condition. In his opinion, the modern culture is dominated by signs that refer only to other signs and not to reality. As a result, the distinction between reality and representation collapses into what Baudrillard calls 'hyperreality' (1–3). Digital art exemplifies this logic. When artificial intelligence generates images indistinguishable from human-made works, or when virtual environments simulate immersive worlds, representation gives way to simulation—the production of a "real" without origin. In such contexts, aesthetic experience is no longer grounded in authenticity or material presence but in circulation, interaction and affective intensity. From this perspective, digital artworks do not represent the world; they generate it. The ontology of art thus shifts from expression to production, from object to process, and from subject-centred creation to distributed systems of interaction. Art becomes an emergent phenomenon arising from the interplay of code, hardware, networks, and users. This does

not imply a loss of meaning but the emergence of a new aesthetic paradigm—one that accommodates procedural, synthetic, and post-human forms of creativity.

However, this transformation is not without ethical implications. As aesthetic production becomes entangled with data extraction, algorithmic bias, and platform economies, the aesthetic domain intersects with structures of power and control. The question of aesthetic truth can no longer be separated from the political and economic conditions embedded within technological systems. To engage with digital aesthetics is therefore also to engage critically with the values and assumptions inscribed in code. At the same time, these technologies open new possibilities for artistic experimentation and philosophical reflection. Artificial intelligence challenges the boundaries of authorship and creativity; virtual reality redefines embodiment and perception; blockchain technologies raise questions about value and ownership. Rather than negating art's traditional role as a mode of revealing, these developments radicalize it. They compel a rethinking of truth, reality, and aesthetic experience within a world increasingly shaped by computational processes.

3. Algorithmic Imagination and The Paradox of Machine Creativity

Creativity, long regarded as a defining attribute of human subjectivity, now occupies a contested space in the age of algorithmic systems. The emergence of artificial intelligence, machine learning, and generative models compels a re-evaluation of creativity as an exclusively human capacity grounded in intention, originality, and self-reflection. As computational systems increasingly produce images, texts, and sounds that exhibit novelty and aesthetic coherence, the question is no longer whether machines can imitate creativity, but how creativity itself must be redefined within a distributed technological environment. Within the Kantian aesthetic framework, creativity is closely linked to the notion of genius—the capacity to produce that for which no determinate rule can be given (*Critique of* Judgment, 175). Artistic creation, in this sense, is not reducible to

technical skill or rule-following but involves the spontaneous generation of form through the free play of imagination and understanding. At first glance, algorithmic systems appear to contradict this model. Machine learning operates through pattern recognition, statistical inference and training on pre-existing datasets, suggesting a form of computational *mimesis* rather than genuine invention. However, this apparent limitation invites a reconsideration of creativity itself. Rather than viewing it as the product of isolated human subjectivity, creativity may be understood as an emergent process arising from complex systems. In this regard, the philosophy of Gilles Deleuze offers a productive framework. For Deleuze, creation does not emerge ex nihilo but through the actualization of virtual potentials—fields of possibility that are realized through processes of differentiation (Deleuze, 216). From this perspective, algorithmic systems can be seen as sites of such differentiation, generating novel forms through iterative variation and recombination across vast datasets. The creativity of the machine, therefore, lies not in autonomy from prior material but in the capacity to produce unexpected configurations within a structured field of possibilities.

This shift from individual to distributed creativity is further illuminated by Gilbert Simondon's account of technical objects as dynamic entities that evolve through processes of individuation (339). For Simondon, technical systems are not passive tools but active participants in processes of becoming. Applied to algorithmic art, this suggests that creativity is not located solely in the human artist or the machine, but in the relational interaction between programmer, system, data, and environment. The artwork emerges as an event within this network, rather than as the expression of a singular authorial intention. Such a perspective fundamentally destabilizes traditional aesthetic categories. Concepts such as authorship, originality, and expression—historically grounded in human agency—become increasingly ambiguous in the context of algorithmic production. When a neural network generates an image or a language model produces a poem, the locus of creativity is dispersed across multiple layers: the training data, the

algorithmic architecture, the computational process and the interpretive engagement of the viewer. The artwork is no longer a bounded object but a field of relations, shaped by interactions between human and non-human agencies.

This transformation also necessitates a rethinking of aesthetic judgment. Classical aesthetics presupposes a reflective subject who evaluates the artwork through sensuous and cognitive engagement. Yet algorithmically generated works may operate beyond the full comprehension of their creators, introducing forms that are neither entirely intentional nor entirely random. In such cases, aesthetic evaluation must account for processes that exceed human control, giving rise to what may be described as a form of machinic or posthuman sensibility. The artwork becomes less an expression of meaning than an event of emergence, inviting interpretation without being fully grounded in authorial intention.

At the same time, the rise of algorithmic creativity reconfigures the role of the spectator. In many digital environments, the viewer is no longer a passive observer but an active participant. Interactive installations, generative systems, and adaptive interfaces produce aesthetic experiences that unfold through user engagement. This participatory dimension resonates with relational approaches to aesthetics, where the artwork is defined less by its objecthood than by the interactions it generates. This shift from spectatorship to participation reflects Nicolas Bourriaud's concept of "relational aesthetics," in which art is constituted through the relations it produces among individuals (9). In digital contexts, these interactions extend beyond human relations to include human–machine and system–environment dynamics, creating hybrid spaces of aesthetic experience.

Despite these possibilities, the celebration of algorithmic creativity must be tempered by critical awareness of its limitations. As scholars of digital culture have noted, algorithmic systems often reproduce the biases and structures embedded in their training data. Rather than producing radical novelty, they may reinforce dominant aesthetic norms under the guise of innovation (Chun, 71-73). Creativity, in such contexts, risks becoming a form of controlled variation—what critical theory has

described as 'pseudo-individuation' (Adorno, 125)—where difference is simulated within pre-established parameters. Moreover, the integration of algorithmic systems into platform economies introduces further constraints. Creative outputs are increasingly shaped by logics of optimization, visibility and monetization, linking aesthetic production with market imperatives. The result is a tension between the generative potential of computational systems and their incorporation into regimes of control and commodification. The question of creativity, therefore, cannot be separated from broader issues of power, access and representation. Whose data is used? Whose aesthetic forms are amplified? And whose voices remain excluded? These questions are essential for formulating a critical ontology of digital creation. In response to these conditions, contemporary artistic practices have begun to critically engage with the limits of algorithmic systems. Techniques such as glitch art and aesthetics (Fig. 1), adversarial interventions and data manipulation expose the underlying structures of computation by disrupting their expected outputs. These practices reveal that creativity in the digital age is not only a matter of generation but also of interruption—an ability to challenge and reconfigure the systems that shape perception.

This critical dimension suggests a broader reconceptualization of imagination itself. Rather than being confined to the interiority of the human mind, imagination can be understood as distributed across networks of human and technical processes. Algorithmic systems participate in this expanded field, contributing to the production of new forms, affects and possibilities. The result is not the replacement of human creativity, but its transformation into a relational and ecological phenomenon—one that emerges through the dynamic interplay of cognition, computation, and culture. In this sense, the paradox of machine creativity does not lie in whether machines can truly create, but in how their presence compels a redefinition of creativity as such. The aesthetic field becomes a space of negotiation between human intention and algorithmic operation, between control and emergence, and between repetition and difference. What emerges from this negotiation is not a

diminished conception of art, but an expanded one—capable of accommodating the complexities of a world in which creativity is no longer exclusively human, but irreducibly hybrid.

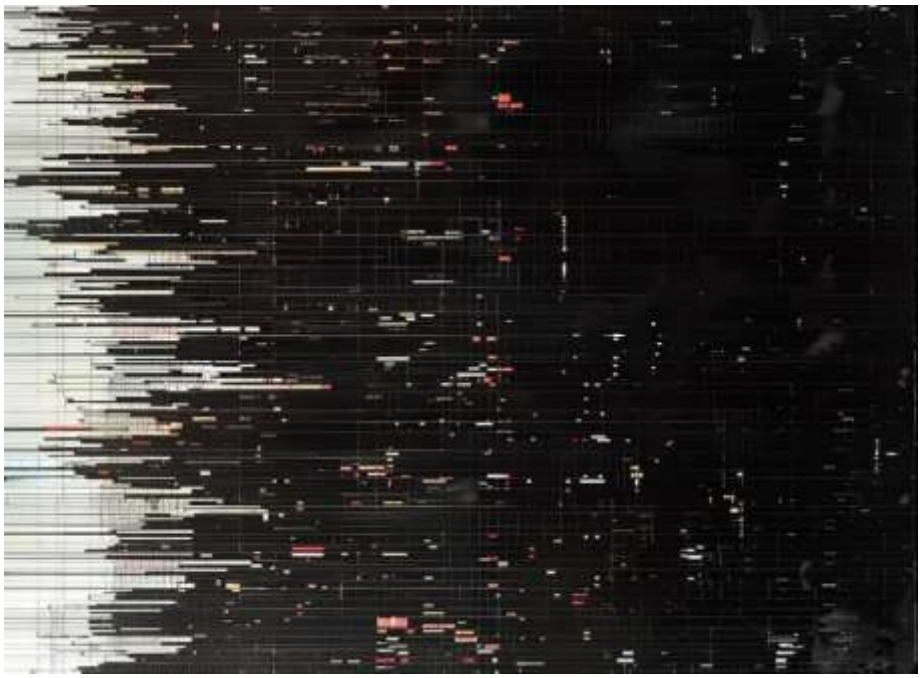

Figure 1 Glitch art Image from Aberrant Realities by Jordan Garner from Pixabay

4. Digital Ontologies and the Future of Aesthetic Experience

As argued in the preceding sections, the relationship between technology and art has reached a critical threshold at which technology no longer merely mediates aesthetic experience but actively co-constitutes it. In immersive environments such as virtual reality (VR), augmented reality (AR), and interactive digital installations, the traditional distinction between viewer and artwork dissolves into a dynamic field where perception, cognition, and embodiment are reconfigured. These developments do not simply expand artistic tools; they fundamentally transform the ontological conditions under which aesthetic experience occurs. Classical and modern aesthetic theories typically grounded experience in the presence of the object and the immediacy of sensuous perception.

Phenomenological traditions—from Edmund Husserl to Maurice Merleau-Ponty—emphasized intentional consciousness and embodied perception as the basis of aesthetic life. For Merleau-Ponty, aesthetic experience unfolds within the "flesh of the world," a chiasmic relation in which subject and object, seer and seen, are intertwined (Ponty, 144). However, in digitally mediated environments, this reciprocity is no longer given but constructed. The world does not precede the subject as a stable horizon; rather, it emerges dynamically through computational processes responsive to user input. Reality, in this sense, becomes contingent, programmable, and ontologically unstable.

Virtual environments exemplify this shift. When engaging with VR, one does not merely observe a representation but inhabits a constructed field of sensibility generated in real time through code. These environments often lack a direct referent in the physical world; they exist as performative renderings sustained by continuous computation. Brian Massumi's notion of the "autonomy of affect" is instructive here, describing how such experiences operate at a pre-cognitive level, directly modulating sensation and intensity (Massumi, 35). Aesthetic experience thus becomes a feedback loop between human perception and technological systems—a hybrid process that blurs the boundaries between embodiment and computation, presence and simulation. This transformation resonates strongly with Jean Baudrillard's theory of simulation as the "precession of simulacra." In digitally saturated environments, images no longer refer to an external reality but generate their own autonomous regimes of meaning (Baudrillard, 1). Digital artworks, particularly immersive installations, do not represent the world; they produce alternative ontologies governed by internal logics and affective structures. Works such as *Rising* by Marina Abramović and *Chalkroom*[*] (Fig.2) by Laurie Anderson and Hsin-Chien Huang

[*] Chalkroom is a virtual reality creation by Laurie Anderson and Hsin-Chien Huang in which the viewer navigates a vast architecture composed of words, drawings, and stories. Upon entering, one is free to wander and fly as words drift through the space like emails—disintegrating into dust, then gathering again into new forms.

exemplify this shift. These installations do not merely depict reality but stage experiential worlds in which participants encounter ethically and emotionally charged environments. Such works are not symbolic representations but forms of "machinic worlding," generating new modes of subjectivity through immersion and interaction.

Figure 2: Visual from Chalkroom

Consequently, aesthetic experience moves beyond representation into the domain of *ontogenesis*—the production of modes of being. If reality itself becomes increasingly programmable, then aesthetic practice assumes an ontological function: it does not simply reflect the world but actively participates in its formation. Art, in this context, becomes a site where new configurations of reality, perception and subjectivity are experimentally produced. This "ontological rewiring"* also necessitates a rethinking of the body. Early discourses on digital culture often foregrounded disembodiment, imagining cyberspace as an escape from physical constraints. Contemporary

* The idea of "ontological rewiring" draws on Bernard Stiegler's work on technics, where technology is understood not as external to human experience but as its condition of emergence. Cf: Stiegler, *Technics and Time, 1*, 1998.

practices, however, emphasize re-embodiment through technological mediation. Haptic interfaces, motion capture systems and neural feedback mechanisms reintegrate the body into digital circuits, not as a residual element but as a central medium of interaction. The body becomes an interface—an active site through which digital environments are sensed, navigated and constituted. This is particularly evident in generative installations or interactive environments (or in VR) where the outcome depends on user input, environmental conditions, or randomization algorithms.

At the same time, digital aesthetics disrupts traditional temporal frameworks. Rather than unfolding within linear, chronological time, digital artworks operate within recursive, event-based temporalities characterized by feedback, iteration and unpredictability. Generative systems and interactive environments produce outcomes contingent on user input, environmental variables, or algorithmic processes. The artwork is thus not a fixed entity but an evolving event, continuously redefined through its execution. Aesthetic experience becomes temporally heterogeneous, immersive, and processual.

These transformations carry significant cultural and political implications. Digital aesthetics does not merely mirror reality; it functions as a site of cultural production, memory formation and critical intervention. Immersive media enable the construction of alternative narratives and identities that challenge dominant historical and ideological frameworks. Projects such as *Virtual Holocaust Memorial* (Fig 3) and *Digital Black Atlantic* operate as forms of what Alison Landsberg terms "prosthetic memory," allowing individuals to engage affectively with experiences they have not directly lived (Landsberg, 2). In such contexts, aesthetic experience becomes an ethical encounter—one that fosters empathy, reflection, and critical awareness. However, these emancipatory potentials are inseparable from structures of power and control. The same technologies that enable new aesthetic possibilities also underpin systems of surveillance, behavioural prediction, and economic extraction. Immersive advertising, algorithmic curation and gamified interfaces transform aesthetic experience into a domain of commodification and attention

capture. As Jonathan Crary argues in *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep*, contemporary digital culture seeks to eliminate intervals of rest and reflection, saturating perception with continuous stimuli designed to maximize engagement and productivity (19).

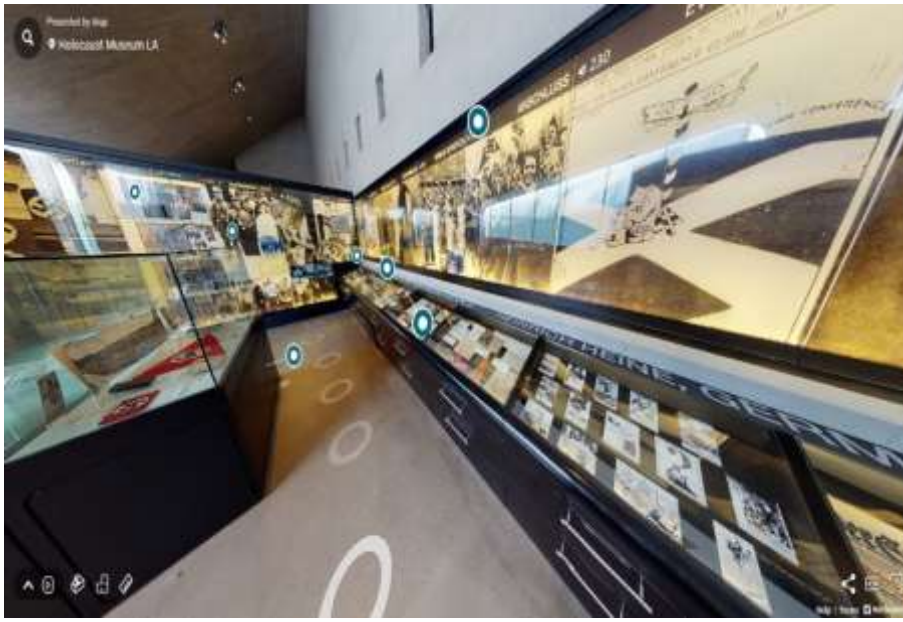

Figure 2. A scene from the virtual Holocaust Memorial in the Holocaust Museum, Los Angeles

The digital aesthetic thus exists within a fundamental tension: it is simultaneously a site of creative liberation and a mechanism of biopolitical governance. This duality underscores the philosophical urgency of rethinking aesthetic experience in the digital age. The critical task is not only to define what digital art is, but to interrogate what it does—how it reconfigures our modes of being-in-the-world, how it enables or constrains forms of life, and how it might open spaces for new forms of thought, affect and action. In an era where reality is increasingly coded and sensation engineered; aesthetics emerges as a form of critical ontology. It becomes a means of questioning not only what we perceive, but how we perceive—and ultimately, what it means to feel, to experience and to exist within technologically mediated worlds.

5. Conclusion

The question that motivates this inquiry—whether technology constitutes a boon or a bane for art and creativity—ultimately resists resolution within binary terms. Rather than yielding a definitive judgment, it compels a shift in perspective: from evaluative opposition to ontological interrogation. Technology can no longer be understood merely as an external instrument applied to artistic practice; it has become a constitutive condition of possibility for the production of art, subjectivity, and meaning. In this sense, it operates not simply as a medium, but as a co-author of reality itself, shaping how we create, perceive, and experience the world.

This insight lies at the core of an onto-aesthetic framework. Digital systems—algorithms, virtual environments, and AI-generated forms—do not merely represent reality; they actively participate in its construction. Aesthetics, therefore, can no longer be confined to questions of style or representation; it must be understood as constitutive of modes of being. Art, in this expanded sense, is no longer a mirror of the real but a laboratory for its continual reconfiguration. The entanglement of art and code reveals reality not as a fixed given, but as a dynamic process of becoming—plural, contingent, and perpetually in formation.

From this perspective, digital art is not an object but an event: an emergent process in which perception, affect, and meaning are co-produced through interactions between human and non-human agents. The artwork becomes an environment, a system, and a field of relations that draws the participant into the act of world-making itself. Yet this generative capacity is inseparable from asymmetries of power. The same infrastructures that enable creativity, participation, and experimentation also facilitate surveillance, commodification, and behavioural control. Digital aesthetics thus unfolds within a tension between emancipation and domination, innovation and capture. This tension foregrounds the fundamentally political character of contemporary aesthetic experience. As technological systems increasingly organize perception and affect, the task of art is not only to create but to critically intervene. Practices that expose algorithmic bias, disrupt computational logics, or repurpose

digital systems enact more than aesthetic innovation; they constitute forms of ontological resistance. In this context, a critical aesthetic praxis becomes indispensable—one that reclaims the digital not merely as a site of spectacle, but as a space for dissonance, reflection, and transformative reimagining.

At the same time, the categories that once structured aesthetic theory—real and virtual, human and machine, artist and tool—are becoming increasingly untenable. What emerges in their place are hybrid configurations: interfacial subjectivities, algorithmic intimacies, and technologically mediated forms of embodiment. These are not metaphorical constructs but lived realities in which creativity unfolds through negotiation with distributed agencies, from datasets and algorithms to sensors and networks. Aesthetic experience, accordingly, demands a reorientation toward process over product, affect over object, and relational experience over isolated interpretation. The implication is not that art is subsumed by technology, nor that technology is reducible to artistic expression. Rather, their entanglement marks a transformation in the philosophical status of both. If art has historically served as a means of making sense of the world, digital aesthetics reveals that such sense-making is irreducibly technological, ontological, and political. The future of creativity, therefore, does not lie in either resisting or uncritically embracing technological systems, but in cultivating an ethics of the interface—an approach that understands art as a practice of being-with: with machines, with code, and with others in an increasingly mediated reality.

To code is to construct worlds; to engage with code is to inhabit them. If algorithms are recognized as sites of decision and value, then each computational act carries metaphysical significance. Under these conditions, onto-aesthetics emerges not as a specialized discourse, but as a defining philosophical orientation of our time—one that seeks to understand, critique, and reimagine the conditions under which reality itself is produced and experienced.

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