TITLE GLITCH ART

glitch n. (dictionary.com)

1.

AUTHOR JONAS DOWNEY UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS



- A minor malfunction, mishap, or technical problem; a snag: *a computer* glitch; a navigational glitch; a glitch in the negotiations.
- 2. A false or spurious electronic signal caused by a brief, unwanted surge of electric power.
- 3. <u>Astronomy</u>. A sudden change in the period of rotation of a neutron star.

Tony Scott, a mathematician/artist/VJ based in Cambridge, UK, operates the website *Glitch Art* (located at http://www.beflix.com). The site is a storage container, method of presentation, and self-named genre for Scott's visual experiments, most of which are static images created from computer "glitches": crashes, mistakes, or other unexpected technological snafus.

The name "Glitch Art" is, in itself, a slight misnomer. Many pieces are more intentional than random – Scott's fascination runs so deep that he is often moved to generate such chaos on his own, by feeding information to computer programs in a form they aren't meant to receive or manipulate.

So, is Glitch Art actually Art? I'm intrigued by the question of how a glitch might be viewed within an art context.

At first glance, the work's blocky, low-res aesthetics appear formally reminiscent of the most geometric of modernist abstract art, particularly the rectangular forms of de Stijl works like Mondrian's earlier composition pieces and some Bauhaus or Expressionist works of Klee, Rothko, and Kandinsky.

These artists avoided direct visual representations of figurative reality, in favor of experiments in spontaneity, absolutes, or studies in form, color, or shape. Glitch art, however, is fundamentally representational in concept, since most glitches are direct depictions of (mangeled) data. At face value, this would seem to be a significant difference between to the two genres; but the problem with this comparison arises upon consideration of what the term "representation" means in the digital (encoded) space. In a digital context, representation refers not to the traditional definition – an image or likeness of a physical object – but rather to a new definition: an image or likeness of immaterial information. Perhaps even more importantly, Scott relinquishes some control of the visual outcome of his work. As the abstract artist sought meaning in the visual organization of formal elements, Scott seeks meaning in "seeing" chunks of data; hence, the data defines the ultimate appearance of the piece. In determining whether the visual similarities to abstract art are mere coincidence, the evidence of the glitch artist's hand is vague but essential:

I do change the colours of the glitches (to make them fit my warped sense of aesthetic), but I never edit the structure, other than cropping and stretching horizontally or vertically. Remember, you cannot have half a pixel!"

Scott allows himself some liberties with the aesthetics of each piece, but this is a consideration secondary to an idealistic preservation of the data's integrity. This self-imposed restriction could work like a rulebook for creating glitch art – this is reminiscent of Neoplasticism's resistance of literal (object-driven) reality in favor of absolutes. Color choice and form were philosophically elevated as tenets, such that the artist could work only within a specific set of limitations (primary colors or non-colors, rectangular planes, non-symmetric aesthetic balance.) Glitch art is perhaps even further constrained in form; the artist's role is in seeking a glitch and applying color decisions to the result. Maybe, then, glitch art is a new notch in the modernist's belt; a not-so-distant relative of contemporary art practices.

TITLE GLITCH ART

JONAS DOWNEY UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS How should one read glitch works? Is it important to understand the data sources? As a signifier of data, glitch art is often so obtuse that most casual viewers would not have the technical savvy to fully understand the processes and sources of the information they are seeing. Some pieces are not explained at all. In this way, glitch art shares some perceivable elitism with that of traditional gallery art practice, but it is a different type of elite – hacker elite.

Thus, the viewer's experience with a glitch art piece involves a personal awareness of computing and technology. Some of the work requires just menial technological experience – any child of the 80's would recognize the familiar blips and digital warps that might arise from an incorrectly-loaded Nintendo cartridge. But the aesthetic and conceptual beauty of a visualized Unix core dump (a copy of the contents of memory used by a computing process) is limited to those with the background to understand it.

Accessibility (or lack thereof) is unfortunately the pratfall in this work. There is an undeniable voyeuristic potential in the practice of rooting around inside random-access memory, looking for bits of email messages and fragments of images stowed away as distant reminders of the machine's (and its users') past. The work is at its most successful when the data alone has some significance, and layers of encoding are decoded, deconstructed, and spread out like scraps. The stories that develop are a mash of technical jargon and personal information – it is as if a surgeon has dissected a cyborg's brain and the viewer has the chance to play connect-the-dots.

These moments point toward a potentially mainstream audience – when social, personal, and (at times) political subjects enter the fray, casual viewers can find nuggets to explore alongside the artist. Although the subject matter of many of the images may appeal only to the technically-inclined, the overall body of work portrays a compelling search for beauty and art in code.

