

Artistic Software for Dummies and, by the way, Thoughts About the New World Order

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What is artistic software?

Artistic software is, first and foremost, software created for purposes different than traditional pragmatic ones. Such programs are not seen as tools for the production and manipulation of digital objects - from online bank accounts to works of art - they are works of art in their own right.

The emergence of this phenomenon is first of all due to the overall spread of software - commercial, proprietary programs as well as open source - and its introduction into all spheres of human activity. Software has always been seen as a neutral tool, tending to become a transparent medium for information processing, and a most comfortable one at that. Software and the products created with its help have always been considered not only to belong to totally different areas but even to be non-comparable. In most cases, an individual piece of software is thought to be completely interchangeable with a competing product without any effect on the result.

Such an approach assumes several stereotypical and false premises. First, software is not a “transparent” tool for the creation and processing of the digital product. It defines a quite limited space, within a specific framework in which people are required to work. Thus it persistently forces people to keep to certain, pre-defined rules. In addition to the limitations of using computer programs there is also a certain predetermined position - a creative, social, even political one - into which the software user is put, not so much by the software’s creators, but by more general power structures: the culture of software creation and media culture as a whole. And this, in turn, depends on the dominant social rules, which will be touched upon in this article. More and more people are finding these limitations not only uncomfortable but also boring and authoritarian. Second, the overall “digitalisation” of reality makes software, the basis of the functioning of digital space, increasingly important as such.

Rationality and Western civilization

The general and recently accelerating change in the world moves toward its deeper rationalisation. The forms, the methods of functioning of the society are all becoming extremely technologised. All means of functioning of the digital world - networks, software and even design are being created in accordance with notions of the rational basis of the universe and are the highest representation of the Western idea - the domination of the Reason. The history of Western civilization is, among other things, the history of human alienation, the history of rationalisation, the history of the loss of the mystical. The changes in the notion of Knowledge as the basis of progress can represent this history in the simplest terms. Up until the

Middle Ages, knowledge was interwoven with magic, mysticism and religion. It was not considered, as it commonly is today, as something purely abstract which could nevertheless have practical applications. Knowledge could not be transmitted solely on the theoretical level, outside of ritual practice. It was transmitted only through personal and full communication of the chosen with the chosen. Even "crafts skills" knowledge could not have been acquired within just a couple of years. Knowledge was not detached from other forms of life. The situation starts to change during the Renaissance: gradually the theorisation of knowledge begins; knowledge separates itself from mysticism and religion and acquires high autonomous status. By the end of the XVII century the final break of knowledge from other forms of life is taking place. The history of rationalisation is the history of the diminishment of the leading role of religion, the history of exclusion of morality from all spheres except maybe that of the "life world" (Lebenswelt). Catholicism has introduced rationalised relations between man and God (indulgence); Protestantism has rejected ancient rituals and their traditional visual attributes and became the peak of the religious rationality, logically progressing to "humanistic" atheism. Gradually science took the place of religion. And science oriented itself towards the cognition of nature by defining nature in terms of matter's lack of inherent value and metaphysical attributes. Examining nature as an infinitely reusable object, science began to apply the same notions to the human being. Thus all scientifically unverifiable truths and meanings could neither be supported nor refuted by all-prevailing Reason.

What now?

- Science, having finally broken away from all its once inherent metaphysical goals, is becoming, by analogy with extreme sport, an extreme science, endangering the very existence of human beings on earth (nuclear and biotechnologies, overall penetration of technology and its use as a means of control over the human being).

- The highly rational way of life in such societies as the US, can go out of whack from time to time: one of the most convincing examples lies in the events of the 11th of September 2001. The growing conflict between East and West - which can be seen as a conflict between an extremely rationalised western society and the metaphysically oriented eastern one - presents one of the most obvious dangers for the current world order.

Culture as content

The type of the society in which the citizens of "developed" countries are living has been called informational for a long time already. The system of such societies, accordingly, is utterly different from the preceding industrial one, which was centered around industrial production.

Post-industrial society is ruled not by commodity-money relations but by informational currents. Or, rather currents of capital and power that are spreading (and to a large extent in the form of open or veiled propaganda) through networks, in accordance with new laws.

All means and media by which such societies function - networks, computers, software and even design - are extremely technologised and are created in accordance with the notion of the rational basis of the universe.

Culture and its manifestations are also turning into information (and even “content”), flowing into information space. Just like any other information, cultural information can be digitalised. With its shift into computer space, culture begins to function by the same rational rules according to which the rest of the system works - by the rules created, in particular, by designers and programmers.

The methods of information presentation, storage and functioning, often define its content as well. In so far as there is no place for metaphysics within information space, the space towards which all spheres of public and personal life are moving, the mode of this space's being is particularly rational - culture as the custodian of the non-rational inevitably becomes sterilized in such space. Morality and “life world” - for a long time and very consistently too - have been being rationalised under the civilization processes. Within the digital environment this process yet intensifies. Existing in the digital realm, human beings are following its logic - the extra-ethical logic of the machine.

Art as the custodian of the non-rational

Art is one of the most mobile and diverse systems; it has been changing continuously to the extent that it contradicts itself. It would be interesting, then, to look at the change in the artist's social role:

- Ancient times. There is no artist yet as such - she is an ordinary member of the society, additionally performing some religious functions. Her work is based exclusively on tradition, her name is not announced, the results of her work are part of the mystical ritual.

- The epoch of Renaissance and Humanism: the artist is breaking from the religious tradition and begins to glorify the beauty of the human and of the surrounding world. The figure of the self-manifesting Genius appears on stage.

- The Technological epoch: The beauty of the world becomes easily reflectable through technical reproduction media. At the same time the ideals of humanism decline - as a consequence of technological progress as well. On one hand, art begins to reflect the crisis of human self-consciousness (modernism), and on the other, it gets diverted into a certain form of commercial activity. Works of art turn into commodities, an extensive art-market is created (there appears, in particular, a notion of “the original”). During the preceding, humanistic epoch, the artist was placed very high in society (artist: demiurge, poet: the ruler of people's minds). Therefore, on the new technological level she begins to actively participate (and be used) in the political struggle.

The Communication epoch

With the development and fundamental change of communicative space the role of the artist is changing again. Artist is not someone who creates images anymore; she rejects the idea of representation.

Information overload becomes a common illness. An infinite number of images have already been created; they are kept in unerasable digital form in readily accessible databases. On the whole, the existing culture can already be represented as information currents that surround people and constantly try to penetrate their minds.

The artist's mission now shifts from creating images to manipulating and redirecting information currents. The artist becomes, on one hand, the information filter, and on the other, its re-transmitter.

This new role of the artist, then, in many ways becomes linked with the functions of communication and computer technologies: her activity is performed by means of networks and computers. The difference is that computers work on the basis of "bare" algorithms, while humans apply intuition, emotions and other non-rational elements - exactly those qualities that are beginning to disappear due to the influence of technology that makes everyone work rationally. Thus design of networks, databases, computers and software becomes defining factor in modern culture. Software and computers tend to be seen exclusively as pragmatic tools for information processing; programmers are usually exceptionally pragmatic people whose rational side often prevails over all others.

Therefore, the artist has to confront pragmatism with the methods she is well acquainted with, based on intuition and non-rationality. Thus, artistic software appears.

How does software art save non-rationality?

One might ask, "How can software art be non-rational, if rational algorithms are what lies at its basis?"

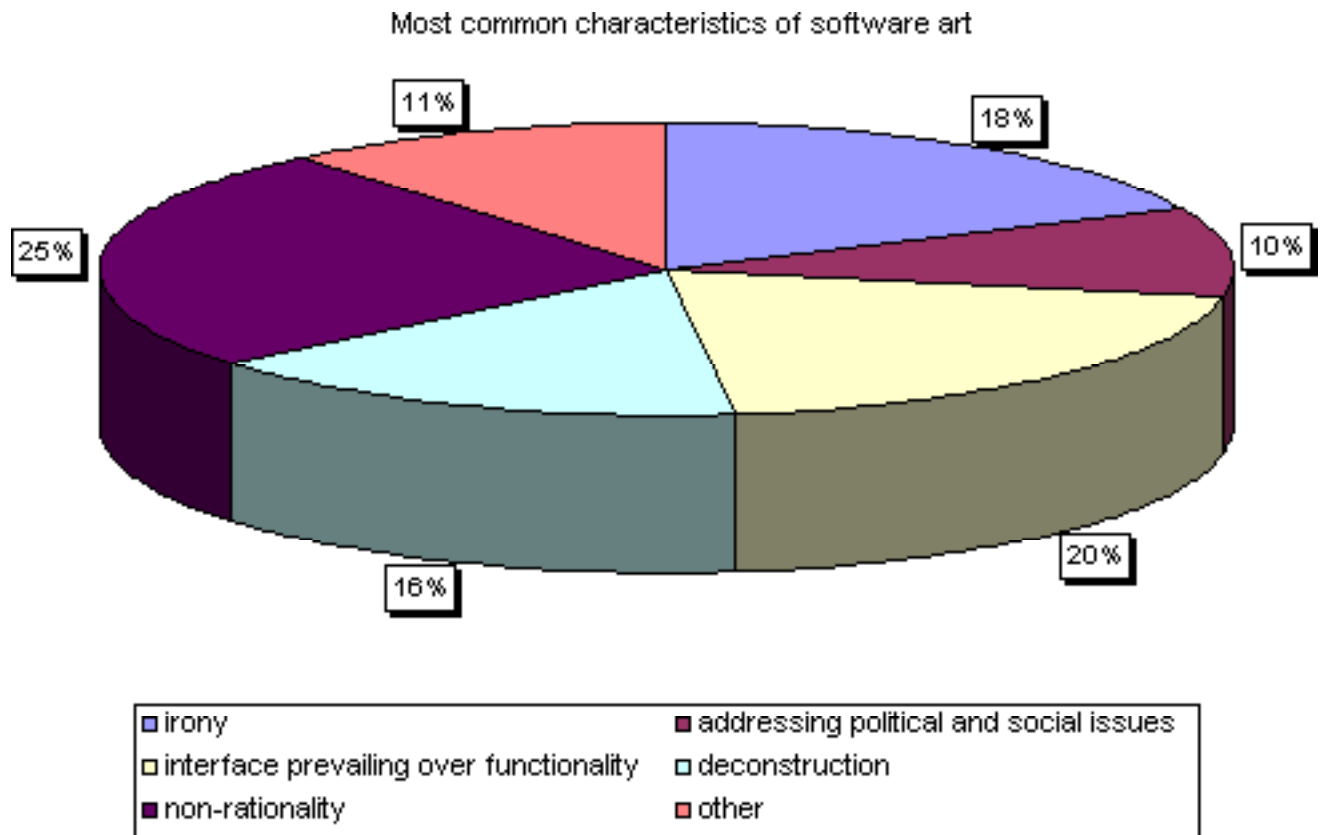
Yes, at the basis of each piece of software there are definite algorithms, but if conventional programs are instruments serving purely pragmatic purposes, the result of the work of artistic programs often finds itself outside of the pragmatic and the rational.

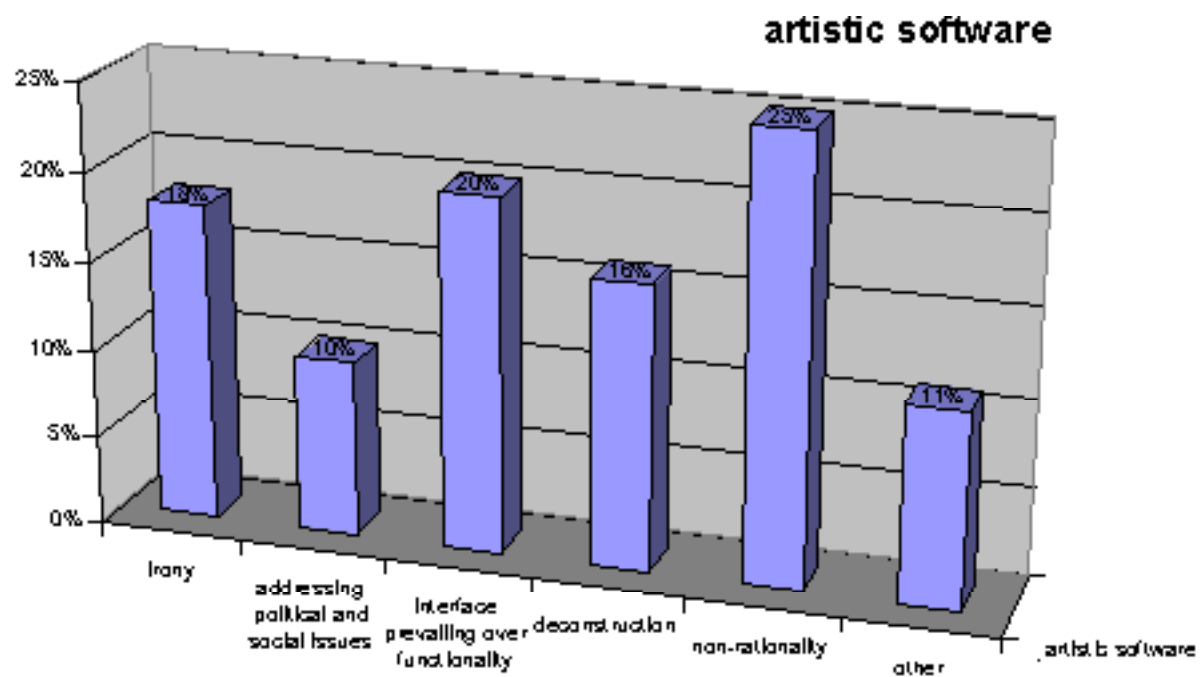
Because the process of the digitalisation of culture and other components of social life is inevitable, it is necessary to consider adequate ideas and mechanisms for the transfer of those spheres into digital space, to find adequate conditions for their functioning within networks. How can we put forth such mechanisms, those which would preserve the remaining grains of the non-rational and metaphysical, those which could guarantee the safety of the society and protect it against further rationalisation? Artistic software, non-rational software, perhaps gives some answers to this question.

Appendix. Most common characteristics of artistic software:

- irony 18%
- addressing political and social issues 10%
- interface prevailing over functionality 20%
- deconstruction 16%
- non-rationality 25%
- other 11%

(data for the beginning of 2002)





	Irony	addressing political and social issues	interface prevailing over functionality	deconstruction	non-rationality	other
artistic software	18%	10%	20%	16%	23%	11%

