Optimize!

Some Remarks on Code, Appropriation, and Conversion

by Joachim Blank

One of the most prominent characteristics of our society is a striving for progress and innovation, a seeking after efficiency and perfection. Consummation is the optimum, according to its etymological definition, “the most satisfactory value“. And we ask ourselves, what might constitute this within contemporary artistic practice? The adaptation of industrial and computer-directed mechanisms of production, or rather the practice of sophisticated manual skills or an emphasis upon process, in order to satisfy contextual and discursive expectations? Or at best, all of these together...? There are many possibilities for approaching the optimal in art. Whether or not this has been successful will be negotiated by all of the participant protagonists within in the artistic system. The act of negotiation itself can be a component of this evaluation process, causing difficulties to arise. No matter how abstract this may sound: when the optimal is achieved in art, it becomes worthwhile to ask oneself whether the result is still art, or if the question of optimization is not relevant. Or is an artwork then already optimal, when it is perfectly executed? Within the artistic domain, it always has to do with the defective, the imperfect or the intentional violation of perfection. Thus the optimal is not quite enough. The defective is the optimal? Perhaps! At least we know that this as a topic is particularly relevant in an era of thought´s having become permeated by the economic, and this is what we will be dealing with in what follows here.

Digital media are not just tools, but rather shape our perception and strategies. They are the decisive implements of strategically accumulated knowledge, this being a world-view dominated by the natural sciences. They not only assist the process of thinking and influence it, but instead actively participate in the construction and shaping as well as reproduction of our world. As the “motherboard-generation“ of personal computers makes obvious, they can only be produced and further developed by themselves. The algorythmic dictates of our world follow the laws of economics. The natural sciences in general are thus the unmediated results of economic thinking, and vice-versa.

Surprisingly this principle functions very well, as can be observed from the ever-renewed means of communication or the high-tech-directed production cycles of the automobile

industry. Automobile development and innovation is, all business crises aside, the marrow and simultaneously most visible indicator of a globalized society. Now as before, here various strands such as cycles of innovation, computerization of design leading up to the full automation of production, marterials research and development are combined with the legendary myths of freedom via acceleration, speed, and mobility into a unique success-story. The perfect “computerization of production“ must be businesses´ philosophy, in order to assure the survival of their own “machine“. Each new generation of cars´ design determines the urban landscape: at the latest, every six years comes the switch to a new generation, since after that the vehicles are written off as tax deductions. Within automobile production we experience a real conflict between function and dysfunction, modernity and the retrospective. The cycles become ever shorter, the rapidity of design sketches increases. New retro-designs are more and more often simply increasingly camouflaged as functionally-oriented facelifts, in order to guarantee the brand´s prominence and image within an economy of attention. Thus these are the spectacular novelties, which have the impact of futuristic conceptual cars when first seen, but then amazingly rapidly insert themselves into the monotonous urban rush-hour´s *tristesse* and look old again already. Their similarity of shape is a result of platform-cooperation, within which-- on cost-saving grounds-- different makes are produced using one and the same technical framework. At the moment this is taking place in the newly-discovered low-price segment, the economy car, where many vehicles based on the same platform are introduced on the market by different manufacturers.

A similar strategy has already become standard practice within the home entertainment sector: if the livingrooms of the 1980s were dominated by the black towers of stereo components, then interior design of the late 90s switched to high-gloss finished white acrylic and aluminum-simulation, following current Apple computers´ current stylistic guidance. Differentiation between individual brands can only be made on the basis of an extremely reduced number of possible characteristics, such as product-formations like the front grill or rear-end in the case of automobiles, but is in particular guaranteed by the major manufacturers´ updated emblems. These important fashion elements are developed with the assistance of special two- and three-dimensionally oriented design software. The result is the product of a thoroughly computer-supported design process, whose paradigms lie somewhere between human fantasies and above all the capabilities of soft- and hard-ware

as well as the high-tech materials being employed. Even when the initial designs might be drawn, as before, in the form of classical sketches, the production requirements of the so-called “rapid technologies“ are already integrated into that phase.

Should fantasies exceed the capacity to carry them out, perhaps the “optimization“ of the the relevant technology will be of assistance. When these new options have been implemented, these thus become common knowledge-- not in the sense of property, but in that of right to practical use. One speaks only of innovation on the threshold of information about the new product up until when it has become mass-produced. For the new products of such a new application are only interesting insofar as they are novel, and these cycles become ever shorter.

General availability in fact now contradicts the construction of exclusivity-demarcating characteristics. These characteristics of exclusive uniqueness possess a higher value in themselves, because not unlimited availability but rather exclusivity and therefore differentiation is thereby produced. Within highly-differentiated capitalistic systems of circulation, such characteristics of exclusive status´ being possessed by a product is often the first step in the direction of mass-produced goods. What was in short supply or the unique was precisely that which was always more valuable and desirable than what was often available and frequently to be found.

Because it is not readily reproduceable, with respect to the market in contemporary art a hand-made unique product will always be competitive since it is not repeatable. And if it does in fact become reproduceable, then its characteristics of uniqueness are lost and it loses its attractiveness. The market oscillates ever closer to these two poles: either mass-production or uniqueness, but very seldom in between.

Ferrari, Maserati and two or three other (mostly Italian) high-class automobile brands employ this same strategy: at automobile fairs they distance themselves from their public. While at such events the automotive philistines with their merchandise-filled plastic bags are allowed to do exactly as they please with all the buttons of any manufacturer, the Italian sports-cars are kept cordoned-off and behind walky-talky-carrying security personnel, some distance away from their fans. Perfect parquet floor, professional lighting-- they stand there like staged, auratic sculptures-- wonderfully highly polished in red or yellow, thus making the mass of people fiddling with digital cameras into dumbly desiring witnesses. This artificially

maintained distance between fan and vehicle proportionally increases expectations about its worth, and thereby construes their mythological-legendary creation into a success story.

It is especially within the fuzzily-defined field of media art that technological innovation, the laws of the mass-market, and the paradigms of the visual arts´ operating system collide. When the frantic development of computer-processors made it possible to carry through more complex three-dimensional applications at the end of the 1980s, artistic works appeared which did little more than demonstrate different variations of 3D effects, so-called “SGI art“ (from Silicon Graphics Group). What was involved was a fascination with technically perfect simulation. Actually it was only the imagination and programming capabilities of the software-developer which could be evaluated as unintendedly artistic in these works, but not their unreflected demonstration illustrating effects. This example is perhaps transferrable into the present, in instances where “Photoshop“ software is used as a newly-developed “artistic filter“: this can be simply kitschy or cool but also interesting, if the employment of this working tool is connected with a discourse-- for example, about contemporary painting. This contextual shift is the artist´s responsibility: appraising the perhaps skillful programming of “Photoshop“ plug-ins alone within an artistic discourse can only be interesting, if alongside that pure functionality in itself, the developer´s intentions are visible or perceivable for a public audience. For it is only in this fashion that it is possible to couple the work with an artistic discourse. Such coding in itself is boring, just as is the unreflective employment and parading of “visual effects“, if no underlying artistic strategy is recognizable. But both of these aspects as taken for themselves can be interesting, if these acts are recognizable as artistic practice within a larger strategy, thereby opening up a discursive field of operation-- or at least, given these actions´ context is transparent. Programming code first obtains value when it is so formulated, that it is capable of running itself through a “machine“ *à la* Deleuze and Guattari: the artwork alone is not the code nor even the “machine“, but rather the process, by means of which (in conjunction with code) a “machine“ in context results.

As an exhibition at the Netherlands Media Arts Institute Amsterdam taking place in the summer of 2004, composed of sixteen artistic positions from the Academy of Visual Arts Leipzig, “Optimize!“ reflected upon a world existing under the pressures of optimization-- the world in which we live every day.

(Translated from the German by Julia Bernard.)