PART I
FORMALISM AND CONCEPTUAL ART

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Many important parallels can be made between conceptual art and the art and technology movement in the 1960s. As a result, the history of conceptual art has great relevance to contemporary artists using the World Wide Web as an artistic medium.

Conceptual art has its roots in the event scores of Fluxus artists such as George Brecht and Yoko Ono, dating from around 1960. Informed by the aesthetic theories of John Cage, these simple textual descriptions served as a "score" to be contemplated or performed, as in La Monte Young's *Composition 1960 #10 To Bob Morris*:

> Draw a straight line
> And follow it.

Conceptual art, as theorized in the work of philosopher and anti-artist Henry Flynt (who coined the term "concept art" in 1961) focused on concepts rather than the physical form of a work, further connecting this emerging tendency to language and away from actions.

> "Concept art" is first of all an art of which the material is "concepts," as the material of, for example, music is sound. Since "concepts" are closely bound up with language, concept art is a kind of art of which the material is language.[1]

Conceptual art was further elaborated in the work of artists such as Sol LeWitt, Joseph Kosuth, Lawrence Wiener, and Art & Language later that decade, also employing language as an essential element. Their work, like that of artists exploring performance and other experimental practices, can be seen as a revolutionary counterbalance to the dominant formalist art theory prescribed by critic Clement Greenberg. Following Greenberg, the physical materiality of paint and canvas took on unprecedented importance in postwar art, exemplified by the New York School of abstract expressionism (including Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, and Willem De Kooning.) By contrast, conceptual artists, following Marcel Duchamp, explicitly challenged the "beholder discourse" of modernist formalism. Such postformalist tendencies (to use theorist Jack Burnham's term) were identified as heralding the "dematerialization" of art. Informed by Marxism, many artists sought to undermine the art market's capitalist logic by producing dematerialized works that defied commodification. For example, Brecht's artist's book *Water Yam* (1963), which included many event scores, was published as an "inexpensive, mass-produced unlimited edition ... [in order] to erode the cultural status of art and to help to eliminate the artist's ego."[2]

In his essay "Paragraphs on Conceptual Art" (1967), LeWitt asserted that "In conceptual art the idea or concept is the most important aspect of the work ... [t]he idea

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becomes a machine that makes the art ..." Such a notion underlies the artist's wall drawings, in which the "idea" for the work would be written by LeWitt (sometimes accompanied by a diagram) and then executed on site, typically by assistants. In many of them, the title of the work describes the idea that "makes the art," as in *Wall Drawing #46: Vertical Lines, Not Straight, Not Touching, Covering the Wall Evenly* (1970). Kosuth emphasizes "idea" even further, insisting that in conceptual art, the art is not the result of the formal elaboration of an idea, as LeWitt suggests, but that the conceptual core of a work of conceptual art remain an immaterial idea. This conviction is made explicit in his phrase "art as idea (as idea)," which appears as a subtitle in many of his early works. Thus the "art" in Kosuth's classic *One and Three Chairs* (1965) consists not of the formal realization of an idea in a material artwork, but solely in the underlying idea itself, which persists immaterially as an idea.

Conceptual art has sought to analyze the ideas underlying the creation and reception of art, rather than to elaborate another stylistic convention in the historical succession of modernist avant-garde movements. Investigations by conceptual artists into networks of signification and structures of knowledge (that enable art to have meaning) typically have employed text as a strategic device to examine the interstice between visual and verbal languages as semiotic systems. In this regard, conceptual art is a meta-critical and self-reflexive art process. It is engaged in theorizing the possibilities of signification in art's multiple contexts (including its history and criticism, exhibitions and markets). In interrogating the relationship between ideas and art, conceptual art de-emphasizes the value traditionally accorded to the materiality of art objects. It focuses, rather, on examining the preconditions for how meaning emerges in art, seen as a semiotic system.

There are important parallels between the historic practices of conceptual art and the art and technology movement that emerged in the 1960s. The latter, reincarnated in the 1990s as New Media Art, has focused its inquiry on the materials and/or concepts of technology and science, which it recognizes artists have historically incorporated in their work. Its investigations include: (1) the aesthetic examination of the visual forms of science and technology, (2) the application of science and technology in order to create visual forms, and (3) the use of scientific concepts and technological media both to question their prescribed applications and to create new aesthetic models. In this third case, new media art, like conceptual art, is also a meta-critical process. It uses new media in order to reflect on the profound ways in which that very technology is deeply embedded in modes of knowledge production, perception, and interaction, and is thus inextricable from corresponding epistemological and ontological transformations. In doing so, it challenges the systems of knowledge (and the technologically mediated modes of knowing) that structure scientific methods and conventional aesthetic values. Further, it examines the social and aesthetic implications of technological media that define, package, and distribute information.

A visionary pairing of conceptual art and new media took place in the "Software" exhibition (1970). Curator Jack Burnham conceived of "software" as parallel to the aesthetic principles, concepts, or programs that underlie the formal embodiment of actual art objects, which in turn parallel "hardware." He interpreted contemporary experimental art practices, including conceptual art, as predominantly concerned with the software aspect of aesthetic production. In this way, "Software" drew parallels between the ephemeral programs and protocols of computer software and the increasingly "dematerialized" forms of experimental art, which the critic interpreted, metaphorically, as functioning like information processing systems. "Software" included works by conceptual artists such as Kosuth, Robert Barry, John Baldessari, and Les

Levine, whose art was presented beside displays of technology including the first public exhibition of hypertext (*Labyrinth*, an electronic exhibition catalog designed by Ned Woodman and Ted Nelson) and a model of intelligent architecture (*SEEK*, a reconfigurable environment for gerbils designed by Nicholas Negroponte and the Architecture Machine Group at MIT.)[3]

A key figure bridging conceptual art and new media art is Roy Ascott, who used textual and diagrammatic elements in his work, employing the thesaurus as a central metaphor in 1962. While Lucy Lippard's book, *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966–1972* (1997), was dedicated to Sol LeWitt, Ascott was prominently quoted on the dedication page. In the mid-1960s, he envisioned remote collaborations between artists, writing that, "Instant person to person contact would support specialised creative work ... An artist could be brought right into the working studio of other artists ... however far apart in the world ... they may separately be located."[4] His classic 1983 telematic artwork, *La Plissure du Text*, used computer networking to link artists around the world, who used ASCI text to create a collaborative "planetary fairy tale." This homage to Roland Barthes' essay, "Le Plaisir du Texte," emphasized the "generative idea" of "perpetual interweaving," but at the level of the tissue itself, which is no longer the product of a single author but is now plaited together through the process of "distributed authorship" on computer networks. At the conceptual core of Ascott's telematic art theory is the idea that computer networking provides "the very infrastructure for spiritual interchange that could lead to the harmonization and creative development of the whole planet." In this light, Ascott's work can be seen as visionary working models of forms of community and sociality that have, in significant ways, emerged over the last two decades.

Since the advent of Graphical User Interfaces (i.e., computer desktops and web browsers) and the World Wide Web in the mid-1990s, many contemporary artists with a prevailing interest in ideas and concepts have mined online media as a vehicle for artistic creation. Fields of practice such as "software art" and "database aesthetics"[5] have emerged as artists have deployed browsers, search engines, databases, and social networks in critical investigations of the technical systems and protocols that construct and disseminate knowledge, structure identity and community, and produce and determine value. In addition to the following case studies of work by Michael Demers and Constant Dullaart, a shortlist of works that offer critical insights into these issues must include wwwwwwwww.jodi.org, the Web Stalker, Bodies INCorporated, Carnivore, They Rule, Female Extension, We Feel Fine, Google Will Eat Itself, The Sheep Market, The Real Costs (see Chapter 15), and A Tool to Deceive and Slaughter. Of particular relevance to the trajectory defined by LeWitt is Casey Reas *et al.*'s *{Software} Structures* (2004), in which the artists used computer code to interpret and implement the conceptual artist's wall drawings as computer programs in order to "explore the potential differences and similarities between software and LeWitt's techniques."[6]

Notes

1. Henry Flynt, "Concept Art," in *An Anthology*, ed. La Monte Young, New York: George Maciunas & Jackson Mac Low, 1962. Note: slight grammar modifications in this quotation were made by the author.
2. Michael Corris, "Fluxus," *Grove Art Online*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007–2010.
3. See Edward A. Shanken, "Art in the Information Age: Technology and Conceptual Art," in *SIGGRAPH 2001 Electronic Art and Animation Catalog*, New York: ACM SIGGRAPH, 2001: 8–15; expanded *Leonardo*, 35, 4, August 2002: 433–438.

4. Roy Ascott, "Behaviourist Art and the Cybernetic Vision," in *Telematic Embrace: Visionary Theories of Art, Technology, and Consciousness*, ed. and intro. by Edward A. Shanken, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003, 2007.

5. See, for example, Florian Schneider and Ulrike Gabriel, "Software Art" (2001), November 19, 2010, www.netzliteratur.net/cramer/software_art_-_transmediale.html; and Victoria Vesna, ed., *Database Aesthetics: Art in the Age of Information Overflow*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007.

6. Casey Reas, "A Text about Software and Art," *{Software} Structures* (2004), November 19, 2010. http://artport.whitney.org/commissions/softwarestructures/text.html.

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Reas, Casey. "A Text about Software and Art." *{Software} Structures*, 2004. November 19, 2010. Online: http://artport.whitney.org/commissions/softwarestructures/text.html.

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1 COLOR FIELD PAINTINGS (BROWSER)*

Michael Demers

Key Words: Browser, Formalism, Hexadecimal Color, HTML, Javascript, Markup Language, Modernism, Modernity, Source Code

Project Summary

Color Field Paintings (Browser) are online artworks created when website visitors click a link to generate a series of browser windows, each with a randomly assigned color based upon a palette established for the piece. These "paintings" reference the color field paintings that emerged in the late 1950s, but in a digital format.
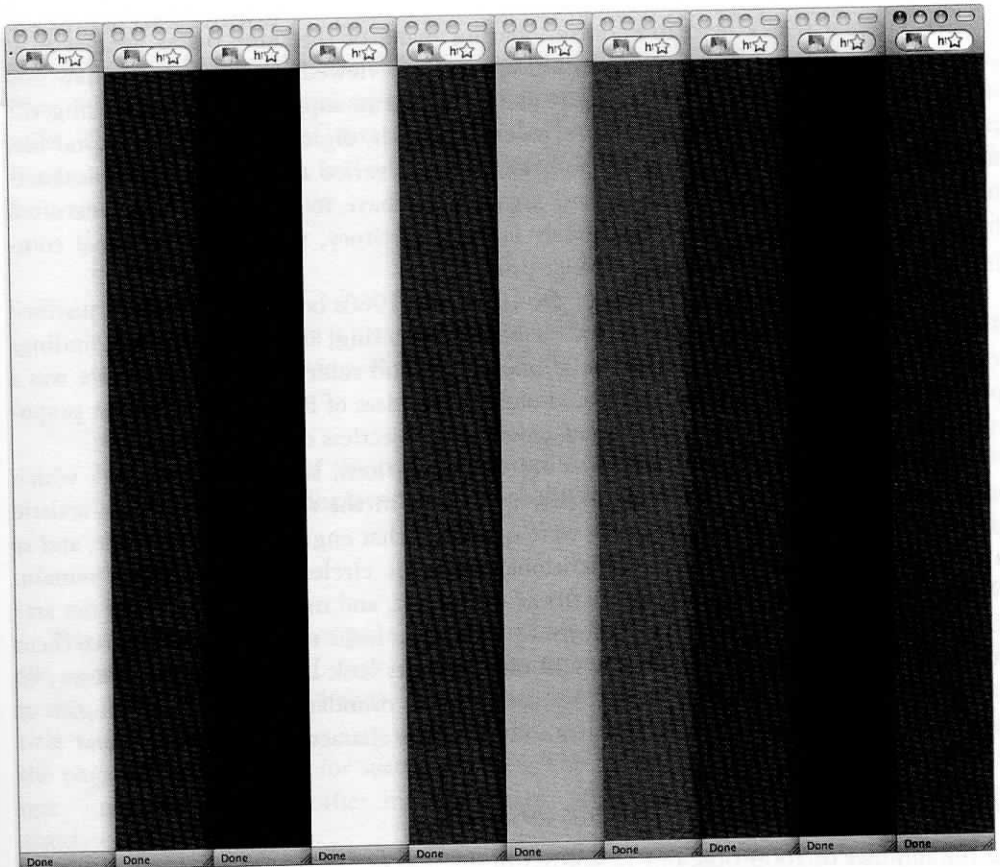

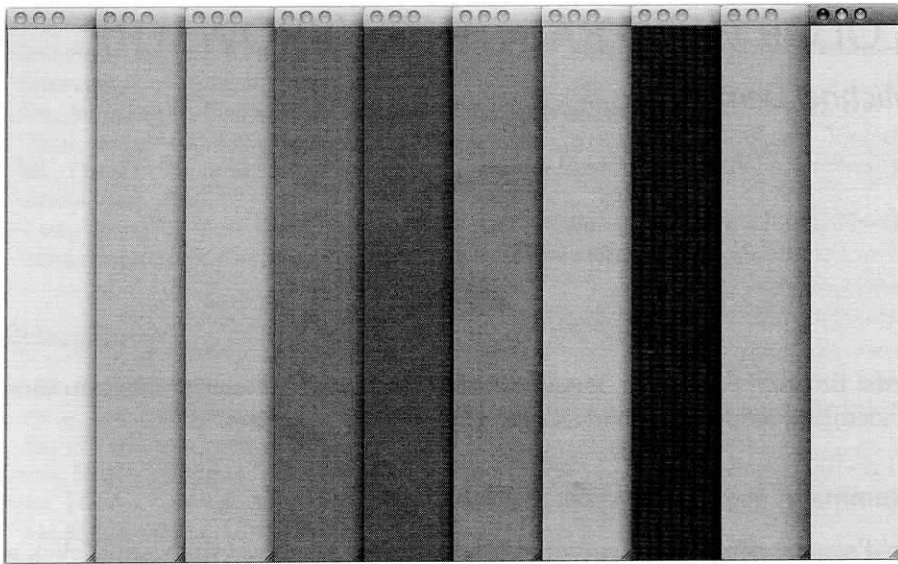**Figure 1.1** *Color Field Paintings (Browser)* by Michael Demers.

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Figure 1.2 *Color Field Paintings (Browser)* by Michael Demers.

Project Developer Background

Digital art is a tricky field to endorse. Sharing many of the same biases against it as photography endured in its time, digital art is often viewed as a process too new and unfamiliar for many connoisseurs of art and academia to support. Often sacrificing the physical object for a conceptual and technical approach, digital art, like the digital file, finds itself somewhere in the ether, formless and too varied to place into a typical art-historical framework. However, digital art does not have to be ambiguous. One often finds it manifest in mundane and overly familiar territory, such as the personal computer, the browser window, or the inkjet print.

If the great Formalist experiment of the 1950s and 1960s both pointed to and justified an exploration of the most fundamental elements of painting, and presented these findings visually in the form of large canvasses of line, shape, and color, I wondered if there was a parallel to be found for digital art? Could one use the ideas of Formalism's greatest proponent, Clement Greenberg, to justify and ground the objectless digital object?

For the student of digital art these are vital questions, stimulating answers which may determine both success academically as well as in the realm of one's own artistic practice. As a painting student, these were questions that engaged my own work; and as a digital artist, especially within traditional academic circles, these questions remain. What are the fundamental characteristics of digital art, and more specifically, of net art? Can we strip these formless objects down to their most basic elements and still see them function as art objects? If so, what would those objects look like? And is there a way to escape the familiarity of our daily interaction with mundane digital technologies to produce art that speaks to those familiar and mundane characteristics in new ways?

Introduction to *Color Field Paintings (Browser)*

In the summer of 2009 I became interested in the idea of creating a randomly generated online digital work that utilized color as its main focus. Initially I thought of using

javascript (a programming language used to add interactivity to websites) to create a webpage that would cycle through a series of colors that changed depending upon the time of day. Further, I wanted the range of colors to shift within a predetermined array, so that these digital "paintings" would rarely replicate themselves, even if viewed at the same time each day. It didn't take long for me to realize that the code to make such a site work was not only widely available, but was rather mundane. Some code could be used to randomly load an array of colors, other code could recognize the user's time of day, and another line of code could automatically refresh the browser window after a set period of time. How was this work advancing the medium of digital art? Why am I bothering to make such a work, I wondered, if all I am doing is producing the technical and conceptual equivalent of a colorful screensaver?

What my project lacked was conceptual rigor based on an art-historical dialogue. I knew that I wanted to use a particular kind of technology to do something visually specific while recognizing the possibility for variation. This in turn led me to think about what I was originally seeking to explore: color. I thought about the idea of color in Western representation, and the use of color both historically (in Modernist painting and sculpture), and contemporarily (in diverse forms of digital output). More specifically, I thought about color as represented through a browser window, and how that use of color served as a reference to and further investigation of the use of color in Formalist paintings of the 1950s and 1960s.

Technical Description

Browser windows, like Microsoft's Internet Explorer, Apple's Safari, or Mozilla's Firefox, provide the user with a visual representation of what is provided in the webpage's source code. This code is a list of data that tells the browser what content to display (text, images, videos, and so on), and where to place that content. The most basic source code for a webpage looks like this:

```
<html>
<head>
<title> The page title is inserted between the title tags. It is visible to the user at the top of the browser window. </title>
</head>
<body>
The main content of the page is inserted between the body tags. Content that is added here will be displayed on the web page.
</body>
</html>
```

The content of the entire page is situated between the <html> and </html> tags, or the open and close HTML tags. Important instructions to the browser are contained within the <head> and </head> tags. In the example above, instructions for the page title was inserted here. This area is also used to add keywords or meta tags, which make the page easier to catalog for search engines. The main content of the page, including text, images, videos, or other media content, are inserted in the code between the <body> and </body> tags.

Each of the pages in *Color Field Paintings (Browser)* follow this structure, though no media content, in the typical sense, has been included between the body tags. What one

sees in each of these pages is a color based upon instructions given to the browser using javascript, which has been inserted into the <head> and <body> areas. As mentioned earlier, that javascript is both widely available and simple to produce. My aim was to use basic javascript to make the browser display certain colors within the framework and structure of a standard webpage.

There are three main technological aspects to the making of *Color Field Paintings (Browser)*: (1) opening individual browser windows in a specific location, at a specific size; (2) assigning one random color, selected from a specified array of predetermined colors, to load in each window; and (3) automatically closing each browser window in the order that it was initially opened. All of this is accomplished with various lines of javascript code.

1. Opening the Browser Windows

Asking a browser to open windows is basically like asking it to open pop-up advertisements. Given the plethora of junk pop-ups for various sundry services, many users have turned off pop-ups in their browser preferences. My first reaction was to research how to get around this browser security issue. Since the browser has no way of distinguishing between my artistic pop-ups and malware, I later decided that instead of inserting code to break the browser pop-up detection, it would be more ethical if I simply asked the user to allow pop-ups from my domain.

Creating pop-ups is easy, especially when using the Behaviors panel in Adobe's Dreamweaver. The Behaviors panel allows the user to add page events and interactivity from a list of menu options. Dreamweaver adds the javascript code to the HTML page represented by these choices. My code ended up looking like this:

```
<a href="javascript: void(0)" onclick="MM_openBrWindow('1r.htm','','width=100,height=800,top=50,left=100')">
```

In this example, a href="javascript: void(0)" is associated with the phrase "Click here to generate the Color Field Painting." I have multiple paintings available on one page, including red, green, and blue options, so I needed to give the user a way to make her choice. Hence the need to make this particular behavior occur after a link was clicked, as opposed to when the page was opened (as most pop-ups do). This code allows me to create a link to a specific destination, directing the browser to open one of a number of possible windows.

onclick="MM_openBrWindow commands the browser window to open when the user clicks the link, and ('1r.htm','','width=100,height=800,top=50,left=100') dictates which file to open (1r.htm is the first of the windows for the red color field painting), the width and height of the browser window, as well as its position on the screen from the top and left margins.

Of course, this just opens the first window in the series. The code for the remaining windows is not that different, however:

```
<body     onload="MM_openBrWindow('2r.htm','','width=100,height=800,top=50,left=300')">
```

Here, the only substantial difference is that instead of opening the defined window upon clicking the link (onclick), the window opens when the page housing the code is

loaded (onload). This is how typical pop-up advertisements are coded. Thus, the user opens the first window in the painting by clicking a link on the homepage and the remaining nine windows of the painting open automatically.

2. Assigning and Loading Random Colors

Asking the browser window to load a random color is like asking it to load a random image. Each time the browser window is opened or refreshed a new color (or image) can be pulled from an array established in the page source code:

```
var bgcolorlist=new Array("#bd2908", "#c13516", "#c64124", "#d05a40", "#db7962",
"#e99c8c", "#f7c1b5", "#fed7ce", "#ffe4dd", "#f0d1ca", "#d9ada2", "#c08172",
"#a75645", "#92331f", "#88210a", "#f23208", "#fff6f4", "#5f1505")
document.body.style.background=bgcolorlist[Math.floor(Math.
random()*bgcolorlist.length)]
```

Using the red color field painting as an example, the code will load a variable (var) background (bg) color (color) from a list (list), with the colors listed as hexadecimal values. Colors used on the web must be coded in a language the browser can read. Notice these six-digit values as a specific series of letters and numbers preceded by the pound (#) character in the code. Each of three pairs of two-digit values translates one of three color channels used for display on a computer monitor (red, green, and blue) into hexadecimal code. Each time this window is opened in the browser, the background color inherits a different value. When this code is inserted into each of the ten windows constituting the red painting, each panel of the overall painting is assigned a randomly determined shade of red.

3. Automatically Closing Each Browser Window

Once I had each browser window opening in a specific location, and the background colors were loading randomly, I had to address what exactly would happen to the painting after it was produced. Left alone, the user would have to close each window individually (an annoying proposition for the user, to say the least). I researched code that would enable the browser to close itself, which not only took the chore of closing the windows away from the user, but had the added bonus of also keeping the work in an ephemeral and temporary state. With respect to the nature of the medium in which these works were being created, this offered a coherent relationship between form and process. The javascript for this feature is easily defined:

```
setTimeout("self.close();",8000)
```

When inserted into each page, this code tells the browser to close itself (self.close) after a defined duration of time. For this work, the windows would remain open for 8,000 milliseconds, or 8 seconds, before automatically closing.

I produced three versions of the color field paintings: red, green, and blue, representing the computer monitor display mechanics. Computer monitors add various amounts of red, green, and blue light to produce the range of colors visible on the screen. Televisions, projectors, and mobile phone screens all use this additive process for RGB display.

Historical Perspectives

During the height of Modernism in the 1950s, trends in art and painting included degrees of visual abstraction in lieu of realistic representation. A critical theory developed in which the material and technical nature of artistic practices would become of paramount concern. This attitude became known as Formalism, and the American art critic Clement Greenberg would become one of its staunchest supporters.

Greenberg wanted to address the most primal elements in the work of art, its most basic structure. It was only in this way, he surmised, that the work of Modernist art could escape the confines of taste and elevate itself to the respectable level of the Old Masters.

Part of Greenberg's technique for justifying this kind of art was to utilize Immanuel Kant's self-reflexive idea of immanent criticism, a system or process used to investigate that very system or process. "Kant," wrote Greenberg in his seminal essay "Modernist Painting," "used logic to establish the limits of logic, and while he withdrew much from its old jurisdiction, logic was left in all the more secure possession of what remained to it."[1] Greenberg sought to ask questions about the foundational (or formal) elements of a painting by looking to painting itself.

It quickly emerged that the unique and proper area of competence in a work of art coincided with all that was unique to the nature of its medium. The task of self-criticism took root in eliminating the effects on an art work that might conceivably be borrowed from or by the medium of any other work of art. Thereby each artistic medium would be rendered "pure," and in its "purity" find the guarantee of its standards of quality as well as of its independence. "Purity" meant self-definition, and the enterprise of self-criticism in the arts became one of self-definition with a vengeance.[2]

In the case of painting, "Flatness, two-dimensionality, was the only condition painting shared with no other art, and so Modernist painting oriented itself to flatness as it did to nothing else."[3] Important in Greenberg's argument is not just the physicality of flatness but the illusion of representation as well. Traditional painting created the illusion of three-dimensional space through realistic depictions that distract the viewer from what the painting fundamentally is: a flat surface with applied pigment. "Whereas one tends to see what is in an Old Master before seeing it as a picture," Greenberg states, "one sees a [Formalist] painting as a picture first."[4]

Color field paintings emerged in the late 1950s and 1960s within this Formalist context. Consisting of flat fields of color with no discernible representational elements, these were paintings that adhered to the purest Formalist sensibilities. Examining the nature of painting by referencing the most primal elements of painting technologies, these images would "test ... all theories about art for their relevance to the actual practice and experience of art."[5]

Color Field Paintings (Browser) references both the conceptual framework of the original color field paintings, while investigating the formal aspects of internet-based artworks. This web project answers similar questions to those posed by Greenberg in the 1960s.

The basic components of a webpage are the HTML, head, and body tags, within which media content is placed. To state this more essentially, a webpage consists of data placed in the source code. The browser displays content based on this source code. Color, in this context, becomes the one visible source of data that does not

present the viewer with representational media (as would text, images, or video). To bring the color into a useable form by the browser, it must be converted into hexadecimal values. The argument made by *Color Field Paintings (Browser)* is that data, represented by hexadecimal values, is the most basic form of visual representation found on a webpage, the most elemental aspect to the Internet web-based artwork.

Conceptual art, perhaps not surprisingly, continued the Formalist experiment in intellectual investigation, if not the assumed visual aspect. Developing during the mid- to late-1960s, conceptual art used Formalism as an art-historical antecedent to further investigate what constituted the art object, while distancing itself from Formalism in the way objects were constructed and the contexts in which they were viewed. "One of the recurring characteristics in much art that is referred to as conceptual," wrote Alexander Alberro, "is the consideration of every one of the constituting elements of the artwork as equal components."[6] This consideration directly relates to the Formalist critical investigation of each element that comprises a painting or a sculpture, using those elements toward a "self-reflexivity ... that systematically problematizes and dismantles the integral elements of the traditional structure of the artwork."[7] Alberro continues:

> the conceptual in art means an expanded critique of the cohesiveness and materiality of the art object, a growing weariness toward definitions of artistic practice as purely visual, a fusion of the work with its site and context of display, and an increased emphasis on the possibilities of publicness and distribution.[8]

Conceptual art walked a fine line between an art-historical tradition and the object-based aspects of fine art (such as visual concerns, the object in the museum or gallery context, and the exclusive nature of art institutions). How, then, are *Color Field Paintings (Browser)* positioned in this history?

1. The Cohesiveness and Materiality of the Art Object

This is the point most closely associated with Formalism, where the materiality of the object is called into question and put to the task of investigating the object itself. In *Color Field Paintings (Browser)*, the materiality of the virtual object exists in the form of browser code. The object and method of display, the browser window, are cut from the same cloth (digital amalgamations of code). Both are visual representations of data, organized in particular ways.

2. Definitions of Artistic Practice As Purely Visual

While there are undeniable visual aspects to *Color Field Paintings (Browser)*, one could argue that the visual aspects serve a subservient display role to the main content of the work (the hexadecimal values found in the source code), and as such the work is not "purely visual." But when visual art is the subject, the visual must be considered. As Lucy Lippard and John Chandler state in their collaborative essay on conceptual art, "As visual art, a highly conceptual work still stands or falls by what it looks like ... Intellectual and aesthetic pleasure can merge in this experience when the work is both visually strong and theoretically complex."[9] In reference to Alberro's criteria, it is important to stress the phrase "purely visual" recognizes the theoretical basis of the work as a *more significant* concern than the aesthetic details of the work of art.

3. The Work Within Its Site and Context of Display

Whereas conceptual artists were concerned with the context of the art museum or gallery and the impact this context had on the art object, *Color Field Paintings (Browser)*, like many web projects included in this book, rejects this paradigm by existing completely on the web. There is no object in the traditional sense, and the material that comprises the project exists as visualized data (the webpage) within another set of visualized data (the web browser). The conceptual artists of the 1960s (for whom the Internet would have been a fanciful idea) would have been attracted to moving the art object out of the physical art museum or gallery and into a virtual data-based realm. Devoid of an institutional context, the work could finally be viewed on its own terms.

4. Possibilities of Publicness and Distribution

Because this work exists on the web, the nature of distribution far surpasses the potential traditional methods of distribution (the art museum or gallery) previously made available to works of art. According to the International Telecommunication Union, there were 1,587,419.8 global Internet users in 2008. In the United States, the total was 230,630.0.[10] This creates an undeniably greater potential for viewership when the number of visitors to art museums in the United States was 59,822 during the same year.[11] Clearly, the web poses advantages to the distribution of content when compared to analog viewing or distribution practices.

Conclusions and Outcomes

After the success of the first three digital color field paintings (red, green, and blue), I decided to reference the notion of Formalism and color field paintings from the 1960s more explicitly. I created online iterations of historically notable color field paintings following the same compositional arrangements observable in the original works. Two works came to mind immediately: *Where*, by Morris Louis (1960) and *Black Gray Beat*, by Gene Davis (1964). These two paintings consist of vertical bands of alternating color. For both online versions, I sampled color from the original works using Photoshop to determine the hexadecimal value, and placed those color values into the javascript code to generate the random color array.

This work was part of the *HTML Color Codes* exhibition curated by Carolyn Kane of Rhizome. As she stated in her introduction to the exhibition:

> *Color Field Painting ("Where," after Morris Louis)* consists of a series of vertical browser windows that appear consecutively across the screen from left to right ... The piece plays on the codification of online color in the context of art history. Morris Louis' painting "Where" (1960), also consists of a series of multi-colored bands that run vertically on the composition, and all of Demers' color are digitally sampled from this palette. However, where Louis' composition consists of hand-painted lines, and fluid and continuous brush strokes that gently converge at the bottom, Demers' color bars are all formed according to the same rectangular dimensions and orientation. They are also animated in time; after all of the bars have appeared, they disappear after ten seconds, making his appropriation of the original a commentary on the grid-like structure of HTML code, and the ephemeral character of internet art.[12]

Finally, the digital color field paintings referenced the structure of the original Formalist paintings and the digital nature of the medium in which the new work was being presented. The work accomplished what I set out to do in my practice by meeting a conceptual rigor with a technological approach and paying historical homage to the original paintings while maintaining a reflexive understanding of the digital work. Much in the way that Greenberg justified Formalist painting by referencing painting itself, here I had been able to take a similar Kantian approach to the production of a digital object—dispelling, for the time being, traditional biases against emerging digital processes.

Notes

* Images associated with this chapter should be viewed in color. See Routledge website, www. routledge.com/textbooks/9780415882224 or the artists' website, www.michaeldemers.com/colorFieldPaintings_browser.
1. Clement Greenberg, "Modernist Painting," in *Art in Theory*, Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2003: 774.
2. Ibid.: 775.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.: 778.
6. Alexander Alberro, "Reconsidering Conceptual Art, 1966–1977," in *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology*, Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson, eds., Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000: xvi–xvii.
7. Ibid.: xvi.
8. Ibid.: xvii.
9. John Chandler and Lucy Lippard, "The Dematerialization of Art," in *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology*, Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson, eds., Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000: 49.
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www.michaeldemers.com/colorFieldPaintings_browser
www.rhizome.org

2   YOUTUBE AS A SUBJECT
Constant Dullaart

Key Words: Conceptual Art, Gesamtkunstwerk, Poster Frame, Screen Time, YouTube

Project Summary

YouTube as a Subject is a tongue-in-cheek series of videos and one sculpture that comment on the temporality of design in everyday life by alluding to the interface used on the online video-sharing platform, YouTube.com. Central to the creation and impact of the work was the ability to post a video response at the location of the original videos on YouTube. Therefore, the responses to my initial series made by other artists have become a key part of the project.

Project Developer Background

Comparisons between media are often made in a discipline-specific historical context and popular culture alike, from the anxieties and fears during their establishment in society (such as the feared negative influence on children resulting from games, television, graphic novels or even books[1]), the celebration of the medium's influence on a better future, to the announcements of their so-called deaths, or exits out of daily use in society. Socrates famously warned against writing because it would "create forgetfulness in the learners' souls, because they will not use their memories."[2] He also advised that since children cannot distinguish fantasy from reality parents should restrict children to wholesome allegories, not improper tales, lest their development go astray. The Socratic warning has been repeated many times since: the older generation warns against a new technology and bemoans that society is abandoning the "wholesome" media it grew up with, seemingly unaware that this same technology was considered to be harmful when first introduced.

In Plato's *Phaedrus*, Socrates warns Phaedrus of the impending downfall of writing (as well as painting and public speaking) as he writes,

> I cannot help feeling, Phaedrus, that writing is unfortunately like painting; for the creations of the painter have the attitude of life, and yet if you ask them a question they preserve a solemn silence. And the same may be said of speeches. You would imagine that they had intelligence, but if you want to know anything and put a question to one of them, the speaker always gives one unvarying answer. And when they have been once written down they are tumbled about anywhere among those who may or may not understand them, and know not to whom they should reply, to whom not: and, if they are maltreated or abused, they have no parent to protect them; and they cannot protect or defend themselves.[3]

Neil Postman, author of the popular book, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, holds a critical view on the impact of new technologies on media and society. On *PBS Newshour* in 1995, Postman said, "New technology ... always gives us something important, but it also takes away something that is important. That has been true of the alphabet, printing, and telegraphy right up until the computer."[4]

Recent theories about the impact of new technologies on media and society focus more on the Internet and so-called "screen time," not only on the effect of alternate realities on the screen, but also the replacement of social contact, and even the effect of the light itself emitted by the screen influencing a natural day/night rhythm.[5]

The social acceptance period of a medium can be compared to an artist's research of a medium, as I outline in the three steps that follow.

First, the technical possibilities of the medium are often explored, and art is made to exhibit these capabilities. As we can see with the development of film, from the magic lantern until the so-called 4k video of today, new techniques were always introduced with spectacular works to prove their flashy capabilities. For instance, an early celluloid cinema movie by the Lumière brothers, *L'arrivée d'un Train en Gare de la Ciotat*, is associated with an urban legend often told to fans of cinema. The story goes that when the film was first shown, the audience was so overwhelmed by the moving image of a life-sized train coming directly at them that people screamed and ran to the back of the room. Hellmuth Karasek notoriously wrote of the film's impact, causing fear and terror, in the German magazine *Der Spiegel*. However, some have doubted the veracity of this incident, such as film scholar and historian Martin Loiperdinger in his essay "Lumiere's Arrival of the Train: Cinema's Founding Myth."[6] Whether or not it actually happened, the film undoubtedly astonished people in the audience who were unaccustomed to the amazingly realistic illusions created by moving pictures. The Lumière brothers clearly knew that the effect would be dramatic if they placed the camera on the platform very close to the arriving train. Another significant aspect of the film is that it illustrates the use of the long shot to establish the setting of the film, followed by a medium shot, and close-up. (As the camera is static for the entire film, the effect of these various "shots" is generated by the movement of the subject alone.) The train arrives from a distant point and bears down on the viewer, finally crossing the lower edge of the screen.

Eadweard Muybridge's famous works recording movements of animals (using several cameras to take pictures one after the other to show exactly how humans or animals move) seem to be the ultimate use of the technical possibilities of the new medium, film, even while the medium was still in development. Muybridge's works are not only functional, proving the technical capabilities of film, but they are also beautifully composed images.

These works tended to catch the attention of the general public during the establishment of the medium. While technical innovations are new, and offer a fresh way to frame or illustrate ideas, the technical components of new media are interesting on their own. I have never understood why this is true, but it seems that the Internet as a medium is still suffering from the lack of medium-specific content which utilizes new possibilities specific to the medium. The Internet still attracts attention by serving generic, medium-unspecific content (such as articles, photographs, and videos) rather than showcasing its medium-specific capabilities.

Analogies are difficult to draw between the Internet as a medium and older art media such as painting. The Internet is not a static medium, like painting or photography. Although the interests in technical possibilities may have influenced medium-specific content during historic periods in painting or photography, in this case it is hard to do

so since these specific qualities lie so far apart. Comparisons can more easily be made between the birth of cinema, as used in the example above, or very recently video art, and the Internet. Since these are recent media developments, they are fantastically archived for new students. We can go to a museum, an archive, or online to UBUweb to find Bruce Nauman's early films and videos, or installations by Nam June Paik. Comparatively, the developments of these contemporary media are closer to each other in time, and have more similarities and therefore medium-specific qualities that can be compared (such as moving images reproduced on a screen with light).

The second step in artistic-medium research would be to find the boundaries of the technical capabilities in relation to how humans use the media. Here I often think of Nam June Paik's magnets on television monitors that produce a random animation seemingly devoid of connotation, close to today's flurry-effect screensaver on the Mac OS X operating system. Andy Warhol's screen tests were literally tests of the attention span of the subject as well as the audience, and produced intriguing portraits. Jodi's (Dirk Paesmans and Joan van Heemskerk) early CD-ROMs, made to crash the computer they were inserted into, also tested the viewers' (or users') relationship with a new medium.

The third step in researching a new medium is to view the young medium on a metaphysical level, questioning the use of the medium—what is it being used to produce, and how is it being used?

While this outline is not a comprehensive approach to analyzing a new medium, it is the way in which I thought about using the Internet to make art for this project.

Starting Point of the *YouTube as a Subject* Series

With the rise of YouTube's popularity, I found myself critical of approaches made by the latest edition of video-hosting websites. As a video artist with a history of production before the advent of video online, these new video-sharing websites were not the platform I was waiting to use. YouTube was badly designed, the video quality was low, and I had seen more interesting platforms (such as Vimeo and others). YouTube, as a platform, was more interested in the quantity, not quality, of videos uploaded to the website. The necessity for curated video platforms was clear to me, as I was working with the Amsterdam initiative PARK4DTV. From this point of view, I was not yet able to appreciate the social media aspect that makes YouTube popular in mass culture.

For me, the distracting website design, the clumsiness of the play button, and the awkward profile set-ups resonated with my dislike for websites like Myspace. These sites are disorganized, unclear, and open to all kinds of content—which result in an overwhelming amount of poor-quality content (in my opinion, both from an aesthetic and conceptual perspective). Additionally, YouTube, like so many of these types of websites, generates an alibi for people who use the platform to show their failed efforts to make something remarkable or authentic. Of course, I formed these opinions before these social media platforms also became filled with interesting content, and before I found easier ways to utilize social media. To state my appreciation for social media seems unnecessary, as it provides the ability to find a song I want at the moment I think of it, to be able to share ideas, inspiration, and links so much quicker then I ever imagined possible in the beginning of the 1990s. As a user, social media is a dream come true. For instance, Delicious.com provides a platform that has changed my life and practice. However, to stay critical with regard to the media that offer services so welcome is tremendously significant. Lest we lose sight of the economic burden of any new media:

for enormous corporations profit is the biggest interest shaping our technical window on the world. Poor design decisions are symbols of other bad decisions made with regard to social justice issues such as censorship and human rights, or mass media issues such as which video is pushed into the mainstream and what price is to be paid for contemporary entertainment.

At the same time that YouTube was growing in popularity, I was interested in the development of art existing online, not only the presentation and representation of art, but mainly art that would have its most important part exist online, and would therefore be media-specific. The art I wanted to create would have to utilize specific qualities the web had to offer, that other media could not offer. Surrounded by a young generation of artists enthusiastic about a medium, questioning how it is used, and ironically quoting its new vernacular, I found myself interested in the formal aspects of the Internet. What were the parameters and browser limits? What were projects that could be done now, in this time of metaphysical reflection on a medium? How would these online art projects fit in the traditional art world; in other words, how could they be commodified, exhibited, or sold?

Researching these questions during my residency in the Rijksakademie van Beeldende kunsten, I quickly found a lot of these problems had been dealt with decades earlier, for example in the conceptual art movement. In this period I had the pleasure of talking to several influential people from the era that first produced conceptual art. How do works without a physical basis (like a website, or a specific idea, or a performance) get to be commodified, and is it a necessity of the art world to commodify art? The most important lesson that I learned from of all of these conversations is to know your audience, and to have your audience know you. Seth Siegelaub did not need a document proving the Sol LeWitt work he was auctioning was authentic, because it was Seth Siegelaub, after all, and we (the audience) were aware of his role as a dealer and promoter of conceptual art in the 1960s. This seemed like the ideal starting point for a career using social media.

Previous generations worked with invitations through expensive regular mail systems, publications, and galleries. This generation fills out a profile, makes a website, and creates a "web presence" through blogposts, retweets, favorited videos, and so on. One of my early arguments that YouTube was poorly designed continued to burden me. Every now and then a slight improvement on the website would provide hope for the future, but I was still surprised at the fact that so many hours of art, science, instruction, gaming, news, activist, sports, amateur, and music videos watched globally all started with the same image: a badly designed play button in an awkward layout, on a website that was unknown five years before.

Technical Realization

So once I had decided to take the play button as the subject of a video that I would create and upload to YouTube, I took some time to capture the button exactly as it appears on the website. Since the button is designed to be semi-transparent, I needed to use a uniform black background. After some searching, I could not find any video that had a play button over a black background, the so-called "poster frame" was never taken from a black part of a clip (if there was one). So I had to create my own video with only black. After having resolved the screencapture on my computer of the YouTube play button, I imported this image to Final Cut Pro and experimented with basic effects while chatting with my friend, Pascual Sisto, on Skype. Together, we generated some ideas before Pascual came up with the reference to a DVD logo or screensaver.

Most of the effects were made obvious by their names (for instance, "Black and White" converts a color image into a grayscale image), but some were less obvious. I tried all of the video effects available in Final Cut Pro to see which ones were visually attractive. The simplicity of the idea hides how many times I have uploaded videos only to see that YouTube's compression changed the aspect ratio or the size of my video.

Presentation

After having made a series of seven videos, I embedded them on a webpage using HTML, in a simple layout where the videos are stacked one upon the other. I called the webpage and the project *YouTube as a Subject* to emphasize the conceptual nature of the work, and to demonstrate that the medium became the subject of this work of art. This project could be read as a reference to Marshall McLuhan's book and famous line, *The Medium is the Message* (1967), although I thought of the work as a purely formal exercise where the form literally was the content. To have the work exist outside the YouTube website was important to me, as collecting the videos and contextualizing them outside YouTube meant that the work was about the player, and not so much about the social part of the website. Also, this helped to differentiate the idea of the work from the techno-utopian ideas put forth by *The Medium is the Message*. Time passed, and I was happy that I had executed an idea I thought was so obvious. I was surprised nobody else had made the videos I uploaded before I did. I thought this was the end of the project.

I should mention the work made by Cory Arcangel, *Blue Tube*, which was of course an earlier comment on YouTube's design, but had quickly lost significance when YouTube changed their logo on embedded videos. I was happy to post my videos on YouTube as a video response, but I did not consider it a starting point for the *YouTube as a Subject* series, since it was not consciously in my mind when I thought of the work.

Responses

Very soon after the release of the works online, my artist friends started to suggest other possible visual jokes where the YouTube design is a subject. Jokes could be made about the playbar, the loading circle dots, the aspect ratio, and so on. I decided to wait before acting on these, perhaps I felt like doing the more "obvious idea" work on a rainy Sunday afternoon.

Then I received an email from YouTube that user "ilovetoeatmice" had responded to one of my videos; six additional emails like this followed, as well as a Google alert that "Ben Coonley" from Brooklyn, New York City, had made seven video responses to "Constant Dullaart's *YouTube as a Subject*." To me, this was a great compliment and just what I had hoped for: someone was interested in continuing the discussion about YouTube's design, linking new videos to my previous work. Now this meant that my work was
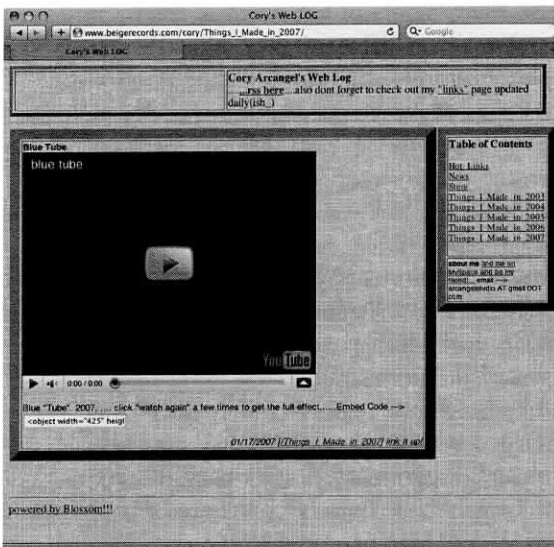
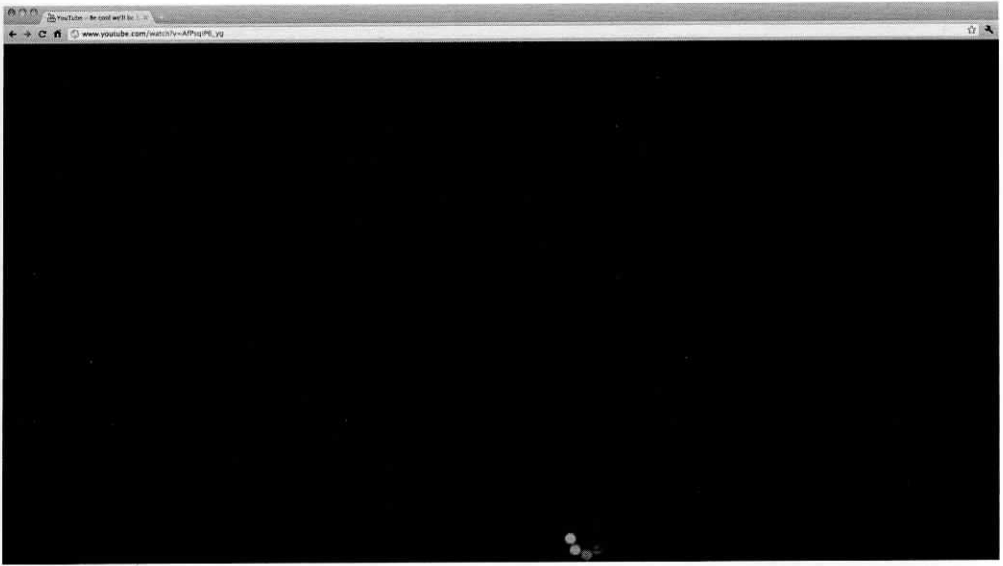**Figure 2.1** Cory Arcangel (US), *Blue Tube*, 2007.

Figure 2.2 Ben Coonley (US), *Be Cool We'll Be Back 100% in a Bit*, 2008. The title references
YouTube.com's message during site maintenance.

not just a stand-alone presentation. Since Ben had made his video response about the
loading circle animation, he added the following instructions: "For best results, use a
dial-up modem connection (28.8 kbit/s or slower) and select YouTube's 'view at high
quality' option."[7]

As Ed Halter wrote in his review, "A Series of 'Tubes," on Rhizome.org,

> In true YouTube spirit, Ben Coonley recently posted his own series as response
> [to Dullart's originals], this time appropriating the spinning wheel of dots that
> eager viewers need to sit through as a video loads—in keeping with his long-
> standing interest in media breakdowns and frustrations.[8]
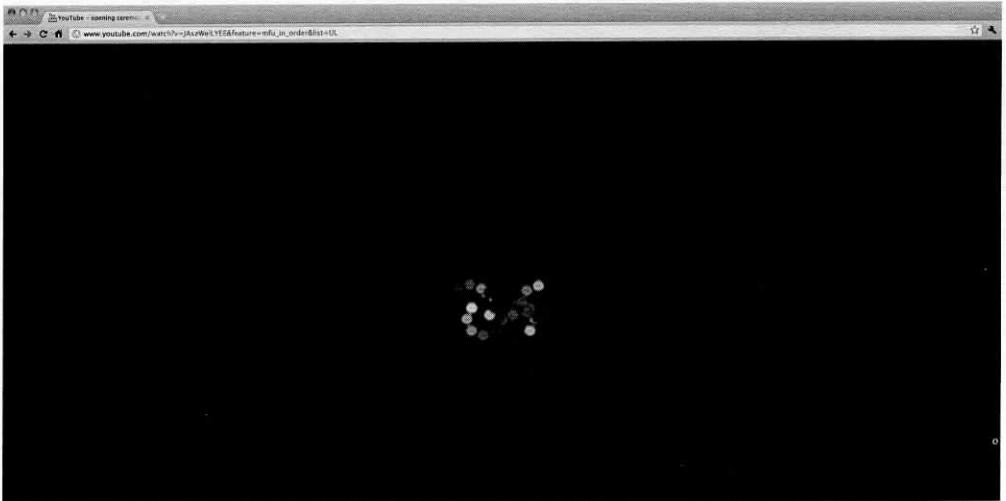
Figure 2.3 Ben Coonley (US), *Opening Ceremonies*, 2008. Both screenshots of Ben Coonley's work
were taken from the series, *Seven Video Responses to Constant Dullaart's YouTube as a Subject*.
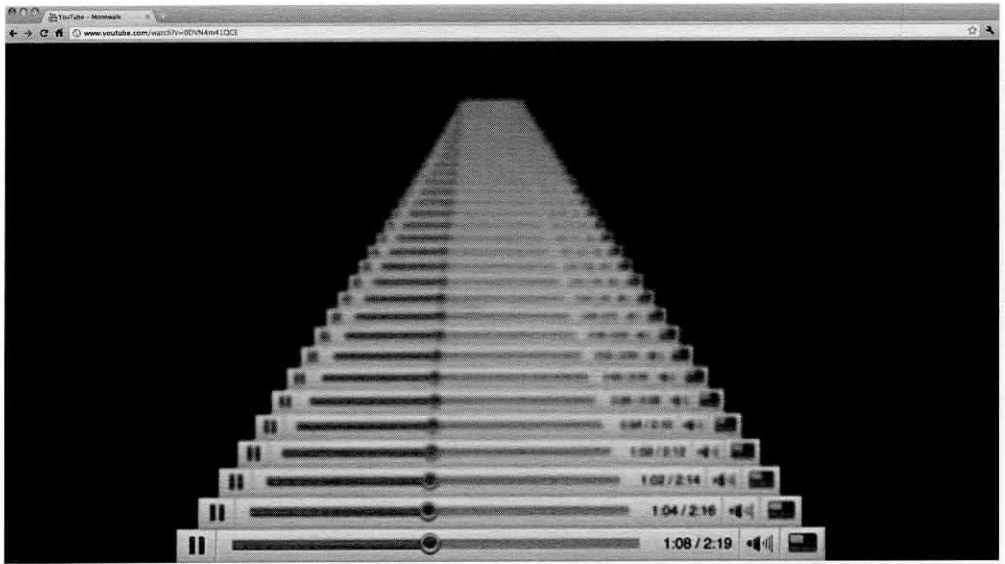
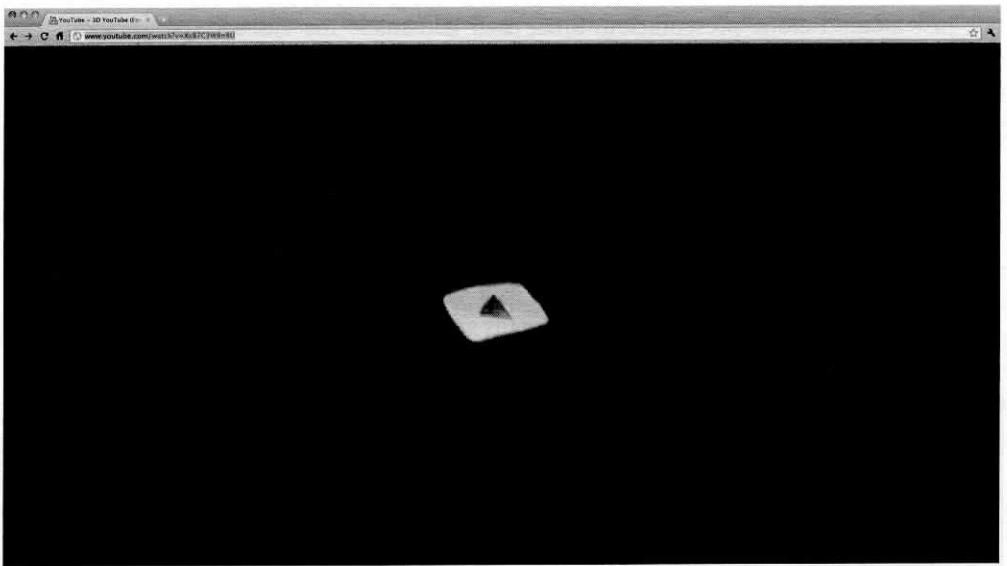Figure 2.4 Martin Kohout (CZ), *Moonwalk*, 2008.

Figure 2.5 Adam Cruces (US), *3D YouTube for Constant Dullaart*, 2008.

After this a sequence of responses followed over the next couple of years. I am still delighted if one makes it into my inbox, and every time I talk about the work, I try to mention all of them.

Conclusions and Outcomes

The responses transformed my original seven-video series into a community-based artwork. However, I do not perceive this as a complete work made by several people, as in a "gesamtkunstwerk," but more as a work in which the comments become part of the
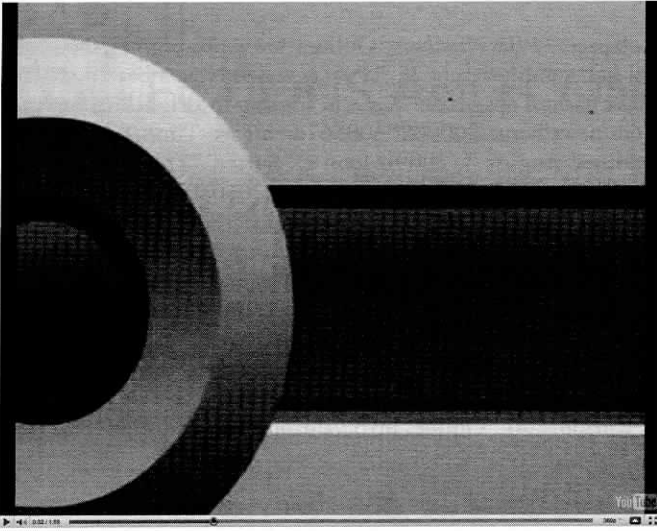
Figure 2.6 Julien Levesque (FR), *Most Viewed, All Time, All Category, All Languages*, 2008.

original, without getting lost from their referent. The responses emphasize the medium-specific quality inherent to social media. In this case, the comment is a new medium. The recorded comment was of course already used as a medium in collected response letters to newspapers, or other collected responses to older media formats, but never as quickly or automatically produced, with so many possibilities for individual users or viewers. These possibilities are leading to fast-growing common vernaculars as we continue to use the Internet for social effects.

For the exhibition "Versions" in the Dutch Media Art Institute in Amsterdam (NIMK) I was asked to co-curate and participate in an exhibition around the theme of the comment as a medium. For this exhibition I decided to continue the conversation of the *YouTube as a Subject* series by adding it to the discussion about how to exhibit web-based art, or how to present web-based art in a physical space, by making Ben Coonley's response into a sculpture. Eight white styrofoam balls with a 20 cm diameter were lit by a light system controlled by DMX (a standard fixture that allows one to turn lights on or off, dim lights, or even turn on a fog machine)—a device normally used by amateur disco fanatics. As I was recording the work in order to place it back on YouTube as a response to Ben Coonley's works, Seth Siegelaub, visiting the exhibition opening, passed by the camera. It only struck me later that this small cameo in the documentation of the work was fortuitious. The work had become physical, but would only find its true form on the social networking platform. Later visitors uploaded more documentation of the work to YouTube (without being asked to do so) just because the sculpture reminded them of the YouTube loading balls, a contemporary icon imprinted in their way of experiencing the world online.

Notes

1. See Plato, *Phaedrus*, Fairfield, IA: 1st World Library, 2008: 117, for Socrates' tale of an emperor who rejects the alphabet as it "will create forgetfulness in the learners' souls, because they will not use their memories; they will trust to the external written characters and not remember of themselves." Available online: http://books.google.com/books?id=M8_fP5Vr2b wC&lpg=PP1&dq=phaedrus&pg=PP1#v=onepage&q&f=false.
2. Ibid.: 117.

3. Ibid.: 117–118.
4. Neil Postman, "Visions of Cyberspace," *PBS Newshour*. Online: www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/cyberspace/cyberspace_7-25.html (last modified July 25, 1995; accessed November 20, 2010).
5. See Brightkite Business Wire, "Fact Time Tops Screen Time According to Brightkite Survey." Online: www.businesswire.com/news/home/20090803005674/en/Face-Time-Tops-Screen-Time-Brightkite-Survey (last modified August 3, 2009); John D. Sutter, "Trouble Sleeping? Maybe It's Your iPad," *CNN*. Online: http://edition.cnn.com/2010/TECH/05/13/sleep.gadgets.ipad/index.html?hpt=C1 (last modified May 13, 2010); and Carla Seal-Warner, "Into the Minds of Babes: How Screen Time Affects Children from Birth to Age Five," Review of *Into the Minds of Babes* by Lisa Guernsey, *Television Quarterly*, 38, 2, Winter 2008: 57–60.
6. Martin Loiperdinger and Bernd Elzer, "Lumiere's Arrival of the Train: Cinema's Founding Myth," *The Moving Image*, 4, 1, Spring 2004: 89–118.
7. Ben Coonley, *Be Cool We'll Be Back 100% in a Bit*. Online: www.youtube.com/user/ilovetoeatmicedotcom#p/u/3/AfPsqiP6_yg (accessed November 20, 2010).
8. Ed Halter, "A Series of Tubes," Rhizome.org. Online: http://rhizome.org/editorial/1890 (last modified August 25, 2008).

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Links

Corey Arcangel, *Blue Tube*: www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=1Xn_q_o303E.

Ben Coonley, *Be Cool We'll Be Back 100% in a Bit*: www.youtube.com/user/ilovetoeatmicedotcom#p/u/3/AfPsqiP6_yg.

Ben Coonley, *Opening Ceremonies*: www.youtube.com/user/ilovetoeatmicedotcom#p/u/5/JAszWelLYEE.

Adam Cruces, *3D YouTube for Constant Dullaart*: www.youtube.com/watch?v=XsB2C3W8n8U.

Constant Dullaart, *YouTube as a Subject*: www.constantdullaart.com/project/youtube-as-a-subject-i.

Martin Kohout, *Moonwalk*: www.youtube.com/watch?v=0DVN4m41QCE.

Julien Levesque, *Most Viewed, All Time, All Category, All Languages*: www.youtube.com/watch?v=YE3AJD6pPng.