Digital Art Reveals a Novel Aesthetics in Practice and Action
: C. S. Peirce, Semiotics and Creativity

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Abstract

The special kinds of aesthetics in digital art practice have been seldom theorized. Digital art creates a new practice, and thus demands a new paradigm in our analysis of the philosophy of art.

Now digital art allows for greater plasticity in space, time, and ongoing meanings of art practice since the purpose of the art experience is now actively changing instead of stable. Therefore, our past categories of aesthetics analysis should change in this case to understand action and interactive feedback as the basis of digital art aesthetics.

I focus on C. S. Peirce’s semiotics and how his concepts can be applied to understand this novel ongoing practice that is digital art. Specifically, I describe his idea of “Thirdness” and how it can be connected to digital art practice’s creative concept. Once we experience and analyze these new artistic experiences, art can be more clearly conceived of as a living thing with its own unpredictable autonomy.

I will argue the attempt to understand the practice and meaning of digital art as an ongoing practice has altered our past views of aesthetics and can add more conceptual richness to the philosophy of art in general.

This study was conceived with a purpose to solve the aesthetics issues of image representation in Digital Art. Digital Art has shown a paradigm shift from the traditional forms of art, when viewed from the perspective of Peirce's semiotics. Research on art’s definition has served as the core discussion in the history of aesthetics
mainly because they assume that there is a common nature in all forms of art, and they premise that certain ‘works of art’ also have such nature. Just as the digital environment has changed human life and perceptions, Digital Art has changed the concepts and sentiments of art and made us rethink the manners and terminology in which we define ‘art.’ Especially the question, ”What is art in human life,” that is raised by digital art deviates from the more essentialist question, ”What is art,” discussed in the history of aesthetics. This prompts aesthetics discussions to highlight reflexive relations between art and human life from the philosophical standpoint instead of what that was concentrated on in the analysis of art’s definition.

The digital environment, in particular, promotes interactivity in human life. Digital art is based on digital culture, which brings about changes to the root of everything including human thinking, sentiment, and acts as well as life conditions. Characterized by the interactivity based on digital technology, digital art too requires novel discussions to explain the art’s characteristics. Considering its characteristics, it is difficult to apply the traditional philosophy of aesthetics approaches to Digital Art because the former pursue the nature of art as finished artistic works. Thus there should be new aesthetics discussions to provide an explanation for Digital Art.

To elaborate, Digital Art finds its core analysis on ‘art activities’ in the participatory and performative nature of practice in the network of artists, writers, and works and the altered structure of production, distribution, and acceptance. The image in Digital Art is only the core area where these art activities characteristics interplay. Thus the image in Digital Art goes beyond the status of stationary ‘objects of appreciation’ or expressive objects of the outside world.

This study compares and examines the digital image and the traditional pictorial image to discover the changed status of image in digital art, and to discuss this as an aesthetics point. As an aesthetics concept to deal with images, ‘representation’ is the category that explains the most important function of art involved in human perception and emotion.

Such traditional representations represent aesthetics concepts that have been considered to be contemplative and to have (Kantian) disinterestedness and characterized by no purpose. The traditional image as an object of appreciation had representation functions restricted toward only the contemplative according to the stationary medium of expression. To the contrary, image in Digital Art has characteristics that actively require intervention from viewers instead of more separate contemplation and require a different structure of production than the traditional image. This means the image should be subject to new interpretations. There
should be the construction of a representation concept proper for the image in Digital Art since it signifies a dynamic image implemented based on experiential activities in the reflexive relations between art and life.

In trying to interpret contemporary art as signs, the semiotics of Charles Sanders Peirce (1839–1914) provides an aesthetic foundation to explain appropriately the dynamic relations of a represented image. This allows for art activities as more core to semiotics via his characteristic of constructing signs in a triadic relationship.

Discussed in Peirce’s semiotics, this ‘Thirdness’ is one of the core concepts of the study. As the artistic interaction of icon, index, and symbol, ‘Thirdness’ in works of art produces semiosis (Peirce’s term for the process of creating semiotics), valuing relationships in works of art beyond dichotomous thought about merely the viewers and the work of art. Especially symbols related to ‘Thirdness’ are connected to thinking and to expanding the analysis of standards of art. Here the conditions of producing meanings are symbol/representation and its tendency of interpretations.

Using these terms, the study figures out how his Mediation function, which Peirce equates somewhat with representation though more concentrated is his interest on the wider relational issues, creates a wider reflexive capacity in symbols. In addition, the importance in his semiotics to community relations makes it possible to assume artistic actuality that allows for experiential activities in digital art. The possibility of a connectivity between or an application of Peirce’s realism in Digital Art’s realism starts with a phenomenological attitude like him that has a tendency of moving towards truth through the intuition and sensation of image. The artistic actuality acquired in the process seeks out truth and is attained through sensational and aesthetic explorations. Those explorations happen in a way similar to his community actuality.

By using his semiotics, this study argued that the image of Digital Art has a dynamic structure of communication and growth. Such a concept of growth emphasizes concepts of process, change, and progress within the work of art, and expands the concept of art as ongoing experiential art activity—a lot like a living creature. Such an approach will provide important clues for discussing digital art that values the roles of the user/viewer intervening in art. In addition, the study employed a strategy of shifting the focus from works of art to art activity and through this hoping to address points via semiotics that were unresolved in the traditional aesthetics discussions.

These discussions perform the following four tasks. First, they can demarcate the research areas by defining the concepts of Digital Art and reviewing its characteristics. Secondly, they will examine in what ways
Digital Art can produce new concepts of representation following its definition above and how this new concept of representation can be applied to the expanded semiotic extension of art as community relations around the art activity. Thirdly, discussions explore a need for a pragmatic aesthetics based on Dewey's ‘experience concept’ to give a full account of representation that allows for experiential art activities. Finally, as the core of the study, this work will also produce the possibility of new aesthetics by connecting the special issues of image representation in Digital Art as similar to the experiential activities in Peirce’s semiotics.

The significance of the study was that it offered new interpretations of image representation by the method of theoretically systemizing dynamic images of Digital Art by discussing its semiotics (connections with the world), its syntactics (relations among signs in formal structures), and its pragmatics (here, the reflexive relations between signs and people). Presenting a new composition between humans and art, the study suggests a prediction for future art. Advancements in technology and civilization have evolved into new forms, combined with human life. Today the areas of art expand to include biology and artificial life. There will be many different fields that can be connected with the areas of art in these phenomena of advancements in human civilization that have even changed the conditions of human existence. Philosophical discussions about new genres of art from those fields should take place in the awareness of close interactive reflexive activities between life and art, in art activity. Like Peirce predicted that art would raise human dignity in its value, the investigator tried to maintain that values of art find further future-oriented human significance in the study.