Our Digital Noology: Catherine Perret in conversation with Joseph Nechvatal

Catherine Perret

Catherine Perret: The most important contribution for art of the so-called New Technologies is that they introduce and/or let appear new process and forms of thinking. Is it possible to define them and their characteristics?

Do you think that New Technologies reveal these forms of thinking or that they introduce some kind of innovation in terms of methodological thinking?

Joseph Nechvatal: I think that what we now mean when we say “New Technologies” is digital technology. I have no doubt that the specificity of digital technology may be used to change our habits of thinking, our noologies - the study of intuition and reason - in quite dramatic ways. I think that digital technology allows and facilitates changes in consciousness by primarily allowing us to act differently with new tools. For example, digital painters, like myself, work and think much differently from traditional painters through their mastering of digital tools - if they do so in alliance with a spirit of heterogeneous innovation and inner-directed risk.

I will try to define some of the main larger issues connected to digital consciousness as I see them; issues which run parallel to, and feed into, the epistemological transformations generated by contemporary theories of physics, biology and mathematics which have become closely associated with poststructuralist theory and cyber culture.

In the last forty years, certainly since the advent of computers, civilization has witnessed a paradigmatic shift. The predictability of the linear equation was found to be insufficient in capturing the total relevant behavior in natural systems. Non-linear equations were troublesome to manipulate until computers provided science with the means through which non-linear mathematical models of self-organization could be demarcated.

What was detected was that matter expressed itself in complex rich ways which were non-linear but, nevertheless, which displayed long-term tendencies and organizational patterns. Specifically, certain spots in the non-linear field were found to manifest as either attraction or repulsion spots to nearby trajectories. The attractors were found to have a stabilizing function in the system and represented long-term tendencies of a system. Chaotic (or strange) attractors signify turbulent behavior in nature. Furthermore, what was discovered was that attractors may mutate and these spontaneous transformations became know as bifurcations.

While the classical sciences isolated physical systems from their surrounding, the new thinking connected to digital fluidity is founded on the realization that all systems in nature are connected and subject to flows of matter and energy that move constantly through them. Dynamic equilibriums result from chaotic energy and manifest themselves in creative processes that generate richly organized patterns – patterns that teeter on the complex stable and the complex unstable.

For me it is neither surprising nor coincidental that a paradigmatic epistemological change for thought and art would follow such developments. In art, science fiction, critical studies, and in an array of philosophical discourses, chaotic and rhizomatic approaches towards turbulent behavior are affecting our consciousness in respect to order and composition.
CP: I have several questions, of course, after your answer. I will take them one after the other. Could you develop what you experienced as inner-directed risk linked to digital practice?

JN: I found that taking chances in relationship to one’s subjectivity is enhanced through digital practices. Not only does the inherent newness, trepidation, and jubilation felt when playing with digital consumer goodies in a non-linear fashion facilitate slight inner-directed risk – but there is an active, moral non-compliant aspect as well. It is quite easy to slip into excess.

CP: Classical science was founded on a metaphysical model where you have no relationship between nature and the object of science which was a pure abstract model of relationships. Although classical science is founded on abstraction - and if it can define grids of regularities - it is because it supposes that relationships are fixed because they are conceptual.

The non-linear equation refers to patterns in nature or in matter itself before those patterns become mathematical models and can be demarcated by digitalization. It is a succession of "demarcations" and not abstraction.

JN: The new sensibility/noology that I am feeling, (which elsewhere I have called cybism) is based on my observation that art and science, after centuries of separation, are becoming entangled again through the discreditation of the concept – one
might say presumption – of objectivity. Richard Rorty writes persuasively about this as does Manuel Delanda; particularly in his book *Intensive Science and Virtual Philosophy*. This connectivist non-separateness is part and parcel with a noology of inter-subjectivity, which on one hand, gives art the license to appropriate scientific tropes, and on the other, lends science art’s powers of non-utility, freedom, and even excess. It is this border-crossing between Janusian mirror states that leads me to believe that we are entering a state of a new kind of natural magic – in some ways reminiscent of the Florentine 15th Century Neo-Platonists. Take Marsilio Fiscino and/or Giovanni Pico as examples. Their thinking typically placed the reign of significance in-between the vast remoteness of spiritual infinity and the baseness of present materialism - therefore concentrating on the zone of transformational actions of humans that lead to a natural magical alchemy. This noology is about knowledge that can transform things and states of the system. In that sense I am maintaining that we are leaving the age of sterile reductive analysis and entering into one of fecund synthesis; much like the poetic-mythic-scientific age of the early Renaissance. The binding force of this synthesis is certainly inter-subjective pleasure (art) and a lust for yeasty comprehensions out of which new possibilities grow. These comprehensions are obtained by experiment/chance/inner-risk – though need not be verified, nor repeated. Indeed they should not be. It is about a search for originality in that sense. The new noology’s validity is obtained through the force of its correspondences and its breath of connectivity. The resulting pan-panoramas will luxuriate this era and be the counter-attack to fundamentalist repression as its imminence will supercede our mistrust of irrationality and lead us into a qualitative approach by escaping locked down definitions. In some ways it is a development of Nietzsche’s Gay Science.

Joseph Nechvatal Studio, New York City 2004

CP: Digitalization accounts for an empirical model of rationality that evokes very precisely what early Ienaian Romanticism tried to conceive of as Naturphilosophie. The question of "attractor" was for example present under the concept of "magnetizing" of all beings in nature and in society too.
Nevertheless, when you speak about "fields", "bifurcations", "connection", "linear" and "non linear", I ask myself if the model of the classical map is finished, or still latent, and, under the map, the representation itself.

JN: Yes concepts are fluid. Also patterns in nature overlap and are simultaneous. We are gazing into a thickly layered field.

In terms of digitalization and its relationship to the Naturphilosophie of Friedrich Schelling’s System of Transcendental Philosophy, we might recall its deep roots in neo-Platonic sublime mind. Techno-Romanticism tends towards a focus on individual passions and inner struggles and hence produces a new and positive emphasis on the emotional artistic imagination in the digital realm. This capacious aggrandizement of feeling over logic becomes perceived as a gateway to transcendent experiences of unity based on ideas of the unity of our own consciousness.

Recall that the romantic mysticism of Johann Gottlieb Fichte, Novalis, and Friedrich Schelling was a circuitous counter-action against much of the overt rationalism of 18th century philosophy. They stressed the accentuation of pathos, fancy, and an aversion to adhering to sociable etiquette in opposition to rationalist obligation. Their Romanticism announced a rebuff to the precepts of regulation, tranquility, equilibrium, quintessence, and rationality that typified Classicism in general and late-18th century Neo-Classicism in particular. Thus Romanticism was a counter-attack opposing the Enlightenment’s ideals of strict materialism by accentuating the visceral, the inconceivable, the mercurial, the inner, the extemporaneous, the emotional, the extravagant, and the spectral. This re-evaluation of ideal human responses was accompanied by a spiraling within the personality and an intensified inquiry into the individual personality with its moods and intrinsic verisimilitudes.

Neo-Platonism is salient to our concerns because Pseudo-Dionysius’s neo-Platonic thought predominantly appears in the post-Kantian romantic transcendentalists, such as in the influential work of Friedrich Schelling, the German philosopher who more than any set the itinerary for Romanticism. Pseudo-Dionysius’s system was essentially dialectical theology - the simultaneous affirmation and denial of paradox in any statement or concept relative to totality. Schelling regards reality as a manifestation of a spiritual vigor that initially operated unconsciously, but that in conclusion, consummated in self-awareness through the instrumentality of human thoughtfulness. Art represented the culminating of that operation. Thus with Romanticism, philosophy became again involved in the challenge of art, and conceptions concerning beauty were used to solve philosophical problems as Romanticism moved away from reason (as it had been conceived through the tradition of Aristotle’s logic) and towards a revival of Platonism in Plotinusian neo-Platonic epistemology, an epistemology that embraces an abstract poly-oneness conception which addresses Pagan polytheism through a unifying oneness. From the neo-Platonic perspective we understand that physical experience makes us consider that we are disconnected, when in actuality we are not. In remarkable parallel developments, 20th century science found that it became increasingly difficult to keep detached from just such metaphysical contemplation. With Techno-Romanticism, the comprehension of both the universe and consciousness as undiminished totality has re-emerged, as the fields of physics and metaphysics appear to be dropping their separate distinctions to some extent and forming an intimate rendezvous in digital art. This is so due to art's attributes of presenting cohesion within apparent borderless excess. As digital art may exemplify this dynamism, it newly fulfills art's ancient function as a model-maker of contemplative consciousness too abstract to be embodied in less circuitous human expressions.
CP: Can we not say that such an epistemological change was efficient in art since Marcel Duchamp - with the cesura that he introduces between art and the object of art and a new concept of object like the ready-made?

JN: Yes Dada thinking is another example of Pseudo-Dionysiusian paradox; the recognition of the simultaneous existence of affirmation and negation – 01 in digital terms.

JN: Yes the feeling I have is that we are trying to exit a new dark age. This time (and again) it’s the flesh humans verses the robotic religio-political ideologues. Giordano Bruno heretically pointed out that religious faith is irrational and has no scientific basis. By spreading the Copernican doctrine and word of a new astronomy he became know as an infidel and was condemned during the Inquisition for teaching there is no absolute up or down. His acute observations on the pretensions of superstition are most relevant to our dark world today. This genius’s death by fire is our beacon of truth.
CP: I extract two key-words from our exchange now: consciousness and abstract. You say that, “As digital art may exemplify this dynamism, it newly fulfils art's ancient function as a model-maker of contemplative consciousness too abstract to be embodied in less circuitous human expressions.” I understand this too abstract contemplative consciousness differently as the abstract conscious of modernity. Modern abstraction meant alienation - and alienation of consciousness before all. The consciousness you write about is not this schized consciousness. It is an abstract-like reflection as in Schelling's system; reflection of the reflection - or presentation of the system's form. It is abstract (by which I mean something like cosmic or systematic or total) because it is without any content of representation. The idea of "art" as "presenting cohesion within apparent borderless excess" (what is given in your paintings) and the concept of "contemplative consciousness" crosses precisely with the notion of presentation where consciousness becomes form.

JN: Yes. Beautifully stated. What is a system's form when that system is continually morphing - besides that of the morph? Yet the system is ripe with an excess of detail at the same time. So we are in a state of supra-representation - which is another form of abstraction. However it is a non-reductive abstraction. It is form not empty, but rather full to overflowing. Good art sets up just such possible alternative models to suggest connectivist states of awareness. For me painting is not merely a cultural product. It is a service product. As such the quality of its service grants it its value. For example digital painting is an alternative method of painting within the system and history of painting pictures. Digital painting is neither in opposition to traditional hand painting nor is it complicit with it. It is both simultaneously within and without the system of painting.
CP: You sat that “connectivist non-separateness is part and parcel with a noology of inter-subjectivity, which on one hand, gives art the license to appropriate scientific tropes, and on the other, lends science art’s powers of non-utility, freedom, and even excess.” This sentence opens up some very interesting paths that I propose we now explore. You seem to apply a political model to the relationship between art and science, particularly when we consider them as subjects associated by social links. This model’s identification seems to be based on appropriation. But what is the basis of this identification for you? Is it the efficiency of the connectivity itself - or connectivity as a new form of social linkage between individuals? And if this were the case, how would you define this kind of linkage?

JN: For me this linkage is exactly what I look for when I look for art. Yes, this linking of the social, scientific, technical with the personal-sensual is what I imagine when I dare think of defining art. This is why when people chatter of the ‘end of art’ I always feel that they are missing the point of art. They are missing art’s pleasurable and ethical force of course, its position of the other, but also its ability to create meta-meanings; comprehensive meanings which are obtained through exactly such sweeping synthetic maneuvers.

So with art, synthetic connectivity may be vast. Art can be stupid and stunted as well, of course. But for me distinguished art, by definition, contains a plethora of intellectual strains in the interests of providing the foundation for a strategy of private discovery - which can then be shared with others. Of course, it must be remembered that in philosophy synthetic statements are those statements judged to be true or false in relationship to the world (but which are not necessary ones), as opposed to analytical truths, which are necessary, and hence cannot be otherwise. In both art and philosophy it is important to make this distinction between synthetic and analytical statements. Only when we acknowledge that art partakes in synthetic connecting activity might we enter the concept of social linkage into consideration, and only if we understand art to be a synthetic psychological thought-vision.

The key political notion here for me is omnijectivity, which is the concept stemming from the discoveries of quantum physics which teaches us that mind (previously considered the subjective realm) and matter (previously considered as the objective realm) are inextricably linked. It is a political concept for me because omnijectivity is possible only with the conflation of polarities; a stance which recognizes the mutual interpenetration that unites apparent opposites (specifically the subjectivity and objectivity). For me art which takes seriously such scientific understanding supersedes the tabular space laid out by classical thought. Art then may promote a non-teleological noology that makes use of the mutual interpenetrational and rhizomatic nature of the thought process typical of the art experience - multiplicitous and heterogeneous.

For me, the basic function of art is to create mental spaces that allow unaccustomed creative situations and sensations to connect socially. Given our society’s heightening condition of connectivity, the heterogeneous, multiplicitous, spreading and non-hierarchical nature of the epistemological rhizome comes together in art under the hyper (i.e. connected) effect of the hyper-total. I define this visual hyper-totality as being produced by an all-over, elaborate, spread out distribution of visual incident which calls upon the optic procedure of spatial summation; a process which unconsciously totalizes the visual excess encountered.

This hyper-cognitive art is where the particular (now updated by electronic connectivity) is seen as part of an accrual total system by virtue of its being connected to everything else. The strategy of hyper-anything includes principles of networked connections and electronic links which give multiple choices of passages to follow and continually new branching possibilities. The total-hyper-being model for a new connected art is the self-re-programmable internal function which explicitly offers a furtherance in envisioning internal, anti-hierarchical models of our patterns of thought to ourselves.
Moreover, since it is difficult making sense of today's swirling, phantasmagorical media society, the general proposition behind art may best be to look for a paradoxical summation of this uncertainty by taking advantage of today's superficial image saturation; a saturation so dense that it fails to communicate anything particular at all upon which we can concur - except perhaps its overall incomprehensible sense of ripe delirium as the reproduction system pulses with higher and higher, faster and faster flows of digital data to the point of near hysteria.

Perhaps the result of this ripe information abundance is that the greater the amount of information that flows, the greater the non-teleological uncertainty which is produced. So, the tremendous load of imagery/sound/text information digitally produced and reproduced all round us today ultimately seems to make less, not more, conventional teleological sense.

If accepted, this supposition, it seems to me, plays into the history of abstract art which teaches us that art may refuse to recognize all thought as existing in the form of purposeful representation, and that by scanning the spread of representation art may formulate an understanding of the laws that provide representation with its organizational basis. As a result, in my view, it is art's onus to see what unconventional, paradoxical, summational sense - in terms of the rhizomatizing world of the imagination - it might make of all this based on an appropriately decadent reading of our paradoxically material-based (yet electronically activated) social media environment.

Perhaps such a basically abstract, open, and thus paradoxical, summation would begin with the presumption that an information-loaded nuclear weapon has already exploded, showering us with bits of radioactive-like information bytes, thus drastically changing the way in which we perceive and act - even in our private subconscious dream worlds. This subject, and the rhetorical strategy needed to explore it, especially interests me in that encounters with the computer create an opportunity for personal transgression and for a vertiginous ecstasy of thought. Hence excelling the assumed determinism of the technological-based phenomenon inherent (supposedly) in our post-industrial information society. Indeed, it seems to me that as human psychic energies are stifled and/or bypassed by certain controlling aspects of mass informational technology, such a personally transgressive ecstatic phenomena will most likely increasingly break out in forms of art. Similarly, simulation technology, when used in the creation of art, will promote an indispensable alienation from the socially constructed self necessary for the outburst of such ecstatic experiences/acts aimed against the controlling world's blandness. Thus the linkage you asked me about might provide, through significant art, a fundamental antithesis to the authoritarian, mechanical, simulated rigidities of the controlling technical world.
CP: Your answer gives me the possibility to be precise again with my question. What is at stake is the epistemological shift you operate between concepts? The first point for me is your use of the term “meta-meaning”. You do not say “transcendental”, which would plunge us again immediately into our previous discussion. You name, for example, “connectivity, non-separateness, omnijectivity, polarities, rhizome” etc.. They have a prescriptive sense, deduced from their scientific roots. But when you speak about inter-subjectivity, even if you add the level of one noology, it is difficult when not understanding a more descriptive concept of the society itself. Or when you mention the “psychological thought-vision”, it too is a more descriptive approach of facts than a paradigmatic model.

Of course I agree totally with your conception: “the basic function of art is to create mental spaces that allow unaccustomed creative situations and sensations to connect socially”. But this connection does not need to be projected as if it was not the case. Art happens because it is in fact intersubjectivity, society, and thought-vision that permit different kinds of relationships between space and time. This shift appears remarkably in the strategic question that you bring out. Could the meta-meaning or synthetic use of scientific concepts provide to art new political energies?

JN: When you ask this question I think you go to the heart of the matter. Yes, something exhilarating happens when one looks at various subjects not as closed conceptual systems, but to find an opening conceptual edge. The inclusion of meta-meaning (meaning that is achieved sensually and not only intellectually) and the synthetic use of scientific concepts in art for me does indeed provide for art a new political vigor. This conceptual edge is obviously very important today after we have learned that modernist reductionist assumptions are not easily changed by mere postmodern negations. Postmodernists typically reject scientific reductionism but often assume a kind of fracturing cultural-political reductionism, while some stay trapped in the scientistic objectivist model because it is largely the only working one out there politically. What seems to be needed are self-mutating conceptual models to think differently with; self-re-organizing political and cultural models that
are never just the completed or inverted objectivity of the usual conceptions.

CP: So perhaps this requires a new utopian power? In other words, could we name society otherwise in order to permit this society to think of itself in agreement with the new modes of thinking offered by techno-science?

JN: Perhaps not a utopian power but rather a polytopian energy. An omni-society, developed in serious recognition of omnijectivity, for example, would take on the features of a mutually connected society interested in its total well being and that of its host – the earth. We are far from that with our simplistic scenarios of good and evil – white hats vs. black hats. The scientific discovery of oogenesis is another example, as it demonstrates the connection between femaleness and maleness. Such concepts are marvelous starting places for the creation and understanding of a new sort of political art, but not one based in tautological vacuous statements composed of the trite simple statements and images that makes politics appear logically true whether the assumed statements are true or false (which they generally are). The role of a mind-freeing imaginative art in the context of the so-called war on terrorism is, in my mind, a polytopian act of the utmost importance as it is full of plausible emergent properties.

CP: I am in agreement with this concept of synthetic meaning of art. But I would like say that it is the imaginary function of the art that matters. And that is not related to the new scientific and technological contents.

JN: Yes for me art may fold into its synthetic mix scientific concepts but art remains closer to the irrational belief one expects from religion than scientific utilitarianism. Again this ties into what I was saying about pagan polytheism. Indeed paganism is more important to me than scientific theory as it can be traced back to Neolithic times. I am saddened that it only survived up until the Middle Ages when Christianity became powerful enough to erase it from existence. For me scientific understanding and paganism are connected however in that they both are an earth-based understanding which lays emphasis on the reverence of all aspects of nature.

My favorite examples of early paganism are found in ancient Greek and Roman religions, as well as in ancient Goddess worship and Druidic religions - and I incorporate these references in my visual iconography continuously. I respect the fact that ancient people believed that everything had a spirit and thus thought polytheisticly. The gods were part of everyday life, the gods were immanent and entered every aspect of their society, influencing everything from laws and customs to the general workings of their community. So when I speak of synthetic polytopian energy, now you know what I am thinking of.

CP: This relates to the anthropological level of reality - to anthropomorphism.

JN: Yes. I think conflating of the human with the earth is a wise thing given the insensitivity exhibited by the powers operating out of logical positivist empirical assumptions.

CP: What do you think is the tendency of human society and what produces the authoritarian and rigidified modes of functionality which you described?

JN: The tendency is binary and categorical. Something art should avoid participating in.
CP: The next point concerns the link that you establish implicitly between the "earth" (the ecological question) and "religion". I think that the ecological question is now the most interesting from a political point of view because it is crucial for anybody who wishes to provoke a sort of new political awareness. I think that it is perhaps the most collective preoccupation by all people of all societies at every social class. But I am not sure that this real link with nature has to do with a sort of imaginary or religious belief. I think that what we experience now of the political powers of religion make anyone very prudent about the question of religion, even if it is paganisim. You know that Christianity is in fact a huge compromise with paganism. It seems to me that the earth/ecological question can be played from the point of view of non-anthropomorphic politics - where the question of the human being is taken on a broader basis.

JN: Perhaps I am wrong, but my sense now is that many, if not most, people are de-sensitized to the fabric of the earth-
world and ignorant of their viral status within it. Utilitarian non-anthropomorphic assumptions cut and distance our bodies from that which surrounds them (and indeed constructs them). My attraction to the pagan idea stems precisely from paganism’s archaic lack of orderliness. It is an un-organized form of collective spirituality. In that sense religion, as defined as a shared force, does not do it justice.

Catherine Perret is professor of modern and contemporary aesthetics and theory at Nanterre University (Paris X). She obtained her Ph.D. in philosophy for her work on Walter Benjamin with Walter Benjamin ou la critique en effet. Dr. Perret is the director of the Art of Exhibition Department at Paris X. She served as the director of the Collège International de Philosophie from 1995 to 2001 and was co-director of U.F.R.L.L.Phi at Paris X from 1993 to 1995. She is a recipient of the prestigious title Chevalier des Palmes académiques.

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Since 1986 Joseph Nechvatal has worked with ubiquitous electronic visual information, computers and computer-robotics. His computer-robotic assisted paintings and computer software animations are shown regularly in galleries and museums throughout the world. From 1991-1993 he worked as artist-in-resident at the Louis Pasteur Atelier and the Saline Royale / Ledoux Foundation's computer lab in Arbois, France on The Computer Virus Project: an experiment with computer viruses as a creative stratagem. In 2002 he extended that artistic research into the field of viral artificial life through his collaboration with the programmer Stéphane Sikora.

Joseph Nechvatal earned his Ph.D. in the philosophy of art and new technology at The Centre for Advanced Inquiry in the Interactive Arts (CAiiA) University of Wales College, Newport, UK. Dr. Nechvatal presently teaches at the School of Visual Arts in New York City (SVA) and at Stevens Institute of Technology. He writes on art and technology for “The Thing”, “Intelligent Agent”, “Tema Celeste”, and “Zing”.

http://www.nechvatal.net

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