Technology, Error and Fetish:
Through the Lens of Glitch Art

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LOGO of GLI.TC/H (still frame)

## Technology as Fix: how can error be a fetish?

Precision, elegance and innovation - just to name a few description that Apple deploys to make the user believe their product is not only a machine but a tiny piece of the realized future. The retina screen "dazzles" the eye, and face ID is a "revolution in recognition". According to its advertising, iPhone X is a device" houses some of the most sophisticated technology we've ever developed"[1]. One can easily reflect on the fetish called by the technical perfection and promise of progress we read from these words, even an erotic reference attached to the smooth surface of the gadget's industrial design. As physical crystallization of innovation which is the era's dominated ideology, commercial technical devices are designed to be fetishized. While at the same time, another visual practice invokes a distinctively different feeling compared with the finest picture iPhone depicts.

At first glance, the genre glitch art presents a completely different picture than value tendencies shown by the usual technical fetishism, and more precisely, the diametrically opposed values: an broken LCD screen, a blinking, pixel-disarranged video clip, a distorted, low-fidelity JPG

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[1] https://www.apple.com/iphone-x/

image, and a fragment of reminiscent 1990s windows system GUI. In the second decade of 21st century, the collective attempt to aestheticize technical errors gain great popular and gradually being embraced by mainstream content production industry, stepping out of the net art subculture where it originated in the 1990s. 91,000 more people are following the subreddit glitch_art. Glitch art event, such as annual international glitch festival GLI.TC/H in Chicago are held, and tutorial and software to help production are also popular. The aesthetics have been borrowed by commercial use in pop-culture media products such as music video, computer game and advertising materials. For example, Taobao.com, the Chinese e-commerce website which listed as the top 20 visited website in 2013 according to Alexa, features a promotion campaign in early 2017 using glitch art topic to stylish its promotional material.
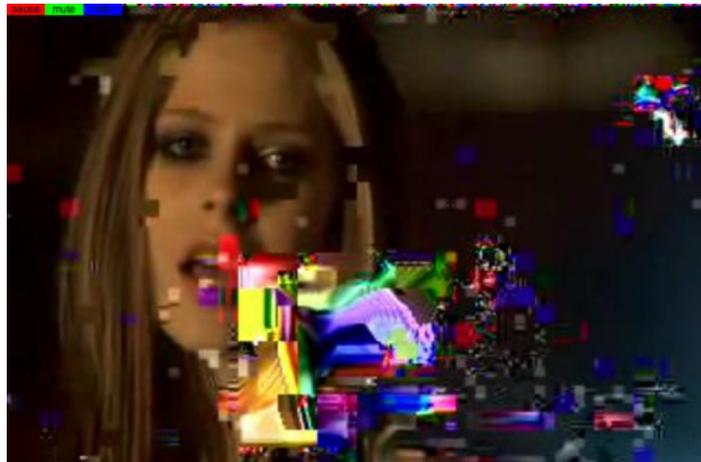
Ben Baker-Smith, Infinite Glitch, 2011 (still frame)
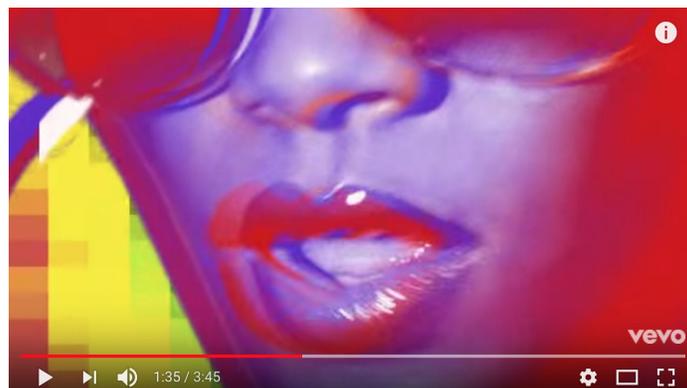
Frame for Rihanna's music video Rude Boy (2009)

This practice foregrounds a facet of technology which goes against the pattern that techno-determinist/solutionist considering tech as a fix to everything, a symbol of eternal progress and the fetish tied with the "omnipotent tech". How should we situate technological failure into the general observation of technology fetish? It is reversed it or a symptom of it?

In this article, I will examine glitch art, the genre of digital art concentrating on crystallizing the dysfunctional moment of digital technical, also other means of theorization/aestheticization interpretation of "errors" performed in the operation of technology, as they provide an interesting circumstantial perspective to corroborate the bewildering relationship between mankind and technology in our times.

Prehistory of Glitch Art

If fetish is a psychological state associated with the state that transcendent value attaching to inanimate objects, then visual art after the 19th century, comprising found materials, circulating in academia, galleries and museums with conceptual, interpretational text is sufficiently a significant depository of a fetish of daily things. In such practice, "state of the art" is often obtained by visually, and at the same time metaphorically, shifting the structure of the found objects to deprive its functionality in the sake of recontextualizing the object in art scenario. For example, Duchamp's Bicycle Wheel defamiliarizes a wheel by putting it upside down above a stool - though the components are all daily, found objects, the position and combination are dramatically distant from a daily utility. Then we can say in this realm, the fetishization of normal things embeds in a "bent," aberrant use case.

Based on this observation, let's look at several works in 60-70' media art. In series Zen for TV, Nam June Paik employs malfunctioning, jerkily blinking TV set displaying nothing but flare abstractly. The same using of TV can also be found in Wolf Vostell's De-coll / age of TV through the late 50s to 60s. In Magnetic TV, Paik intentionally places a magnetic up to the CRT tv set to distort the signal; the turbulent electronic phosphors is visualized into a set of screen-saver-like curves. Joan Jonas' Vertical Roll, 1972 displays an array of fragmented, disjointed vertically moving framed clips. "The reason why it's called 'Vertical Roll' [is] because in the piece there's a

rolling bar of the video, which is a dysfunction of the television set", she explicitly explained. [2] Lacking any meaningful content, those early media art reconfigure the cinematic medium in a setting contextualizing from the normal home enjoyment, which brings the medium, or the "thing" itself forward to the front stage. It fairly to say that glitch art, at least visually, is a derivation of them in the popular culture. And conceptually, the dysfunctioning operation helps to confirm the technical objects' meaning in the field of art - in other name - the state of being fetished. I will further discuss this aspect in the following section.

Wolf Vostell, 6 TV De-coll / age, 1963 (installation view)

Joan Jonas, Vertical Roll, 1972 (still frame)

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[2] https://www.moma.org/learn/moma_learning/joan-jonas-vertical-roll-1972

Disenchanted Image and Enchanted Machines

Where had the aura that images lost due to mass production gone, as Benjamin stress in the Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction?

A Italian Futurist wrote a manifesto "The Art of Noises" in 1913 and made "noise machines" which composed no traditional music but generated uncomfortable noise. By doing this, he intended to "replace old world orchestras with the sound of modernity"[3]. Noise became a recurrent trope in Futurism practice to call the machinery future. A very similar expression refers to the thrill with "speed" can be found in Hito Steyerl's "In Defense of the Poor Image" in 2009: "The poor image is a copy in motion. Its quality is bad, its resolution substandard. As it accelerates, it deteriorates"[4]. Thus in those narratives, noise or poor image, unsatisfied within human's viewpoint, is on the contrary exactly a sign of the efficacy of machine production".

Even today, human are still so fascinated with the idea "automated writing/drawing", and try to mystify AI generated images, no matter how absurd the result is, the viewer are tolerate with the content but emphasis on the premise that "this is made by machine". For example, Botnik Studio used predictive keyboard trained AI to write a new chapter to *Harry Potter*. The result is hilarious and illogical, while people see it as "the chapter reads not like the usual word salad of text prediction, but like unusually inventive fanfiction"[5]. In this scenario, machine's capacity even the "beautifully" disturbing error it makes is in nature exciting, and "human standard" obviously do not applies to the machine's creations.

As technological precision and standardization emerged with the popularization of mass production, error comes with it like the other side of the coin - if there is no standards, then also no broken standards. If we take this into our mind, we can further believe that a completed state of techno-fetishism is essentially made up with the two sides - perfection and imperfection, rule and the overcome of the rule - all conducted by machine itself without people's interference. By fetishizing error, things start to live without people's acknowledge. The legitimacy of things, start

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[3] http://ivc.lib.rochester.edu/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/Kane-Compression-Aesthetics.pdf
[4] http://www.e-flux.com/journal/10/61362/in-defense-of-the-poor-image/
[5] https://www.theverge.com/2017/12/12/16768582/harry-potter-ai-fanfiction

to not necessarily associate with their functionality - that is to say the network centralized human and his "servants" around him. Therefore I propose that the aestheticization of error in a post industrial world is a progress of the technofetishism that only focus on the positive side of the technology.
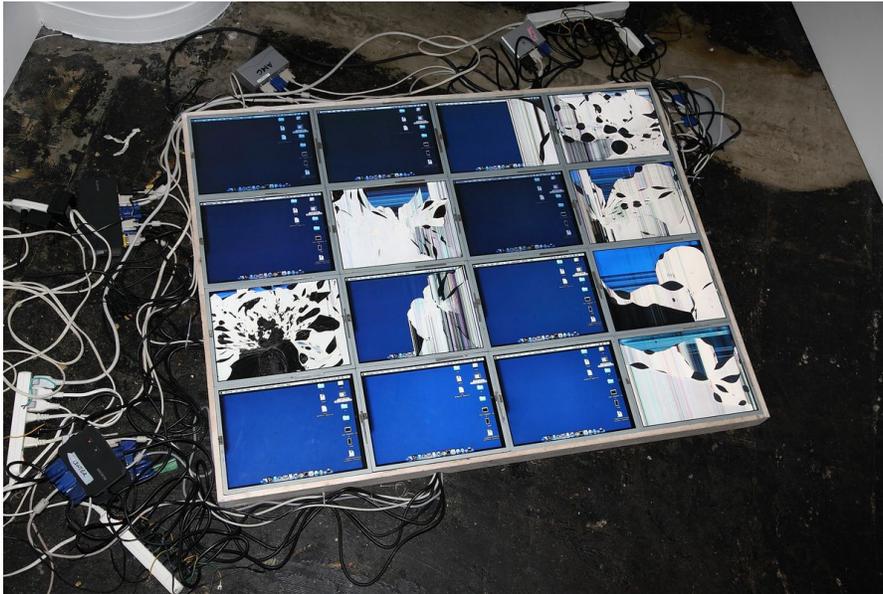
UCNV, New Vulnerability, 2012/2014[https://ucnv.org/newvulnerability/]

Randomness: Inorganic Organ

Randomness, as a key element of glitch art, finds its root in 60s happening and accident art: it is all about "handing out of the charge". But to whom the artists hand over the agency? The following paragraphs are trying to discuss under this prompt.

The randomness in today's popular imagery are technically almost based on different operation to an algorithm-generated random number, called pseudo-random number. As the name shows, it is not naturally real random, but utilizing a calculated result from a complex, but still, designed formula whose output perceived by its audience as unpredictable. An enclosed, offline computer does not have the capacity to "think" randomly; it is not a human who can easily come up with a random number, in stead its operations are all scripted. So technically, a random number generating algorithm will always throw out the same result as the mechanism is predetermined.

So how can we ultimately see different random numbers? The key, or the "seed", is the time. "Current time" is fed into this function as parameter and as the current time itself is always changing, the result changes, gives us the appearance of randomness. This anecdote gives the "randomness" a poetic endorsement. The temporality, embedded in a random number originated from "time", are inherent within glitch filters & software, if they use the default random number generator provided by the programming languages, are highly likely to be based on the same mechanism.

To compare with, "real random number" still exist but they always involve a factor originated in physical world as the input to the generating algorithm, such as the digitalized wind sound captured by an mic, or merely the buzzing noise created by the running machine itself (In this manner, a physical noise become the source of digital noises).

Upon these knowledge, the nature is sufficiently random and to reach a real randomness, the digital machine seeks help with nature itself. Then the randomness shown in them, in fact, reaffirm the relation between digital randomness and nature. But the visual result of such machine, with inner logic hidden, display the illusion of randomness which fascinated the human who scripts them. Because looking into human's inorganic creation, there is nothing more exciting that they perform some humanness, and in this case, is the competence of creating random things - mysterious randomness lift scripted machine up to the level where their creators stand. Human-being makes mistakes; human-being creates. Through this logical path I propose the fetish of randomness as displayed by glitch art reveals a transformed double of human himself, which evoke a strange narcissism when a similar capacity is found and transcend into a magical power, of which the appreciation is oppressed, and he eager to find a substitute in the mirror.

Cure and Maintain Uncanniness

A roaring anxiety attached to the technical devices becoming increasingly complex and black-boxed, and therefore impossible for lay users to get the knowledge of its inherent operational mechanism. Placed in this context, although a technical error firstly breaks the

functional promise and therefore create uncertainty and tension, while at the same time, it offers an exchange.

Through Benjamin M. Hill's account, malfunctioning provides a chance for users to confront this anxiety: for this moment calling the previously invisible medium into view and under inspection. For example, he mentioned an absurd head title published on Christian American Family Association's website during 2008 Beijing Olympic, "Homosexual eases into the 100 final at the Olympics trails"[6]. It later revealed that the news supplier for this conservative organization had been utilized an automatic system for a long time which scans the news sources and replaces controversial words with terms which more reflects the organization's value. In this cases, the name for the U.S. Olympic player is obviously not Homosexual, but Tyson Gay. The system marked "gay" as a word should be avoided and changed it into "homosexual", a term "they believed more clinical and pathological than gay".

Following the same logic, no matter how high the resolution is, a pixel omitted screen is made up of pixels, and a cracked iPhone screen informs the materiality of the device - it is not entirely transparent information flow at your hand. Through errors the hidden nature of technology object are being exposed. It is not as bold as it seems to relate this moment of the revelation of an inner mechanism, a "secret knowledge" to the moment in *Sandman* when Olympia is found to be a robot rather than human.

Faced obscure technology, we see "the return of the surmounted", that is the unseen superpower and magical belief, as Freud reflects on Olympia's case. Although supported by scientific reasons, the long mystified practice in users to fix a gadget by "turning off and turning on again" is essentially ritual (along with other practice like "pating to fix a TV set"), which is a remedy for the hopelessness root in the strangeness.

Technology, as the "dead" object subject to human's control, reverse the hierarchy when it becomes complicated, and this moment of failure is a peak of the machine shrivels users, but also leaks some information that previously packed so tight inside its shell. Thus I saw the dislecticity in this moment when an alternative, metal control (the inner nature being leaked out)

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[6] Benjamin Mako Hills, "Revealing Errors", *Error - Glitch, Noise and Jam in New Media Cultures,* Edited by Mark Nunes, Continuum Books: 2011, pp.34

redeem as a substitute for one losing simultaneously (the control over functionality). Though this new piece of knowledge gained through error may has barely no pragmatic meaning (as in the Homosexual case, if no second case occurs no one will know what other terms are being replaced, the system is still highly black-boxed), it breaks the balance between machine and its users, introduces a new dynamic which is the cure and reinforcement of uncanniness at the same time.
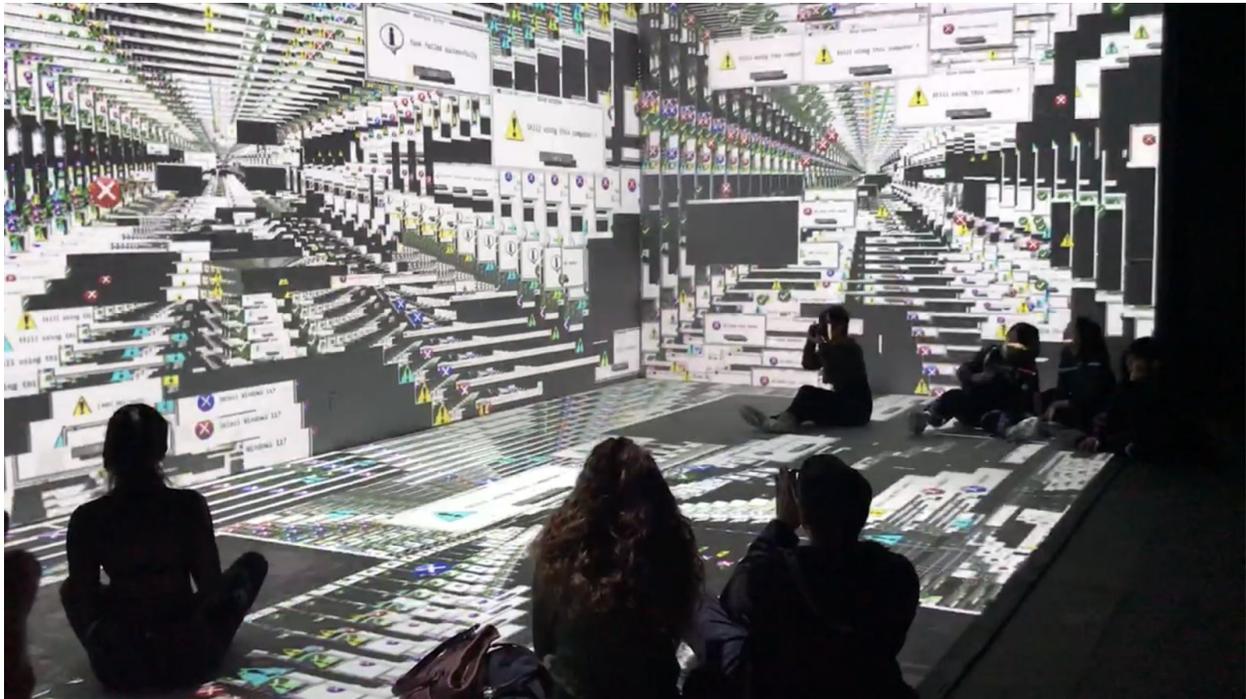
.bug, Wu Yuhui & Pink Monkey, 2017 (installation view)

Conclusion

In her "Glitch Studies Manifesto"[7], Rosa Menkman criticize "conservative glitch art", which focus more on design and are generated manually, or with software. They are filter in their essence, and Menkman argues "to design a glitch means to domesticate it". "Domesticate", I think, is an interesting term to use as it suggest wild, native glitch is self-sufficient from human's world, and human's intervene causes negative consequence. In other words, only machines can perform

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[7]http://amodern.net/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/2010_Original_Rosa-Menkman-Glitch-Studies-Manifesto.pdf

glitch, and this privilege is not shared with human, as the designed glitch involving human's intent and as a result, reverse the agency held by machines.

I would end this article with this comprehension of glitch art. As the genealogy of the concept fetish shows, it is too easy to umbrella all discussion over non-human things under the name fetish, especially in a critical manner, which I do not intent to do. Neither an eulogy or a lament, this article intend to document how error, a seemly negative construct, could help to epitomize human-being's view in the recent century towards technology from it being dead object, to uncanny medium, to non-human actors. As the carriers of values travel back and forth between the poles of perfection and imperfection, functionality and dysfunctionality, causative sociality and punk-hacker asociality, the technical-failed moment and its ossified form, art, provide a counter-narrative to the fine, high-tech image and feed us richer layers to explore.