Digital and postdigital art: from aesthetics of a subject to the ontology of an object

Arte digital e pós-digital: da estética de um sujeito à ontologia de um objeto

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Abstract

The study highlights the increasing diversity of digital and postdigital art along with its rising or even defining influence on various phenomena and spheres of sociocultural reality. Based on ideological attitudes and value orientations, the media reality, through the ontologization of digital and postdigital art, becomes a social model of understanding reality and social life, while organizing communication, interpretation of meanings, and translation of ideas in a special way. In counterpoint to the scientific, technocratic paradigm, which in many respects dominates the digital and postdigital realm, the digital and postdigital space simultaneously becomes an arena for the revival of archaic consciousness. The essential and content foundations and aspects of the digital and postdigital manifest the categorical, conceptual, and essential ideas of art in general. They interact with the social, cultural, political, as well as geographical and topological, environments to the point of creating new cultural, social, symbolic, and material phenomena, hybrid and transformed forms. The essence of beauty is accessed through representations, mediated by symbolic, semantic, and essential agents. The study addresses specific aspects of digital art from the standpoint of materialistic approaches, postmodern concepts, network theories, and social constructivism. Particular attention is paid to the ontologization of art objects in the framework of object-oriented philosophy. Art objects acquire their ontological status from their own authenticity and gain their reality from the

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outside. Digital and postdigital art combines the immanent with the transcendent, which makes its objects possible or necessary, perceivable or real. Digital and postdigital art is marked by duality and ambivalence, which form a holistic unity in the aspects of object-subject relations and the social and non-human sections of reality.


**Resumo**
O estudo destaca a crescente diversidade da arte digital e pós-digital, juntamente com a sua influência crescente ou mesmo definidora em vários fenómenos e esferas da realidade sociocultural. Com base em atitudes ideológicas e orientações de valores, a realidade mediática, através da ontologização da arte digital e pós-digital, torna-se um modelo social de compreensão da realidade e da vida social, ao mesmo tempo que organiza a comunicação, a interpretação de significados e a tradução de ideias de uma forma especial. Em contraponto ao paradigma científico e tecnocrático, que em muitos aspectos domina o domínio digital e pós-digital, o espaço digital e pós-digital torna-se simultaneamente uma arena para o renascimento da consciência arcaica. Os fundamentos e aspectos essenciais e de conteúdo do digital e pós-digital manifestam as ideias categóricas, conceituais e essenciais da arte em geral. Eles interagem com os ambientes sociais, culturais, políticos, bem como geográficos e topológicos, a ponto de criar novos fenômenos culturais, sociais, simbólicos e materiais, formas híbridas e transformadas. A essência da beleza é acessada por meio de representações, mediadas por agentes simbólicos, semânticos e essenciais. O estudo aborda aspectos específicos da arte digital do ponto de vista de abordagens materialistas, conceitos pós-modernos, teorias de redes e construtivismo social. É dada especial atenção à ontologização dos objetos de arte no âmbito da filosofia orientada a objetos. Os objectos de arte adquirem o seu estatuto ontológico a partir da sua própria autenticidade e ganham a sua realidade a partir do exterior. A arte digital e pós-digital combina o imanente com o transcendent, o que torna os seus objetos possíveis ou necessários, perceptíveis ou reais. A arte digital e pós-digital é marcada pela dualidade e pela ambivalência, que formam uma unidade holística nos aspectos das relações objeto-sujeito e nas seções sociais e não humanas da realidade.

**Introduction**

Digital art, as art should, is constantly transforming. New digital instruments appear, artists’ workshops open their doors to connoisseurs and accidental visitors, and new technologies are implemented, manifested, and recombined, offering new methods, styles, and spaces. Digital art seeks to stand out, break out of ordinariness, and merge with the rapidly virtualizing reality. The further digital art goes and the more the area of its manifestation and action expands, the closer it comes to (and often merges with) the utmost traditional, analog, ancient, and pre-digital directions, structures, subjects, images, ethical principles, and aesthetic constructs. Many well-established, classical approaches, principles, and patterns of comprehension and interpretation retain relevance and in some aspects dominance in the perception and understanding of digital and postdigital art. These expressions with the prefix "post", such as "post-digital" and "post-Internet", imply that digital technology intertwines with the social, cultural, political, and geographical environments to the point of creating new social, symbolic, and material phenomena, hybrid and transformed forms. Both terms go beyond the understanding of digitalization through discrete units that can be translated into binary code or through hardware and software. The technical nature of digitalization gives way to sociocultural factors.

In this context, the goal of the present study is to determine the specifics of postdigital art, its origins, and typology.

**Methodology**

Analysis of digital art is conducted in the study by means of several theoretical approaches.

Materialistic approach: The study proceeds from the materialistic understanding of art, viewing it not just as an abstract expression of ideas but as a physical artwork created with the use of instruments and materials.

Postmodern concepts: This approach considers digital art as a result of the cultural and social processes characteristic of postmodernism. This allows analyzing artworks in the context of contemporary cultural discourses, revealing their connections with historical, social, and cultural factors.

Network theories: This approach is based on the analysis of digital art through the lens of network relations. Art is examined as part of a global information network, which allows
accounting for both the impact of technology on the creation of an artwork and the reciprocal effect of art on technological processes.

Social constructivism: This approach focuses on the understanding of digital art as a product of sociocultural interaction. Art is viewed as a form of social discourse constructed by various social groups.

The described methods were integrated into the study for a comprehensive analysis of digital art and its role in contemporary society.

Results and Discussion

Naturally, there are some specific features to the diverse types and forms of digital art. For instance, interactive digital art (installations, network digital projects) emphasizes network interaction, immediate involvement, and immersiveness of the object or action. Machine-generated art (fractal, algorithmic art) assumes that either the leading role is played by a non-human or hybrid subject, or it is realized by the author with the help of software and assistive digital and, wider, technical means (digital photography, digital painting, 3D art animation, motion graphics, etc.), where the digital metric serves as a tool and space for expressing the image, creative impulse, idea, thought, and realization of the aesthetic. Drone technology also reflects a symbiosis of science and art: drones and unmanned aerial vehicles are used both as the subject and the tool. For example, the Spaxels technology allows making paintings with the night sky for canvas and a multitude of controlled or automatic drones for paint. Augmented reality art constitutes in its unity this reality itself, and media reality becomes a social model for understanding reality and social life.

Furthermore, in the different perspectives of art, there is a rising importance to the question of what "digital" is – whether it is a novel, non-traditional form, a way of broadcasting and conveying messages, a space for the coexistence of the artist, the artwork, and the viewer, or something that makes up the essence of the "new" or rather "present" art. It is contemplated whether the subject or object of art loses its metaphysical essence as it becomes a transformed form and now exists in a digital format. This raises the question of whether something that constitutes digital art exists or whether the world and its various spaces do not so much undergo the digital transformation as record a different metric of ontological and typological consolidation or subjective perception.

Postdigital art is moving away from bright eye-catching images and provocative technology-intensive presentations and performances. It is no longer an exhibition of cutting-
edge achievements of the media and digital industry. Instead of showing its technological specifics, postdigital art focuses on organizing communication processes between the people involved in interaction through digital matter (Gartenfeld, 2017).

Today, it becomes more and more clear how a digital native and a digital immigrant differ, to what extent, and what causes this difference: previous experience, worldview positions, ways of accessing reality, mental projections of beingness, and the specifics of realization of the potential. Digital art is also a means of asserting, expressing, and promoting political and ideological positions of parties, organizations, communities, social groups, and ideological circles of all varieties in the widest range. Thus, digital art displays the diversity and controversy of modern political, economic, and social space. In this framework, art objects contribute to the transmission of the views, principles, and norms established in a value and ideological system of views, uniting supporters, followers, and sympathizers on the one hand, and on the other – attracting new ones and broadcasting positions "to the world" or "to the masses".

Digital art is a special phenomenon, but first and foremost, it is art in the general sense. Its issues, objectives, manifestations, and specifics coincide with the stages of development of art. The essential and content bases of digital and postdigital art show the categorical, conceptual, and essential ideas of art in general. Digital art is a different space, and it also generates the specificity of variability, features, and characteristic traits of traditional and non-digital directions, currents, and concepts within the frameworks, boundaries, and narrative and discursive schemes of digital and postdigital space. Digital and postdigital aesthetic practices require a new language of communication, as well as criticism in the examination of relations between people and the modern media-cultural environment, between the subject of art and the viewer, which are now most often a transcendent whole that exists in a constant disintegration. However, the language of art is always the new and the old, the changing and the eternal, because, like many languages, digital aesthetics combines the physical, the mental, the abstract, the transcendental, the iconic, and the semantic. A virtual copy simultaneously presents an independent object, a representation, and an embodiment of the original. This copy can both replace the original and show the essence, content, and idea. The issues of embodiment vs. disembodiment and the perception of space (Paul, 2023) play a key part in the artistic exploration of the digital and postdigital era.

Digitalization is like a technological process embedded into social, political, and historical relationships, which is what makes digitalization possible. If art is emotions, feelings, and states (Grigoriev, 2015), this is what should be digitalized; the system itself must
be digital. Otherwise, the indicated phenomena are of the same nature, manifest in the same way, and have the same essence and action as non-digital. J. Kosuth, one of the founders of the conceptualist movement, asserts in "Art after Philosophy": "The substantial import of such work, it would seem to me, has been the radical reevaluation of how an artwork works, thereby telling us something of how culture itself works: how meanings can change even if materials don’t. ... the physical shell has to be destroyed since art is the power of an idea, not a material" (Kosuth, 1969). Digitalization is not merely an issue or phenomenon of new relevant incarnations of art, it also largely affects and formats traditional non-digital objects and forms. Some researchers, alongside witnesses to the era, say that objects have now reached a "post-digital state of mind" (Kolb, 2021). "Object art brings us closer to the transcendence of the world through the object, and non-object art distances us from objects, from the world as a whole. Digital art possibly has some special way of recording the ‘truth of existence’, as it chooses a new language to establish and substantiate human existence" (Stroeva, 2011).

At the turn of the millennium, the term "postdigital" was discussed (Jandrić, 2023) as applied to digital technology as an expression of human desire, a radical embodiment of existence in the transforming digital scenery of social existence. This is not the end of the digital era but its continuation in new social, political, ideological, ecological, economic, and other conditions and frameworks, in current topical aspects of the dominating paradigm. Digital and postdigital objects and acts of art become part of the relevant social, political, or intellectual agenda, be it postcolonialism, postfeminism, or queer theory. One of the popular motives for using "post-" terms is the desire to critically distance oneself from new technological developments (Cascone, 2000). Instead of connecting technology with the ideas of technological and broader social progress and striving for perfection, artists increasingly (Klein, 2021) resort to the digital and technology to compromise reality and its subjects with aesthetic means. However, this is no longer pure aesthetics. The aesthetic now does not proceed from the absolute of the spirit, idea, or beauty, nor is it limited to the meaning of sensual perception; yet it continues to relate to and correlate itself with social and cultural conditions. Defects, fractures, and program failures of reality are becoming increasingly popular as themes of creative work. However, the disruption of connections and the destruction of the world, the deconstruction of structures and the disintegration of the individual and society have always been the fundamental aspects of problematization and the driving force of art as a way of reflecting and overcoming reality.

The postdigital is often examined in connection with posthumanism, the actor – network theory (ANT), and new materialism. Yet these directions, especially the ANT, are
themselves in many ways a legacy of the predigital, rather than digital, world and theoretical, less often empirical-practical concepts of the past but not of the future in such a frame of reference. Nevertheless, this does not make them obsolete. They propose a language and optics that fit dynamic and uncertain structures, constructs, and aggregations, which consolidate and reproduce digital/postdigital reality and the Internet/post-Internet environment. In this sense, the postdigital is not what comes after but what was before – a return of old forms, principles, images, and narratives, a renaissance of past symbolic, social, political, and aesthetic structures.

Materialism in the Marxist-Leninist tradition sees art as a reflection of actual reality and assigns public consciousness the role of an objective source that intrinsically connects and determines the interaction of art with the political, economic, and social institutes and phenomena. It also establishes its own materialistic aesthetic – the concept of the aesthetics of public existence. In such a respect, art is defined by intersubjectivity, where the content, diverse reality in its aesthetic originality, must correspond to the form – internal organization, a specific structure of a work of art (Frolov, 1984). However, as asserted by G. McHugh, "The Internet changed everything – that includes art. Post Internet artists are […] ontological questioners" (McHugh, 2015, 15). The postdigital, which was once understood as a critical reflection of digital aesthetic materialism, now describes the disorderly and paradoxical state of art and media in the wake of digital technological revolutions (Andersen, 2014, 5). The acceleration of information flows, the approaching horizon of technological singularity, and the constant disintegration and reassembly of social structures, networks, and constructs ontologize the dynamic aspect of digital and postdigital art, fundamentally grounding it in reality.

Current mediality as the formalization of meaning and attachment of meaning expression to a certain format and mode of expression (Chernyavskaya, 2015) is characterized by networks: the real, material networks of devices and the virtual, metaphorical networks of thinking (Meyer, 2021). The metrics and topologies of digital space somewhat define and predetermine the meanings and communicative load of objects – subjects or carriers of art. Although they surely do not define them in full: the specifics of network interaction, the characteristics of the communication-transmission channel, and the properties and qualities of the object do not exhaustively determine and limit what digital and postdigital art is. The very interconnectedness and yet intrinsic contradictory nature of both the affective and the cognitive, as well as the mental and the medial, is perhaps especially pronounced precisely in digital and technologically driven art. The concept of immanence usually means "existing or
remaining within", inalienability, and inner connection as opposed to external. In the history of philosophical thought, immanence has accumulated a considerable number of descriptions and very different interpretations. At some point, G. Deleuze and F. Guattari likened immanence to thinking, which "constitutes the absolute ground of philosophy … the foundation on which it creates its concepts" (Deleuze, 1994, 41). The plane of immanence (plan d'immanence), one of the fundamental concepts in Deleuze’s metaphysics and ontology, states that "immanence is not immanent to substance; on the contrary, substance and its modes are in immanence" (Deleuze, 2001, 26-27). The plane of immanence establishes that it cannot be defined from within, but also cannot be "above" or proceed "from". An object is not only an element, a part of a more powerful and complex system, but is constituted from the same system, functioning and acting consistently in, with, and through it, immanently mapping its environment, discovering its own dynamic capabilities and kinetic relationships, as well as the relative limits of those capabilities and relationships. Art in Deleuze’s philosophy acts as a sphere of realization of the principle of difference, and the world of Art is "the ultimate world of signs, and these signs, as though dematerialized, find their meaning in an ideal essence" (Deleuze, 1972). G. Deleuze, J. Derrida, F. Laruelle, and other theorists of radical immanence tried to overcome transcendence setting aside transcendent categories and define a world that is valid or immanent to itself. Digital art is simultaneously a constant rupture, divide, and discreteness and a striving for universality, totality, and continuity. "Art liberates the life that humans have imprisoned" (Deleuze, 1996), and digital art is an attempt to escape the prison of digital reality and digital confinement. Discussions on the nature of revelation and the creation or predestination of meaning (Trozzo, 2021) in the act and absolute of art are actualized in theological discourses that occupy an albeit more localized but traditional ideational domain reflecting ineffable or apophatic angles of "super"-existence.

The key criterion of art has become the amazing, replacing the category of the sublime (Stroeva, 2011). The interrelation of the ethical and the aesthetic reveals itself most acutely in the spheres of the social and the political, coming closer to the mundane and actual demands and trends, and seemingly departing or moving away from the spheres of the eternal, abstract, and metaphysical. One can try to derive meanings from Plato's dialogues or the religious and ritual canons of ancient Egypt, but also must find and discover them in the here and now. The subtle connection of times is both elusive and clearly visible. Symbols, meanings, narratives, and ideas in digital space are eclectic and holistic, fragmented and unified. Yet this is not a jigsaw puzzle where the pieces make up the whole picture but the overall metaphysical interconnectedness of everything in general.
Today it is increasingly postulated that art objects are irreducible in one way or another, both (downwards) to their elements and components and (upwards) to their effects. The object-oriented ontology (OOO) in G. Harman's view opposes such kinds of reduction and their combination – "duomining". The classical line of the undermining and overmining of objects, originating from the previous and generally other philosophical and intellectual approaches, concepts, and traditions, is continued here. One branch of the philosophy of undermining leads to the search for the primordial, initial foundations of objects (in this context, objects of art) of material nature. The other branch is devoted to similar principles and tasks but is grounded in the paradigm of immateriality. Here the eternal perspective of the correlation between the material and the ideal in an art object is clearly manifested. This raises the question of what is, for example, a painting, a statue, or a holographic projection – a material, physical thing, or something ideal, primary, and possibly independent of its materialistic, perceived side. "OOO program emphasizes objects considered apart from their relations" and "OOO upholds the counter-tradition that takes relations to be external to their terms" (Harman, 2018). The undermining philosophy presupposes with its essence that objects acquire their reality from outside: from some, however different in many respects, bases of material nature or ideal foundations. Objects in such systems are secondary to the fundamental principle and the true reality. In other words, they are things for us rather than things in themselves, there is always something that makes them possible or necessary, perceived or existing.

One of the key thoughts asserted by Harman in "Art and Objects" is "the notion that beholder and artwork fuse jointly into a third and higher object, with the corollary that this third term is the key to shedding new light on the ontology of art" (Harman, 2020). Arguably, it cannot be called a new word or a revelation, its significance is defined precisely in the space of object-oriented philosophies and the main lines of speculative realism. The very idea of unity in numerous variations – of the viewer and the art object, the creator and their creation, the artist and the viewer, etc., – probably not only goes along with the entire history of comprehension of art and the artistic image, but is also often discovered in personal perception, in individual or collective contact with what can be called the sphere of art. In this context, objects begin to either synthesize, build out of or on top of each other or to emerge, appear as some entities, some objects within an object. Both paradoxically refer us back to the principles and ideas of "upward" and "downward" reductionism, against which our conceptual scheme seemed to operate. Considering two autonomies, the independence of the work of art from the beholder and the independence of the beholder from the work of art, we return to
questions of unified intentionality containing definite objects that by their existence determine and predetermine, asserting an inability to go beyond hybrid objects. This in many ironic ways echoes a key tenet of correlationism, against which the OOO has largely declared its crusade.

Interactive digital installations or theatrical performances and film screenings using virtual and augmented reality technologies accentuate the special significance of personal experience, personal perception, and immersiveness, bringing to the fore not analytical schemes, not interpretive understanding, but immediate emotional experience, feeling and perception here and now, a shift from the semiotic to the phenomenal. Energy, vitality, and expressiveness in this sense are not reducible to a certain statement, and the statement itself is both more and less sensual. They do not coincide, neither do they replace each other, substituting for each other depending on the area of their action: from sensual involvement to critical analysis.

In a Heideggerian sense, the technical means we have for mediating or "revealing" the world (from primitive crafts to languages) shape our ability to think, perceive, and define the image of our reality. By defining that "metaphor is actually the only way to phenomenologically experience external reality" (Strutt, 2019, 82), we approach technical media theory from a different angle, and metaphorical constructs change our knowledge, lifestyles and ways of living, education and learning trajectories, and patterns of perception of reality. In general terms, we seek the potentiality to "reach an understanding of a functional and dynamic digital ontology that is affectively embodied, acting upon our consciousness through the technical work of visual expression within a digital medium". Digital and postdigital works of art by contemporary creators incorporate the bodily multisensory and affective levels of image generation and perception (Denikin, 2017). The feelings experienced at the moment of affective determination of the image, the mental and physical actions of the viewer (Denikin, 2017) determine the aesthetic value of the art of postdigital images. The actor, through the construction, perception of the object (subject) of art, receives experience through the interaction of their own corporeality and mentality with the digital structure.

A liberation from space, heading towards a pure experience of metaphysics in motion. Space and time shift to the overlaying of the present, the multi-layered digital reality is reflected by the multi-layered digital art, and it, in turn, adds new layers to the current slice of reality. The images formed by digital art represent metaphysical and material objects. The material/infrastructural aspects of storing and cataloging digital and electronic works, as well as the issue of preserving both pure analog and digital forms and their hybrids, the digital mode and digital systems for storing, accessing, and describing such objects, the digital about
the digital and the digital in the digital, not only in the artworks themselves but also in the environment and access to them. A digital container holding various digital attachments, a digital hyperobject including objects of different natures, and ontological fixation and manifestation. Symbolic representations, defined as some material objects or groups of objects organized according to syntactic and semantic types constitute a representational system (Goodman, 1976). Anti-essentialism, which emerged in the middle of the 20th century, attempts to overcome the crisis of traditional aesthetics, the sociocultural conditions of existence, and the transformation of the category of the aesthetic. Changes in the image of reality and historical, political, and cultural context reveal new planes and aspects of an artwork. Anti-essentialism proceeds from attempts to get into the essence of the work, to the essence of beauty, to the true ideas and pure meanings in favor of a more pragmatic and to a degree even utilitarian fixation of the conditions of perception and representation, characteristic features, correspondence to certain paradigms and social and cultural constructs.

Digital art gives the artist enormous opportunities for self-expression, allowing them to find new forms and create fresh and unique images. The digital goes into spectacularity, engages and immerses "inside". Mixed reality is not yet virtual, but it is no longer real, and objects here reveal not only their dualistic nature but also their very existence as an ontologizing rupture. Algorithmic and generative creation inherits kaleidoscopic formats and rigorous methods of making artworks, which constitutes the autonomy of the non-human (machine, hybrid, distributed network), but the very possibility, the very direction is defined and perceived through the prism of the human, even if the barrier or, conversely, the means of access is provided by non-human agents.

The digital and postdigital era, the digital transformation, and the penetration of advanced projects and tools of scientific and technological progress into all spheres of human life, including everyday and routine life, contribute in many ways to the convergence of art and science. Science art, data art, mathematical art, and other hybrid forms encapsulate and unify in the traditional dimension the far divergent or opposite positions of science and art not only in the sphere of metaphorical analogies and ideological principles of activity but also as subjects and objects in the here and now. Digital art exhibits transcendence in immanence. Not only is the transcendent expressed as the conceivable negation of the immanent, but art fuses together what is on the "other" and on "this" side. Immanence replaces transcendence in perception, but the idea, essence, and authenticity of digital and postdigital art restore the transcendent through the immanent. Digital and postdigital art is marked by ambiguity and duality, which form a holistic unity and mutually condition and support each other.
The human creator (who, perhaps out of habit or natural ego, considers themselves as such or convinces themselves that only they, and not some soulless machine or something artificial, albeit intellectual, are worthy to bear such an honorable title) and generative machines, algorithmic AI systems, and procedural content generation systems are caught in a situation where "the agency of one entails the automatism of the other" (Chia, 2022). There is also a pressing issue of the autonomy and independence of the human person (both as the artist and creator and as a viewer and observer) from not human but technical and hybrid agents. On the one hand, the instrumental equipment of authors and artists improves as the necessary tools become more accessible. For example, there are more opportunities for independent creators to create, promote, and distribute their art independently (Frenneaux, 2023). Yet on the other hand, creators become bound to and dependent on technical means, digital platforms, and the methods of creation, display, distribution, and presentation of their works or various types of content.

**Conclusion**

It's tempting to adopt the formula "To each society – its own art", hence to information society – digital art, and to post-Internet society – post-Internet art. Indeed, art, oscillating between aestheticization and ontologization, in one way or another serves as the comprehension, description, and aesthetic representation of the topical. Social, political, and economic problems, social contradictions, lifestyle, as well as predominant, newly emerging, and dying values and meanings – all of this is manifested and reflected in works of art. The form, tools, and ways of access are, in turn, defined by the era, the state of scientific and technical progress, and the accessibility or inaccessibility of forms. Thus, digital and postdigital art is defined and produced by the ages of information and post-information society, digital transformation, technologies, and spaces. On the other hand, art itself predetermines some vectors of development and understanding. Art is not exclusively a hostage of society, technology, the epoch, and civilization; it also reveals their essence, illuminates the apparent traits, displays the hidden ones, and sets examples and trends. Art is not only shaped by man for the present day but molds the man of the future.
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