

Glitch: Designing Imperfection

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Foreword

Per Platou

Old Bitch Bay, June 2007

www.liveart.org

In 1995, after many years running a tiny, much too eclectic record label, I decided to apply for membership to UKS (the young artists' society in Norway). The original work I submitted was a cassette tape with recordings of different types of office trash, chairs, shelves and old Siemens computers being crushed in an industrial garbage compactor (yes, it was my night-time job; I had to feed the kids). From my point of view it was a kind of identity prank. After working with so many musicians with far bigger egos than skills, not even to mention sales potential, I wanted to prove that I could be an "artist" too.

"This will knock their brains out," I thought about the tape, but I was wrong of course. After a long waiting period my application was turned down without any reason, and in a moment of rage and disappointment I filed an extremely angry and vicious complaint, venting all my contempt for the snooty art world, stating elaborately that they had missed their only chance of revitalizing their rotten, bourgeois and corrupt system. Two days later I received a kind letter of acceptance, and after a few months I was asked to join the board.

So there I was, knowing nothing, but with a rapidly growing self-awareness as a "conceptual artist" inspired by ... well, I knew the names of Marcel Duchamp and Andy Warhol (mainly through the Velvet Underground). But this was 1995 and

suddenly came the internet, and then came Netscape, and then I stumbled over a totally weird webpage that repeatedly caused my Mac to halt, shiver violently and eventually crash. "My first virus!" I exclaimed happily and emailed it on to everyone I knew. The web address was jodi.org and some years later I would come to know the couple behind it as one of a handful of truly radical net.art pioneers, fucking with my computer and my understanding of art.

The net.art movement (with the very important dot) was all about resistance toward the slick neo-liberal dotcom-hype that dominated so much of the late 1990s. Its mythological origins state that the term originally was a technical mistake, and a quite interesting one.¹ And here, far too early, comes the moral: Aren't the mistakes always more challenging, more interesting, more touching than sickening success stories? Just look at the American avant-garde film movement from the 1950s and 1960s; one name that stands out is Stan Brakhage, the hardcore eccentric filmmaker who always "destroyed" his shots in the developing process by adding mysterious chemicals, food, insect legs or whatever. His "mistakes" became an art form influencing what today is seen as mainstream visual old-skool glitch aesthetics used in everyday jingles for MTV and ads for Jaguar cars. The same can be said about the electronic glitch music movement that started in the late nineties and manifested itself through the Viennese label Megis.

So what is a "glitch" anyway? Well, it stems from German and Yiddish and means to slip or slide, but in everyday use it's a spurge of electrical current, or a little electronic hiccup. And when glitch music came along it felt extremely contemporary and relevant for all us who had experienced fucked-up CD players or a "live" computer crash. When my partner Amanda Steggell and I conducted our first internet-fuelled dance performance *M@ggie's Love Bytes* in 1996, the computers on stage crashed several times and things went extremely bad, technically speaking, but this very fact left the audience in awe, and one critic even spoke about "the incredible drama created by what seemed like stone-age technology."

It didn't take much to understand that the tension was created by what went wrong, and not what we had rehearsed for months in a dance studio. "Failure is success" we deducted cleverly, and a couple of years later we deliberately fake-crashed a Mac during a new performance ... resulting in a yawning audience. The crash wasn't real and somehow one could subconsciously feel it.

Fast-forward to 2002 when we decided to arrange a small symposium in Oslo to investigate if the concept of glitch could be transferred from music to other art forms, like visual glitch or social glitch (which is today often filed under "relational aesthetics"). Submitting "glitch + art" to

Alta Vista in those days resulted in very few hits, but the one on top was significant: a fresh new visual glitch diary called befliX.com by a young Englishman named Tony Scott. He investigated the visual phenomenon of computer glitches and during what must have been his first public presentation ever, he stunned the Oslo audience with several extremely beautiful screen grabs of computers or software crashing, snapped at the exact moment of their death, so to speak. And Tony was totally hardcore, no fake glitches would ever be allowed in his garden. Since then I have been convinced that one can (and should) allow for various kinds of random actions/events in art-making, technically or otherwise, but the conclusion remains: It is impossible to deliberately make a mistake.

A short time ago, I conducted a series of "public confession sessions" in Oslo under the label "Reality Check," where artists were encouraged to discuss art projects that had failed miserably. At first it was hard to get anybody to speak up; however, a few brave souls stood up, and the event soon became a massive success with hordes of fellow artists, curators, press and delinquents turning up, crying and laughing with the miserable (heroic) ones. It was without a doubt the biggest success in my infamous curatorial career. The outcome, however, was highly dubious; after a few sessions, artists were calling me day and night, literally begging me to be on the show, with the most unbelievably boring projects. Eventually, after one too many nightly phone calls from drunk, miserable, incredibly dull artists who

tried to convince me that they were "totally losers," I decided to quit the whole show, to let the true failures, the hubris die with dignity and not be buried with the average common artcrap.

So for the love of all the true-life glitches out there, it is my sincere hope that this glossy coffee-table book of beautiful errors fails miserably.

Introduction

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“A glitch image hits you right between the eyes.”
Ant Scott

Definition

The visual glitch is an artifact resulting from an error. It is neither the cause, nor the error itself, it is simply the product of an error and more specifically its visual manifestation. It is a significant slip that marks a departure from our expected result.

Glitches usually arise from mistranslations that are facilitated by a loss or breakdown in our communication signals. They are the imperfect and unexpected results of such malfunctions, which have no apparent purpose to their existence in the setting of perfect processes.

On the other hand, visual glitches are quite often fleeting artifacts that momentarily offer a glimpse into the inner workings and complexities of storage, display and communication technology. In doing so, they sometimes become an unintentional feedback mechanism, a last chance for us to know that technology has malfunctioned.

From a visual composition standpoint, glitches are incongruously linear, complex, sharp and occasionally blurred. Fragmentation, linearity, complexity and

repetition are the more common meta-qualities of visual glitches. Together with the quality of being unexpected, they make the visual glitch an unashamedly amorphous entity that pleases or annoys.

Contemporary Context

Due to our never-ending pursuit of signal perfection, higher definition, increased clarity and fidelity in consumer electronics, audio and visual, glitches are eliminated in a matter of milliseconds. At other times, they completely steal the limelight and become centrepieces of attention – however unwanted – such as an ATM video display glitching.

Visual glitches are rare in standard occurrence and yet paradoxically, they are quite easy to provoke, which makes them ideal for being appropriated, used as a medium for artwork or even elevated to the status of a genre. Imperfections in diamonds are affectionately called “inclusions.” Outside of art and design, however, glitches don’t get off the hook so easily – they are branded as bad reception, undesirable fuzz, static or interference.

As a complete contrast, however, to some, visual glitches have become the rare diamonds and objects of fetish and desire. It is not unusual for the qualities of fetish

objects to be exaggerated as they are framed, or placed on a platform for discussion. Thus the fetishization of the visual glitch can result in challenging and questioning common taste in the best examples, or simply demonstrating a lack of aesthetic awareness in others. Consequently, fetish glitches are not necessarily glitch artworks, but their appropriation as artworks is quite common. The appreciation of the glitch can also be perceived as an attempt to explore or facilitate the fetishization of technology itself.

Popular culture is saturated with images of visual interfaces distorting and glitching. The glitch has become a prop or direct metaphor to assist the narrative. It is a touchstone for conveying heightened danger, or fear of the unknown.

Process

For the glitch artists, the process of creating visuals is an involved process, which stems from an understanding of their tools: computer hardware (storage media, memory and display technology) and software (operating systems, image processing libraries, file storage and data transmission protocols). Fundamentally though, everything boils down to principles of composition, color and personal taste, which are immutably non-specific and

timeless. Aesthetic considerations therefore govern the way glitch artists crop, compose and even provoke the generation of these images. (Scott refers to a tweaking of his colors in print, a process that borders on the insanely meticulous and some others have documented lengthy processes and outcomes in creating visual glitches.)

In *The Pattern on the Stone*, W. Daniel Hillis defines the essence of digital technology as the process of restoring signals to near perfection at every stage, and he goes on to link this to the concept of keeping a complicated system under control. The visual glitch is a blatant display of lack of control on the part of digital technology and in a reverse kind of way it symbolizes our dominance over it.

In forcing a visual glitch, there is an element of unpredictability that makes experimentation worthwhile and rewarding.

Less commonly, the qualities of pure visual glitches are also studied and mimicked by adept designers, who create what can be termed as “glitch-alikes.” These directly share the visual characteristics and makeup of pure glitches found in their original habitats, but are actually synthesized and faked.

This Book

We certainly live in machine-inspired human cultures of perfection, where the clarity of a signal becomes a marketable asset or bankable commodity, and in which static, undesirable detritus and failure are not usually options. Nonetheless, throughout the course of creating this book, we have heard artists, designers and audiences of media-arts events discuss at length what is so special to them about the glitch.

In the works featured in this book, which are from artists and designers worldwide, there is a lot of meaning attributed to these semi-unordered bits and bytes – to

the conceptual value of those losses and unexpected surprises. For one contributor it could be their state of mind and personal neuroses playing out in the digital canvas. For another, the playful nature of design accidents or their assertion of dominance over our less-than-intelligent machines. Yet to others, using the glitch as a medium harks back to a time when imperfections were tolerated and are now retrospectively enjoyed as qualities. In a sense we are cherishing the little idiosyncrasies that are absent from the soulless machines churned from the production lines.

The glitch therefore has metaphysical presence, and many philosophical allusions have been made over its nature and origin during our correspondences with contributors. Does the glitch serve as a constant reminder for the human capacity to err? Does it comfort us by humanizing the machine?

To the glitch artists who strive to get their work shown in galleries and the designers whose work graces the covers of glitch albums and features in vodka advertisements, these provoked, designed or otherwise captured and framed glitches hold as much significance as traditional mediums.

Aside from appreciated aesthetic qualities, the utter complexity of some images, juxtaposed with their spontaneity and sometimes short life, is a status unique to glitches and systemic chaos in nature. From a media history standpoint it is also interesting to anthologize aspects of media such as glitches, for they may be forgotten when our signals become more perfect and our glitches less visual.

Some attempts have been made to categorize the aesthetic qualities of glitches and understand where they sit, or even ask the question whether glitches are a genre, medium or sub-medium in the pantheon of art forms. On the whole, though, it is my

belief that the glitch should remain largely uncategorizable and orphaned in the face of changing technology. Its lack of function, or unwanted function, sits well within the realm of glitch art and design already, where it is used as a medium that adequately conveys persuasion and subversion in the same visual frame.

Whether or not you accept glitch art as a valid art form, glitches themselves are too short-lived, unless captured and displayed.