The effect of the transverse of the virtual and the actual in the digital image

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I. Introduction

This paper will look at an aesthetic value of the digital image through its unique qualities. The digital image is generated by the technical aid of computers and developed by new media artists. While the traditional value of visual images was based on resemblance through representation, the digital image is defined as time-based and immaterial and presented by the loss of self-referentiality and simulacra. Additionally, since new media art emphasizes the viewer's positive participation, immersion and interactivity become the natural conditions of the digital image.

However, in spite of its uniqueness, the digital image has been criticized as being nothing but information stored as algorithm and as lacking of a critical distance while viewers are immersed and interactive with it. According to Theodor W. Adorno, a work of art should keep a critical distance from the viewers to awaken them. However, this paper argues that with regard to its unique quality of the transverse of the virtual and the actual, the digital image sheds light on the deployment of ontology.

In order to develop this project, this paper will apply Gilles Deleuze's thoughts as a methodology. In his ontological perspective, the digital image will be identified as components for the virtual structure, rather than information. Furthermore, interactivity and immersion will be understood as a driving force for embodying the being through experiencing difference.

As a framework, this paper will define the digital image as simulacra and suggest a new perspective on the virtual for the entity of the digital image. Borrowing main

concepts from Deleuze, it will examine the questions of the disappearance of distance and immersion in aspects of sensation and intensity. Lastly, it will construct the aesthetic quality of the digital image based on the positive affirmation of being.

II. The digital image as simulacrum in the virtual space

The digital image is understood as simulacra in terms of having immaterial and ephemeral qualities and not representing an external object. The value of the simulacra has been highlighted by Deleuze. Contrasting simulacra to Plato's concept of copy, he emphasizes the infinity of simulacra. According to him, while "the copy is an image endowed with resemblance, the simulacrum is an image without resemblance" (Deleuze The Logic of Sense 257). In other words, the Platonic copy is based on the principle of the imitative: there exists an exemplary similitude for the pure resemblance of the copy. On the other hand, free from the relation to resemblance between the original and its copies, the simulacrum internalizes dissimilarity and deploys difference; therefore, it includes huge dimensions, depths, and distance. According to James William, Deleuze describes this infinite state of the simulacra as "becoming-unlimited" or a "becoming subversive of the depths" which can evade "the equal, the limit, the Same, or the Similar" (Deleuze, Gilles 517).

> If it is true that representation has identity as its element and similarity as its unit of measure, then pure presence such as it appears in the simulacrum has the 'disparate' as its unit of measure-in other words, always a difference of difference as its immediate element. (Deleuze Difference and Repetition 69)

In Deleuze's plan of reversing Platonism, the simulacrum, breaking down a hierarchy between the original and its copies, enjoys its accidental and simulated nature. In this

manner, it shows affirmation for itself and approaches "the real world of potential becoming" (William 517). Therefore, Deleuze's concept of the simulacra endows the digital image with affirmation for its existence, no longer as a being subordinated to the origin.

This paper attempts to verify Deleuze's propositions through new media artist Jeffrey Shaw's work *Place- Ruhr* (2000) (fig. 1). This work is intended to explore a three dimensional virtual environment through the viewer's interactivity. The viewer steps on a rotating platform and navigates projected images within a large circular projection screen. This installation represents virtual landscapes that actualize particular sites in the Ruhr area. What the viewer experiences through this interactive immersion is "augmented reality" (Shaw 265). Instead of experiencing virtual reality, the viewer participates in the extended real world and its inhabitant through fictional constructs. The virtual image in his work has opens the real world of potential becoming through the sense of the enlarged reality.

In fact, the word "virtual" is derived from the Medieval Latin *virtualis*, itself originated from *virtus*, meaning "strength or power" (Levy 23). According to Pierre Levy and Constantin V Boundas, Deleuze specifies the virtual, comparing it with the actual, the real, the possible, and the potential. Pierre Levy presents that according to Deleuze, the virtual is not opposite to the real, but rather tends to be the actual. The possible having a tendency to be the real is already fully constituted, but it lacks existence. The difference between the possible and the real exists purely in logic. The virtual is described as a knot of tendencies or forces or a problematic complex that accompanies a situation, event, object, or entity. Conversely, the actual appears as the solution to a

problem. Although the real and the actual have the same position in which they are both patent, while the former refers to existing things, the latter refers to a particularly invented solution, here and now, to a problem. Thus, the actual has a meaning of creative which implies innovative productions of idea or form; however, the real is just a selection among determined entities. In a manner of comparison, the possible and the virtual also have a similar position in which they are latent. However, while the former refers to a predetermined set of possibilities, the latter refers to problems, knots of trends, constraints, forces, and goals (23-30). On the other hand, the potential, unlike the virtual, depends on another being for its existence. Its identity, determination, and orientation come from the act or from that which is actual. Thus, the potential and the possible are clearly representable because they are grasped in the image of the real (Boundas 87). Lastly, while the possible and the real are close to substance, the virtual and the actual are close to events.

Furthermore, Deleuze argues that the virtual and the actual are indistinguishable. According to his explanation, the virtual image never stops becoming actual and, in fact, the actual is surrounded by a virtual cosmos. The actual, as the object of actualization, has the virtual as its subject, and actualization belongs to the virtual. The relationship implies that while the actual itself is an individuality, the actualization of the virtual becomes a singularity as an event. However, as this circle contracts, the virtual draws closer to the actual, both becoming less and less distinct. Then, the actual and the virtual enter into a tight circuit, and this moment reaches crystallization (Deleuze Dialogues II 148-150).

Delezue describes this indistinguishable relation through duration. There are two types of time: "the passing of the present" and "the preservation of the past" (Deleuze Dialogues II 151). For him, the present is a mono-directional movement in continuous time. Based on the concept of the present, the actual is defined by this passing of the present and the virtual by the preservation of the past. The two aspects of time are distinguishable during actualization, but are exchanged during crystallization; they become indiscernible, each relating to the role of the other (*ibid*).

While the participant immerses into the digital image by zooming in or out, the image is deployed as images within images and formulated as a series or continuum. Each image is latent and subsisted in a virtual environment. This virtual image contains the past which is conserved in itself, not conserved inside the present which it is now past. When the virtual image actualizes followed by a series, the actual presents the entirely contracted past which coexists with the present. In this manner, the present is constituted as past and at the same time, it is constituted as present. Thus, duration in the digital image has succession and coexistence at the same time.

III. The digital image as the embodiment of the being of sensible

Reputed to lack a critical distance, the digital image is frequently treated as phantasmagoria for pleasure. Thus, immersion into it reflects a negative aspect in terms of the value of artworks. However, this paper likens the digital image to as good conductor for sensing sensation.

The digital image is sensed. According to Deleuze, the sensation is an event, felt such as vibration, which happens on a surface between the body and an exterior environment

(Deleuze <u>Francis Bacon</u> 31). It is closer to an ontological event sensed by the body and the organs than an epistemological mechanism drawn up to the mind.

> Sensation has one face turned toward the subject (the nervous system, vital movement, instinct, temperament) and one face turned toward the object (the fact, the place, the event). Or rather, it has no faces at all, it is both things indissolubly, it is Being-in-the-World, as the phenomenologists say: at one and the same I *become* in the sensation and something *happens* through the sensation, one through the other, one in the other. And at the limit, it is the same body that, being both subject and object, gives and receives sensation (*ibid*).

In sensation, the boundary of the subject perceiving and an object perceived is absorbed with each other. It is rather a prior state of the dichotomy and is a state of being in the world.

Bill Seaman's work *The world Generator* (1996-7) (fig. 2) is based on virtual interface which is composed of a series of spinning container-wheels which enable the participant to generate and navigate virtual world in real time. One spins the container-wheels and selects digitized images successively from a vast collection of media-elements. The selected images consist of a continuum and are projected on the big screen. As we experience his work, our body is placed in a virtual environment. Through interactivity we encounter digital materials and unfold a series of digital images. Immersing into them, we experience a pure event of actualizing the virtual. The experiment with our body in the virtual structure is about the intensity of desire sensed on our body, rather than the understanding the meaning of images as activity of recognition.

We are in our sensation, and our body becomes a maximal field for a desire without being divided as a subject or an object.

The body, as a subject of sensation, is a virtual field in terms of being able to differentiate multiple relations. To create maximal intensity as a driving force for desire, the body removes the boundaries among body organs. In the two new media works, the participant crosses between corporeal reality and artificial image illusion by the collaboration of two senses, haptic and vision. The two senses effectively internalize to sense sensation, yet not in a relation of subordination between them. Deleuze calls this state of synesthesia "without organs" which operates directly on the nervous system, convulses the body, and activates a force (Deleuze A Thousand Plateaus 153). In fact, Aristotle was the first philosopher to order the body organs, in which the senses of hearing and sight are prior to touch, taste, smell, and motor sense as well and to warn the use of two senses at the same time because he believed it makes people lose their ability to reason. However, from Deleuze's perspective the use of two senses means the mutual communication of senses and increases sensation. In addition, it indicates a previous state of the differentiated organs; therefore, there exists no hierarchy among them.

On the other hand, immersion is compared to sensation which drives us to think in Plato's concept. Deleuze calls this sensation "signs" which are not objects of recognition, but objects of a fundamental encounter (Smith 30). This encounter sign refers to sensible qualities or an intensive product of differential relations and becomes "the being of the sensible" and not sensible being (*ibid*). Moreover, signs include intensity which means "pure potential movement" which exists as becoming. With this notion of intensity, Deleuze mentions that "sensation ceases to be representative and becomes real" (Smith

37). Therefore, as Seaman's work shows, a series of digital images deployed by the differential relations of the participant is understood as encountered signs, and immersion is compared to a force for an intensive synthesis of differential relations rather than removing a critical distance.

IV. The understanding of the digital image as ontological attributes

The digital image embodies differences through the actualization of the virtual. This paper has defined the digital image within a transversal relationship between the virtual and the actual. In this perspective, the digital image in the virtual is compared to a monad in Leibniz's term which is a basic element consisting of a world and discernable in quality. Negating the same identity among monads, they consist of a continuing world. Each monad reflects other monads as a mirror; therefore, perceiving the monad means virtual reflection of the world (Leibniz 222). Therefore, each digital image as a monad is a component of compossibility in Leibniz's term means that monads occurring successively are able to have a meaning as an event (Leibniz 64). Constituting a series of digital images in the virtual environment implies an event as singularity in which each event will be different according to the constituted relation of images. In Deleuze's term, the actualization of the virtual is called differenciation while differential relations of the virtual in itself are called differentiation. Differenciation cannot exist without differentiation, and differentiation without a process of differenciation does not have meaning as an event (Deluze <u>Difference and Repetition</u> 206-7). Thus difference has a pair of differenciation and differentiation. A process of actualizing digital images results in difference and divergence.

Sensation differentiates differences. According to Deleuze, differences are considered as perception of variation in intensity (Deleuze <u>Difference and Repetition</u> 222-23). As sensation is sensed as desire on the body, the driving force for desire is called intensity. Comparing Nietzsche's concept of will to power to Deleuze's concepts of desire and intensity, Jinkyung Lee mentions that while a force makes possible what a desire wants to do, a desire gives a force direction and quality. Thus, based on a desire, the quality and attribute of a force is different. In other words, a desire is an immanent process of an activity. Based on a desire, a specific subject or activity is formulated and changed (465). In this manner, the body becomes a maximal area in achieving the immanent change of desire. A difference from desire is called actual difference. According to Deleuze, actual difference comes from the internal differenciation of difference and mean the dynamic and creative actualization of difference. On the other hand, conceptual differences are in the category of recognition and defined as the difference of the ideal form and its resembling copy (Hayden 31). The digital image as encountered signs concerns divergent relations of objects which are produced by a desire and intensity and delivers difference.

This difference sustains the difference of being. It means the difference of nature, rather than the difference of degree. While the former indicates a concept of difference which withstands the pressure of identity, the latter indicates only differences between self-identical entities. Therefore, in the case of intensity there are only differences of nature since the segmentation of intensity brings out its attribute which differs in nature from the other (Boundas 86). Being cannot be a subset of a referent or meaning, and it is not a category or genre. A being in its nature is the expression of a tendency which is not merely possible but real.

Being is both being and becoming where it is becoming. To be is to become, and the being acquires its identity because they become, and because they express its pure nature. In interactivity in new media works, the participant is described as a fragmented subject. It does not mean an instable self defined in psychoanalysis. Based on Deleuze's concept of being, this subject is understood in Neitzsche's concept of perspectivism which acknowledges multiple points of view. In terms of conceding the existence of each being, a self becomes a part of a whole existence. Instead of being placed in a certain category, each being endows its singularity with its attributes. In fact, being is singular and the same in the sense of all the numerically distinct designators and expressors (Williams Gilles Deleuze's Difference and Repetition 64).

Gill Scott's work *Beyond Hierarchy?* (2000) (fig. 3) emphasizes the viewer's experience through an interactive self-editing. This work needs participants' cooperation. Each participant is in an ergonomic chair and controls the segments of six workers' lives (three male and three female workers). These six characters are assembly workers from an industrial center in the Ruhr area from the beginning of the 20th century to the present and wish to end a hierarchical organization. The six characters are projected on arches such as moving mural paintings in a church. The two workers are chosen by two participants shaking hands on the stairwell and meeting in front of film footage showing famous street demonstrations from the 1910s to the 1990s. In this process, the respective time zones of the screen characters collapses, bringing out generation clashes. The non-linear deployment of sequences depends on the viewer's expression through interactive experimentation. Each participant in her project experiences a singular event revealed by the differential relations of the being.

This difference should be repeated to formulate a new subject which doesn't subside into an identity and diverges its multiplicity. According to Boundas, "to repeat is always to behave in relation to something unique and singular which has neither likeness nor equivalence" (102). Thus, through the repetition of difference, a subject stands on a track of the coming into being and opened creation. Interactivity and immersion in new media art practice ontological aesthetics.

V. Conclusion

This paper started with two strategies; one was to examine an esthetic value of the digital image and the other was to find its historical connection to contemporary art. Through the transversal relationship between the virtual and the actual, the digital image was understood within an ontological category. In fact, ontology has been continuously studied in philosophy and positively applied to modern art. Performance art and video art in the 1960s especially extended an ontological aspect by asking the viewer to participate directly into the work of art.

The concept of virtuality with the use of computers opens a new genre, new media art. It produces digitized images in a virtual space, and interactivity and immersion are its key characteristics. Like post-structuralists' attempt to reverse traditional thoughts, theses new elements seem to try to disconnect them from the traditional concept of art. For instance, it adopts the simulacra in a category of images, deploys complicated concepts of time, and removes a distance between subject and object. Moreover, it appeals to sensation rather than reason.

Based on these new qualities of the digital image, this paper has argued that the digital image in new media art deals with becomings of being in ontology. In Deleuze's concept,

the being is understood as a nomadic subject which subverts conventional frames and creates endless newness. In addition, this paper suggests that the ontological aesthetics experienced by the digital image differs from "Aestheik" which deals with art of art. Rather, it orients "Aisthetik" which deals with art of life.

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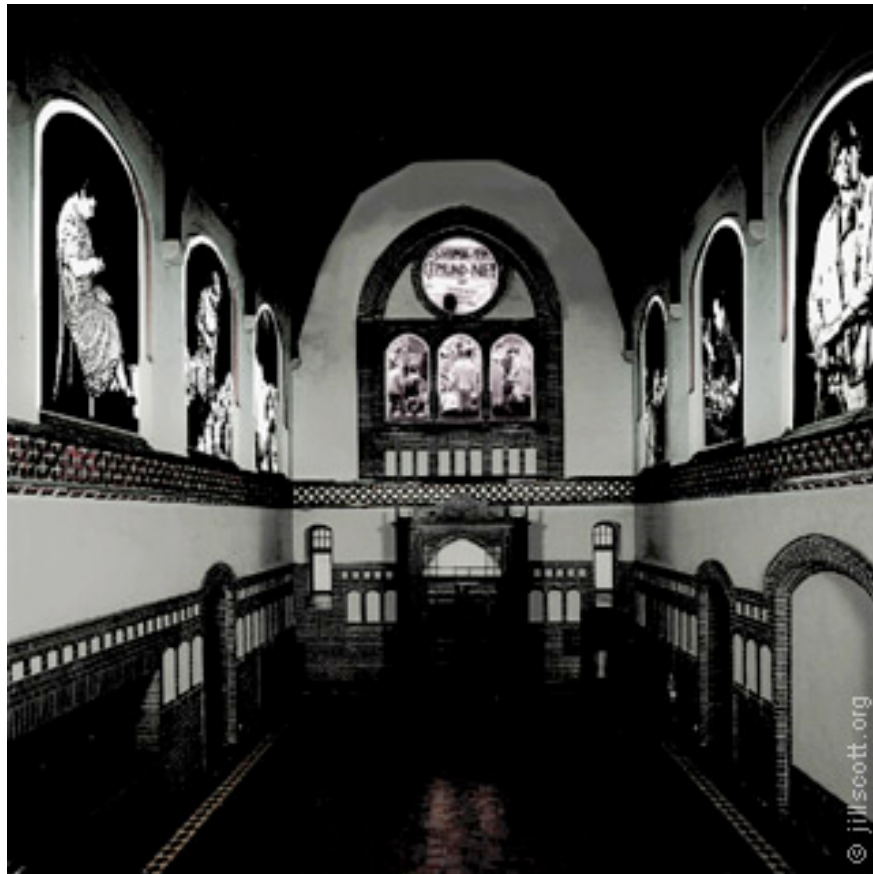
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Fig. 1) Jeffrey Shaw, *Place- Ruhr* (2000)

Fig. 2) Bill Seaman, *The world Generator* **(1996-7)**

Fig. 3) Gill Scott, *Beyond Hierarchy?* **(2000)**