

**No.009**

**Media, Connectivity,  
Literacies & Ethics**

**Beautiful Pixels – Aesthetic  
Innovation in Interactive  
Online Art: The Case of  
BoyBlack**

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# 1 Introduction

This paper seeks to address the possibility of innovation in interactive online artwork, firstly by addressing a case study, BoyBlack.co.za, and secondly by contextualising it within certain notions of postmodern aesthetic theory. This is inspired by an interest in how contemporary aesthetic practice interacts with computer-mediated and internet-centred flows of technological innovation, and of course, vice versa: how technological innovation can allow experimentation with new ways of art-making and art-consuming.

In many respects, in this paper it is taken for granted that technological innovation has enabled the possibility of creating interactive online art. The paper does not focus on the technology used to create the artworks; it is accepted that various art-making technologies (typically various image-making and animation software programmes as well as the background coding for website creation<sup>1</sup>) have become increasingly available and powerful over the last few decades, to the point that they are being used by artists such as BoyBlack as their primary expressive tools. As well as this, it needs to be assumed that likewise the increased accessibility of online spaces, both through the growth of broadband services and in the lowering of costs associated with buying domains and hosting websites, has also made possible the emergence of interactive online artworks and opened up the potential to reach new audiences. The question, then, is not whether interactive online art is technologically innovative. Instead the query is related to how interactive online art meaningful is meaningful in the broader context of contemporary art and aesthetic theory. Specifically, how does it facilitate artistic and aesthetic innovation in practice, in art making and viewing? In order to consider these questions, the BoyBlack.co.za artwork and its artists are introduced. Following this, various approaches to postmodern aesthetics are discussed to provide a basis for the analysis of the case study. Before this, however, I explain in more detail what I mean by “interactive online art”.

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<sup>1</sup> BoyBlack cite the following programmes that they use in making their work: Languages: PHP (PSPad), HTML, Sequel, ActionScript (Flash Develop (open source IDE), PSPad; Graphics: Photoshop, Flash, 3d Studio Max, Microsoft Paint, Flash, and Notepad

## 2 Interactive Online Art

In her book, *Life on the Screen*, psychologist Sherry Turkle seeks to understand how people relate to themselves in the context of their personal computers and the simulated realities (specifically role-playing games) that can be accessed through them. She explains that the computer is an “object-to-think-with” (1996: 48) but also alludes to the fact that they can be objects to *create* with, when she offers an analogy of the relationship of a computer scientist to a computer as similar to that of an artist to his/her tools. Both subjects, she says, develop “close, sensual ties with their tools” (1996: 62). This paper deals with the situation where the figures of computer scientist and artist merge into a new creative subject whose expressive tools are purely digital: pixels, RGB colour and binary code.

I take “interactive online art” to be art that is created with the computer and related digital technologies, as per the Turkle-inspired conception of the computer as an “object-to-create-with”, *and* that is created to *be shown and viewed on the computer screen*, specifically through websites. These artworks are distinct from the (quite common) practice of showing digital versions of “offline” works online. In this situation, the world wide web allows for a great deal of exhibition, publicity and networking space for visual artists (as discussed by McLaughlin, 1996); the technology facilitating a secondary mediation of artistic practice, an *additional* way of showing and viewing artworks that were intended primarily for “real world” spaces. Online art is also distinct from the practice of using the computer and related technologies to make digital artworks that are intended for offline spaces. Here, digital technologies allow for the constant pushing of artistic boundaries and ongoing innovation in terms of how artworks are made and art is defined. The use of digital media in art-making is certainly not a recent innovation; works of art have long been created with the computer (and other related technologies)<sup>2</sup>. Interactive online art is created specifically to exist on and be viewed through the internet as well as being

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<sup>2</sup> For example, works entered into the Prix Ars Electronica, an annual “international competition of cyber-arts” – see [www.aec.at/en/prix](http://www.aec.at/en/prix).

made with various computer software programmes. It is both digital and mediated by the digital. Although it is entirely plausible that these artworks might migrate to offline spaces such as galleries, they were not created for them. The intended exhibition space is the computer screen of each viewer<sup>3</sup>. This is interesting because it represents a spatial and symbolic shift from normative, gallery-bound conceptions of how art is valued and viewed. It suggests a democratic movement towards self-exhibiting which artists can define and enact on their own terms.

Technologically facilitated innovations in fine art extend to the emergence of works of art created uniquely for the personal computer as viewing medium and thereby encompass varying degrees of action required by the viewer in order to engage with the art. Like many “offline” artworks, online artworks invite different degrees of involvement from the viewer, both through the psychological and taste-based acts of looking and judging, as well as through forcing actual physical involvement. In the case of offline artwork, this could be through the negotiation of space in viewing a sculpture, or artworks that respond in some way to the presence or actions of the viewer. In the case of online art, the interaction is related to user interface activity such as clicking, dragging and scrolling. In including the word “interactive” in the term “interactive online art”, I am not suggesting that only online artworks are interactive, but that interactivity is an embedded feature of most online artworks. This suggests a new spin on ideas of interactivity between the art-viewer and the art-viewed and the ways in which, as in many other areas of contemporary social life, technology has created new channels through which human beings can impel (artistic and aesthetic) innovation.

I have chosen a single case study for analysis in order to address the concept of interactive online art, an art duo calling themselves BoyBlack who work exclusively online. Through a combination of an interpretation of one of their artworks, [www.boyblack.co.za](http://www.boyblack.co.za), and an interview with the artists I examine how the existence of the world wide web and interactive software technology has enabled these artists to

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<sup>3</sup> The varying interpretive contexts of individual viewers could of course in itself mediate the experience of the viewing of such artworks – an exploration of this falls beyond the remit of this paper, but could form an interesting area of further research.

extend the artistic experience, both in terms of the creation of artworks and of their interactive consumption by the art viewer.

### **3 About BoyBlack**

BoyBlack is made up of Shaun and Maciek<sup>4</sup>, two young South African men of “western heritage”<sup>5</sup>, both in their early twenties and living in Cape Town. They went to high school together (citing their arts and design teacher as a major influence on their motivation and work) and then worked together in a variety of community projects, during which time they formed a working partnership and started to experiment with various modes of computer mediated artistic self-expression. They are close friends as well as artistic collaborators; each brings something unique and complementary to their partnership. Shaun specialises in back-end coding, while Maciek specialises in concept and front-end visualisation, although they make it clear that their working process is not black and white in this manner, but always a fruitful exchange and integrated process. They admire one another, and thrive on their respective strengths. Maciek says of Shaun, “[He] does all the hard work, programming, figuring out technical limitations and discovering all the amazing things that it’s possible for us to do. I float around irritating him with the odd technical idea (some are useful, most aren’t) and then make a picture or two, which I pass off as interface and graphics,” while Shaun says of Maciek, “I love the way that [he] deals with design: If something seems wrong, and I point it out, more often than not he will push it further in the ‘wrong’ direction and remind me that design is not art, and neither is engineering, but they both produce art as a by-product when played with.”

Maciek appears to be the more expressive communicator of the two, an assumption based on Shaun’s more limited responses to the interviewer. Boyblack.co.za was

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<sup>4</sup> I reserve their surnames as per their own practice of publishing their contact details on [www.boyblack.co.za](http://www.boyblack.co.za). All quotes from Shaun and Maciek are from the interview, which took place via e-mail in June and July 2007.

<sup>5</sup> This is Maciek’s term, taken from the interview transcript. It is a euphemism for “white” and reveals some of the deeper social and racial politics that saturate all levels of life in South Africa. In the interview, answering a question related to their motivation for making art, Maciek refers to a socio-economic context in which young South Africans with “western heritage” suffer from limited financial and infrastructural support – a reference to many white people’s growing sense of alienation and marginalisation as a result of government instituted affirmative action that systematically directs resources to “previously disadvantaged” groups.

one of their first websites, and they developed it with the primary intention of “exhibiting” their artwork, and now use it as a portfolio of sorts, a place to which they can direct those interested in their work for professional or creative reasons. They continue to conceptualise and develop other online projects, one of which is a photo-sharing, rating and creative networking portal called Pijin ([www.pijin.net](http://www.pijin.net)). They are both self-employed, and make a living through freelance design and coding work, although they stress that financial uncertainty and difficulty in securing contracts are everyday realities. They live within the at once uncertain and rich-in-potential, post-Apartheid socio-economic milieu, partially cocooned by the slightly insular creative scene in Cape Town (their contemporaries are musicians, photographers, filmmakers and other workers in the creative economy, many of whom share similar lifestyles of a combination of self-employed freelancing and expressive creative work). They admit to having somewhat dreamy, romantic temperaments, and are extremely reflexive about their work, their personal lives and relationships and how they hope to make a difference to the world in which they find themselves. In fact, they express a broad concern with the injustices and inequalities that are part of the fabric of everyday life in South Africa and a belief in the transformative possibilities of artistic practice.

As digital artists, they relate intimately and closely with their chosen tools of expression, working long hours at their computers, Shaun’s “primary tool”, sometimes together, sometimes independently. Maciek describes experiencing a psychological and physiological “hangover” when he “works/plays” too long with his computer, such is the intensity of the experience: “I fear the computer becoming the centre of my life, because my body and most of my senses are not there to share in the processes that happen in the machine. They waste and my mind can become a babble of information (as expressed when you click on the broken computer, the birds are pecking at, in the Boyblack.co.za introduction).” Nevertheless, they exhibit a shared hope in the potential of computer technology to facilitate profound socio-economic change in societies such as South Africa, and consider their work as part of a broader movement towards a more just and democratic society in which enabling computer technologies are broadly available to everyone: the utopia of the digital divide bridged.



My interaction with the artists was, perhaps aptly so in the context of this paper's subject, entirely computer mediated. An e-mail interview was the only data from which I was able to build this portrait – which is very much, therefore, a portrait of BoyBlack the artist duo rather than Shaun and Maciek as individual artists. Although both answered my interview questions separately (Maciek in much more extensive detail than Shaun, as will be evident by citations to follow), I nevertheless got the sense that many of their views overlap and are in harmony, to the extent that in my mind, their individual identities are subsumed by their collective artistic identity. This, of course, is also an interpretive result of the collective identity that they project through their artworks.

#### **4 The Artwork<sup>6</sup>**

I came to the BoyBlack website through word of mouth, and, in the purely subjective sense that characterises all art appreciation, found it beautiful and worthy of deeper analysis within a theoretical framework. My decision to focus on BoyBlack as a case study for exploring the aesthetically innovative nature of interactive online art was empirically confirmed by BoyBlack's own views on their work as revealed through the interview conducted with them.

Although they do not necessarily call themselves artists, I gained the distinct impression that BoyBlack work with a kind of artistic integrity that differentiates them from the legions of corporate-commissioned graphic designers that dominate visual expression on the internet. Of course, as an appreciative viewer, I had already formed the subjective opinion that BoyBlack.co.za was an artwork and its creators' artists, and I was interested in whether they shared my views. The first question that I asked them was whether they were comfortable with me terming their work "art". Throughout the interview, although they displayed some ambivalence, at times preferring the term "design", they did not disallow an interpretation of their work as

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<sup>6</sup> I encourage the reader to spend some time exploring [www.boyblack.co.za](http://www.boyblack.co.za), so as to experience the artwork first hand and to put into perspective my description and interpretation. This is especially recommended if you wish to avoid having your viewing experience either ruined or directed by mine.

art. Shaun explains, "...design is not art, and neither is engineering, but they both produce art as a by-product when played with." Maciek starts by saying, "I think we have made some art, but we mostly design," but later explains, "Works, such as BoyBlack, talk to people on quite an abstract level. Inspiring and hopeful, they do not ask viewers to do anything specific, but just to intuitively feel their way around. So... on these levels I guess that certain of our projects could be described as art."

They also make it clear that BoyBlack was made for the internet alone, and that the entire artwork was conceived of as an online project. Maciek says unequivocally, "Absolutely, boyblack.co.za was never going to exist anywhere but the web. The works are bound, firstly, by technology; they were created with the fundamental purpose of *expressing* [sic] through available technologies." The site was designed both for the web and in order to address the web as a topic. As an exhibition space, BoyBlack see the internet as providing them with unique, affordable and accessible opportunities for creative expression. This is particularly the case in terms of the interactivity latent within the internet. Shaun explains, "With BoyBlack we were exploring very simple (and old) ideas of web interactivity (i.e., we designed the elements, and the viewers could play around with those elements in a relatively freestyle manner)." According to the artists themselves, then, their work can be considered "interactive online artwork", which clears the way for a description and interpretive analysis.

## **Access control**

BoyBlack requires a demonstration of commitment from the viewer before full access to the artwork is shared. This takes the form of three click-through "enter" screens. The second masquerades as a "home page" website, complete with amateurish graphics, party snapshots and an emotive "dedication". A viewer looking for "art" might be put off by the crude visuals, and leave, but clicking "enter" results in a realignment of the webpage into a scene of a silhouetted boy sitting between broken computers, birds pecking at the exposed wires. With a lack of obvious buttons to click to progress, the viewer is forced to explore by mousing over the images, one of which changes to indicate a click-through option, which leads to the actual BoyBlack

world, again delayed (or introduced) with an almost jarring animation that suggests a turbulent flight through buildings (or close-ups of computer chips?) in a digital city. Then, a question: “Do you want to see?” Choosing “no” closes the browser, choosing “yes” leads to another animation, before opening up into a largely empty scene, with an offer of instructions, before a pixellated backdrop appears, populated by tiny flashing squares.

This many-layered approach towards entering the space within which the artwork is hosted is itself an aesthetic statement. Antithetical to the standard efforts of maximum accessibility and ease of use in website design (for example Shneiderman, 1997) in that it forces a level of commitment and effort from the very beginning of the experience, it imposes the idea of interactivity. The viewer cannot simply see the art, she almost has to show that she wants to see it by demonstrating that she can find it. A random user routed from a search engine is less likely to have the patience to get through these various forms of access control because they do not know what they are going to get; but users who were referred by word of mouth to the website, as I was initially, have some idea that what lies beyond the faux home page will be aesthetically worthwhile and visually stimulating, and will be prepared to demonstrate their commitment in order to earn their ticket in to the “exhibition”. On another level, this can be seen as an artistic need for reassurance that the viewer is interested, and conversely, a reasonable guarantee for the artist that only interested people will visit. The access control filters viewers, in the way that a guest list might do at a gallery opening, and questions the notion of the accessibility of the internet as an expressive medium.

By the reference to “home page” websites, it may be that BoyBlack also wished to differentiate themselves from amateurish user-generated content and signal that their work is not part of the communicative and expressive chaff characteristic of various Web 2.0 spaces or chat rooms. Although Maciek claims to be excited by the new accessibility of web-enabled technologies and spaces, and believes that this has enabled a growth in creativity because “the steps required to making a mark or sound, laying down a thought are requiring of less and less commitment and energy,” the access control displayed by BoyBlack suggests that they still believe there is value in commitment to the hard work of creative expression. BoyBlack projects this

on to the viewer, requiring them to demonstrate commitment in order to earn the right to view their hard (art)work.

## **Interactivity**

Once inside the exhibition space, the viewer must again explore, and will discover that clicking on each of the tiny squares will open up a separate interactive artwork. One, for example, called “Let’s Exercise” pops up a flock of miniature aerobics dancers who move in time to tinny dance music. When the viewer mouses over one of the dancers, it jumps and whoops. Another, “Patrice and Kevin” shows a small (white) boy and his (black) nanny. The little boy takes toys from his playbox and scatters them all over the screen; the nanny patiently cleans up after him, putting the toys back in their box. “Faces” shows a series of portraits, which the viewer can cycle through by clicking. Another, “RoseGirl” introduces an enigmatic figure, who glides closer if the user picks up a rose lying off to the side and drags it into the girl’s hands. “Doodle” allows the user to do just that by picking up a pixel-pencil. “Spores” starts with a single flower that pops, then wilts and releases spores that reproduce across the space, while “Feral Cat” shows a disjointed portrait of a wild tabby. “Let me” allows a chaotic black line to jaggedly fill up the screen – the viewer must intervene to stop it and restore order. “..” shows a telescopic view onto a girl with her hair blowing in the wind, when clicked, the view expands to quieten the whole screen, with only the sound of a breeze audible.

As the user navigates from artwork to artwork, a “map” of her movements is visualised with a line that joins the flashing squares in the order in which they were visited. The user can choose to allow the artworks to remain open, in layers upon the screen, or can close (and reopen) a selection of them at any point. In this sense, each viewer creates her own version of the BoyBlack site, exhibiting a different combination of artworks viewed and the order in which they are viewed. Maciek calls this “pseudo-unique”: “Once you are in the site-proper, you are faced with this empty canvas, unsure of its extents or purpose. You then populate it with various little explorations of life. The order in which you explore is not pre-defined, so your choices lead to differing compositions of sight and sound.” In this sense, the artwork seems to be seeking a personal connection with each viewer. This links directly with

Maciek's imagined viewers, who will view BoyBlack.co.za alone at their personal computers, at home, "in private, quiet, where some of these messages can touch your personal/hidden experience of love and life. ... It will make you smile at least once." Maciek visualizes a technologically mediated, yet phenomenologically direct, artistic link between the image of himself, alone at his computer creating the artwork, and the image of his viewer, alone at her computer viewing the artwork, where only two screens and fibre optic cable separates their eyes and hearts. This dream of aesthetic and pseudo-personal interaction is poignant, and is related to Maciek's view of interactivity as a way of offering a degree of aesthetic agency, with "viewers making choices and directly controlling their experiences."

### **Beyond 4:3 – Renegotiating browser space**

The viewer will also notice that the space that the artworks inhabit is larger than the screen itself, suggesting a framed and restricted view into a world that is larger than the standard 4:3 computer screen is able to contain. To see further than the limits of the computer screen, the viewer can navigate by mousing over the edges of the screen, with the view moving in the corresponding direction to allow the viewer to see further. The suggestion here is that everything that is visually mediated is *framed*, and that some things exist outside the frame of vision. Furthermore, it illustrates the aesthetic limitations of the computer screen and, by extension, all computer technology. Maciek explains, "The whole style of the site would not have existed were it not for the relationship between bandwidth/processor/software restrictions and our want to re-perceive those restrictions. We were constantly saying things like, 'But why does the site have to fit into a browser window... how can we make more space?'" By refusing to follow this custom of web design, BoyBlack.co.za redefines certain limitations of the web and reframes the ways in which art is framed in the first place – and therefore the ways in which viewers can interact therewith.

## **Pixel art**

Early computer aesthetics were heavily dependant on the pixel as a building block to creating images. Eighties era games such as Pac Man and Tetris perhaps best personify this aesthetic – and despite a movement towards simulated Second Life-style three-dimensional online environments which deemphasize the pixel, work such as BoyBlack.co.za reemphasizes it as an expressive tool. BoyBlack has managed to wield the pixel, like many computer game designers, to represent very complex and engaging images. Maciek describes their aesthetic as “freestyle pixel art”, which on one level, celebrates “the pixel as the foundation of computer graphics and, in fact, the foundation of computing...” and on another level seeks to redefine its limitations by introducing a freer, messier form, which does not attempt to present smooth, perfect, Disney-like, television cartoon-style images and which has “stray pixels floating around.” By manipulating “very small grids of lights, on or off, one or zero,” as Maciek explains, BoyBlack experiment aesthetically and technologically at the same time, by purposefully using low-tech aesthetics in highly innovative ways and by making the very subject of their artworks technology itself (as in the opening sequence featuring the broken computer).

## **RGB, yeah!<sup>7</sup>**

Another key feature of the artwork is the celebration of the RGB (Red, Green, Blue) colour palette which is used for any colour representations on screens, including televisions and computer monitors. The alternative colour palette, CMYK (Cyan, Magenta, Yellow, Black) is related to pigments used in printing by graphic designers and artists who seek to achieve the most accurate colour reproduction possible in their prints and photographs. BoyBlack cite RGB colour as one of the primary attractions to the web as a medium. Maciek explains, “You only get that quality of RGB on a computer screen...!!! [sic] No print or paint can match the luminescence that a computer monitor adds to an acid or fluorescent colour.” That the colours are not related to real world tinctures but to digital code which achieves a further

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<sup>7</sup> Maciek: “As a medium, the web offers many exciting and new possibilities that exist in few other places: interactivity, animation, animated interactivity, RGB colours (yeah!) and user-created content.”

dimension through the electronic backlighting of the screen, suggests that BoyBlack seek to use the shapes (pixels) and colours (RGB) that are unique to the screen to express themselves. In turn, this suggests a complete immersion in technology as expressive tool. The luminescence to which Maciek refers can be understood on a literal level, as the light from the computer monitor which enlivens the artworks and on a metaphorical level as the animation of their artistic expressions with the “spirit” of technology.

## **5 The Postmodern Aesthetic Continuum**

Although aesthetic theory cannot be conflated with art practice and analysis, it can provide useful frameworks for seeking to understand how interactive online art could fit into broader cultural movements of contemporary life. Interactive online art is a fruitful empirical site upon which to explore various notions of aesthetics related to the position of art in contemporary innovation-driven, postmodern society. Where does interactive online art such as BoyBlack.co.za, with its unique framing within the screen, and its unique engagement of the art viewer, fit within the continuum of postmodern aesthetics? How are content and structure negotiated technologically for aesthetic ends and where can meaning be found? In order to begin to approach these questions, it is useful to contextualize BoyBlack.co.za within a theoretical framework: the postmodern aesthetic continuum.

The aesthetic is a concept that has been described as “vague, variable and contested” (Shusterman, 2006: 217). It is commonly agreed to refer to the analytical system related to philosophies and theories of art and beauty. It is also fundamental to philosophies related to the search for meaning in the relationship between (seeing) subject and (viewed) object, that is, between human subjectivity and sensual, mediated experiences of the surrounding world. As Shusterman noted, there are many competing, often contradictory, notions of the aesthetic within the continuum of postmodern theory; some of these are related to art, others less so. Although the terms “aesthetic” and “art” should not be considered interchangeable and great gulfs could be said to exist between the practice of art-making and aesthetic theorising,

conceptual and empirical overlaps can also be identified and fruitfully explored. In the context of contemporary art, various opposing viewpoints on the rootedness (or not) of the aesthetic in the social can be looked at as representing alternative ends of a many-layered theoretical continuum, with empirical art-making realities being situated somewhere between each end and each layer, encompassing elements of each position in dynamic tension with one another. Each end of the continuum leans towards opposing definitions of the postmodern, which Agger (1990) describes as a chasm between “critical” and “cosmopolitan” postmodernisms. The former sees the postmodern as a continuation of the social, cultural, political and economic structures of industrial capitalism, in other words, as late modernity; the latter sees the postmodern as a break from and subversion of industrial modernity and the beginning of multi-cultured, liberating globalism. The former understands the prefix “post” to mean, “extended”; the latter understands it to mean “subverted”. The former would see postmodernity as implying the expansion and consolidation of modernist aesthetic power structures, the latter would see it as subverting and dissolving those structures. As different as these approaches seem, of course, they both rely on defining themselves in relationship to modernity, and hence both represent the acknowledgement of a movement there from.

In what follows, I would not wish to suggest that the vast body of postmodern aesthetic theory that exists can be simplified and distilled into simplistic binary-oppositions. Nor do I wish to appear to condone what may appear to be a fruitless theoretic enmity. I find it more helpful to consider the contradictions within postmodern aesthetic theory not as irreconcilable disagreements, mutually cancelling concepts or epistemological dead-ends, but as elastic relationships and fertile spaces, which may allow the nature of art, art-making and art-viewing to be explored and redefined, so as to seek meaning in works such as BoyBlack.co.za. Binary oppositions are enriching rather than eliminating. Because the aim here is to understand how interactive online artworks may move aesthetic theory and practice in certain directions, it is useful to have some idea of what those directions might be before mapping movements towards or away from them. I highlight four “layers” of this continuum of postmodern aesthetics so as to suggest a model for thinking about interactive online art in general and the BoyBlack case.



## **Ideological – Hyperreal**

On the one hand, the aesthetic can be seen as ideological; a mode of mediating specific power structures and the interests of normative moral systems. According to some theorists, this makes the aesthetic politically and socially imbricated; an ideological construct that must be addressed critically (Eagleton, 1990). On the other hand, the aesthetic can be seen in the Kantian sense (as per Eagleton's discussion of the "Kantian Imaginary", 1990), as that one realm of human life where power is not at stake; where all that exists is art for art's sake and experiences of objective sensory beauty float free of responsibility. According to some postmodern theorists, the aesthetic is a free-floating system that is independent of social realities, and which is constructed entirely of images, which reflect and construct one another ad infinitum, displacing the real world with a hyperreal world of self-reproducing images and thereby bypassing the political altogether (Baudrillard, 1983, 1988). The ideological approach necessitates a critical interrogation of aesthetics as representative of power structures and unequal distribution of resources, whereas the hyperreal approach is partly nihilist, seeing aestheticism as lost in a "wilderness of mirrors" (Eagleton, 1990: 374), reflecting and representing nothing but the act of representation itself.

## **Pessimistic – Optimistic**

Related to the hyperreal-ideological continuum is what Chouliaraki (2006) terms an opposition between pessimistic and optimistic postmodern aesthetics. The former, or "post-aesthetics", maintains that surface appearance, or form, has become divorced from content, or meaning (Chouliaraki, 2006: 50). Post-aesthetics is radical in the sense that meaning is not necessarily sought, and if it is, connections with social, political or cultural contexts are not considered relevant. It is pessimistic in that those supporting this view do not think that social/cultural/political change is possible or necessary and see aesthetic practice as solipsistic, often purposeless, and form and content as connected neither to one another nor to their contexts. The latter, or "reflexive aesthetics" seeks to reconnect what is seen as a false rupture (Chouliaraki,

2006: 53) between form and content. It seeks to re-locate the political and re-route meaning into artistic practice and the environments that enable experience. It locates aesthetic practice firmly within ethical contexts and is optimistic in the sense that it sees art as seeking to contribute to social/cultural/political change and seeks significance through expression, encouraging a new “age of mediation” where infinitely new “variations in meaning-making” become aesthetically possible (Chouliaraki, 2006: 53).

### **Solid – Liquid**

In theorising the transition away from classic modernity, Bauman (2000, 2007) has suggested that notions of postmodernity be replaced with those of “liquid modernity” and flow, because “in ... a kaleidoscope of constant change... there is no centre around which things could condense, solidify and settle” (Bauman, 2007: 122). Modernity, according to Bauman, is signified by a reliance on all things solid and rooted, whilst liquid modernity thrives on exactly the opposite and is negotiated through a lack of attachment to structures and permanence. Economically, this is represented by the transition from “heavy capitalism”, a Fordist style industrial economy to “light capitalism”, a globalised, distributed, informational economy that relies on cross border finance flows (Bauman, 2000: 55-59). Aesthetically, this is represented by, according to Bauman, a loss of “true” art. In a technologically mediated, hyper-aestheticised world that insists on constant innovation, change, and progress, notions of “beauty” and “art” are threatened and become dispensable, consumable and in crisis, such that we have a situation where we have “aesthetics saturating the world in which we live, but no object of art, no works of art” (Bauman, 2007: 125). This is a deeply pessimistic proposition – that due to the flattening of aesthetic structures, the democratizing accessibility of art-making tools, the explosion of visual culture and mediation, the increasingly temporary and fluid nature of representation, and the appropriation of artfulness by commerce (such as in the industrialization of culture as per Adorno & Horkheimer 1947, and mass production as per Benjamin 1936, and in advertising, as per Ewen 1976), there is no longer such a thing as the “true” artwork. Liquid art therefore, suggests the impossibility of aesthetic meaningfulness in the postmodern situation, whereas for Bauman perhaps,

one of the redeeming qualities of modernity was the more solid, reliable, unchangeable (and elite?) nature of its artworks.

### **Calculation – Simulation**

Turkle refers to a movement from a modernist aesthetic of “calculation” to a postmodernist aesthetic of “simulation” (1996: 20), the former drawing on aesthetic structures that value structure, logic and rationality, the latter valuing instead the qualities of the simulacrum (Baudrillard, 1983) and centering on the detached, floating, “surface” qualities of representation. In the specific context of computing interfaces, Turkle describes how the look and feel of software interactivity evolved from DOS-style user command functionality to the now ubiquitous graphic user interface, which in many ways mimics the “real world”. The change from C:/command typing to clicking on a representational icon or button to open a programme; from word processing represented as white type on an endless black space to those that simulate the typewriter and paper page (and now even those that can translate the actual act of hand writing into type); and the emergence of floating windows that allow the user to multitask in numerous layers, all represent a movement towards a simulated rather than calculated computational interaction (Turkle, 1996). The detachment of representation from the thing being represented (in the case of computing the actual code and hardware behind the interface), once again raises implications for postmodern aesthetics related to the connectedness (or not) of what is being represented and the implications for meaning-making therein.

## **6 BoyBlack.co.za and the Postmodern Aesthetic Continuum**

How can we make sense of BoyBlack.co.za in the context of the continuum of postmodern aesthetics and vice versa? It is, of course, impossible to define the artists or artwork as either/or ideological/hyperreal, pessimistic/optimistic, solid/liquid or calculated/simulated. The points that I wish to highlight are related to the aesthetic innovation of the interactive online artwork and can be grouped under three broad

areas that should be considered elastic, interdependent and overlapping: form, content, and context.

## **Form**

The BoyBlack website is an example of a technologically enabled innovation in art-showing. Through their aesthetic vision and choices that are mediated through the technologies that they use, BoyBlack comment upon the expressive possibilities of the internet. By redefining normative web frameworks for viewing information and art through their treatment of the space of their browser window, they provide an innovative way through which their art can be viewed which is not constrained by the normative 4:3 ratio. Furthermore, they empower themselves as artists through self-exhibiting, on their own terms, at their own convenience and in complete control of access and framing (as opposed to the mediating role of gallerists and curators in the exhibition of offline artwork). In these ways, it could be argued that interactive online art innovates art-showing.

Furthermore, the site innovates art-viewing. In the use of “access control” and the solicitation of interactivity – “Do you want to see?” Are you sure? – they engage more closely with a potentially smaller audience (effectively choosing quality over quantity in their relationships with viewers). The structure of this approach suggests a devotion to their practice of art-making and the viewers’ aesthetic experience – contrary to Bauman’s suggestion that no art in the “liquid modern” world is able to demonstrate anything quite so solid as a commitment to the audience’s aesthetic experience. BoyBlack’s hope that their users will engage with their work in private, intimate ways, demonstrates how deep they consider their stake to be in the works that they have produced. The work is “liquid”, or as Maciek says, “semi-permanent” in the sense that it will only exist as long as they can pay their hosting fees and is only available to those with internet access. It is global in the sense that “it can be accessed from anywhere in the world (anywhere that’s wired, that is...)” (Maciek) yet is subject to the semi-permanence and reinterpretation of anything posted online which Maciek celebrates: “Personally, I like the disposability of web art and the very new way in which people view it. You can copy it, send it, steal it, hack it, link it, go

somewhere else etc. You cannot get too protective over your work.” However, it is “solid” in the sense that it shows profound emotional, intellectual and artistic investment in the artworks themselves and in their viewers.

## **Content**

In Chouliaraki’s terms, BoyBlack could be described as reflexive artists, who seek to reconnect the “rupture” between form and content, assigning equal priority to both. The result is an holistic aesthetic experience in which meaning is transposed across both structure and substance. For many of the sub-artworks contained within the site, structural interactivity is related to meaning, but the subject matter is independently meaningful too. The artists engage topics beyond a merely reflexive exploration of their medium. For example, “Let’s exercise” could be seen as a commentary on mediated fitness, exercise videos, and the production line of gyms, where women seek to achieve Jane Fonda-style looks. “Real men” (showing a cycle of male figures in various postures, including the feminized role of a dancer) could be read as a commentary on masculinity and the social roles of men. From this perspective, the interactive online artwork can be subjectively and heuristically analysed and interpreted just like any other artwork – making the aesthetic experience quite traditional but for its technologically-enabled consumption context.

It should also be acknowledged that a large degree of “content” is a reflexive creative examination of the technologically mediated medium in which the artists work. This is perhaps best engaged with in the opening animation, as well as in the treatment of the sub-artworks throughout the site. The “freestyle pixel art” aesthetic can be read as a celebration of digitally mediated computer art which is ambiguously both calculated and simulated. In the sense in which it centres the pixel in the expressive process, BoyBlack.co.za is calculated in that it is aware of and representing the background code that is generating the images. Yet in the sense in which BoyBlack.co.za immerses itself entirely in the digital world, it could be described as entirely hyperreal, self-referential in the sense that it attempts to comment on almost the entire history of computing graphics. As both a manifestation of technological expression and an examination of technology as medium, BoyBlack.co.za is so

turned-in on technology as both structure and topic that connections to contexts beyond the screen are difficult to locate.

## **Context**

Yet the artists discuss their socio-economic and cultural environments as a major source of expressive inspiration. It could be argued that their artwork is partly ideological in that it is based on a “liberating” philosophy of technology. Maciek: “one of the leading concepts in some of our design [is] to somehow use virtual activity to excite real-world activity, if only because it’s so easy to escape into the virtual.” At several other points throughout the interview, Maciek reiterates a vision of technologically facilitated social change and a view that art can form a part of this. With such an ideology underlying the work that they produce, it is difficult to categorise it as entirely hyperreal. Some artworks show a high degree of awareness and criticism of the social environment in which they work. From the portrait of “Gaatje”, an “informal car guard”<sup>8</sup> amidst the portraits of peers and friends, to the commentary on the status of black domestic workers in suburban homes (historically one of the most exploited informal work forces in South Africa) in “Patrice and Kevin”, elements of BoyBlack.co.za show an engagement with the socio-economic context from which their art emerges, rather than pure techno-artistic solipsism. In this sense BoyBlack show a partly ideological approach to aesthetics and (mildly) criticize power structures in visual ways, although other artworks within the site represent a more detached and free-floating imperative, focussing more on personal and emotional issues (such as “By Our Sides” and “Bad Day”).

Finally, it is important to situate the aesthetic-technological choices of the artists within a broader socio-economic context. Through their ethical decision to create interactive online artworks, BoyBlack perform their opinions on their socio-economic contexts. Deeply aware of the “digital divide”, they enact their creative abilities technologically, rather than in any other way, in order to contribute to a hoped-for

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<sup>8</sup> Someone who works watching parked cars in exchange for a tip, usually their only form of income, upon the driver’s return, and considered by many as a form of begging. This work typically indicates an extreme level of poverty in the individual car guarding, and also illustrates the high levels of unemployment in South Africa.

broader movement towards technologically enabled social development. Their art can therefore be seen as a kind of action in itself, purposefully distanced from the well-worn grooves of gallery circuits and the artistic economy, representing an alternative set of aesthetic choices.

## 7 Conclusion

How is interactive online art meaningful? Where does its innovation lie?

When I asked BoyBlack why they make the art that they do, one of Maciek's responses was, "Because the pixels are so beautiful." The transition of pixels from technological elements to artistic ones is poignant. To be sure, they have always played a central technical role in visual mediation in the history of computing, many results of which could certainly be defined as artistic. But it seems that the pixel has re-emerged as an abstract interpretive tool put to use through artistic talent in order to create emotive objects of beauty, shot through with reflexivity, introspectivity, outrospectivity, and most importantly, latent with potential and realised *interactivity*. If practitioners recognise the potential beauty of digital elements in order to create artworks that viewers can not only look at, but engage with and view on their own terms (manifestly rather than merely conceptually or interpretively), it may fall to researchers and theorists to recognise the aesthetic place of interactive digital web art and theorise and research the place of "beautiful pixels"<sup>9</sup> within broader visually mediated postmodern society.

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<sup>9</sup> Other examples of "beautiful pixels", or interactive online art, are some of the works exhibited at [www.yugop.com](http://www.yugop.com) and [www.thomastraum.com](http://www.thomastraum.com)

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