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### Database aesthetics : art in the age of information overflow

Vesna V. (ed), Univ Of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, MN, 2007. 336 pp. Type: Book (9780816641192)

Date Reviewed: Oct 26 2009



Computer programming has had a long association with art--consider Knuth's seminal work [1]. Computer scientists often make claims about the beauty of their programs and the relation of their work to other fields, particularly architecture and design. This book approaches the subject from the opposite direction. It is a collection of essays from artists who want to explore the artistic potential of the computer and, in particular, the database.

Computer scientists are well aware of how a database can assist humans. According to this book, however, databases are also harbingers of a new aesthetic that may define the twenty-first century. While the predominant aesthetic of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries was the linear narrative, where the artist essentially wishes to convey a story with a beginning, middle, and end, the database offers the opportunity to reuse our source material at will, disregarding any notion of a linear sequence of events. This new database aesthetic is also liberating in another sense: database works of art are interactive computer programs, meaning the work of art is co-created by the user, by interacting with the program. Database art also makes us aware of how much information about ourselves is being stored in databases, without our knowledge.

In this volume, West Coast artists and art theorists explore these ideas. At its best, this is a thought-provoking exposition. Chapter 7, "Recombinant Poetics and Related Database Aesthetics," exemplifies its worst:

The database aesthetic puts the poetic nature of composition, media configuration, sequence, media 'distribution,' and differing qualities of articulation in line (and/or in virtual time|space when we consider virtual space) with the constraint-based nature of combinatorics. Modular media-elements and/or processes are designated and/or addressed via code-enabling alternate subsections of code to become functional through a particular structural set of operative strategies that link digital potentials with multimodal digital phenomena.

At such times, Wiles' proof of Fermat's last theorem might be an easier read [2].

The works of database art pose a different problem: some seem accessible and some seem esoteric. In the end, though, they are all computer programs. Code may never age, but user interfaces do. To take a trip down memory lane, read some database art project descriptions. It is a pity that the contributors do not dwell on this: while art is usually thought to have a timeless dimension, their artworks appear to be perishable goods.

Reviewer: [Panagiotis Louridas](#)

Review #: CR137410 (1008-0761)

- 1) Knuth, D.E. *The art of computer programming (3 vols)*. Addison-Wesley Pub. Co., Reading, MA, 1968-1973.
- 2) Wiles, A.J.; , Modular elliptic curves and Fermat's last theorem. *Annals of Mathematics* 141, (1995), 443-551.

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