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Agrippa: Standard and Non-Standard Uses of the Digital

Agrippa is a project that refused to subscribe to traditional notions of text, electronic media, mechanical reproduction and the digital network. Generally, it challenged the notion of permanence. The digital network is comprised of bits, not atoms, and this makes physical space and memory obsolete as digital objects and texts can be preserved without the threat of physical decay. However, *Agrippa* posits that even the digital cannot be viewed as permanent, and with the self-destructive nature of a scrolling text, Gibson challenged society to preserve what was inevitably going to become obsolete without intervention. By exposing this negative space of the digital, Gibson raised questions of authenticity.

In this paper, I will examine the different components of the project and what it aimed to accomplish conceptually; I will argue that Gibson used the digital network and the computer in a non-standard way. Furthermore, I will study how art has a special function in challenging standard objects, and how this function is related to authenticity.

The Project

Agrippa: Book of the Dead is anything but a book, and, it is hardly dead. *Agrippa* is a piece of conceptual art created by writer William Gibson, artist Dennis Ashbaugh and publisher Kevin Begos Jr. In 1992, publication of the work was announced, and the *New York Times* described it as such:

16-by-21 1/2-inch metal mesh case sheathed in Kevlar, the polymer that bulletproof vests are made of. Sheltered inside the case is a book of 93 rag-paper pages bound in singed and stained linen that appears to have survived a fire. The last 60 pages have been fused together to form a block; cut into the block is a four-inch square niche that holds a computer disk; encrypted on this disk is the text of “*Agrippa (A Book of the Dead)*,” a short story by Mr. Gibson. The encryption process entails a computer “virus” programmed by a team of anonymous hackers. Because of the virus, the story cannot be viewed normally on a computer screen or printed out at will. The first time the disk is inserted in a computer, the words of the story begin scrolling up the screen at a preset speed as if the computer and not the reader were scanning the text. This first “reading” is also the last. As the sentences scroll by, the virus is silently corrupting all the data on the disk. When the last word vanishes from the screen, the disk is no longer usable (Jonas).

The *New York Times* was a bit off in their description of the art project: For example, the short story was actually a poem. The article gets a few things right, however; it goes on to say that the first 32 pages of the rag paper contained sequences of the letters G, A, T and C, representing DNA sequencing. Also, the article states that seven pages of the book included copperplate etchings by Ashbaugh, which were images inspired by gene scans: Six of the etchings were overprinted with early 20th century advertisements for certain household items and “gadgets” like telephone and cameras. The NYT cites that only 95 copies of *Agrippa* “deluxe” version were printed, and that each copy cost \$2,000 – a smaller version was said to have been printed with some variations and a smaller price tag (Jonas).

The poem, which is now hosted on Gibson’s personal website, is a picaresque account of different images one might find flipping through an old scrapbook or photo album. Gibson said *Agrippa* was the name of the particular model of Eastman Kodak photograph album that his father kept snapshots in (Gibson, *An Introduction*). The opening of the poem reads:

I hesitated
before untying the bow
that bound this book together.

A black book:
ALBUMS CA. AGRIPPA
Order Extra Leaves By Letter and Name

A Kodak album of time-burned
black construction paper. (Gibson, Agrippa)

The poem is essentially about remembering Gibson's father and even Gibson's own childhood. He meditates on the memories of his father made possible by the "mechanism," or this case, the camera. The central conflict of the poem is between disappearance and timelessness contained in the picture (enabled through the mechanism):

The mechanism: stamped black tin,
Leatherette over cardboard, bits of boxwood,
A lens
The shutter falls
Forever
Dividing that from this. (Gibson, Agrippa)

On December 9, 1992 at The Kitchen, an art gallery in New York City, a public reading of the poem and the eventual "hacking" of that event became known as "the transmission." The reading was live broadcast to other galleries and locations in different cities. The disk that was being read from, that contained the text, was programmed the same as the others – to erase itself after a single use (Kirschenbaum 130).

The day after the reading, someone had posted a copy of the poem on the electronic bulletin board known as MindVox. The text became viral and jumped to FTP servers and email accounts, including USENET and listserv email. A pirate who called himself "Templar" took credit for the hack (Kirschenbaum 130). The theory of how this

happened is that a group of NYU students at the reading made a videotape of the scrolling screen as the text was displayed on a projection screen. The students are said to have then transcribed the poem and uploaded it to Mindvox – one of these students being Templar (Kirschenbaum 131). The original post by Templar:

When I first heard about an electronic book by William Gibson... sealed in an ominous tome of genetic code which smudges to the touch... which is encrypted and automatically self-destructs after one reading... priced at \$1,500... I knew that it was a challenge, or dare, that would not go unnoticed. As recent buzzing on the Internet shows, as well as many overt attempts to hack the file... and the transmission lines... it's the latest golden fleece, if you will, of the hacking community.

I now present to you, with apologies to William Gibson, the full text of AGRIPPA. It, of course, does not include the wonderful etchings, and I highly recommend purchasing the original book (a cheaper version is now available for \$500). Enjoy. (Kirschenbaum)

After the hack, the academic community has tried to decipher and explain *Agrippa*. One such academic endeavor is the Agrippa Files. The Agrippa Files were made by a team of researchers participating in the Transcriptions Project on literature and information culture at the University of California, Santa Barbara, English Department. The team has archived all materials relevant to and associated with *Agrippa*.

Non-Standard Use and Authenticity

Kim Knight in *Media Epidemics* draws on Matthew Fuller in *Media Ecologies to* describe the standard object as a “result of processes of abstraction that reduce the chaos of heterogenic existence into ‘clear cut definite things with clear cut definite relations’” (Knight 18). Knight illustrates the standard uses of a VCR: “I identify the VHS tape as a standard object defined as an apparatus of production (records content), transmission (is portable), and reproduction (facilitates copying)” (Knight 18).

Gibson created a project that was subversive to the standard operation of the digital network. In *Everything is Miscellaneous*, David Weinberger says that the fundamental characteristic of the digital world, and how it differs from the physical world is that “[i]nstead of atoms that take up room, it’s made of bits” (Weinberger 6). Danah Boyd in *Social Network Sites as Networked Publics: Affordances, Dynamics, and Implications* agrees with this standard definition of the digital network. She says, “bits are easier to store, distribute, and search than atoms” (Boyd 46). She goes on to list the four main “affordances” that emerge from the properties of bits:

Persistence: Online expressions are automatically recorded and archived.
 Replicability: Content made out of bits can be duplicated.
 Scalability The potential visibility of content in networked publics is great.
 Searchability: Content in networked publics can be accessed through search.
 (Boyd 46)

Gibson’s self-deleting poem challenged the affordances given by Boyd: The text of the poem was not “automatically recorded and archived,” rather, it was automatically destroyed.

In *Digital Contagions* Jussi Parikka describes the advent of hacking and viruses. He says that the rise of the digital network is similar to the rise of a city, and that the complex nature of any structure that depends on interconnectedness like the city, the body, the brain, the church, the state, brings with it inevitable negative side effects. Gibson explored this negative space that allows viruses to challenge the standard practices of the digital network.

Knight says that “[t]he viral structure becomes visible and subject to mapping when it deviates from the operations of the standard object” (Knight 18). Because Gibson used non-standard practices to deliver his digital project, hackers like Templar had to re-

standardize the object to ensure its existence. This is an interesting tug-of-war between author and hacker: one side sentences the art to obscurity and the other tries to save it – and both sides are using the same instrument. The non-standard use of the digital by Gibson, as he explores the negative space, is seen in direct contrast to the standard uses of the digital, which, paradoxically, the hacker employs.

Beside challenging standardization in the digital realm, *Agrippa* also challenges the traditional (or standard) means of artistic production in a capitalist society: The project cannot be reproduced more than once, and so the object resists becoming a commodity available for mass consumption. To buy the book for \$2,000 is almost an insult to the consumer: to open the book is to absorb the costs. *The New York Times* articles states: “The challenge for collectors who buy *Agrippa* is how to protect their investment while savoring the object. To read Mr. Gibson's story is to destroy it” (Jonas).

The Frankfurt School of thought argues that “commodity fetishism” dominates how art functions in a capitalist system (Strinati 50). According to Dominic Strinati in *An Introduction to Theories of Popular Culture*, the Frankfurt School argues that Americans “are said to worship the price we pay for the ticket of the concert, rather than the performance itself, because we are victims of commodity fetishism whereby social relations and cultural appreciations are objectified and dominated by money” (Strinati 51). If we examine *Agrippa* through the Frankfurt lens, then we see how the project works against this notion of fetishism. When the buyer of the \$2,000 book consumes the object, the commodity disappears. This contradicts standard ways that visual art viewing and book reading usually occur: Typically, the object can be admired, hung on the wall or the book shelf for all to admire when one chooses. Gibson, however, does not afford the

buyer this luxury. The contents of the project cannot be saved, and the price tag challenges the buyer to pay for something that is not a commodity to be resold, reused, reproduced or admired at will.

The Frankfurt School also argues that art in a capitalist system that art depends on “standardisation,” or “substantial similarities” (Strinati 58). This would require that the way in which the medium of the art is employed is congruent by every artist, even if some “pseudo-individualization” occurs (58). Gibson, however, resists any form of standard uses of any of the mediums he employs, especially the digital, as discussed earlier. Furthermore, Gibson’s challenges to the digital are intentional, and as a piece of art, *Agrippa* succeeds in drawing attention to the negative spaces of the digital when the Internet was still in its infancy. Art, according to Fuller, has this special function in society to challenge and change standardized practices:

A society of standard objects also relies for their invention or development on the mobilization of affordances within them, drives that surpass their limits. One of the underlying themes of this book has been how the compositional dynamics developed in art contexts exceed the art systems that have grown up to instrumentalize and ...delimit them. Art is a compositional dynamic in which the standard object exists only as a cliché. One of the powers of art...is to insist on the possibility of the entirety or any part of life being always reinvented (Fuller 169).

In his art, Gibson begs what permanence in the digital network truly means. He makes the reader, the audience, to re-consider how one is to value art. If it is only for the price tag, then buying into *Agrippa* is a bad investment; if it is for the intrinsic value of experiencing art, then it is a good investment.

An argument might be made that *Agrippa* was unsuccessful in resisting “standardisation,” as the text can now be accessed by simple a Google search, and that the

digital has actually preserved what was meant to become obsolete. It might be true that the text still exists, but the text does not preserve the authenticity of the project. Even though parts of the original project still exist today in archives like the Agrippa Files, thanks somewhat to the initiatives of Templar, they are not the originals. We become aware that the originals are gone, destroyed in their first consumption. Walter Benjamin says in *The Age of Mechanical Reproduction* that “[t]he presence of the original is the prerequisite to the concept of authenticity” (Benjamin). Benjamin says the loss of authenticity of an art object is the same as the loss of the object’s “aura” (Benjamin).

In the text of the poem, we find a divide between disappearance and timelessness. The same conflict of disappearance and preservation is found when trying to re-assemble the project. The idea of losing authenticity after re-assembly is illustrated in Gibson’s later novel *Pattern Recognition*. Today’s existence of the poem *Agrippa* functions the same way as “The Footage” in the later novel: The audience is left piecing together artifacts to interpret the object in both scenarios. Refiguring the artifacts to interpret the whole does not restore the loss of authenticity or aura, or so Knight argues when describing “The Footage” in *Pattern Recognition*:

Rather than transmitting the artist’s meaning, the footage functions as a floating signifier – it is open to multiple, shifting meanings, according to the receiver, and the context. The obscured conditions of production allow the footage to operate as a floating signifier that is propagated successfully among the footagehead subculture, the members of which seek pattern recognition as a way of constructing meaning (Knight Chp. 3 p. 9).

If the remaining pieces of Agrippa that have been assembled together can never give context or full meaning to the whole which the parts represent, then to say standard uses of the digital have “triumphed” over Gibson’s non-standard use is invalid.

In closing, we have reviewed the different components of *Agrippa* and what each aimed to accomplish conceptually. We have seen how Gibson used the digital in a non-standard way, and how art has a special function in challenging standard objects and authenticity. In a society where art too frequently becomes a commodity or fetish, it is important to realize the intentions of this unique project: If Fuller is right in saying that art has a special place to change standard objects, then *Agrippa* is a fine example of how to change existing norms.

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The Project (previously The 7PM Project from 2009 to 2011) is an Australian news-current affairs and talk show television panel program, airing weeknights across Australia on Network 10, produced by Roving Enterprises. The show is hosted by Waleed Aly, Carrie Bickmore and Peter Helliar on weekdays and Lisa Wilkinson, Peter van Onselen and Tommy Little on Sunday with rotating daily guest panellists. Microsoft Project and Microsoft Teams, the power of two. Use Project and Teams to empower collaboration and management of projects, including file sharing, chats, meetings, and more. Work hand in hand without being side by side. Collaborate on projects even when you're on different continents. Enable all team members to update tasks simultaneously so you can get more done together. Stay on track effortlessly. A project is a temporary endeavor undertaken to create a unique product or service. The word project comes from the Latin word projectum from projicere, "to throw something forwards" which in turn comes from pro-, which denotes something that precedes the action of the next part of the word in time (paralleling the Greek πρότερον) and jacere, "to throw". The word "project" thus actually originally meant "something that comes before anything else is done". When the word was initially adopted, it referred to... The Project. 843 646 tykkäystään. 44 979 puhuu tästä. News delivered differently. Näytään lisään sivusta The Project Facebookissa. Kirjautu sisään. tai. Luo uusi tili. Näytään lisään sivusta The Project Facebookissa. Kirjautu sisään. Unohditko kirjautumistilin? The Project: With Jesse Mulligan, Kanoa Lloyd, Jeremy Corbett, Josh Thomson. The Project is a New Zealand current affairs show hosted by Jesse Mulligan, Kanoa Lloyd and Jeremy Corbett with rotating guest panelists. It draws topical and controversial current affairs content as well as comedy from recent news stories.