

Viractuality and Post-Conceptual Art

Joseph Nechvatal

Post-conceptual art is that contemporary art that builds upon the legacy of Conceptual Art, where the concept(s) or idea(s) involved in the work take precedence over traditional aesthetic and material concerns. Post-conceptual art has been traced to the work of Robert Rauschenberg¹, and the intermedia concept employed in the mid-sixties by Fluxus artist Dick Higgins², but is now more often connected to digital art production³, where the computer code sets the conceptual rules for a physical production. I have identified this post-convergent and post-conceptual trend in 1999 as: viractuality.^{4,5}



Joseph Nechvatal, *1% Owns 50% of the World* (2014) 36x36" computer-robotic assisted acrylic on velours. Photo courtesy Galerie Richard Paris/New York

British philosopher and theorist of conceptual art Peter Osborne makes the point that “post-conceptual art is not the name for a particular type of art so much as the historical-ontological condition for the production of contemporary art in general.”⁶ With the increased augmentation of the self via networked electronics, the virtual now co-exists with the actual (thus the term *viractual*)⁷ as the digital links up with the organic. Consequently, the *post-conceptual art object* demonstrates an interlaced sense of artistic viractuality that couples the organic with the technological and the static with the malleable. The post-conceptual art aspect of viractualism is essentially a visual prosthetic then for the meeting of the machinic and the corporal dominion. Circumstances that are not fully historically conditioned yet. Viractual post-conceptual art strives to present in natural light this understanding with depictions of anti-essentiality of the body. Here, human flesh is undone by digital disturbances it cannot contain.

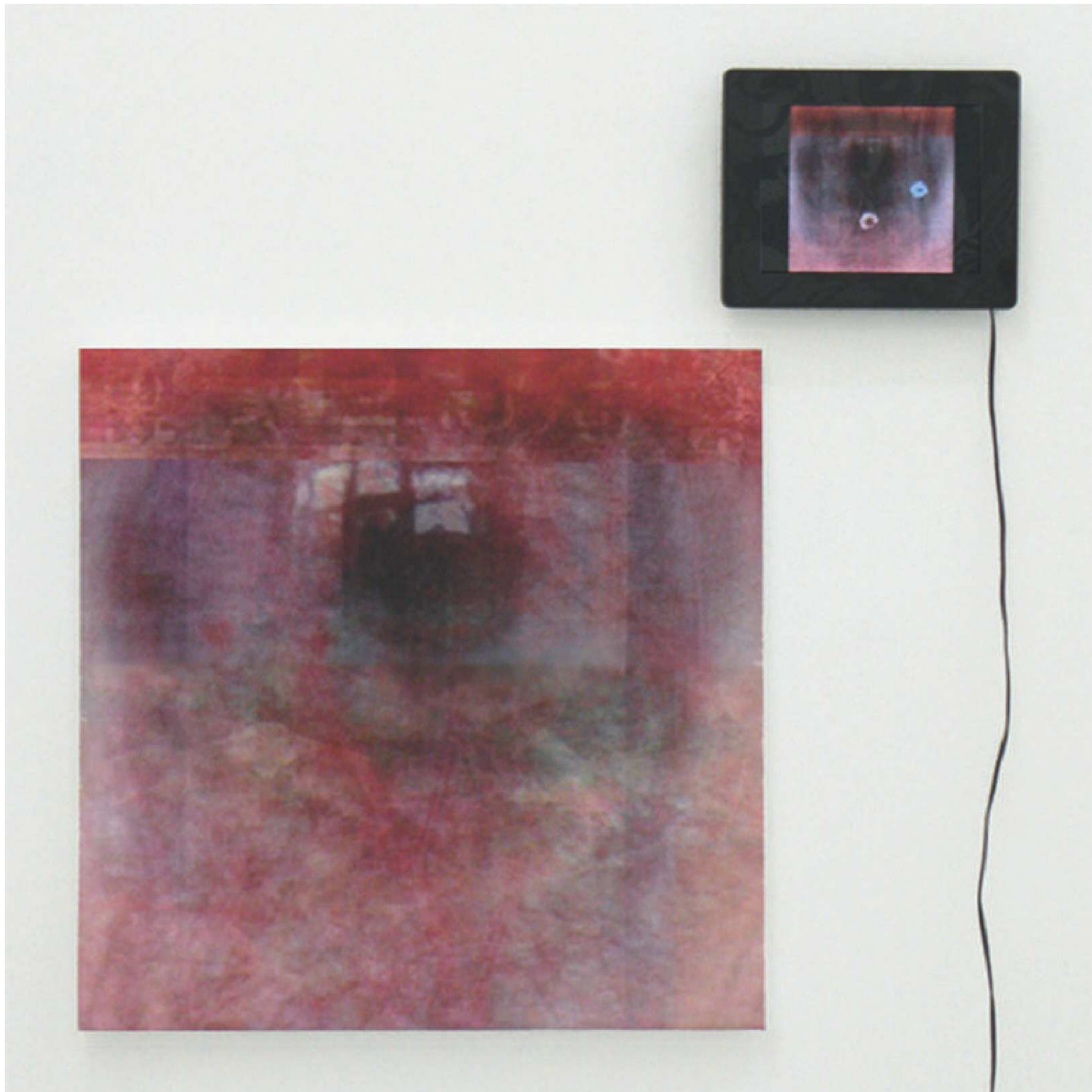
Essentially, the foundation of viractualism as post-conceptual art is that computer technology has become a significant means to making (and understanding) contemporary art. Consequently, with post-conceptual art we are investigating art in its many forms of addressing the merging of the computed (the virtual) with the uncomputed corporeal (the actual). This merging in post-conceptual art is what I call the *post-conceptual viractual*. It begins with the realization that every new technology disrupts previous rhythms of consciousness. For me, the viractual realm is now the authentic domain of art in light of the information age.

Thus, the post-conceptual art object can be further inscribed as a thing of viractual liminality which - according to the anthropologist Arnold van Gennep (based on his anthropological studies of social rites of passage) - is the condition of being on a threshold between spaces. I wish to suggest that the terms viractual (and viractuality) may be concordant conceptions helpful in defining the post-conceptual art object as a third fused inter-spatial place of the arts — forged from the meeting of the virtual and the actual.

Concerning this viractual span of liminality, I am reminded here of two very different, yet complimentary, concepts: *entrainment* and *égréore*. Entrainment, in electro-physics, is the coupling of two or more oscillators as they lock into a commonly sensed interacting frequency. In alchemical terms an *égréore* (an old form of the word *agréger*) is a third concept or phenomenon that is established from conjoining two different elements together. I suggest that the term viractual may be a concordant entrainment/*égréore* conception helpful in defining the post-conceptual art object as a place of third-fused inter-spatiality which is forged from the meeting of the virtual and the actual — a concept close to what the military call *augmented reality*, which is the use of transparent displays worn as see-through glasses on which computer data is projected and layered. The keystone of the post-conceptualness of post-conceptual art is that virtual producing rule-based computer technology has become a significant means for making and understanding contemporary art and that this brings us to a place where one finds the merging of the computed (the virtual) with the uncomputed corporeal (the actual). This blending of computational with the object indicates a subsequent emergence of a new topological cognitive-vision of links between the computed virtual and the uncomputed corporeal world. Digitization is a key metaphor for post-conceptual viractuality in the sense that it is the fundamental translating system today. But I think that in every era the attempt must be made anew to wrest the art tradition away from conformism that is about to overpower it.

The post-conceptual art object recognizes and uses the power of digitization while being culturally aware of the values of monumentality and permanency — qualities that can be found in some powerful analog art. This indicates and initiates communions of the protoplasmic body to virtual spatial conditions. Consequently, the post-conceptual aspect of art articulates a new techno-digital sense of life.

Gender here is viewed as an act of becoming that fails to sustain sex oppression by ceasing to draw the boundaries of the Other. As such it



Joseph Nechvatal, *scOpOphilia* (2009) 19.7x19.7" digital animation screen and computer-robotic assisted acrylic on canvas. Photo courtesy Galerie Richard Paris/New York

is a provocation not only to male/female constructions of heterosexuality, but also to homosexual constructions of identity.

This critique of "representation" in the aesthetic sense is part of a critique of "representation" in the political sense (and vice versa). Art here is seen as political in the sense that it is a site of power struggles which fail to presuppose a metaphysics which is itself a politics – a politics which establishes an order of values which often maintains the dominant order of meaning and power over break-through ideologies. The point is that within viractual creation with post-conceptual art, all signs are subject to

boundless semiosis — which is to say that they are translatable into other signs.

Post-conceptualness is a new sensibility in art respecting the integration of certain aspects of science, technology, myth, consciousness and curiosity that captures the prevailing art spirit of our age. This viractual *zeitgeist* is precisely an autopoietic desiring machine in which everything, everywhere, all at once is connected in a rhizomatic web of communication. Therefore, the post-conceptual art object is no longer content with the regurgitation of a standardized analog repertoire of image-tropes.

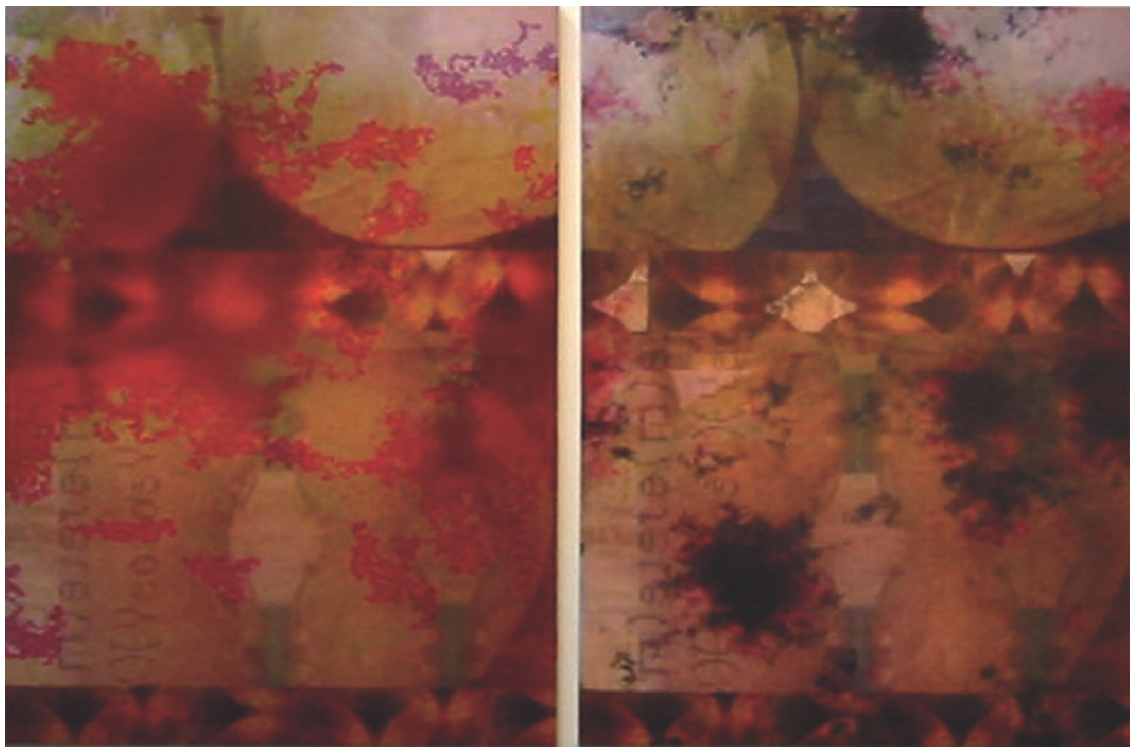
Rather I detect in post-conceptual art a fertile attraction towards the abstractions of advanced scientific discovery — discovery now stripped of its fundamentally reductive logical methodology.

Personally, my guiding avatar into post-conceptual viractualism has been Janus — the two-faced Roman God who faces both directions simultaneously. Janus is similar to the ancient Egyptian God Aker, a two human-headed deity who surveys the western and eastern gates of duat (the underworld). As Janus has eyes on both sides of his head, a Janus-like viractual model would be able to see on every side. Hence he is the symbol for viractual de-habituation, open-mindedness, and for taking an even-handed view, as Janus was able to look backward into the past as well as forward into the future. Moreover he represents a question that has two sides to it.

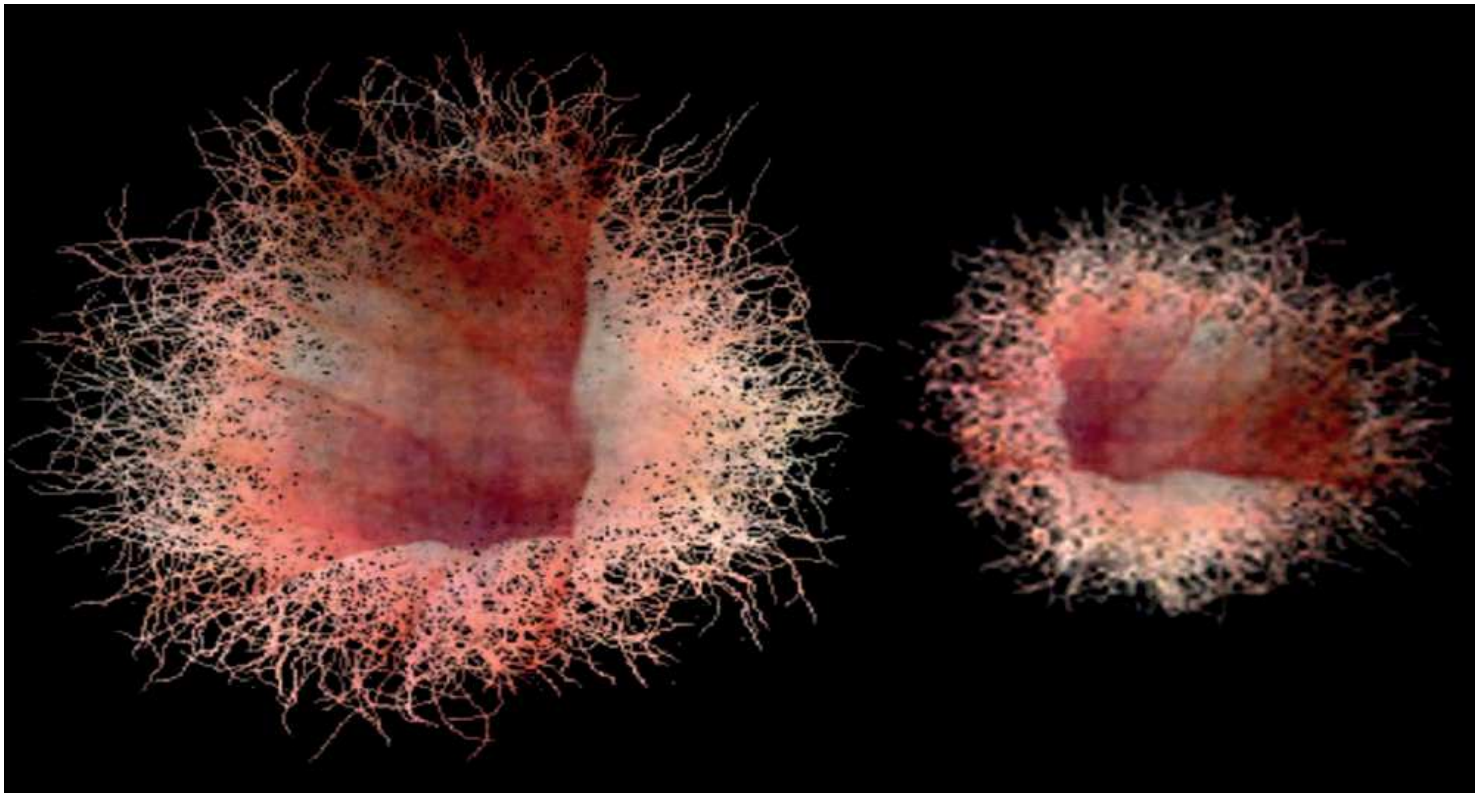
This appreciation of valid antithetical simultaneities is very useful in reaching nonreductive synthetic conclusions concerning the whirr

of information processing which takes place within the aesthetic viractual body. Viractual constructs integrate opposites and antitheses and in this respect differ greatly from typical dualistic thinking; the tendency to formulate concepts in terms of two exhaustive categories (in viractuality's case the actual and the virtual). Dualistic causality, bolstered by the seductive powers of linear narration (hence appearing clearer in terms of its authoritative explanatory closure) appears unsophisticated to me in the realm of post-conceptual viractuality. Indeed, particularly in the realm of post-conceptual art, the *post hoc ergo propter hoc* (after this, therefore because of this) logical error of assumed causality is ticklish.

Thus in order to author an explanatory yet non-reified investigation (free from the deceptive certainties of conjectural cause and effect) and instrumentally place the emphasis on viractual capacity with post-conceptual art, I find it necessary to examine the post-conceptual art object from two directions at once:



Joseph Nechvatal, *Orgiastic abattOir flawless ignudiO* (2004) 88x66" dyptich, computer-robotic assisted acrylic on canvas. Photo courtesy Galerie Richard Paris/New York



Joseph Nechvatal, *madOnna cOl bambinO* (2011) 66x44" computer-robotic assisted acrylic on velvet, photo courtesy Galerie Richard Paris/New York

one direction starting with an inquiry into the larger philosophical and technical concepts of viractualism (what might be referred to as the metaphysics and technological ideology surrounding the details); and also from the other direction, through the examination of specific artistic events and details. This dual method is a post-conceptual searching for a dynamic equilibrium of equivalents, not a disanalogous mechanical cause and effect historicism, which often thwarts the radical newness of artistic enterprise in an effort to historicize and make what is radically new familiar and comfortable by placing post-conceptual art into a smooth, evolutionary continuum where vanguard art is made to seem to have evolved out of the past, thereby mitigating its newness by homogenizing differences into a false perception of sameness.

So, viractual post-conceptual art is an important topic because of what has happened to our visual tendencies with digital immersion. Within post-conceptual art, the horizon-line and vanishing-point are unmistakably exhausted tropes that are no longer needed.

Indeed the horizon-line and vanishing-point within virtual space in general appear to me more and more only as an inappropriate habitual holdover from the Cartesian mentality which has nothing to do with the specificity of virtuality. The space of post-conceptual art is an emergent space of vast all-overness and spread-outness quite remote from the customary Western pinched perspectivist mentality. This entails the question of visibility, but it also entails questions of peripheral cognition. And this field of peripheral cognitive-viractuality, a field of artistic endeavor laced with the juicy strands of imaginative and visionary optics, I believe, is a field that is now open wide to artists with the advent of viractuality: the meeting place between virtuality and actuality.

¹ P. OSBORNE, *Anywhere Or Not At All: Philosophy of Contemporary Art*, London, Verso Books, 2013, 99-116.

² *Ibidem*, 99.

³ *Ibid*, 125-131.

⁴ J. NECHVATAL, *Immersive Ideals / Critical Distances*, PhD thesis, 1999, Saarbrücken, LAP Lambert Academic Publishing, 2009, 56.

⁵ Christiane Paul, in her seminal book *Digital Art* discuss-

es my concept of viractualism. C. PAUL, *Digital Art*, London, Thames & Hudson, 2006, 58. One of the images she chooses to illustrate that section of the book is my painting entitled the birth *Of the viractual* (2001). Joe Lewis, in the March 2003 issue of *Art in America* discusses the viractual. J. LEWIS, "Joseph Nechvatal at Universal Concepts Unlimited", *Art in America*, March 2003, 123-124. John Reed in *Artforum* discusses the concept in his piece #1 Joseph Nechvatal. J. REED, "Joseph Nechvatal", *Artforum Web 3-2004 Critic's Picks*, March 01, 2004. <https://www.artforum.com/search?search=John%20Reed&page=7>
Frank Popper also writes about the viractual concept in his

book *From Technological to Virtual Art*. F. POPPER, *From Technological to Virtual Art*, Cambridge, The MIT Press, 2006, 122.

⁶ P. OSBORNE, *Anywhere Or Not At All*, *op. cit.*, 3, 51.

⁷ I developed further the concept of Viractualism in an on-line seminar I held from November 1st to the 15th in 2002 that was conducted as part of the Virtual Construction project at the Empyre Forum <http://www.subtle.net/empyre>. I thank Christina McPhee again for that opportunity.

Two key factors in the history of communicating immersive environments: mix of reality vs. cognitive realism¹

Marcin Sobieszczanski

The history of immersive environments was strikingly presented in 2010 by van Krevelen and Poelman as a continuation of the work of Tamura.² Here we find the main prototypes as well as their technical progression articulated in terms of placement within the famous theoretical continuum "Reality / Virtuality", as invented in the 1990s by Milgram and Kishino.³ But, if the philosophical speech involves the ontological status of the objects, the scientific basis that led to the technological achievements exploits the resources of the philosophy of appearance, perception and of the gnostic status of the percepts that different devices provide. Indeed, the method of 3D "look oriented" (see-through) refers to the long tradition of the philosophy of perception initiated by Brentano, Stumpf and Husserl, taken up by the psychologists of form⁴ and systematized in the cognitive approach used by cognitive scientists of the environment, such as Gibson⁵, and of vision, such as Marr.⁶

Moreover, it is not, curiously, the continuation of the theoretical hybridization Real / Virtual which led to the most convincing prototypes. The theoretical continuum that establishes this hybridization is based itself on the *qualitative* ideal of immersion. In fact, between 1962 and 1967 epistemological separation between two approaches in the design of simulators of environmental perception is prevalent.

On the one hand, there is a continuation of the long line of analogue machines, both electronic and magnetic, aiming to produce the most complete and the most accurate perceptual substrate as possible, in the field of cinema and education by simulacrum, in military engineering and industrial traineeship.

The patent of Heilig⁷ from August 28, 1962⁸, is one of the best achievements of this method.⁹

On the other hand, the idea of a "dispatcher" of multimodal sensations implemented on a digital computing machine germinates. Later on this will also include some analogue mechanisms¹⁰, as well as the functional modelling of "sensory-motor coupling" or the "retroactive subjugation" of the sensitive substrate and postural gestures and attitudes. In this second kind of approach, advantage is taken not only of that which predestines the computing machine to perform its role of being a simulator of the nervous system of animals and humans, but the *critique* of the ergonomics of cultural behaviours, both