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Not-just-art/Not-just-tools: The Encounter of Aesthetics and Instrumentality on a Computer Screen

Within the field of so-called “software studies” that have emerged in recent years a renewed interest in the relationship between aesthetics and instrumentality have set a significant agenda. Artists have begun to produce software work, like browsers and complete operating systems that not only ‘functions’ in art institutional contexts but anticipates concrete use on the personal computer. The critic Matthew Fuller has introduced the term “not-just-art” to describe this type of work that is both a work of art and a tool to process (digital) information. The term is adequate but it gains depth and precision if it is coupled with the ‘reverse’ term “not-just-tools”. The coupling makes clear that it is not just a matter of expanding the notion of art through the practical logic of the tool but also of expanding the notion of the tool through abstract logic of art. My presentation will by way of three examples (a game, a design program and a operating system) point to different aspects of this exchange between art and tool logic where conventional distinctions between the conceptual and the concrete, the visual and the functional, dissolves into an unruly and complex interdisciplinarity. The focus will be the critical and speculative potential of this interdisciplinarity vis-à-vis an increasingly conform software culture; and I will argue that as a tool art can distort this culture, put it back into play and open new possibilities for creative work.