
Book Review

LOPES, DOMINIC MCIVER. *A Philosophy of Computer Art*. Routledge 2009, 160 pp., \$128 hardcover, \$43.95 paperback.

Reviewed by Greg Trotter

The rapid development and increasing ubiquity of computer technology has revolutionized many fields and, indeed, changed our everyday lives. For instance, we no longer purchase or listen to music in the same way, downloading songs rather than perusing record stores, and social media websites such as Facebook have transformed the ways in which we communicate with one another. A less obvious candidate for this kind of technological transfiguration is the work of art. Some questions we might ask ourselves about the relationship between computers and art include whether there is such a thing as computer art, and if there is such a thing, what sorts of characteristics are constitutive of computer art? These questions and more are grappled with and answered in Dominic McIver Lopes' book, *A Philosophy of Computer Art*.

The book begins by highlighting a distinction that is crucial to Lopes' argument. Lopes wants to draw our attention to the fact that computer art is not digital art. The conflation of digital art with computer art, Lopes notes, is a common occurrence, but if we take the two to be identical, we miss the crucial point that computer art is a new art form while digital art is not. He gives several examples of digital art, including Frank Gehry's Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, which was designed using CATIA, an architectural software application, and Harold Cohen's *Clarissa*, a drawing made by a computer program, written by Cohen, called AARON. What these works have in common is that they are manifestations of pre-existing art forms. Gehry's museum design is still a work of architecture and Cohen's drawing remains an instance of pictorial representation. All that has changed is the medium by which these works were created.

Digital media, then, do not constitute new art forms, only a new kind of medium. For this reason, we can think of digital media as "art kinds" that play a role in the way in which a work is produced. Importantly, however, digital media do not constitute "appreciative art kinds." The fact that a building is drawn digitally before its construction does not come to bear on our appreciation of it as a work of architecture. The idea is that we do not *appreciate* a digital work simply by virtue of its being digital. So, for instance, we do not appreciate Gehry's museum as a work of

digital architecture, but rather as a work of architecture; what we appreciate is the architectural product, not the digital means by which it is produced.

Lopes is setting up the notion that there is something special about computer art, something that makes it both an appreciative art kind and a new art form. The rest of the book is an attempt to tell us how computer art fits both categories. Lopes gives us an explicit definition of computer art: “an item is a computer art work just in case (1) it’s art, (2) it’s run on a computer, (3) it’s interactive, and (4) it’s interactive because it’s run on a computer” (27). With this working definition, Lopes is tasked with answering three interrelated questions: the specialization question (what is computer art?), the value question (is it valuable?), and the art question (is it art?).

For Lopes, the concept of interactivity (the third component of his definition) plays the most crucial role in identifying a work as a work of computer art and provides the key to answering these three questions fully. Accordingly, Lopes devotes his third chapter to delineating the unique character of interactivity. For Lopes, a work is interactive “just in case it prescribes that the actions of its users help generate its display” (36). Interactivity is what sets computer artworks apart from other artworks. Rather than simply assuming the role of spectator, appreciating a work from a distance, one becomes a “user” when appreciating computer art, actually playing a role in how the work is displayed. In Jeffrey Shaw’s *Golden Calf*, for instance, the calf of the work’s title does not appear until a user picks up a portable LCD screen and directs it at a pedestal in front of her. Computer art, Lopes concludes, is indeed an appreciative art kind because we appreciate computer-based works in relation to the interactivity of other computer-based works.

With this fuller answer to the specialization question, Lopes moves to address the value question by confronting several criticisms levied against computer art. Lopes defuses these objections by showing how they are adaptations of critiques of mass art. While Lopes affirms that computer art is really the newest form of mass art, he points out that critiques of mass art fall flat against this new form because they focus on a feature that is inessential to computer art, namely, “having similar displays” (98). A film, for instance, has the same display in all of its presentations — its contents do not change whether it is projected on a movie screen or viewed on one’s television — and some have objected that this discourages active thought. While this objection may fail even against traditional forms of mass art, the concept of interactivity, integral to computer art, makes computer art importantly different from other forms of mass art.

To tackle the art question, Lopes confronts the challenge presented by video games. Video games appear to fit Lopes’ definition of computer art. But do they actually count as art? To develop an answer to this basic but very difficult question, Lopes adopts a cluster theory, providing a list of features compiled by Berys Gaut. In his final chapter, Lopes shows that computer-based works, including some video games, have some features of the list by virtue of their “computer-based interactivity” and therefore count as art.

Lopes’ book provides an insightful account of computer art, one that ventures answers to some perennial questions in aesthetics. His book is clearly written and highly accessible, with many interesting examples, and will likely be of interest to students of philosophy, technology, and, of course, aesthetics at both the undergraduate and graduate level. Lopes could have given a sturdier account of why computer art counts as art. By showing only that computer art has certain features of Gaut’s list, Lopes leaves the reader wanting in this regard. Of course, giving a definitive answer to the question about what counts as art is not the easiest task. This criticism aside, the book raises interesting questions about an art form intimately related to our technological age.

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