The Rhetoric of Soft Tools

Marisa Olson

L et's think about tools in general. One popular understanding of them is that they are a middle man; a means to an end. We think of tools not as having *telos* (an ultimate aim or intended form), but as the by-product of an idea and precursor to a form. The wrench gets the water flowing in our plumbing system, etc.

Recent discourse around new media has prompted us to think a bit more critically about tools. Both Christiane Paul (2008) and Lev Manovich (2001) (mainstays on many a media studies syllabus) have written field-defining books that focused on new media's role and potential classification as either 'tools' or 'objects' made with those tools. Speaking in broad strokes, a new media artifact can then be either the program that makes possible an image, video or website (a 'tool'), or it can be the image, video or website itself (an 'object').

I have since wondered: what about those tools that are objects? And vice-versa? What about those artifacts that are not only de facto encapsulations of their conditions of production and consumption, on a most basic level, but that also comment critically on network conditions and other postinternet factors of making? In fact, my first endeavor when signing on as editor and curator at Rhizome[1] was to spur a rethinking of their mission statement to support not only immediately-recognizable 'new media art', but also to support broader forms of practice and a broader range of works that 'engage critically' with media culture; something I would come to call 'Postinternet' (Olson 2012).

The 'production' of tools implies the manipulation of cultural production in ways that inevitably encapsulate the social conditions of the 'producer' and 'consumer' of the cultural object. After all, tools are clearly objects in the case of artist-made tools – even if they are as seemingly immaterial as a broadcast through air, a software plug-in, or an Internet search function.

As in communication, tools operate by directly or indirectly performing the processes of describing, analyzing and synthesizing. In the case of synthesis, tools not only perform the classic rhetorical function of combinatory and referential production-via-inference, but also the mathematical and scientific functions of making connections between ports. In tool-based synthesis, the very modes of input and output described by these tools are recreated as part and parcel of the analytic process.

Writing self-reflexively in their titular font, the collective Dexter Sinister's artist statement/manifesto, 'A Note on Type' (2011), describes 'Meta-the-difference-between-the-two-Font', their typeface developed in 2010 by using MetaFont, a computer typography system programed in 1979 by Donald Knuth, author of 'the multi-volume

computer science "bible"', *The Art of Computer Programming* (2011). As they explain, 'MetaFont is both a programing language and its own interpreter, a swift trick where it first provides a vocabulary and then decodes its syntax back to the native binary machine language of 1s and 0s' (Knuth 2011). Knuth intended MetaFont as a helper application for teX, the computer typesetting system he created 'to facilitate high-quality typography directly by authors' (Knuth 2011).

This tool to support a tool to support a system used by artists was further revamped by Dexter Sinister to create a self-reflexive, creative tool of their own. Both Dexter Sinister's statement and the font in which it is written are discrete art objects. Using Knuth's modification of an extant software program, the artists further worked the algorithm into a typography system that is both tool and object.
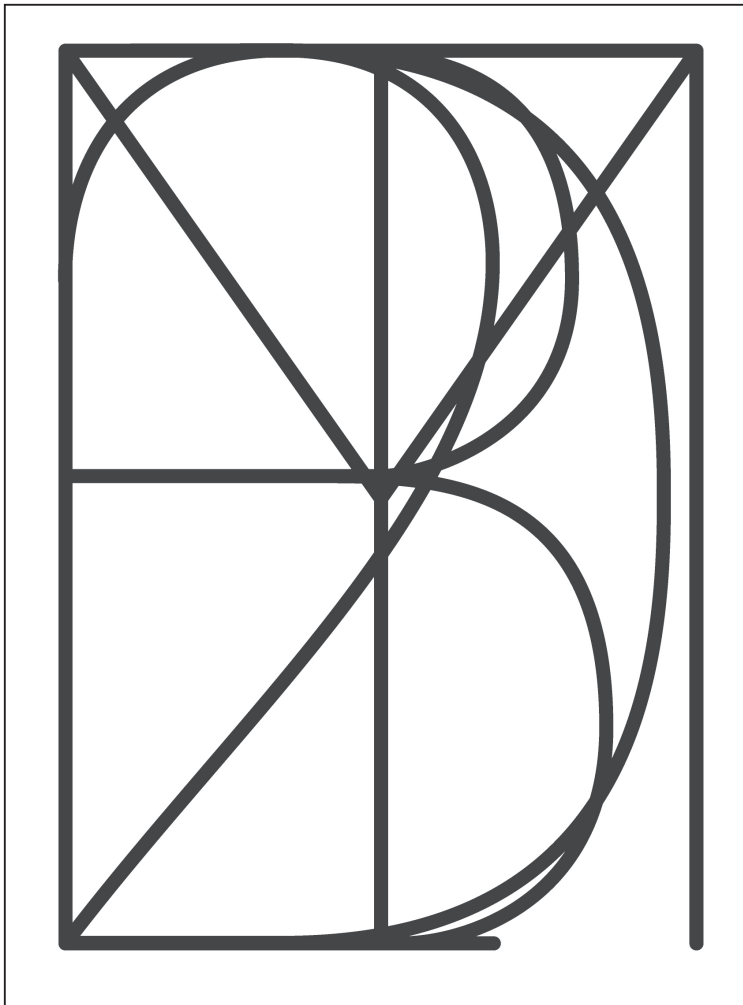

Figure 1. Dexter Sinister, A Skeleton, A Script, Or A Good Idea In Advance Of Its Realization (2010) (Risograph Print With Multiple Passes).

We can call such systems 'soft tools': devices without the physical force of the sickle and hammer, which are no less effective in their ability to create objects soft or hard. Quite simply, consider the meaning of the prefix 'soft-' in the word software. There is here a significant syntactic affinity in the relationship between soft tools and 'soft power'.

Developed by political scientist Joseph Nye (1990), the concept of 'soft power' is a strategy to co-opt and attract foreign actors' attention to one faction's way of thinking. Soft power is a strategic tool, whereas hard power is a tool employing the tactics of brute military force or monetary coercion. Returning to the example of the wrench, hard power employs material objects (tanks, currency) in trying to force an outcome. Soft power is more programatic and exercises itself largely through psychological operations (psy-ops), and the exportation of ideology and cultural values, often through popular media such as film and television. The worldwide popularity of American music is one manifestation of soft power.

What we are calling soft tools operate similarly. While they may actually have a *telos*, or an end goal in mind, the tools themselves are programatic in nature. Codes, algorithms, API's, software generators, fonts, logos, video-processing devices and patches, etc: these ephemeral tools are not hard media, though they do very often produce tangible effects and ephemera.

Artist Cat Mazza has been working for several years with her soft tool, KnitPro.[2] This generative application has been put to multiple uses. Internet audiences can upload corporate logos to receive a knitting pattern, which the user is encouraged to employ in the name of protest. A common example illustrated on the KnitPro site entails Disney logos hand-knit into garments, in order to comment on the physical sweatshop labor (frequently performed by poorly treated, undercompensated women) overlooked at the site of Disney-product consumption. Mazza also initiated a participatory project in which a variety of users were invited to knit patches of what would then be knit into a larger 'Nike Protest Blanket'. More recently, the artist has been shaping these projects into recreations of historic wartime initiatives and other governmental programs, thus invoking the collaborative, even familial, context of community textile-making.

Mazza's work is a good reminder of the fact that conditions of production and reception are always bound up in any work and its transmission. Her work can also serve as a prompt to consider the reception of soft media. Michel de Certeau's writings on the sociology of material culture, specifically his theories on the consumptive experience, harken to the aforementioned spectrum of strategic and tactical operations, soft power and hard power. In fact, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1984) begins with a critique of the frequent assumption that media consumers are powerless, passive spectators. Taking the example of TV viewers, de Certeau fleshes out an argument wherein 'consumption' is in fact defined by an act of making he likened to the classical Greek notion of *poesis*. Spectators are not passive, but take in a proliferation of images and make something of them. Soft tools are productive of *poesis*.
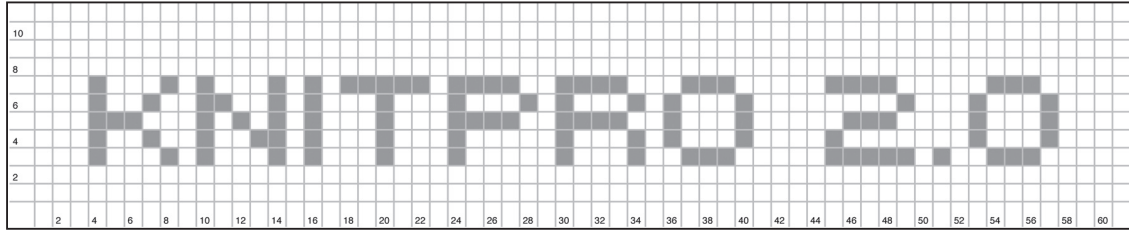
Figure 2. Cat Mazza's *KnitPro 2.0* (2004).

De Certeau says of this soft form of making: 'the latter is devious, it is dispersed, but it insinuates itself everywhere, silently and almost invisibly, because it does not manifest itself through its own products, but rather through its ways of using the products imposed by a dominant economic order' (De Certeau 1984). This is exactly what we mean in pointing to soft, seemingly invisible, methodological tools. And let's not forget that the builders and users of soft tools are themselves always already consumers, whether they are digesting an inherited visual language or a dominant operational protocol.

The artists MTAA have also made performative algorithm-based work resulting from the reception of extant material. The duo's work often incorporates the interpretation of historic avant-gardes and software experimentation, as in their endurance-based performance project, 'One-Year Performance Video' (1YPV).[3] This is one in a series of computerized 'updates' of seminal 1960s and 1970s video art pieces. In their introduction to the project, they raise the question, 'Is there meaning in replacing On Kawara's zen-like devotion to his date paintings with an automated script which functions in a similar way?'

In the case of 1YPV, MTAA updated Sam Hsieh's *One Year Performance 1978–1979*. Rather than spending a year in a cage, as Hsieh did, the artists spent a short amount of time in their studio, which they'd dressed to resemble living quarters. They shot clips of themselves performing daily tasks such as working, sleeping, even going to the bathroom. The clips reside as soft bits of data, stored in a computer to be automatically strung together and looped according to temporal data collected from viewers (so we see them sleeping at night, for instance). MTAA deferred the endurance portion of the project to their algorithm (a soft tool), and made viewers of this expanded theater project (who could clock viewing-time online) responsible for receiving a year's worth of the piece.

More recently, MTAA have begun another series of software-based performance works, entitled 'Autotrace'. Using the Adobe Illustrator software's Live Trace (soft)
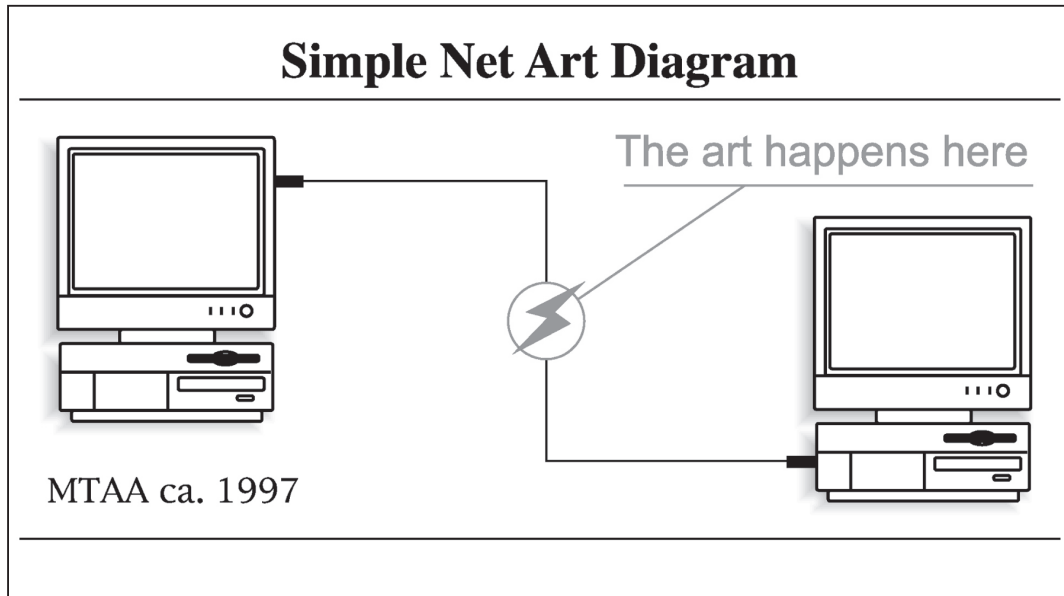
Figure 3. MTAA's *Simple Net Art Diagram* (1997).

tool, the artists upload a (soft) art historical remnant (jpeg) of an extant work to create automatically-generated (soft) vector images, which then may or may not be produced physically. In fact, MTAA makes a soft digital copy (memory) of the image produced available to Internet audiences, who may themselves decide upon downloading and possibly printing. The spotlight here is on the rhetorical act of using soft tools to iterate what begins as a soft image. In their first public demonstration of this tool, entitled *Autotrace #2 (Nocturne; performative)* (2008), the artists plugged in a jpeg of Joan Miro's *Nocturne*, which was then converted to a bitmap image and randomly sampled to determine the shape of the final vector image. Despite its dependence upon an original, the (soft) image-object became further and further removed from its original authorial context, and greatly removed from the process we might classically call 'mimesis'. There are, in these vector images, suggestions of the form represented, but they are simultaneously extracted from the original representations – if there is such a thing.

This line of thinking brings us into the territory of the mechanical reproduction, about which Walter Benjamin famously wrote with an emphasis on photographic media, including film. The concept behind mechanical reproduction's oft-recited 'withering of
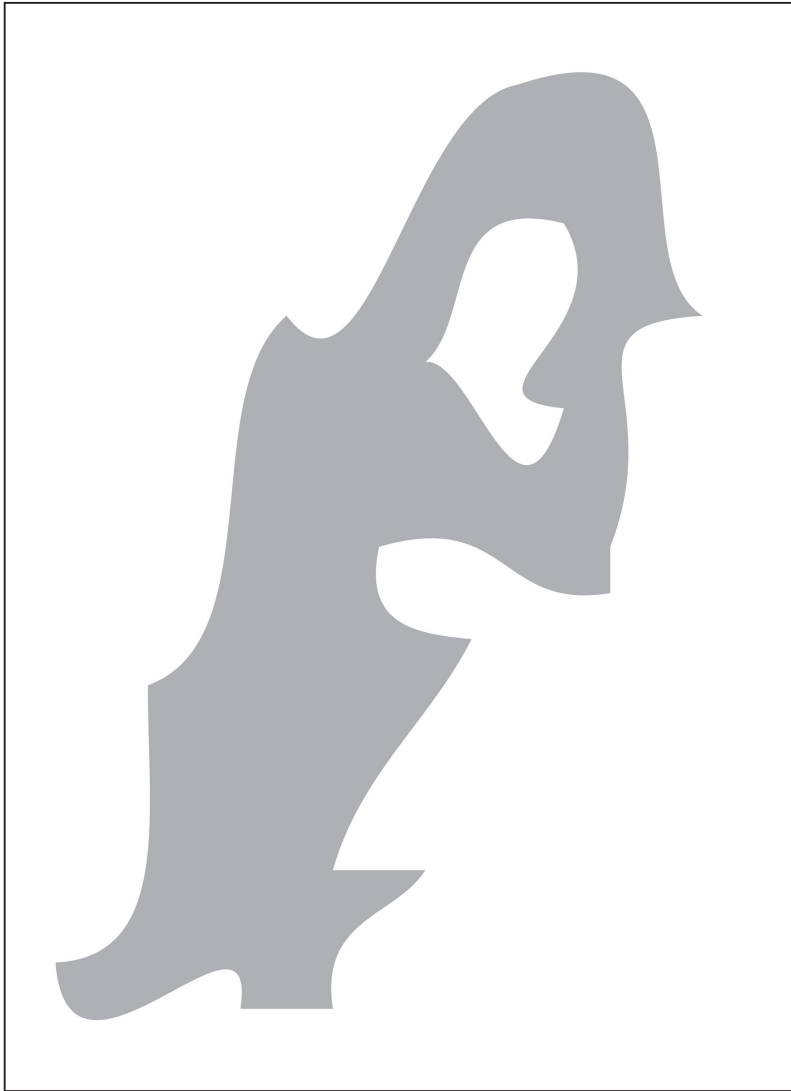
Figure 4. MTAA's *Autotrace #2 (Nocturne; performative)* (2008).

the aura' relies on a crucial separation of the 'authentic' object from its ritualistic use. Benjamin argues: 'To an ever greater degree the work of art reproduced becomes the work of art designed for reproducibility. From a photographic negative, for example, one can make any number of prints; to ask for an "authentic" print makes no sense' (1968). His good news is that 'the instant the criterion of authenticity ceases to be applicable to

artistic production, the total function of art is reversed. Instead of being based on ritual, it begins to be based on another practice – politics.'

We can read between these lines to surmise that even as this authorial shift takes place, there is still a material separation between the mechanically-reproduced image-object and the use to which it is put – a sort of softening of the reproductive process. The image itself can be seen as soft, immaterial; existing outside of time or physical space, regardless of the transmitted visage's intended materialization. It resides in the unique conceptual 'place where it happens to be'.

Reinforcement of this idea may be found in Baudrillard's *Simulations* (1983), where he speaks of this new system of representation as one in which 'signs of the real [are substituted] for the real itself [...] concealing the fact that the real is no longer real.' This fact results from the newly-rendered disauthenticity of the reproduction, as much as from

Figure 5. Jeremy Bailey's *Transhuman Dance Recital* (2007)
(screencap. Transmediale).

a new consciousness in which the space of flows between the perception, transmission and reception of images has become conceptual, soft.

Jeremy Bailey is often confidently self-deprecating in offering hilarious parodies of new media vocabularies. In his video *Transhuman Dance Recital #1* (2007), the artist pokes fun at the newfangled freedom of the roaming ambiguity that may result from the softening of tools, or of reality itself. Sarcastically visualizing what a body dematerialized by code might look like, his pseudo-autobiographical character claims to have 'transcended [his] human form', thus freeing himself from the 'imitative constraints of the natural world', with his head floating atop a roughly-sketched, blobby digital, octopus-like form that clings to his movements as he speaks to viewers about this purported liberation while fluidly dancing with an animated smiley-faced blue triangle. Bailey's work serves to remind us of the persistence of viscerality, of the reality in corporeality. We should recognize that the softening discussed in this essay is widespread, but so too is hard reality. I would not seek to argue otherwise.

In *Whatever Your Mind Can Conceive* (2008), Kristin Lucas gives viewers reality TV-style documentation of her visit with Dr. Ron Abbott outside of artist collective Eteam's International Airport Montello (IAM).[4] Lucas had been invited to respond to one image from a larger collection of images documenting creative activity at IAM. What we actually see is the product of that creative interpretation visualized as a problematic physical reaction, manifesting in rashes, lesions, and other unwanted physical symptoms. 'Dr. Ron' attempts to diagnose the artist using soft tools such as Internet-based questionnaires programed to spit-out potential diagnoses. Meanwhile, Lucas gives us a similarly soft, rhetorical, visceral response to a reproduction while reminding us of the significance of flesh. In fact, we might see her performance as invoking Maurice Merleau-Ponty's (1968) concept of a phenomenological 'flesh' that binds human subjects. One affect of this conceptual flesh lies in making people concomitant to each other's experience. Unlike the stage make-up on Lucas' face, this flesh is soft in the sense that we discuss here, and it becomes the channel by which her interpretation is almost virally communicated to other humans – further interpreters of her work. Lucas' work signifies most powerfully in its interpretation of the contemporary world of ideas – specifically visceral fear, scientific discovery or 'infomatic' paranoia. It is this interpretation itself that is the pivotal work, the resulting embodiment of which acts as aftermath or evidence of the (soft) concepts' execution.

Whether or not concepts or interpretations are written across the body, or across a corpus of material work, we are left with the question of how to read them. In the process of freeing the reproducible from its material shell, Benjamin virtually debunks traditional aesthetics. He reminds us that, although the term once applied to the sense experience of things (i.e. touch or taste), we found ourselves in a critical world in which taste was a matter to be displayed (as in 'good taste'). In this scenario, our system of aesthetics is based upon possession or a material accumulation that Benjamin likens to fascist land-grabs and related political hierarchies (Benjamin 1968).

Figure 6. *Kristin Lucas, Travel Advisory* (2007). Creative Commons Attribution -
Non Commercial-ShareAlike 3.0 Unported License

So how are we to experience the relative goodness of a work, soft or hard? Firstly, we can imagine that both De Certeau and Benjamin would claim that our experience of a creative concept or its dissemination is now enabled by the softening of the author-producer construct, and even the weight displaced upon image-objects. By debunking our entrenched notion of aesthetics, this new understanding of the rhetorical act executed with soft tools allows both producers (the artist and her viewer) to speak in different, multiple or even competing voices. And any rhetorical analysis of those utterances must reside in the process of interpreting what the artist says, and how they do so.

In my essay, 'Lost Not Found: The Circulation of Images in Digital Visual Culture' (2010), I discuss the practices of Internet artists known as pro-surfers, whose work could in part be characterized 'by a copy-and-paste aesthetic that revolves around the appropriation of web-based content in simultaneous celebration and critique of the internet and contemporary digital visual culture [...] work heavy on animated gifs, YouTube remixes, and an embrace of old-school "dirtstyle" web design' tactics, each of which can function as soft tools while being launched into orbit as soft objects. In an attempt to hold pro-surfing up to the vocabulary yielded by photo and film theory, I go on to argue that:

> [T]he work of pro-surfers transcends the art of found photography insofar as the act of finding is elevated to a performance in its own right, and the ways in which the images are appropriated distinguishes this practice from one of quotation by taking them out of circulation and reinscribing them with new meaning [...]. (Olson 2010)

The work found on the blog of the original pro-surfer collaborators, Nasty Nets[5] (of which I am a founding member), exemplifies these practices. In it, 'images are taken out of circulation, often without attribution or a hint of origin, unless that is part of the story being told' by the image. Some of this material is posted and revered as ready-mades, while other samples get remixed or reconstituted in new image-objects. In these cases, the material's lack of context becomes part of its narrative. At some point, Nasty Nets co-founder Guthrie Lonergan conceived of and programed a soft tool called 'Pic-See'[6] to be employed by fellow surfers in the scraping of images from open image repositories. Rather than having to wade through a site's code to pin down the URL for an image, Pic-See is a soft tool that makes these addresses immediate while combing the images from the websites in which they are embedded. This enabled the redeployment of the images in new contexts or platforms.

While Lonergan created his own soft tool, this kind of Internet art often relies on the use of pre-existing tools: applications ranging from video editing software, to software defaults and intuitive design systems. Once upon a time – in fact, right around the time that camcorders and similar hardware was made available to the public – we might have located these tools somewhere on the spectrum between amateur and prosumer devices. Critic Ed Halter recalls in his Rhizome essay, 'After the Amateur' (2009), that the corporate products that created the consumer class referred to as prosumers were:

> Technology marketed for amateurs [which] generally did not require as much skill or training as professional equipment. Most amateur gear produced what would be considered a lesser image quality by professionals – in the case of motion pictures, a smaller strip of film than the industry-standard 35mm, thus capable of only lower resolution. (Halter 2009)

The contemporary moment in image production does not require advanced skill either (which is not to argue that so-called amateurs are not skilled), but it leaps from the preceding context in which Halter said '[p]rofessionals pursued careers. Amateurs pursued hobbies. Professionals made images for public consumption. Amateurs made images for private use.' The proliferation of soft tools allows artists whom would previously be demoted as 'amateurs' to share with a wide public soft objects whose production is able to shrug off normative constraints as to ideal forms or resolutions. Even when they index outside sources or the borrowed *vérité* of other people's worlds, the voices channeled by these soft tools are not inauthentic. They are simply functional outside of the aforementioned rubric of classical aesthetics.

Let's briefly return to the world of rhetorical theory from which that construct evolved. In Plato's *Gorgias* (1959), Socrates articulates a specific relationship between theory and practice. Ideally, practitioners and their consumers should have a balance of both. A doctor should understand the broader function of the body *and* be able to apply the craft of medicine in a holistic manner. But, whereas medicine is regarded as a *technē* (a 'real' art), cookery is degraded as merely the *empeiria* ('experience') of something: a knack. Medicine cares for the body; cookery only pretends to. Socrates moves to argue that rhetoric (defined broadly by Aristotle as 'the power of persuasion', we now understand rhetoric as encompassing a broad range of visual and communicative practices) falls into the lowly category of cookery – a non-art under this rubric.

Cory Arcangel's series of generative drawings, entitled 'Hello World',[7] might help us rethink this limiting notion. The productive work here lies in the interface between Arcangel's artist-made program (a soft tool) and the receiving printer (a hard tool) by which the renderings are output. The series title nods to a well-known computer program, among the simplest of the sort, meant to test and display the working status of a computer system. Whereas a computer on this system might normally announce its status by printing the phrase 'Hello World' (or in networked contexts by displaying a screen-based pixel arrangement conveying the same message), Arcangel's soft tool manipulates this function by calling upon his computer to print seemingly-abstract line drawings.

Interpreting this work under the rubric expressed in *Gorgias*, we might say that the (soft) program is a recipe, the (soft) algorithm is the chef – the rhetorician, and the skilled execution of the algorithm is the cookery itself, the soft rhetorical act. Without meaning to oversimplify Arcangel's drawings by boiling them down to a culinary art, we can say that the resulting 'dish', the drawing, performs a visualization, a *result* of the rhetorical act, whereas the act is the true locus of the work.

These drawings were exhibited in Arcangel's recent solo show at the Whitney, where the curator, Christiane Paul, said that the show's title, 'Pro Tools', 'references the popular software of the same name, which enables users to compose, record, edit, and mix music and sound' (Paul 2011). Each of these soft tools and processes has what we might consider a material impact on the final product, but without ever removing an object from the Pro Tools platform. Paul goes on to say that, 'While none of the works in the exhibition

actually make use of the [eponymous] software, the name captures Arcangel's practice of recording, composing, and remixing.' In other words, the body of work on display privileges the rhetorical sensorium of soft tools over those objects resulting from their use. Process itself is on display.

By way of investigating a similar relationship between rhetoric and object, we might consider the process by which film form tries to 'suture' a viewer to film, marrying projection of the film's print to the viewing process, thus making her forget who's doing the looking. Here the thinking world separates between experience, the representation of experience, and the point or value of the experience. The question I would now pose is: can we have work made with soft tools that recognizes the distinction between hard

Figure 7. Film still from the Yes Men's
The Yes Men Fix the World (2009).

552

and soft objects, while preserving the vast richness of the creative experience or narrative immersion? Can soft tools channel knowledge and craft through lived experience? I believe that they can, and that in doing so they benefit from the conditions of reproduction boiled up by postmodernity.

In consideration of the ways in which soft tools enable a productive warping of the 'author' concept, and provide the opportunity to speak in a variety of voices, we might look to activist performance group the Yes Men's response to a media ecology aptly described by Fredric Jameson. In the 'Video' chapter of *Postmodernism* (1990), Jameson articulates a transformative moment in which our separate notions of 'the media' (as in mass-communicated channels) and 'artistic media' fused. He puts us on the road to understanding what Henry Jenkins would later call 'media convergence' (2006) – in part the soft melding of tools into each other (i.e. the marriage of phones, cameras and camcorders) in increasingly dematerialized applications.

It is within this media ecology that the Yes Men were able to copy, paste and 'identity correct' the code of Dow Chemical's corporate website, presenting viewers with an idealized, if misleading reflection[8] of the prior site. Exploiting this digital re-presentation, the artists were also able to generate misleading e-mail addresses nonetheless convincing enough to secure them a spot on *BBC News*. In the ensuing interview, a Yes Man posing as a representative of Dow Chemical was given a platform to relay the historical details of a ruinous event known as the 'Bhopal disaster'. Following this oration, the (mis) representative claimed that Dow would finally be taking hitherto eschewed responsibility for the accident, going on to explain how they would direct corporate resources toward compensation of generations of victims.

The Yes Men are among a cadre of independent media activists whose motto is 'by any media necessary'. By virtue of this series of scandalous events (in which they were later found out, and in turn secured a separate BBC interview), they were able to use soft tools to imitate hard power in a way that could potentially yield soft power in the transmission of idealized cultural values to the world. Rather than mediate between representation and reality, the Yes Men used soft tools (including the voice) to re-present the realities of the Bhopal disaster in a way that told the story they wanted to tell. It also turned contemporary cynicism about the realness of representational media in their favor, shifting unbelievability onto Dow, who were subsequently moved to release a statement that no, they were *not* going to take responsibility for Bhopal. Excavating a bright side to Flaherty's documentary-related edict that 'sometimes you have to lie to tell the truth', the Yes Men took the model of parody (voicing participation and critique simultaneously) afforded by the contemporary media environment and ran with the soft (which is not to say less effective) strategy of subversion. If there is a moral in the group's modified reflection of the world in their attempts to change it, it is that soft tools give us a soft reality free for the morphing and fresh for rhetorical change.

References

Aristotle (1984), 'Rhetoric', in Jonathan Barnes (ed.), *Vol. 2 of Complete Works: the Revised Oxford Translation* (trans. W. Rhys Roberts), Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Bailey, Jeremy (2007), *Transhuman Dance Recital #1*, http://jeremybailey.net/transhuman.html. Accessed July 30th, 2012.

Baudrillard, Jean (1983), *Simulations*, New York: Semiotexte.

Benjamin, Walter (1968), 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', in Hannah Arendt (ed. and trans.), *Illuminations*, London: Fontana.

De Certeau, Michel (1984), *The Practice of Everyday Life* (trans. Steven Rendall), Berkeley: University of California Press.

Halter, Ed (2009), 'After the Amateur: Notes', http://rhizome.org/editorial/2009/apr/29/after-the-amateur-notes/. Accessed July 30th, 2012.

Jameson, Fredric (1990), *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism,* North Carolina: Duke University Press.

Jenkins, Henry (2006), *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*, New York: New York University Press.

Knuth, Donald (2011), *The Art of Computer Programming, Volumes 1–4,* Boston, MA: Addison Wesley.

Lucas, Kristin (2008), *Whatever Your Mind Can Conceive*, http://vimeo.com/26393863. Accessed July 30th, 2012.

Manovich, Lev (2001), *The Language of New Media*, Cambridge, MA & London: MIT Press.

Merleau-Ponty, Maurice (1968), *The Visible and the Invisible* (trans. Alphonso Lingis), Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press.

MTAA (2008), *Autotrace #2 (Nocturne; performative)*, http://www.mtaa.net/mtaaRR/news/twhid/autotrace_2_nocturne_performative.html. Accessed July 30th, 2012.

Nye, Joseph (1990), *Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power*, New York: Basic Books.

Olson, Marisa (2010), 'Lost Not Found: The Circulation of Images in Digital Visual Culture', in C. Cotton and A. Klein (eds), *Words Without Pictures*, New York: Aperture; London: Thames & Hudson.

—— (2012), 'Postinternet: Art After the Internet', *FOAM Magazine*, 29.

Paul, Christiane (2008), *Digital Art*, 2nd edition, London: Thames & Hudson.

—— (2011), *Cory Arcangel Pro Tools*, New York: Whitney Museum of American Art.

Plato (1959), *Gorgias* (revised text with introduction and commentary by E.R. Dodds), London: Clarendon Press; New York: Oxford University Press.

Sinister, Dexter (2011), 'A Note on the Type', *Afterall*, 27.

Notes

1. See Rhizome's website, http://www.rhizome.org. Accessed July 30th, 2012.
2. See KnitPro here: http://www.microrevolt.org/knitPro.htm. Accessed July 30th, 2012.
3. 'One-Year Performance Video', http://turbulence.org/Works/1year/. Accessed July 30th, 2012.
4. International Airport Montello, http://www.internationalairportmontello.com/. Accessed July 30th, 2012.
5. See the Nasty Nets website, http://nastynets.com/. Accessed July 30th, 2012.
6. See 'Pic-See' on the Nasty Nets' website, http://nastynets.com/picsee/. Accessed July 30th, 2012.
7. See Cory Arcangel's website, http://www.coryarcangel.com/wp-content/uploads/2010/08/Hp-Pen-Plotter-Hello-World.zip. Accessed July 30th, 2012.
8. See the Yes Men's work on the Dow Ethics website, http://www.dowethics.com/. Accessed July 30th, 2012.