

“Technology will surely drown us.”¹
- Marcel Duchamp

Growing up in Malton, Ontario, a young Tasman Richardson would often ride his bike through Wildwood forest to a large industrial complex. There loomed a factory, whose operations were never immediately clear, and behind which stood an enormous garbage compactor. From time to time, the facility’s workers would dispose of broken toys there—Star Wars figurines, remote control cars, race track sets, and on the luckiest days, damaged Atari consoles. Taking turns climbing into the massive dumpster, Richardson and his friends would dig through the trash, dividing up the gleaned objects to take them home as new treasure.

The art world tradition of salvaging and discarding objects has resonated with Richardson since he was a boy. He would eventually learn of celebrated Dadaist Marcel Duchamp who refined the practice in the early 1900s, elevating quotidian materials to the status of fine art through recontextualization in the gallery space. Pioneering the readymade process, as an artist Duchamp sought to incorporate the productive aspects of randomness, accident, and chance, as a response to the paradigmatic shifts towards industrialization, rationality, and mechanization of his era. Through the studied application of contingency, the elevation of everyday objects, and formal experimentation with collage and photomontage, the Dadaists critically assessed the conditions of their time; especially the increasingly violent and mechanized world in which they lived, as laid bare by the catastrophic events of WWI.²

In Richardson’s own time, the digital revolution has catalyzed a different set of conditions, which merit their own aesthetic response. For many artists, Richardson included, this has taken the form of the *glitch*. Translated into the gallery, glitches are a visual manifestation of technological failure, and so function analogously to Duchamp’s readymades, marking the rise of a conceptual and visual genre worthy of the moniker *dataism*.³ Summarily, glitch art brings into relief the anatomy of technical media, and the social and political milieus in which they operate. Tasman Richardson’s practice is positioned within a trajectory of digital glitch artists, who surfaced predominantly in the late 1990’s and early 2000’s online to build on a tradition established still earlier by Fluxus artist Nam June Paik, who in turn cites Duchamp as one of his greatest influences.

Both Paik and contemporary glitch artists adopt interventionist technological randomness as the dominant figure and method in their work. Whether through the Atari 2600 home videogame system that Richardson deconstructs, or the televisions and tape recorders

¹ Dore Ashton, “An Interview with Marcel Duchamp,” in *Studio International*, vol. 171, no. 878, June 1966, pp. 244-46.

² “Marcel Duchamp and the Readymade.” *Museum of Modern Art*, www.moma.org/learn/moma_learning/themes/dada/marcel-duchamp-and-the-readymade/.

³ Dewitt, Tom. “Dataism.” *Leonardo*. Supplemental Issue, vol. 2, 6 Jan. 1989, p. 57., doi:10.2307/1557946.

through which Paik experimented, glitch art offers insight into the effects, behaviours, conventions, and values of a world routinely impacted by advanced technological systems.⁴ Glasgow-based theorist Tim Barker recognizes the Duchampian legacy of contemporary glitch works, describing them in terms of a parallel gesture of collecting and redisplaying the operational breakdowns of technical media, which for the everyday user are typically regarded as banal or inconsequentially errant. Seen together as a pattern, these breakdowns can help to unsettle the dominant order of techno-utopianism.⁵

In other words, through their investigation of analogue and digital failure, glitch artists produce uniquely damaged artworks that, through creative practice, are meant to foreground and critique the ubiquity of electronic devices and technological progress. Foremost theorist of the genre Rosa Menkman takes it a step further, conceiving of glitches as platforms for the penetrative investigation of technological function, where artists and viewers can together interrogate what technologies mean in a changing world, including how they operate in our lives in ways that we are often unaware. Situated somewhere between its Dadaist forefathers and digital glitch contemporaries, Richardson's *Janus* (2017) is exemplary here.

Projected on two bisecting screens, the dual-channel video was produced by harnessing the visual outcomes of sabotaging the aforementioned Atari 2600 console. The Atari system is historically well-known for having sparked the massive home console gaming industry, which in 2018 generated over \$130 billion in revenue.⁶ Through deliberate impairment of the 1980s-era device, in its time considered to be the cutting edge of affordable consumer electronics, Richardson steers and animates the Atari's low-resolution 8-bit graphics as would a conductor with an orchestra, manipulating the low-resolution sprites and frame buffers of the system based on their colours and attendant tones. *Janus* is archetypal of the fractured, staccato, and unstable aesthetic of contemporary glitch art, its vivid discordant colours and noisy audio combining to generate an immersive and unsettling technoscape.

Back again in the discourse of glitch studies, such visual manifestations of technological error are taken as evidence of a system's "failure to fully fail,"⁷ as a device attempts to complete some task which either overloads or disrupts its capacities to function. In the case of *Janus*, Richardson has intentionally misused the Atari's time base corrector, a device employed to eliminate errors caused by mechanical instability. During the technical process

⁴ Paik's *Magnet TV* (1965) is a definitive example of primordial glitch practice and involved a magnet set on top of a cathode ray tube television, which distorted the signal and produced vibrant fragments and abstract patterns on the screen.

⁵ Tim Barker, "Aesthetics of the Error: Media Art, the Machine, the Unforeseen, and the Errant," in *Error: Glitch, Noise, and Jam in New Media Cultures*, ed. Mark Nunes (New York: Continuum, 2011).

⁶ Lanier, Liz. "Video Games Could Be a \$300 Billion Industry by 2025 (Report)." *Variety*, 1 May 2019, variety.com/2019/gaming/news/video-games-300-billion-industry-2025-report-1203202672/.

⁷ Hugh S. Manon and Daniel Tekmin, "Notes on Glitch," *World Picture* 6 (Winter 2011): http://worldpicturejournal.com/WP_6/Manon.html

of translating the Atari's analogue signal to digital programming instructions, Richardson has suddenly removed its game cartridge, while also varying the amount of electricity flowing into its hardware. Physically interfering in this way causes the console to continue to send information, but with the content removed, the system attempts to self-calibrate, thereby generating random couplings of sound and image. Richardson has meticulously collected these outcomes over the course of hundreds of hours, never separating the visual and auditory elements, so as to eventually arrange them into digital readymades, held together through the symphonic glitch assemblage that is *Janus*.

Modifying the strength of the electrical signals that run to the machine further broadens the range of unpredictable results. In a process referred to by writer Christopher McKinnon as "controlled brownouts,"⁸ if the power is at full strength and not fluctuating excessively, the sounds and images produced by the machine will be that of perfectly ordered bars of bold colours and pure tones, not unlike the test patterns of analogue televisions of yore. If the power is reduced however, a dynamic spectrum of unstable visual noise and sound is generated. In effect, just as Duchamp eschewed the concept of the artist as a skilled producer of handmade objects, Richardson has evolved the concept of the video artist from being a recorder of imaged reality, towards that of a purveyor of aesthetically converted analogue-to-digital, and digital-to-analogue hardware signals.

In *The Aesthetics of Failure: Post-Digital Tendencies in Contemporary Computer Music* (2000), one of the earliest treatises to describe and analyze a contemporary iteration of the glitch genre, electronic and industrial music composer Kim Cascone maintains that art forms which apply the aesthetic of noise confront us with the fact that, "The tendrils of digital technology have in some way touched everyone...Indeed, 'failure' has become a prominent aesthetic in many of the arts in the late 20th century, reminding us that our control of technology is an illusion, revealing digital tools to be only as perfect, precise and efficient as the humans who build them."⁹ In the wake of Cambridge Analytica, the rise of deepfakes, and the real impacts of nonsensical memes upon the political landscape, it would seem that the past few years have ably demonstrated the point—that the more saturated society becomes with digital information and technological devices, the more that error and breakdown will become ever-present.

Equally important however is the critical potentiality of the glitch, and the artists who experiment with it as a visual grammar, both of which are sure to persist alongside emerging future technologies. While *Janus* presents a sublime and immersive viewing experience inevitably keyed to nostalgia for a simpler time, it also gestures towards the volatile and pervasive information systems that surround us today. Named for the dual-

⁸ Christopher McKinnon. "Failure, Transformation, Order: Tasman Richardson's 'Janus.'" *Luma Quarterly*, vol. 2, no. 7, Winter 2017.

⁹ Kim Cascone, "The Aesthetics of Failure: 'Post-Digital' Tendencies in Contemporary Computer Music," *Computer Music Journal* 24.

faced Roman god of gateways and transitions, *Janus* beckons us towards the ambivalent threshold of technology; what the philosopher Martin Heidegger called its “danger and saving power.”¹⁰ Its unstable signals lull us into a rhythmic and regulatory space of comfort, beguiling us until we stumble into the dystopian techno-future that awaits us on the other side.

¹⁰ Heidegger, Martin. “The Danger” in *Bremen and Freiburg Lectures: Insight Into That Which Is and Basic Principles of Thinking*. Translated by Andrew J. Mitchell. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012. p.44-63.