

# DUFRENNE AND THE VIRTUAL

## as an Aesthetic Category in Phenomenology

### *Introduction*

In the last five to ten years technological progress has fostered the increasing use of the term *virtual*. Especially in the field of computer technology certain interfaces have been developed which are to be subsumed under the notion *virtual reality*. These interfaces, engineered to enhance the interaction between man and computing machine, are to be characterized as a frameless simulation of a universal environment, which may even lead to the construction of sensual input of tactility. We will return to this definition later.

However, the notion of the *virtual*, as we want to demonstrate, may serve as an aesthetic category, which originates in a particular *Ausarbeitung* of phenomenology. As such, it can be applied in analyses by present aesthetic theory. The starting point is a close look at inquiries into aesthetics in relation to new media (art which is generated by means of or with the help of computers and video, thereby engendering works of art which cannot be accounted for in traditional ways). As a result, a certain theoretical inhomogeneity of these inquiries becomes manifest. Various models of explanation like e.g. constructivism<sup>1</sup> are employed in a dispersed, pluralistic manner, and lack precise or rigorous examination of the field of inquiry. Consequently, no generally acknowledged terminology or conceptualisation has been developed and applied. Starting from the smallest, nuclear units and continuing upwards in scale until the comprehensive, general phenomenon is reached, the aesthetic field is simultaneously underdetermined, as obvious gaps in its description (for instance perceptual constitution) seem to indicate,

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<sup>1</sup> (cf. Florian Rötzer (1993), *Images Within Images*, or, "From the Image to the Virtual World," in: Timothy Druckrey (ed.), *Iterations: The New Image*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press 1993, pp.6177)

and overdetermined, as the multitude of competing models of explanation indicates. The collection of essays *Electronic Culture*<sup>2</sup> from 1996 can be taken as an illustration of this pluralistic approach (plural in its pejorative sense). Either the realm of new media is regarded as a continuation of traditional forms of art by new means, that is, an approach in which the traditional categories are arduously adapted to these expansions of art, or a new conceptual system is brought into being, so the novel phenomena can be described in a precise manner, even in a new vocabulary<sup>3</sup>. The danger that lies in the first approach is a possible lack of flexibility of its concepts, which eventually will limit its conception of new phenomena; the danger of the latter consists in the lack of an underlying, supporting conceptual system to simultaneously constrain and organise the production of new notions.

In this quandary, we will try to present the development of a different perspective which may offer a solution intended to unify the two approaches. In terms of the category of the virtual, which is not widely used by phenomenological aesthetics, phenomenology may offer a possible way to answer both demands: the demand for conceptual rigour and the demand for adaptability to new constellations and facts. In order to give an account of this concept we are going to give a short summary of phenomenological aesthetics, its main representatives and its main concepts. Mikel Dufrenne's never tiring efforts in phenomenological aesthetics will be outlined; furthermore we will try to explain how the notion of the virtual, especially in the definition given by Dufrenne, can be applied to aesthetics in new media; an example of art in this new media will illustrate how the virtual can contribute to aesthetics as an efficient category. Finally a short discussion will present some ideas of the chances and possibilities of an aesthetics supplemented with phenomenological rigor and phenomenological categories.

### *Phenomenological Aesthetics*

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<sup>2</sup> (Timothy Druckrey (ed.), *Electronic Culture*, New York: Aperture 1996)

<sup>3</sup> (cf. Villem Flusser, Jean Baudrillard)

Where phenomenology, if at all, deals with art phenomena it deviates from traditional aesthetics which sometimes still uses Kantian categories. The primacy of perception in phenomenology hints at a preference of sensuality as aisthesis. Hence it may be worthwhile to take a look at phenomenological positions in regard to aesthetics.

Generally it can be said that phenomenology has laid emphasis on various aspects of art. A few of its attempts lead to quite independent art theories, such as the aesthetics of reception following Roman Ingarden's analyses of literary works of art. Starting points in Husserl's writings with regard to the project of a phenomenological aesthetics are, among others, the theory of the image, the role of phantasy, and the neutralisation of the relation to reality.

To give an impression of what phenomenological aesthetics is about, and to render a survey of the notions and concepts engaged, we will present in a short outline its main representatives and their ideas. The historical beginnings of a phenomenological aesthetics which Husserl did not explicitly elaborate in his work are sketched with a few names: Moritz Geiger<sup>4</sup> expands Husserl's focus on the object as such to aesthetics by the concepts of empathy (*Einfühlung*) and aesthetic enjoyment, which he mainly derives from empirical psychology. Fritz<sup>5</sup> emphasises, in a way similar to Heidegger, the artistic being-in-the-mood (*Gestimmt*

*Sein*) and the relation of art to religion and metaphysics. Oskar Becker<sup>6</sup> gives an account of the work of art as a hyperontological phenomenon, which cannot be considered simply a past fact, but remains beyond history. Yet these approaches are far from being systematic or complete, which perhaps is the reason for not having engendered further discussion. In comparison, Roman Ingarden<sup>7</sup> is an exception, as he triggers the development of the above-mentioned aesthetics of reception, which elaborated his theory

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<sup>4</sup> (*Die Bedeutung der Kunst*, 1916)

<sup>5</sup> Kaufmann (*Das Reich des Schönen*, 1960)

<sup>6</sup> (*Dasein und Dawesen*, 1963)

<sup>7</sup> (*The Literary Work of Art*, 1931)

of the interpretatory gap to an impressive theory of the processes in a reader's consciousness. As a matter of fact, Martin Heidegger has to be mentioned in this context, since he began his work as an assistant of Husserl in the phenomenological tradition. His contribution to aesthetics in general, as original and substantial as it may be (above all, his analyses of the work of art and of language as *Dichtung*), does not share many of the conventional features of phenomenological inquiry (focus on intentionality, on acts of consciousness, and so on), so it can be skipped here.

With regard to the phenomenological tradition in France, where the question of aesthetics fell on more fruitful grounds in terms of interest and elaboration, one has to mention Jean

Paul Sartre's concept of imagination. In his work imagination is not, as in Husserl's theory, only a modification of the primordial *Urmodus* (arch-mode) of perception, but has a power of its own, which results in the de-realisation, the *néantisation* of the real world. At the same time imagination is one of the forms which render possible a process of consciousness between subject and object. Sartre distinguishes this imagining consciousness from the realizing consciousness of perception. According to Sartre, the latter has infinitely rich nuances, whereas the former is determined by an impoverished state. The work of art, for Sartre, is transformed into an unreal thing, i.e. it appears only as aesthetic object, and only under the condition that the spectator's consciousness changes into an imagining consciousness. What we conceive as the work of art, as the real object in space-time, or as the real perceived musical performance, is for Sartre only the real analogon for the unreal object of consciousness, the aesthetic object. The material quality of the work of art is the agent evoking the aesthetic object. Sartre has to be praised for having introduced sensuality into the discussion of aesthetic experience.

The other great figure in French phenomenology is, of course, Maurice Merleau

Ponty. His fundamental contributions to the phenomenological movement, or rather to the idea it represents, are manifold. We only will recall the most important ones which treat

problems of the aesthetic field. The first thing that has to be mentioned, when Merleau-Ponty's view on painting is considered, is the emphasis on a lived perspective, on the relation between the living body and the visible world. In this way, he abandons the univocal, planimetric perspective. In the works of painters he tries to extract meaning which refers to qualities that seem rather alien to painting, such as the gesturing and speaking of the subject. In the same attempt Merleau-Ponty points out the primacy of solidity and constancy over secondary qualities like color and tangibility in a context of the subject's life itself. It is the fusion of the self and the world which, according to Merleau-Ponty, takes place in artistic creation, and not an imitation or subjective projection of the artist's imagination. Moreover, this approach allows for the overdetermination and abundance of meaning in an artwork. The notion of style as a system of equivalences an artist creates in order to grapple with the visible world (the coherent deformation by which he concentrates the still scattered meaning of his perception and brings about its explicit existence<sup>8</sup>,

and the intertwining of the visible with the invisible mark the subsequent drifting towards questions of ontology. This orientation towards ontological problems is a tendency he shares with the French philosopher Mikel Dufrenne, who has to be praised as the main contributor to the project of a phenomenological aesthetics.

### *Mikel Dufrenne*

Mikel Dufrenne's *Phénoménologie de l'expérience esthétique* (1953)<sup>9</sup>, is a systematic and comprehensive attempt to penetrate the processes and layers in experiencing aesthetic phenomena of all kinds. In later years he dedicated a great part of his studies to aesthetic questions, such as *Le Poétique* (1963) in the following decade. Between the 1967 and 1981 a series of essays with the title *Esthétique et philosophie* was published in three volumes. 1987 the

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<sup>8</sup> Maurice-Merleau Ponty, *Signs*, Evanston: Northwestern University Press 1964, pp. 54f.

<sup>9</sup> *The Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience*, Atlantic Highlands: Humanities Press 1987, p. 5.

book *L'oeil et l'oreille* (The Eye and the Ear) treated questions of the sensuous and focused on the mutual relation among the senses with regard to lived aesthetic experience.

Moreover we would like to draw attention to the fact that in the German speaking world Dufrenne is not as widely known as in England and North America. Until today not one single translation of his books into German has been published. Due to this fact Dufrenne is not widely studied among phenomenological thinkers in Austria, Switzerland and Germany.

In order to give an overall impression, we will sketch the main concepts of the *Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience*. In this book, Dufrenne aims at the correlativity of aesthetic object and aesthetic experience, which can be described only in their mutual relations. Since aesthetic experience takes place in a subject, more precisely in a spectator-subject, Dufrenne stresses the aspect of the recipient and not that of the producer of art. The aesthetic object is the work of art accomplished by aesthetic perception. The sensuous is the key concept for the aesthetic object, since here one does not deal with an object's raw, expressionless sensuousness (of sense-constituents), but with a sensuous which is instrumental in the structure of the aesthetic object. The sensuous is the common act of the sensing and the sensed<sup>10</sup>.

Furthermore, the meaning of the aesthetic object is given as a whole in the sensuous and does not refer to something that lies outside the object as with action or knowledge. This meaning organizes the aesthetic object within the limits of spatio-temporal patterns. By means of potential internal relations a world is expressed, which, according to Dufrenne, qualifies the aesthetic object as a quasi-subject. The inexhaustible abundance of the aesthetic object in its multitude of actual and potential relations within itself and with the spectator justify speaking of a world as well as giving it the status of a quasi-subject.

This world within the aesthetic object has an expressivity of its own, since it is capable of rendering expression. This feature, one

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<sup>10</sup> Mikel Dufrenne, *In the Presence of the Sensuous*, Atlantic Highlands: Humanities Press 1987, p.5.

of Dufrenne's most original contributions<sup>11</sup>

is based on affective qualities which enhance the status of the quasi-subjective and make it possible to establish a typology of aesthetic objects. For the function of the affective quality, like the meaning of which it is the expressive counterpart, is precisely to organize the sensuous<sup>12</sup>.

On the subject's side, Dufrenne introduces feeling (sentiment), which enables the communion of subject and object in aesthetic experience. Feeling operates as transcendental organ of the recipient, dealing with the expressivity of the work of art and locating it in his or her presence. This interplay of aesthetic object and perceiving subject in aesthetic experience also has a transcendental dimension: the affective quality of the aesthetic object even constitutes the expressed world and can thus be looked upon as cosmological a priori. In the perceiving subject as well certain affective categories can be identified, e.g. the sublime, tragic, the just, which we know a priori, and which Dufrenne calls existential a priori. In this transcendental context, the term virtual emerges for the first time: the existential a priori is a knowledge a priori, it has been always already possessed, thus it is virtual in the sense of being a possibility, a knowledge that has not yet been actualized. In his late work Husserl stressed the importance of habitus and sedimentation for his general concept of the life-world. Both of these terms are comparable with Dufrenne's virtual knowledge, to the extent that they are able to presuppose a realm of habits or achievements in consciousness which is not directly accessible by the latter's activities. Dufrenne remarked on this in The Notion of the A Priori: Now, the only difference between the a priori, understood as a virtuality and as a habit, is that virtuality is a nonacquired habit, even if it comes to light only through experience. Virtuality is the ground from which habits arise; it determines the facility and rapidity of their execution<sup>13</sup>.

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<sup>11</sup> Edward S. Casey, Forward, in: Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience, p.xxvii.

<sup>12</sup> Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience, p.xxxiii.

<sup>13</sup> Mikel Dufrenne, The Notion of the A Priori, Evanston: Northwestern University Press 1966, pp. 155f.

This work is an attempt to liberate the concept of the a priori from the restrictions of Kant and to apply it in his position of a post-critical naturalism<sup>14</sup>.

As far as the meaning and function of the virtual and of virtuality are concerned, Dufrenne characterizes them as a not yet actualized knowledge, a possibility on the side of the subject in opposition to a possibility on the side of the real and of nature: For we must not confuse the virtual with the possible here. In the subject, the virtual already exists, even if it is not actualized or made explicit. The opportunity to be made explicit as knowledge is proposed by the world, since the subjective a priori is nothing more than the comprehension of the objective a priori: the subjective a priori remains virtual because the objective a priori remains possible<sup>15</sup>.

At this point in our account of Dufrenne's aesthetics, it might be useful to stop and turn to a short lexical outline of the term "virtual," which is used in different contexts. "Virtual" derives from the Latin "virtus," meaning strength or virtue. Its literal translation is "in possession of certain physical virtues." Its customary use would be as being such in essence or effect though not formally recognized or admitted, or, in physics, of, relating to, or being a hypothetical particle whose existence is inferred from indirect evidence, e.g. virtual photons<sup>16</sup>.

(moreover, the theory of science in a Bachelardian way, an *épistémologie*, may certainly contribute to the notion of the virtual, if Bachelard's emphasis on indirect inference is considered; according to him, apparatuses and experimental devices of natural science already represent filters or media which permit only indirect or mediated evidence); in the 19th century, with the developing science of optics, the virtual image is described as an image (as seen in a

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<sup>14</sup> Edward S. Casey, Translator's Introduction, in The Notion of the A Priori, p.xxiv.

<sup>15</sup> Mikel Dufrenne, The Notion of the A Priori, p. 202.

<sup>16</sup> Moreover, the theory of science in a Bachelardian way, an *épistémologie*, may certainly contribute to the notion of the virtual, if Bachelard's emphasis on indirect inference is considered. According to Bachelard, apparatuses and experimental devices of natural science already represent filters or media which permit only indirect or mediated evidence.



plane mirror) formed of points from which divergent rays (as of light) seem to emanate without actually doing so ; and about at the end of the last decade, the term virtual reality accounts for an artificial environment which is experienced through sensory stimuli (as sights and sounds) provided by a computer and in which one's actions partially determine what happens in the environment . In optics, the optical image is defined as the apparent reproduction of an object, formed by a lens or mirror system from reflected, refracted, or diffracted light waves. There are two kinds of images, real and virtual. In a real image the light rays actually are brought to a focus at the image position, and the real image may be made visible on a screen. This is impossible for a virtual image, since it is constituted by rays that do not come from where the image seems to be; e.g., the virtual image in a plane mirror is at some distance behind the mirror. It can also be formed inside an instrument like a microscope or telescope at the point where diverging rays would cross if they were extended backward into the instrument. Thus in the traditional notion of the virtual two genuine meanings can be identified: one relating to the possible and the other relating to a certain mode of visibility. This historical determination of the term virtual already offers some points of departure for a use in an aesthetic theory, e.g. the connotation with visibility or the connotation with appearance, which connects it to traditional aesthetic questions (schöner Schein).

### *Virtuality in Dufrenne and in Aesthetics*

Dufrenne uses virtuality or the virtual not only in the sense and context presented above; his return to the term demonstrates his fascination with

In L'oeil et l'oreille<sup>17</sup> Dufrenne inquires into the interplay and interdependence of different sensorial registers. It is the virtual which forms the main subject in the concluding chapter. This chapter begins with the already known definition of the virtual as an immediate imaginary: the virtual is not to be applied if two senses are stimulated

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<sup>17</sup> (Hexagon 1987)

simultaneously (which is a simple synesthesia). It is only employed if the stimulus in one sense is accompanied by a certain image of another stimulus in a different sense, e.g. the music of a painting which is not a musical object. The virtual is located in the body of the subject, where the experience of the world is gathered: My hand has already felt the velvet quality of this fabric, and did not forget it, as my mouth did not forget the sugar-taste of the raisin whose golden transparence my eye has grasped<sup>18</sup>. Dufrenne calls it an imaginary immanent in perception: the velvet quality is not present, as if invoked, but it is not absent as if never known, either it is virtually here. Imagination is seductive, says Dufrenne, for it can carry away one's images in an aesthetic experience, hence his claim to suppress imagination during aesthetic perception. The imaginary has to be distinguished from the imagined: the imaginary is not felt, not given as embodied, it is pre-sensed in the shadow of the sensed<sup>19</sup> it is an imaginable, which is a different way to signify the virtual. This notion of the virtual recalls Dufrenne's earlier thoughts; above we saw that the virtual is the subjective counterpart to the possible in the realm of the real. The imaginable precedes the real, and the imaginary as the virtual can be defined as a function either of the subject or the object, either as immanent imaginary or as the non-perceived which impregnates the real as the possibility of perception: the non-visible which adheres to the visible and renders it a new dimension. The visible tells of this invisible: the gold of the raisin tells of its sugar as the transparence of the crystal tells of its sound<sup>20</sup>. The virtual seems to appear in the object, it haunts the object and adds being and sense to it. Dufrenne even refers to Merleau-Ponty when he says that it urges us to think the object as flesh<sup>21</sup>. The virtual, again in its definition as a priori, is the potential in the object; in the subject it is a possibility to anticipate experience. Thus the virtual can be understood as a mediating instance between object and subject. This feature, as can be easily conceived, is

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<sup>18</sup> (loc.cit., p.190)

<sup>19</sup> (loc.cit., p.193)

<sup>20</sup> (Loc.cit., p.195)

<sup>21</sup> (loc.cit., p.194)

essential in explaining the structures of aesthetic experience<sup>22</sup>. Dufrenne defines imagination by its receptivity, as recipient, not as producer of the imaginary: hence the imaginary is part of the world. The imaginary can remain impersonal, latent, in a pre-actualized state: The imaginable ocean, which lends its title to the musical work, is evidently not visible in listening to the symphonic poem; but it must not be imaginarised, either, must not tilt in a subjective imaginary, where manifold images can contribute to a singular mediterranean<sup>23</sup>. In the concluding paragraphs Dufrenne determines the virtual as trans-sensuous in order to designate a certain pre-sensed in aesthetic experience: This virtual were latent due to lack of its power to inscribe itself in a determined register, because it reaches across several of them: transsensuous since multisensuous, one would dare to say, but also multisensuous since presensuous. (Loc.cit., p.199)

Summarizing the definitions of the virtual, we can distinguish three types or connotations of the virtual: first, the virtual as a priori knowledge in the subject, structuring affective qualities and dispositions. Second, the virtual in its function as imaginable as intermediate between object and subject, situated in the shadow of the sensuous, and a priori to any given image, the trans- or pre-sensuous. And third, the virtual as a particular species of image, derived from its application in optics, from the field of the visual; though it is probably suitable to describe this species of images in other senses, too it should be possible to generalize the image and detach it from vision<sup>24</sup>.

However, the question is: which distinctions can be made with regards to a virtual image? A juxtaposition of all those meanings of the virtual would certainly serve well to describe its precarious location. Contrary to the genuine image, a virtual image is not located in the realm or region where images are constituted or perceived, it is displaced, shifted, like a phantom which is haunting imagination and

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<sup>22</sup> (Loc.cit., p.196)

<sup>23</sup> (Loc.cit., p.198)

<sup>24</sup> (here we have to think of Saussures definition of the signifier as an acoustic image, which already is subjective, yet, of course, not visual)

even perception. It is somewhere else, in an impossible position on the verge of being imagined, on the verge of the imaginable, effecting the imaginable, but not being perceived itself.

Virtuality, then, could be applied to phenomena, especially aesthetic objects, which affect more than one imaginary or sensual register, but without subduing to simple synesthetic combinations, e.g. in situations when we talk about the sound of a color without actually imagining a sound at the sight of the color.

What is not actually perceived, yet on the verge of being perceived, adds to an aesthetic object a new meaning (increase of being and sense<sup>25</sup>). It co-constitutes its depth and expressivity. It is this virtual that adds to the overall effect of the work of art, but without actually being taken into account mentally or perceptively, as something that causes anticipations of future images.

Of course one has to ask about the necessity of the introduction of the term virtual into a theoretical framework, since there are several terms with similar meaning which philosophy has been using for a long time: What might be the difference to possible, real, unreal, latent, apparent, as if (in Husserl's phenomenology the difference between real and unreal could be complete that list)? Obviously, the main connection of virtual to these terms is the relation to a certain visibility, in addition to a weakened or changed mode of reality (though Dufrenne uses this more optical meaning in his later writings). Moreover, the aspect of inherence, of unrecognized being contained has to be mentioned, which, according to Dufrenne<sup>26</sup>, in Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience and The Notion of the A Priori holds a decisive position, and can be compared with the concept of latency in psychoanalysis.

### *Art in the New Media*

What are the characteristics of art in the new media such as video, computer graphics and image processing, and computer-aided

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<sup>25</sup> Loc.cit., p.196)

<sup>26</sup> Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience and The Notion of the A Priori

art forms in general? From the point of view of the constitution of an aesthetic experience, the mechanised interactivity has to be observed (the happenings and the actionism of the 60s might be called the predecessors to this feature; hence much of what can be said on interactivity is also valid for these art forms). Furthermore there is the immersive quality of surrounding environments; the digital processing of images; the self-referential and self-modifying forms of generative patterns; and new forms of collective participation and collaboration in the creation of the work of art<sup>27</sup>.

The virtual, however, can account for two of these dimensions: interactivity, and immersion, as these dimensions are linked to the field of phenomenology. New artistic devices and methods are more efficiently explained and conceived by other approaches, e.g. by sociology or psychology of creativity. If perhaps the phenomenological inquiry into the aesthetics of new media will have developed further, it will be possible to grapple with the above-mentioned feature of collectivity, since intersubjectivity was an is a main issue in phenomenology.

Interactivity, which can be seen as a terminological suggestion for an answering aesthetic object, complicates this object's constitution: not only has the spectator-subject to respond to the expressivity of the aesthetic object, she also engenders new strata of meaning within it, adds new dimensions of expression by virtue of her own reactions. She thus deepens and affirms the status of the aesthetic object as a quasi-subject. In the case of interactive contexts virtuality will be applied to analyse and explain the emergence of unforeseen dispositions in an interactive dialogue with the work of art. We might say that the dialogue produces an image which remains virtual, since it is not foreseeable and exceeds any anticipations. There is also a reference to the imaginable, as a sensed or even only pre-sensed potential that comes into being through mutual constitutional processes as the interaction continues (very much in the same way as the quasi-subject is engendered, but on an even more personalised level).

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<sup>27</sup> (for the latter cf. Pierre Levy, "The Art of Cyberspace," in: Timothy Druckrey (ed.), *Electronic Culture*, Aperture 1996)

Immersive environments, as a second trait of art in the new media, are another art form the notion of the virtual can deal with. An immersive work of art surrounds the spectator on all sides by its sensorial input; its technological implementations can be flight simulators for airplane pilots or virtual reality arcade games. The simultaneous substitution of several sensorial registers creates a distinct kind of virtual image there is not need for a reduction such as in any performative art (in theatre, the spectator has to parenthesize the fact that he sits in the auditory). This impossibility of keeping one's distance gives rise to particular sensations. However, if this immersive environment interacts with the immersed subject in terms of tactile feedback or simulated motions, another layer of sensory perception is provided contributing to aesthetic experience though presently it is difficult to imagine a full-fledged work of art of this kind. Nevertheless, at this point the virtual consists of the enclosing image as well as of the trans-sensuous quality felt or better pre-sensed in this environment. Presumably this pre-sensuous may function as well as a sort of reality-sign (to make it possible, as in early psychonanalysis, to distinguish the real from the imaginary), because the virtual extends across all senses without being involved in any, and thus impartially accounts for a grasp of reality.

### *Examples for Virtuality*

To illustrate the competence of the category of the virtual in explaining aesthetic experiences in the art of the new media, an application to two exemplary works of art will be sketched. These works of art are deliberately chosen simple, so the general idea can be more easily conveyed.

The first one is VIDEOPLACE, an interactive media installation from 1975 by the pioneering computer and video artist Myron Krueger. VIDEOPLACE was an installation with video equipment, basically set up to interweave video input with graphical editing and participant's responses to their fed

back images. Krueger had noticed [...] that people identified themselves very strongly, almost physically, with their video images,

even in the form of silhouettes. In an early experiment, when Krueger and an assistant at a remote location were using video silhouettes of their own hands to point at objects in a shared video space, he accidentally moved his hand's video image so that it intersected with the video image of his assistant's hand. The assistant moved his hand away, as if he had been touched. In a visceral way, mixing people's video images together in a way that was visible to them created a new kind of communication space, complete with a sensitivity to the boundaries of one's virtual body<sup>28</sup>. Moreover, the instance of actual touch is a test in implementing virtual reality—reconstructing in an image the sensation of touching and being touched ranks among the most difficult tasks in VR

engineering. This example makes it quite obvious how the virtual affects bodily sensations by projection and identification: the persons taking part at the video installation produced virtual images of their bodies, and reacted upon what virtually happened to these images. The perceived margins of their physical bodies overlapped or fused with the sensations given by the work of art, thereby opening new dimensions in self-perception and participating in a process of discovering new possibilities of movement and interaction.

The other example is a more recent work: in 1993 Joachim Sauter has developed a provocative interactive experiment concept, with the title *The Un-Seer (Der Zerseher)*, in which the unconsciously and arbitrarily executed movements of the eye are linked, on a visual level, to changes in the image and thus the position of an external observer is systematically destroyed. Using an eye-tracking system, eye movements are linked to the image such a way that each movement destroys the part of the image viewed. What remains is a color painting of motions executed by the eye. Here, the observer is captured inside the image; he or she interferes with the image while creating a new image<sup>29</sup>. By correlating the unconscious bodily movements of vision with effacing the actual seen image, a virtual, pre-sensuous, as it were, connection is made between customary acts of seeing and the image of e.g. consummation; here,

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<sup>28</sup> (Howard Rheingold, *Virtual Reality*, New York: Summit Books 1991, p.122)

<sup>29</sup> (Florian Rötzer, *loc.cit.*, p.75)

the German idiom *mit den Augen verschlingen* (to swallow up with the eyes) takes on a new meaning, as does the aesthetic object in the process of constituting and simultaneously de-constituting, of building up and destroying at the same instance. Virtuality in this case is applied with regard to the uncommunicable, only imaginable yet not imagined decay of visibility. The impossibility of a decomposing visibility is performed by the virtual, for it cannot be rendered visible in the domain of visibility itself – we would only see a painting painted over with incoherent strokes.

### *Outlook*

These two examples represent of course only very rudimentary analyses. Yet we hope that they give an impression what the category of the virtual can contribute to aesthetics and especially the aesthetic theory of the New Media. Its elaboration by Dufrenne with its twofold emphasis on imagination and on potentialities of various kinds reassured us of the suitability of the phenomenological method even for describing present art forms; this first glimpse allows, however, to conclude that introducing the virtual into aesthetic theory in phenomenological contexts prevents from an unreflected and rash use of virtuality, and that it explains some phenomena and circumstances especially in the art of new media. If we want to continue our inquiries in the outlined way, we could, for instance, aim at a phenomenologically complete description of all phenomena encountered in a virtual reality-environment. A next step would be to reduce the description to those specific aesthetic qualities which are engendered by the particular art form (as certain stimuli are characteristic of dance, of theater, of music). Above all, the complete sensorial immersion into an environment without any need for reduction has to be studied with great care, since this feature is characteristic of the new art form produced by using the techniques of virtual reality. The elaboration and development of these approaches will be a promising task for future research in the aesthetics of New Media.