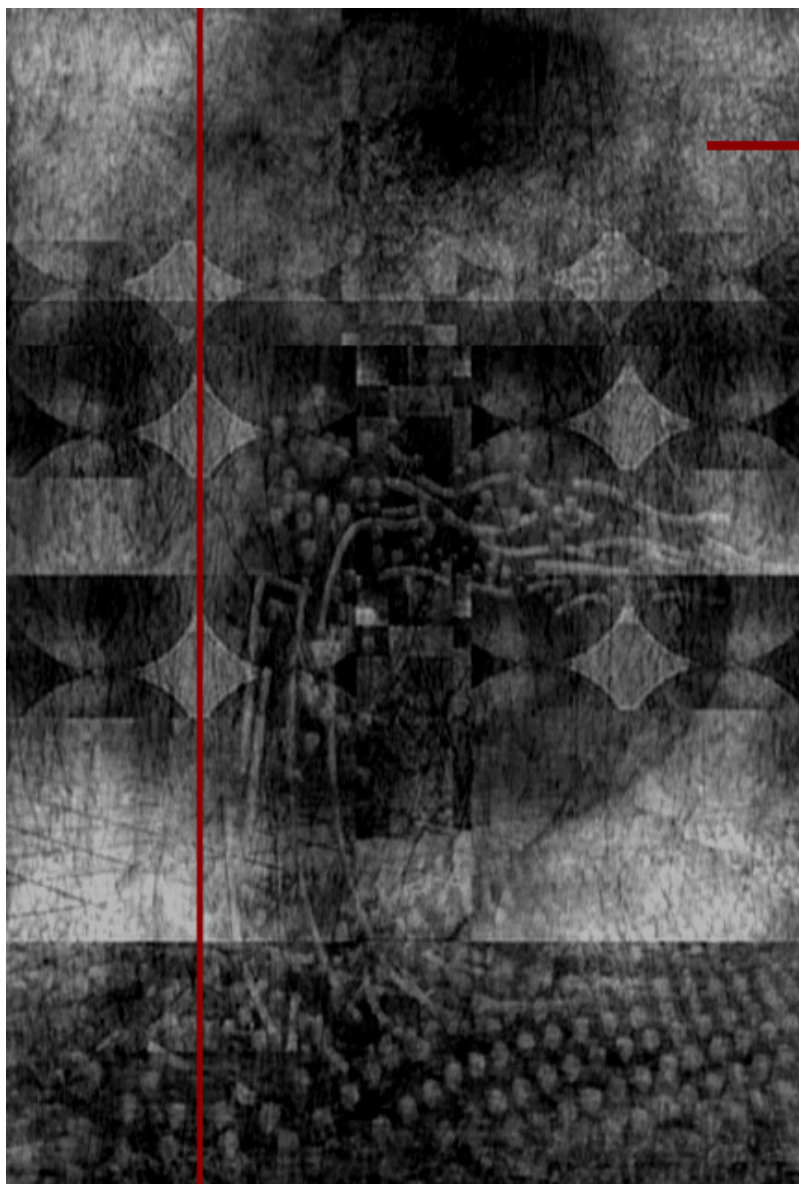


On Joseph Nechvatal's 2005 computer-robotic painting *rite Of spring*

by Erika Matsunami

Keywords: cybernetics; gender-fluid; fiction; transferred autonomy; queer posthumanism; viral aesthetic



rite Of spring (2005), Joseph Nechvatal
computer-robotic assisted acrylic on canvas, 112 x 168 cm¹

¹ Image courtesy of the studio of the artist: Joseph Nechvatal

rite Of spring (2005) by Joseph Nechvatal is a mystic and mysterious monochrome acrylic painting that raises questions of viewing (appreciation) and that which is beyond the creator's intentions (creativity).

The diverse play of time and space in the two-dimensional phenomena of this monochrome world (a world without realistic techniques) is created by a tapestry woven by the overlaps and gaps of its superficial rhythmic layers. Thereby, my understanding of this digital painting that Nechvatal calls *rite Of spring* is that algorithmic time intervenes. Immersion into noise (whether viral algorithmic activity is noise or not) is the template that is created and constructed by a script that forms a new spatiality. Is that new spatiality that of erosion? If so, it is completely different from the erosion of a biological virus as it functions in an environment in which there is no smell, no sound, and nothing can be said to the existence of metadata.

I

“Ich möchte über das Pathos hinaus die Bewegung ordnen”. (I want to order movement beyond pathos.) -Paul Klee, September 1914

According to Roman Bartosch and Julia Hoydis in their essay *Narrating the Edges of Humanity: Conceptions of Posthumanism in Anglophone Fiction*², “Focusing on the symbiotic interdependencies between the human, the animal, and the machine as well as ethically charged ontological distinctions between the human and the nonhuman, the general preoccupation of posthumanism is seeking a redefinition of the category of the human. As a philosophical concept, it also interrogates the legacies of Western humanism and captures the tension between perceived risk of losing the traits of the ‘essential’ human, which Francis Fukuyama, for lack of a better term, calls the “Factor X” (2002, 149), and the embrace of new possibilities of (co)existence, as envisioned, for example, in Pramod K. Nayar’s notion of a “species cosmopolitanism” (2014, 150).”³

The monochrome world of *rite Of spring* was painted by computer-robotics on a two-dimensional canvas. It’s maquette came from the virtual world, the space without perspective of the world of “seeing-in”⁴ the real world.

The creativity brought about by the narrativity of this robot-assisted acrylic painting—that is free of clear depictions—lies between random construction and the collapse of a certain rhythm that pulses between unintentional space and time. Here there is no category of gender in our ‘thoughts’; rather, gender is ‘intangible’ in relation to the “I” of physical existence. It

² *Narrating the Edges of Humanity: Conceptions of Posthumanism in Anglophone Fiction*, Roman Bartosch and Julia Hoydis, *Anglistik: International Journal of English Studies* 30.2 (Summer 2019): pp. 65–68, Universitätsverlag Winter GmbH Heidelberg, 2019

³ Ibid. p.65, The relevance of this essay by Roman Bartosch and Julia Hoydis to Joseph Nechvatal's work *rite Of spring* is from the point of view that "humanism transforms itself into something" goes beyond the essentiality and existentiality in post-humanism.

⁴ *Art and its Objects*, Richard Wollheim, 1968 (Cambridge University Press, 2015) As an experience of 'seeing-in': from two-foldness to multi-foldness in *rite Of spring*; the possibility of new irreducible modes and changes in the essential mode of human existence.

might be possible to begin to think in this fiction that the “I” does not lie in my thoughts, but exists in ‘my’ DNA. There, traces of memory are also intangible. The secret of the life-force lies not in an external paradigm, but in a series of random events whose possibilities are immeasurable. Needless to say, today’s science of genomic sequencing has proven that this invisibility is a reality. A collection of cells, formed by formless information, is our individual ‘essentiality’.

Pathos and cybernetics in art refers to rhetoric. The word ‘pathos’ has undergone many changes in meaning since it was first systematically defined in Greek rhetoric. The basis of the Western tradition follows ancient Greek culture. In rhetoric, pathos refers to the means of persuasion in speech. In the context of post-Warhol painting, *rite Of spring* is more organic and biological than Warhol. It suggests a transition in art away from the metaphysical inorganic towards the metaphysical organic which has been taking place since the 1980s.

As for the relationship between image and information, *rite Of spring* consists of a group of encodings. Its invisible information (such as $B \rightarrow x7 + \{ \} <---$) with which this methodological research began, I already find at the beginning of the 20th century with the musical fine art of Paul Klee. Encodings are already there, as when Klee started to design a space of fictional virtuality. He methodologically made paintings within a new mode of active line and color which referred to visual codes and coded logics. Klee explored these methods of organized visual composition in his teaching practice with his so-called ‘visual poems’.

At first glance, Klee’s method of creating space-time on a two-dimensional canvas space by using the visibility of lines and colors may seem similar to *rite Of spring*, yet Joseph Nechvatal’s visual fiction uses a completely different methodology than that of Paul Klee. By contrast, Klee advanced the evolution of language through compositions based on a new mode of visual code. Nechvatal’s methodology is a shift from drawing towards visual expression made through code writing. The visual mode that we see with *rite Of spring*, and the composition of that visual mode, are the same acts. The act of drawing has been transformed into the act of programming.

But Nechvatal’s *rite Of spring* must also be considered within a mechanical context, as he has been exploring automatism. Automatism is a practice glorified by the Surrealists as early as 1924 in André Breton’s first *Manifeste du surréalisme* (Surrealist Manifesto). Nechvatal is very interested in the of semi-automatic drawings of André Masson (1896–1987) which began in 1923.⁵ Now, a 100 years later, I would like to note that an interpretation of the digital as the material requires an understanding about the transfer of coding in the structure of the computer system. (Reference: Artistic Research N.N - Zwischenliend⁶) Empirical experiments in science have methodologies for creating virtual situations, but this is different from that virtual world.

⁵ André Masson: *There Is No Finished World*, Joseph Nechvatal, 2024, <https://whitehotmagazine.com/articles/there-is-no-finished-world/6366>

⁶ Artistic Research *N.N-Zwischenliend*, Erika Matsunami, 2019, <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/526802/561392>

It is necessary to consider diversification within the virtual world as applies to the concept of the automatic.

II

As Lyndsey Jennings said about the work of Joseph Nechvatal “(...) Nechvatal’s work stretches to many fields, including music, computer coding and writing. He is also a researcher, who looks into the possibilities of using viruses to produce chaotic elements into an image.” For example, to create the paintings and animation in his 2015 *bOdy pandemOnium* show at Art Laboratory Berlin, Nechvatal used a custom virus program co-created with Stephane Sikora that was written in the C++ programming language. This virtual virus invades, destroys, and transforms Nechvatal’s prior painterly maquettes based on intimate parts of the human body. (Part of these maquettes were sampled from online medical image banks.) The 2x2m *frOnt windOw retinal autOmata* (2012) computer-robotic assisted painting focused on the eye and the 2x2m *rear windOw curiOsités* (2012) painting on the rectum, which when taken together represents the highest and lowest orifices of the human body.⁷

What I would like to focus on here is Nechvatal’s research into the possibility of using viruses to create chaotic elements in images. To create the works in *bOdy pandemOnium*, Nechvatal used his C++ programming language to invade, destroy, and transform his pictorial images based on intimate parts of the body. I think of this ‘image’ practice as a template (or schema) as the virtual virus infiltrates the digital image and causes it to collapse into transformation. It’s like a virus entering your body and destroying your cells. But antibodies can resist the virus, and the destroyed environment in *rite Of spring* repeats the reproduction of the virus. This is resistance by antibody reproduction.

The technical method of *rite Of spring* is completely different from the collage technique of cutting and pasting which was created by Cubism and used to great results in the Dada art movement. The random repetition of invasion, destruction, reproduction and reproduction (in time and space) in *rite Of spring* is a phenomenon only created by computer programming techniques used as an artistic method.

So, what new creativity does *rite Of spring* bring us? The act of driving a car, riding a bicycle, or using an instrument becomes part of our human senses. From this point of view, *rite Of spring* answers my questions about how it has us look at the space between viewing (appreciation) and what is beyond the creator’s intentions (creativity). As such, *rite Of spring* applies to the growth of our human evolution in the 21st century.

⁷ Joseph Nechvatal, Lyndsey Jennings, <https://www.doc.gold.ac.uk/creativeprojects/index.php/work/joseph-nechvatal/>

Erika Matsunami (www.art-identity.de) is a Japanese artist and artistic researcher, who is based in Berlin, Germany. Her work spans a range of themes and media, from sculpture and photography to video (audiovisual), sound composition, performance art and mixed media installations.