

Alexander Schubert

# Switching Worlds

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<b>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</b>	9
<b>PUBLICATION OF ARTICLES</b>	10
<b>ABSTRACT</b>	11
<b>1. INTRODUCTION</b>	12
1.1 Postdigital Turn	12
1.2 Personal Motivation	14
1.3 Postdigital Change in Perspective as a Compositional Strategy	14
1.4 Thesis Structure	15
<b>2. DIGITALITY, POST-INTERNET AND A NEW AESTHETIC</b>	17
<b>2.1 Digitality</b>	18
2.1.1 Raster and sampling	19
2.1.2 Computability of the New Media	21
2.1.3 Overlaying through Transcoding	23
<b>2.2 Post-Digitality</b>	25
2.2.1 Invisibility	26
2.2.2 Digital Imprinting	27
2.2.3 Post-Screen	29
2.2.4 Dis-Illusionment	31
2.2.5 Errors and Glitches	33
2.2.6 Visualization	37
<b>2.3 Post Internet</b>	38
2.3.1 Implications	39
2.3.2 Post-Internet Art	41
2.3.3 Post-Internet Perspective	43
<b>2.4 New Aesthetic</b>	47
2.4.1 New Aesthetic and the Web x.0	48
2.4.2 Virtual Ghosts	50
2.4.3 Surfaces	51
<b>2.5 Summary and Outlook</b>	53
<b>3. METHODS OF ARTISTIC RESEARCH</b>	57
<b>3.1 Artistic Research</b>	57
3.1.1 What is (Artistic) Research?	58
3.1.2 The Concept of Knowledge and (Sensory)Experience	61
3.1.3 Forms of Artistic Research	63
3.1.4 Production Aesthetics	65
3.1.5 Subject and Objectivity	68
3.1.6 Artistic Research: Opportunities and Summary of Relevant Aspects	70

<b>3.2 Exploratory Approaches in my Composition</b>	70
3.2.1 World Disclosure and Changing Perspectives	70
3.2.2 Tools, Interfaces and Research for the Arts	72
3.2.3 Experimental Designs	76
3.2.4 Documentation	82
3.2.5 Objective Subjectivity	84
3.2.6 Concrete Methods and Tools	86
3.2.7 Summary and Objectives	87
<b>4. POSTDIGITAL CHANGE OF PERSPECTIVE AS COMPOSITION STRATEGY</b>	88
<b>4.1 Composed Refocussing</b>	89
4.1.1 Focus in the Art Field	90
4.1.2 The Focus of my Compositional Work	92
<b>4.2 Postdigital Inevitability</b>	94
4.2.1 Postdigital Courses of Action	94
4.2.2 Postdigital Imperative	96
<b>4.3 Postdigital Practice as a Disclosure Tool</b>	98
4.3.1 Overview of Existing Practices	98
4.3.2 Interface View	104
4.3.3 Composite-View and Analogue Discretization	105
<b>4.4 The Digital Error as a Visibility Tool</b>	107
4.4.1 Glitch Art	109
4.4.2 Analogue Glitch Art and Surface Error	112
<b>4.5 Virtuality and Uncoupling</b>	115
4.5.1 Fundamental Terms	116
4.5.2 Uncoupling of the Tools	120
<b>4.6 Truth and Dis-Illusionment</b>	124
4.6.1 Deception	125
4.6.2 Nullification	127
<b>4.7 Uncoupling the Body</b>	131
4.7.1 References	132
4.7.2 Virtual Control Mechanisms	133
4.7.3 Synchronized Community	135
4.7.4 Changing Perspectives	138
<b>4.8 Post Internet</b>	140
4.8.1 Overview of Post-Internet Artworks	142
4.8.2 Sensitization and Disclosure	144
4.8.3 Wiki-Cooperation	146
4.8.4 Repository Composition	149
<b>4.9 Summary and Virtual Imperative</b>	151
<b>5. CONCLUSION AND PERSPECTIVES</b>	152
<b>5.1 Outlook “With the Eyes of the Machine”</b>	155

<b>6. PUBLISHED ARTICLES</b>	<b>158</b>
<b>6.1 The Aesthetics of Error</b>	<b>158</b>
6.1.1 Kinds of Errors and Principles	159
6.1.2 Causes of Error	159
6.1.3 Analogue and Digital Media	160
6.1.4 Coding	161
6.1.5 Behind the Scenes	163
6.1.6 Post-Internet	164
6.1.7 Virtual Systems and Expectations	165
6.1.8 Narrative Crash	166
6.1.9 Artificial Bodies and Performance Machinations	168
6.1.10 Forecast	171
<b>6.2 Virtuality and Deception</b>	<b>173</b>
6.2.1 Uncoupling	174
6.2.2 Hologram	176
6.2.3 Computer and Games	177
6.2.4 Bodies and Identities	180
6.2.5 Avatars and Synthetic People	181
6.2.6 Quantitative and Qualitative People	183
6.2.7 Virtual Imperative	184
6.2.8 Empty Interconnections and Lifeless Worlds	186
6.2.9 The Dis-Illusioning of the Production Resources	187
6.2.10 Tutorial World	188
6.2.11 Interfaces and Overlaps	189
6.2.12 Between the Worlds	190
6.2.13 Conclusion and Prospects	191
<b>6.3 Binary Composition</b>	<b>192</b>
6.3.1 Pop Aesthetic	193
6.3.2 Overwhelming	194
6.3.3 Intuition	196
6.3.4 Humour	197
6.3.5 Bodies	198
6.3.6 Private	199
<b>6.4 Focussing the Gaze</b>	<b>200</b>
6.4.1 Central Themes in my Work	201
6.4.2 The Slow Penetration of Light	202
6.4.3 Prototyping	203
6.4.4 The Relationship between Sound and Light	205
6.4.5 Pitfalls	208
6.4.5 Installations	209
6.4.7 Future Projects	210
<b>6.5 Uncertain Conditions</b>	<b>211</b>
6.5.1 Sensor/Performance	211
6.5.2 Hybrid	212

6.5.3 Immersion	213
6.5.4 Narration	214
6.5.5 Thoughts/Projections	215
<b>7. WORK LIST</b>	<b>217</b>
<b>8. LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS</b>	<b>220</b>
<b>9. BIBLIOGRAPHY</b>	<b>222</b>

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## **ABSTRACT**

In the context of this work, I propose the examination of my compositional strategy in the context of a postdigital<sup>1</sup> perspective and present my artistic method as a tool for visualizing and sensually experiencing digital effects in the analogue world. This approach is based on the assumption that, today, the use of digital tools and representational forms is no longer the exception but the rule, and that this circumstance nowadays significantly influences our interactions, views and body images. In particular, these approaches address the question of whether, in this newly established constitution, our view of the analogue, non-digital environment has also changed. "Post-digitality" is to be understood here as a "shift in perception". This readjustment of a digitally influenced or digitally reflective perspective will be presented as a compositional strategy. Under the title "Switching Worlds", this practice will be established as a technique that actively thematizes the interweaving of the analogue with the digital and their interplay, thus making it palpable, and shall present and contrast different perspectives. The comparison of virtual and physical worlds and their artistic decoupling will be presented as a compositional approach and method of artistic research that attempts to convey these implications not only theoretically, but also to make them comprehensible to the senses.

<sup>1</sup> In this article I use the form "postdigital" for the adjective and "post-digital" for the phenomenon.

# 1 INTRODUCTION

*The digital revolution is over.*<sup>2</sup>

With these words, Nicholas Negroponte proclaimed an age in which the use of digital tools and representational forms is no longer the exception, but has become the rule.<sup>3</sup> Today, our interactions, perspectives and body images are significantly influenced by this reality. Even though technical fields continue to develop and a fascination for technology persists, the digitalization and virtualization of our living environment are, although not yet complete, so far advanced that it can be taken for granted. Digitality is no longer a sign of the future and is slowly disappearing from our focus: it is its absence that continues to catch our attention.<sup>4</sup> There is much to be said for the fact that, in this newly established constitution, our view of the analogue, non-digital environment is also changing. This observation is reflected in the term “post-digital”.

Post-digitality is to be understood here as a shift in awareness. This readjustment of a digitally influenced or digitally reflecting perception shall be presented as a compositional strategy. Under the title "Switching Worlds", this practice will be established as a technique that actively addresses the penetration of the analogue and digital and their interplay and thus makes them palpable by positioning and contrasting different perspectives next to each other. The comparison of virtual and physical worlds and their artistic decoupling will be presented as a compositional approach and method of artistic research, which attempts to convey these implications not only theoretically, but to make them comprehensible to the senses.

## 1.1 Postdigital Turn

The postdigital perspective is based on an analogue world which is completely permeated by digitality. The use of the prefix “post” before the term “digital” refers not to the end of digitality, but to the moment when the digitalization of cultural living reality is more or less established. “Post” initially describes not a state after digitalization, in which there is no longer any digitality, but rather, its complete distribution. On the one hand, this term can now describe the extent to which our modes of seeing, interaction, communication and reception have changed as a result of widespread digitalization. On the other hand, this shift describes a differentiated position towards digitality. With the social, economic and governmental integration

- 2 “The digital revolution is over.” Negroponte, Nicholas: 'Beyond Digital', in:Wired (2008),  
online: <http://web.media.mit.edu/~nicholas/Wired/WIRED6-12.html> (Retrieved: 19.7.2019)
- 3 Miyazaki, Shintaro: 'Medien, ihre Klänge und Geräusche – Medienmusik vs. / (=) Instrumentalmusik',  
in: PopScriptum 9 – Instrumentalisierung – Medien und ihre Musik(2008) , Forschungszentrum Populäre  
Musik der Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin [ 'Media, its Sounds and Noises– Media Music vs./ (=) Instrumental  
Music', in: Popscriptum 9 – Instrumentalisation– Media and its Music ],  
online: [https://www2.hu-berlin.de/fpm/popscrip/themen/pst09/pst09\\_miyazaki.htm](https://www2.hu-berlin.de/fpm/popscrip/themen/pst09/pst09_miyazaki.htm) (Retrieved: 19.7.2019)
- 4 Negroponte, Nicholas: 'Beyond Digital', in: Wired (2008),  
online: <http://web.media.mit.edu/~nicholas/Wired/WIRED6-12.html> (Retrieved: 19.7.2019)

of all digital technologies, they have lost some of their original magic. In the post-digital viewpoint, digital technology is not seen as a pure tool, but as including its cultural implications.

The starting point for postdigital upheavals is digitality and its properties of computability, discretization and fragmentation. But the implications meant here emerge only in the subsequent step: in the broad use and cultural integration of these technologies. Consequently, a number of elementary reference points are now available for social and artistic disposal. Central are questions of manipulability (this being simplified and more strongly established by digital tools) and connected to this, of authenticity. Easy access to processing and synthesis techniques as well as to large amounts of data has enabled the creation of qualitatively new potentials here (and also democratized their availability).<sup>5 6</sup> Also affected are representation in general and of physical bodies in concrete terms. A changed depiction and reception in the context of the postdigital shift goes hand in hand with virtualization and leads to an increased decoupling of original and image, as well as cause and effect. As a consequence, aspects of body perception, identity, authenticity and social interaction are affected.

Parallel to social development in the age of digitalization, the use of electronic media in the arts – and also specifically in art music – has changed. In multimedia music, electronic content and processes are, by now, rarely an end unto themselves; rather, they are used representatively – i.e. exemplarily, descriptively or symbolically. Comparable to the stagnation of material progress in instrumental composition<sup>7 8</sup>, there has been a change in the way digital tools and content are used. Sound effects, projections, synthesis programs and transformations are, for the most part, established techniques that are increasingly seldom sufficient as the sole *raison d'être* for a work. Then again, the creative field of research is all the more diverse, searching for forms of presentation and interaction that discursively deal with our changed reality of life, and therefore, with digital tools and representations.

5 Cornell, Lauren and Halter, Ed: *Hard Reboot: An Introduction To Mass Effect*, Cambridge Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2015, p. 20.

6 Weibel, Peter: 'The Post-Media Condition', in: *Metamute* (2006), online: <http://www.metamute.org/editorial/lab/post-media-condition> (Retrieved: 20.7.2019).

7 Lehmann, Harry: *Gehaltsästhetik [ Salary Ethics ]*, Munich: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 2016, p. 197ff

8 Lehmann, Harry: *Die digitale Revolution der Musik [ The Digital Revolution of Music ]*, Mainz: Schott Verlag, 2012, p. 92.

## 1.2 Personal Motivation

Ever since I owned a computer as a teenager, the interplay between analogue and digital content has been a central element both in my private life and in my artistic work. My musical (and artistic) activity has always been characterized by integration or interweaving of electronic content and techniques as well as analogue material. Since the beginnings of my compositional work, making music has meant cutting, collaging and editing samples and audio tracks. My socialization is characterized by an electronic production environment. Nevertheless, the analogue, wild, spontaneous, gestural, direct has always played an important role in my life. I love being performative, sleeping outdoors in the open air or playing with acoustic instruments. These opposite poles have always driven me to produce art. So, in the beginning, I mixed field recordings with electronic simulations of nature, composed acoustic music albums and then, in the course of time, deconstructed one track after the other, or integrated electronic performance setups into free jazz. The friction between these contrasting elements and the resulting and questioning of each one inspired me: to see the electronic as an analogue object and to simulate the analogue through the electronic. I wanted to represent the virtual, the constructed and the artificial in a setting that was not technical, cold and clear. The digital should always shimmer through, through a tangible, warm, human surface. This central duality contains a number of ambiguities that are either connected to it or directly result from it. These include aspects of authenticity and physicality, for example. Over the last twenty years, this activity has evolved from an intuitive approach to an increasingly consciously reflective approach. Last but not least, the formulation of this text represents a further step in the concretization of these aspects.

## 1.3 Postdigital Change in Perspective as a Compositional Strategy

If one understands the postdigital shift as a change in the perception of digital content, or as a reorientation of position in relation to digitality, the question arises as to how art can, or should, behave respectively. I find this issue extremely relevant in the context of multimedia composition. Due to the social connotation of digital media, I would even go so far, in the sense of a postdigital imperative, as to say that these connotations can no longer be blanked out. The implications of digital technologies have become an integral part of the digital itself.

An artistic examination of this range of themes offers the chance to make these aspects sensually perceptible and directly tangible. Because the consequences of post-digitality particularly influenced perception, experience and also physical interactions, it is obvious that this level should also be dealt with. The technique of perspective-comparison I have proposed should enable the possibility to compare different modes of perception and interaction. In this way, opposing modes of presentation and communication are juxtaposed and thus made tangible. By this, I understand the process of visualization.<sup>9</sup> It is intended to bring into

<sup>9</sup> In the German text the word "Sichtbarmachung" is used, which does not only refer to how something is visualised—but rather, that it is visualised.

focus those consequences of digitalization which are invisible, unnoticed or disregarded. As there is a noted disappearance of technology in the wake of post-digitality, art can offer space here, to once again make characteristics an object of observation. In my own artistic practice, I realize this approach essentially through the construction of immersive settings with technical contents. So, firstly scenarios are constructed, which can then be deconstructed and contrasted with another perspective. The continuous comparison of opposing modes of observation provides the space for the audience to form its own opinion. In this sense, my compositions contain no clear moral conclusions, but instead, offer an experimental setting that challenges the audience to take a stand. I regard this process as artistic research since it explicitly involves neither illustrative nor descriptive works of art, but rather, experimental setups with an open outcome. Many of my pieces are setups that deal with digitally-mediated perception. This enables the sensual experience of the technical content and then the evaluation by the audience (and by myself). These approaches are exploratory, in the truest sense of the word, as I want to learn, together with the audience, something about the changing modes of perception and interaction in the postdigital age.

#### **1.4 Thesis Structure**

The presented text is divided into two main parts. In the first part, I describe my compositional strategy and its contextual classification (Chapters 2–5). In the second part, I present a collection of essays and magazine articles about the thematic field that I have written in recent years (Chapter 6). Therefore, I will first present my approach to postdigital techniques in contemporary composition and place it in the context of cultural studies. I will exemplify and substantiate this with various shorter contributions.

Initially, I will introduce the terms “post-digital”, “post-internet” and “new aesthetic”(Chapter 2). Originating with a description of the basic digital characteristics (Chapter 2.1), their consequences are explained and systematized in the context of the postdigital turn (Chapter 2.2). As a central point, the digital error as an artistic tool is also discussed in this section (Chapter 2.2.5). A further direct consequence of digitalization, the term “post-internet” is used to describe the repercussions of widespread distribution of the internet, first socially and then artistically (Chapter 2.3). The “new aesthetic” proposed by James Bridle is a collective term that attempts to describe the impact of digital techniques on the visual language of the present day (Chapter 2.4). The visibility of technology itself and its technical influence on society are discussed as central points in this chapter. This summary represents the content basis and motivation for my own work.

Subsequently, I will situate my artistic activity within the context of artistic research (Chapter 3). First, I will outline the basic characteristics and issues of artistic research (Chapter 3.1), focusing on the production of knowledge through sensual insight, the aesthetics of production, and the interplay between the researcher/subject and the object under investigation. I will then correlate these approaches and observations with my own practice (Chapter 3.2). The development

of technical tools (Chapter 3.2.2) and experimental settings (Chapter 3.2.3) plays a central role here. This forms the basis for examining the postdigital thematic area at a sensual level of experience in an experimental set-up with an open outcome. Methodical documentation tailored to the project will be presented as an integral part of the compositions (Chapter 3.2.4).

In Chapter 4, I present my composition strategy as a tool for achieving a post-digital change in perspective. In doing so, I present my artistic practice as a means of comparing different perspectives within the interplay of the analogue and digital world (Chapter 4.1). I argue that the influence of the digital is so elementary that the use of digital content must necessarily be thought of as postdigital (Chapter 4.2). A postdigitally positioned composition can actively reflect codes of representation and interaction and make them perceptible. The influence of program interfaces and the affordance of digital technology, in general, are concrete examples (Chapter 4.3). The digital error is often used in my artistic work as an instrument for breaking up narration and media presentation. This is a key method with which to steer the focus away from pure technology onto its implications (Chapter 4.4). Analogue and digital are discussed as two levels which increasingly penetrate and overlap each other. This coupling and artistically induced uncoupling are presented as practical approaches (Chapter 4.5), followed by the consequences of increasing virtualization on the concept of truth and upon physical sensations (Chapters 4.6 and 4.7). Finally and specifically, I deal with the influence of post-internet shift in the compositional context (Chapter 4.8). The virtual imperative (Chapter 4.9) suggests the viewpoint that the use of digital techniques always has a virtual character, and that this should not be ignored in the artistic context.

The second part of the thesis (Chapter 6) contains five articles which have been published in various magazines. These texts elaborate on some of the topics presented in the main text and additionally provide further details about some of my compositions and techniques. The essay *The Aesthetics of Error* (Chapter 6.1) explains in detail the use of digital error, introduced in Chapter 4.3, and also references the topics of authenticity and reality, presented in Chapter 4.6. It also discusses the more general connotations of malpractice/malfunction and failure. Aspects of physicality, identity and authenticity are discussed in the essay *Virtuality and Deception* (Chapter 6.2). This text also expands upon thoughts from chapter 4.6, giving supplementary examples from an artistic and compositional context. The essay *Binary Composition* (Chapter 6.3) takes this paper's recurring theme of ambivalence and duality and extends it to further levels, such as humour, intuition and pop aesthetics, as well as expanding the principle of opposing perspectives out into a broader spectrum. The main body of text introduces the use of light as a postdigital means of visualization (Chapter 4.3.3) and is supplemented by the essay *Focussing the Gaze* (Chapter 6.4), which provides further insights into light usage in my work. The last essay *Uncertain Conditions* provides a summary of the basic intentions of my work (6.5) and specifically reflects the interplay of technical and human.