

CULTURAL COMMENT

WAS STEVE JOBS AN ARTIST?



By Joshua Rothman

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Steve Jobs likened himself and his employees to artists; he deployed his mercurial personality in the ruthless way that artists sometimes do. He cared about his products the way that artists care about their art. Was it all just marketing? Photograph by Justin Sullivan / Getty

There are a lot of great arguments in the new film “Steve Jobs,” but one stands above the rest. Jobs and Woz—Steve Wozniak, the co-founder of Apple—are in the garage, disagreeing about the design of the Apple II. Jobs thinks that the computer should be sealed up and impossible to modify; Woz thinks it should be open and expandable, so that hobbyists can tinker with it. Jobs says that a computer should be perfect, like a work of art. Woz says that’s ridiculous. Jobs tells Woz, “Every time you say, ‘A computer is not a painting,’ I’m going to say, ‘Fuck you.’ ” Then, we flash forward more than a decade, to 1988. Jobs and Woz are backstage, and Jobs is about to unveil the first computer from his new company, NeXT. The computer is a beautiful cube that’s impractical, expensive, and doomed to fail. “A computer is not a painting,” Woz intones. “Fuck you!” Jobs replies.

That argument is fictional (although Jobs and Woz did, in fact, disagree about the expansion slots in the Apple II). Still, it gets to the heart of one of the most fascinating questions we can ask about Jobs. How, and to what extent, was he an artist? His company developed and sold beautifully made computers and devices while name-checking, in its advertising, artists like Pablo Picasso, Alfred Hitchcock, Ansel Adams, and Miles Davis. Was that comparison unwarranted? Or did Jobs, through his work, become like one of the artists he so admired?

“Art” is a capacious term. We typically imagine artists to be solitary people creating art by hand. But many artists work in more expansive, disembodied ways. We all recognize that film directors are artists, even though, in its substance, the work of directing often involves the management of teams and budgets on a corporate scale. Jeff Koons employs a hundred and fifty people, and the art works those workers create, at his direction, sell for tens of millions of dollars. Clearly, a vast distance separates Koons’s studio from the world of high-tech device manufacturing, but—at least in theory—the difference could be one of scale rather than kind. If a giant sculpture built to order by a team of employees can be

a work of art, it's at least possible that mass-produced computers could be art works, too.

It goes without saying that there are profound differences between computers and sculptures. The most obvious one is that sculptures are meant to be contemplated and interpreted, while computers are meant to be used. Computers are tools, and, as such, they should disappear—you're supposed to forget about them and concentrate on your own work. From this perspective, computers are products of "design," rather than "art." A well-designed computer might facilitate thinking and creativity; it might be, in Jobs's famous phrase, "a bicycle for the mind." But a computer can't be, in itself, a work of art, because it carries no message (or messages) and has no point of view. A computer is more like a musical instrument than a piece of music.

This is an eminently reasonable way to think about computers, and yet Jobs never seems to have believed it. He wanted his devices to get out of the way of the creative people who used them. But he also thought that there was a special kind of technological beauty, uniquely realizable in the medium of computers, which itself verged on, and sometimes attained, the status of art. Certainly he aspired to artistic success. In 1984, he had the signatures of the core Macintosh engineers engraved on the inside of the machine; in 1988, introducing the NeXTcube at Davies Symphony Hall, in San Francisco, he held up one of its circuit boards and called it "the most beautiful printed circuit board I've ever seen in my life." (The audience applauded.) He loved "design," but yearned for something grander and more emotional.

The journalists Brent Schlender and Rick Tetzeli, in "Becoming Steve Jobs"—for my money, a better book about Jobs than Walter Isaacson's biography—write that, while observing the creation of the movie "Toy Story" at Pixar, Jobs found himself in awe of "the slow, successful, and patient development of a work of art that would live long beyond its creators." They quote John Lasseter, the director of that film, who remembers Jobs saying to him, "You know, when we make a

computer at Apple, what's its life span? About three years? At five years, it's a doorstop. But if you do your job right, what you create can last forever." Schlender and Tetzeli suggest that, when Jobs returned to Apple, he did so with that kind of lasting achievement in mind. He wanted to save Apple and defeat his competitors. But he also wanted to create products that embodied a kind of beauty to which he, more than other people, was sensitive, and to communicate through them his own sensibility.

For all its charms, the movie "Steve Jobs" struggles to make plausible the artistic side of computer development. It's easy to imagine how, if Jobs had been a composer, the film could have shown his mind at work: walking beneath the redwoods, composer-Steve might hear a snatch of melody in birdsong and, later, fold it into a concerto. (That's the sort of creative process shown in [Apple's ad](#), from last year, featuring the composer [Esa-Pekka Salonen](#), who writes music on various Apple devices.) The film tries to do this in its treatment of case design. Michael Fassbender's Jobs is deeply concerned that his computers look good. He's delighted with the cheerful front face of the original Mac, and obsessed about the optical perfection of the NeXTcube's right angles. In a clever scene set right before the cube's introduction, he surreptitiously collects a handful of calla lilies from the floral displays around the concert hall, then places them in a vase next to the cube. The austere and sculptural lilies look far better than the frothy bouquet that had been in the vase before.

But this is a poor approximation of what the real Jobs did: his achievements were far more extraordinary, if harder to visualize. Often, artists are integrators: in many art forms, discrete elements are fused together (melody and rhythm, form and color) to create something that is more than the sum of its parts. Jobs seems to have believed that a similar process applied to computers. When he started making them, in the nineteen-seventies, computers were big piles of parts—you bought a kit, or a blueprint, and then assembled them yourself. This drove him crazy, but also suggested that a new kind of art was possible—one realized

through the vastly complex processes of technological integration, during which chips and bits, instead of melody and lyrics, could flow together to make a perfect whole. Jobs hoped that a perfect technological device could be transcendent, or “magical,” as he sometimes put it. It could embody artistic energy, becoming not just a tool but a source of inspiration in its own right.

For any artist, making an art work “come together” is difficult. But the challenges of perfect technological integration are especially formidable. The words “hardware” and “software” don’t do them justice. Languages must be invented and synchronized; components must be designed or acquired; bridges must be built from the physical world of manufacturing to the digital one, in which code unspools. It’s very difficult to hide the seams; imperfect technology products are always devolving into their component parts, which compromises their aesthetic unity. Moreover, unlike a traditional artist, the computer artist must see into the future, guessing which of many different technologies, each maturing at its own rate, will coincide in time. And all of this must be accomplished within the corporate environment—through the hiring and firing of employees, the setting of priorities and agendas, the acquisition of companies, and the creation of teams. In important ways, the computer artist works in a milieu hostile to aesthetic concerns.

It seems crazy to imagine that the outcome of this process might be an artistic product. And yet Jobs often acted as if that were the case. He likened himself and his employees—“artiste engineers,” Schlender and Tetzeli call them—to artists; he deployed his mercurial personality in the ruthless way that artists sometimes do. He cared about his products the way that artists care about their art. Was it all just marketing? When Jobs called a circuit board “beautiful,” was he just using the cult of beauty to sell computers? Personally, I doubt it; I think he was sincere. As for whether he was right, we can all decide for ourselves: many of us own his most beautiful piece of work, the iPhone. Using it, we can ask ourselves whether its deep technological coherence constitutes, in itself, an artistic achievement.

In the meantime, it seems to me that “Steve Jobs,” by not taking a stand on Jobs’s art, fails to capture what was really interesting about him. Jobs fascinates not just because he was both brilliant and mean (many very successful people are both gifted and flawed) but because he was engaged in a titanic effort to create art out of technology on a mass scale—a process which was complicated not just aesthetically but morally. (Jeff Koons’s studio, while it surely employs some disgruntled M.F.A.s, is a far cry from the factories at Foxconn, with their suicide nets.) Like the hero in a novel by Thomas Mann, Jobs moved heaven and earth to realize a vision that may or may not have been worth it. He will long be remembered as a technological visionary and a gifted businessman. But did he create art, or just gadgets? That’s the question upon which his legacy depends.



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