

Coded Communication: Digital Senses and Aesthetics, Merging Art and Life

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This one-day symposium framed several central questions in digital practice and digital theory, examining historical and contemporary themes across art, science and the humanities. Art has been transformed by the digital age, changing the tools and processes of practice, moving to digital expressions and digital seeing. These changes are balanced by the recurrent questions of the human condition, and of the ways that art both defines and transcends its time. In what ways does digital art address the social, cultural and historical debates of this time, without being simply determined by its technologies? And how can emergent disciplines around digital aesthetics and the digital humanities converse with the work of artists, innovators and technologists? In what ways does the new digital palette afforded by contemporary media open new ways of seeing, sensing and understanding the world? The symposium organisers invited a range of artists and theorists to discuss these themes, framed in the broader contexts of electronic visualisation and digital art of the EVA London conference.

Digital aesthetics. Digital art. Digital culture. Digital humanities. Digitalism.

1. INTRODUCTION

This day-long Pre-conference Symposium of keynote talks and invited talks follows on from the first EVA London Pre-conference held in 2016 (Bowen & Giannini 2016).

The symposium covers questions about digital theory and practice in the areas of aesthetics and art, from both a historical and contemporary context. Presenters come from a variety of backgrounds, including curators, artists, and academics.

The first half of the symposium was organised by the Royal College of Art and the second half has been organised by the Pratt Institute School of Information, with a joint panel session at the end of the day. These wide-ranging presentations are designed to be contrasting as well as thought-provoking.

Information on the keynote speakers and abstracts for all the talks are included in the following section.

2. PROGRAMME

Douglas Dodds, Victoria & Albert Museum (V&A), London, UK

Biography: Douglas Dodds is Senior Curator at the Victoria & Albert Museum, London, in the Word & Image Department. He is responsible for developing the Department's digital art collections, which range from early computer art to recent born-digital works. Douglas also leads a project to digitise the Department's prints, drawings, paintings and photograph collections.

Title: *Engaging with Code: A V&A Perspective*

Abstract: The UK's national museum of art and design acquired its first computer-generated images as long ago as 1969. The V&A's computational art collection now includes some 1,500 prints, drawings, photographs and born-digital works, created from the 1960s to the present day (Beddard & Dodds 2013). I outline some of the issues involved in acquiring, maintaining and displaying a diverse range of artworks created with code.

Monika Parrinder, Royal College of Art

Title: *Unpicking the Seams: Cities, Networks and Communication*

Abstract: The contemporary city is an aggregate of digital networks, analogue objects and infrastructures, and their psychic and social effects. In the narrative of the 'Smart City' (Ratti & Claudel 2016) – connected, efficient and responsive to personal need – this is an imagined realm of control and choice.

It is in the seamless interfaces of the so-called Internet of Things that this is particularly resonant, where 'calm technologies' recede into the background, embedded or 'naturalised' in the everyday objects of our peripheral awareness. And yet, foregrounding the human-machine interface, and new human-gesture metaphors of pinching and swiping, obfuscates machine-machine relationships also at play. The increased range of operations of the digital economy are impossible to read or 'de-code' in any simple semiotic sense.

I consider the value of a more seamful engagement with information environments. The city provides a way in: looking at operations on the ground; studying failure; observing consequences; looking for traces of use, non-use or abuse.

Traces provide clues, patterns evidence effects – a forensic sensibility recalls the sleuthing mode proposed by Marshall McLuhan (1964), bringing the unconscious environment to conscious attention. His claim for the dialectical role of art (and criminality) as anti-environment provides fertile comparison with aesthetic practices today which create an awareness of, or build in resilience to, the alienating effects of embedded technologies.



Figure 1: *White City Place: Networked for Creative Thought*. Photograph by Monika Parrinder.

Chantal Faust, Royal College of Art

Title: *Swimming in the Shallows: The Scan, the Touch and the Surface*

Abstract: There is one word in the English language that is used to describe three very different ways of seeing. A 'scan' is a close examination, a slow and repeated sweep of the eye and also the hasty glance of a quick skim. These actions are markedly different, but they all perform the same function: an eye is searching for something. The slow careful focus that absorbs every detail, the staccato pan across a horizon and the bounce of an eyeball as it skips across words on a page are all forms of reading the surface of the visible. Slow, sideways or barely there, behind each method of observation is the one purpose: detection.

For the scanner who reads the perceptible world, meaning accumulates with each shift of the gaze. Thought and vision are here combined. It is a close-up form of vision that takes us into the realm of haptic aesthetics. But what happens when we try and see surface? The distance between the thing that sees – whether it is an imaging machine or the seeing eye – collapses. There is no space between the look and the thing. It is all there, on the surface. Nothing is hidden, everything is given away. This practice-led presentation focuses on scanning, touch and an attraction to surfaces, from the interface of the screen to the painted gesture, offering a haptic approach to thinking about digital aesthetics.

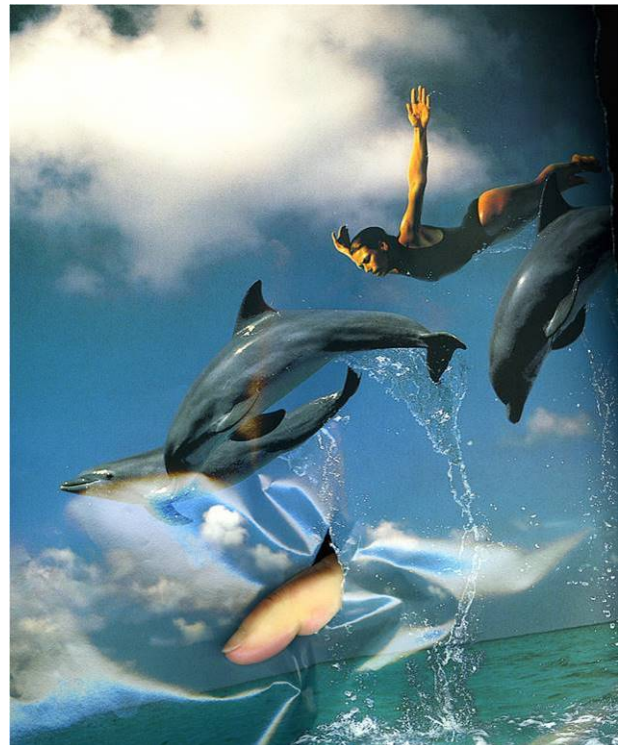


Figure 2: *Dolphinger* (2010), Chantal Faust.

Gareth Polmeer, Royal College of Art

Title: *Digital Senses and the Autonomy of Art: Histories, Contexts and Possibilities*

Many discussions on digital art or electronic visualisation emphasise a technologically deterministic position on the production and reception of works. This determinism also extends to the meaning and purpose of digital works of art. Such views have precluded deeper philosophical reflection on the histories, contexts and possibilities of digital aesthetics, and the autonomy of art and the senses in the 21st century.

I consider aesthetic theories of the early 19th century and canonical questions in ancient thought, to show that appearance and impermanence are ontological ideas key to the discussion of contemporary digital art (Polmeer 2016). The loci for these debates were the works of Plato and Hegel, both of whom have had significant influence on various areas of the digital humanities, from notions of simulation and illusion, to time and the ends of art in relation to other areas of human life.

I argue that the shadow of postmodernism in contemporary discourse has occluded fundamental ideas that speak to the potential of digital aesthetics, showing that new insights from the past can be brought to problems thought only relevant to the technological particularities of the computer age.

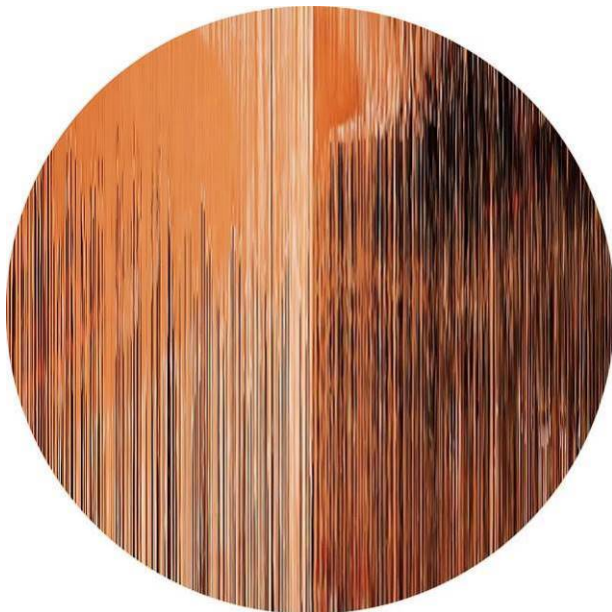


Figure 3: *Double/Distance* (2016), Gareth Polmeer.

Brigitta Zics, Ravensbourne, London, UK

Biography: Brigitta Zics is an award-winning artist who creates works with visual and material sensitivity that seeks to fashion new experiences. She works on the convergence of art and science and explores mixed-media forms combining various techniques and emerging technologies. Her recent interests embrace experiential art, human perception and art, and the aesthetics of data and algorithms. She is currently Deputy Head of Postgraduate Department at Ravensbourne, London, with a focus on practice-based research. See also: www.brigittazics.com

Title: *Art in the Age of Experience*

Abstract: In art making, there is a clear paradigm shift between the object itself to an experience of the object. I argue that this shift brings a viewer experience to the central arena of aesthetic inquiry, moving from art that represents, to art that is created to affect. Referring to this as Experiential Art, I believe this shift in aesthetics is part of a larger socio-economic change that has seen the rise of the Age of Experience; tools, products and services created for enhancing the subjective being. Distinctively, this new aesthetic arena relies on site-specific and situation-based methods or/and technologies that enhance human perception to facilitate viewers' self-reflections. I argue that moving towards subjectivisation challenges the notion of materiality and with it, the institutional framework of art as we know it.

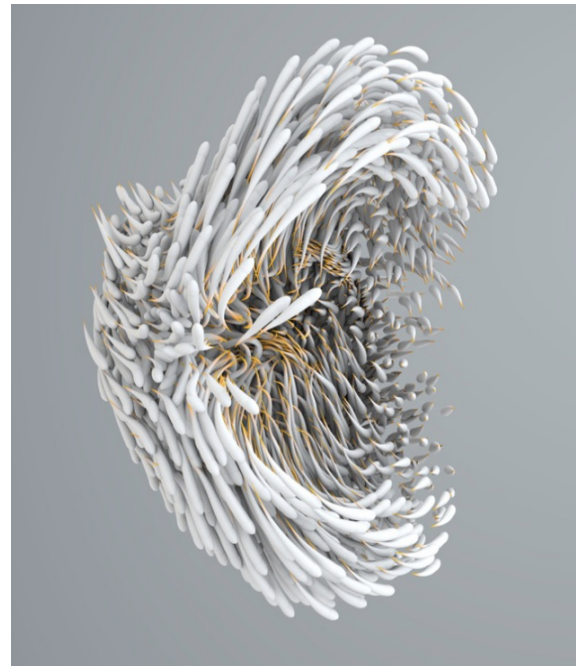


Figure 4: *Serendipitous Murmurations* (2017), large-scale audiovisual installation from the *Collective Motion* exhibition series.

I consider the Experiential Art Manifesto; that describes the characteristics of experimental art - art that produces meaning through experiences. To exemplify this I showcase the Eye Resonator; an interactive art installation that creates a feedback loop for viewer's self-reflection, and a Collective Motion exhibition concept that explores the universal pattern of collective motion and migration through sets of artworks facilitating a networked, sensory-rich experience.

Carla Gannis, Pratt Institute

Title: *La Emoji Lujuria*

Abstract: The current speed of technological advancements suggests that biological organisms and the environment are irrevocably changing. In light of this, it is fascinating to discover how easily the visual vernacular of our day aligns with the symbology of a prescient artist from 500 years ago. *The Garden of Earthly Delights*, Hieronymus Bosch's most ambitious work, embodies the conflicts, humour, darkness and absurdity of human, earthly and cosmological conditions.

I consider my interest in digital semiotics and how I was inspired to create *The Garden of Emoji Delights*, a reimagining of Bosch's "garden" with emojis. For this project, I produced drawings; a largescale 2D print work; moving image works; 3D prints and augmented reality experiences, thereby creating spaces that offer comparison and contrast. These translations are alternately reflective, parodic, humorous and critical, and allow imagery and the social constructions behind that imagery from different places and times, to be viewed in the same space.



Figure 5: "The Garden of Emoji Delights" (2014), Carla Gannis. See also animated version (<https://vimeo.com/158156834>) and Giannini & Bowen (2016).

Peter Patchen, Pratt Institute

Title: *From Atoms to Bits and Back Again: Finding Truth in Simulacrum*

Abstract: Artists have always created fictions through which we arrive at greater understanding. In a post-fact/post-internet age, are new media artists with the easy access to 3D printers and other manufacturing technologies reflective of a cultural moment in which we choose simulacra of affirmation in lieu of truth?

Tula Giannini, Pratt Institute

Title: *Digital Art and Aesthetics: Transforming Museum Practice*

Abstract: Observing the digital life of museums today, we can see that the lion's share of museum activities and work is being carried out across all departments using digital tools and technology, while virtual and Web museums on the Internet proliferate, engaging millions of users. In contrast to this digital profusion, seeing digital in museum galleries, whether viewing art or using digital devices to enhance user engagement, is evolving slowly and continues to face resistance and technical challenges. Surveying the museum for digital presence, reveals mostly digital signs and spaces for showing exhibition related videos, while most galleries remain quite traditional.

Although museum professionals are excited about the possibilities of using digital technologies in galleries to engage audiences (Giannini & Bowen 2014 & 2015), curators often see these efforts as detracting from the art, seemingly unaware that museum goers bring their digital life and ways of seeing into the gallery – their cell phones always at hand – and seem to become disoriented when separated from their digital vision. The growing presence of digital media screens and interactive digital displays in daily life, including retail stores, train stations, airports and other public places, reinforces visitors' expectations of seeing digital. Importantly, this tests their aesthetic judgment and ability to distinguish commercial art from fine art, as digital differences blur these boundaries. From daily digital experiences, the shift to digital aesthetics and seeing is becoming encoded in the human brain, reinforced by all media going digital and the Internet of Things (IoT).

Looking to the future, inevitably, more galleries and museums will feature digital art, so that digital artists and digital curators will begin to hold sway in museum hierarchy, enabling them to take the lead in reimagining traditional gallery framework. This in turn, will introduce a new digital gallery concept

designed for digital art and experience. Ideas and technical innovation growing out this creative digital arts partnership will no doubt influence exhibitions and gallery shows generally. At Pratt School of Information, we have delved into that future, and in 2015 launched a [Master of Science in Museums and Digital Culture](#), the first program of its kind, designed to prepare students as museum professionals for the digital world.



Figure 6: *Aluminium 4*, by Angela Bulloch (Tate 2012). This work reminds us that electronic/computer art has introduced new ways of seeing interaction with art. From the work's label, "pixel boxes have been programmed to change colour" and "the electronic lighting element means that the work and the viewers' response to it – changes over time." Photography by T. Giannini, 2016.

Ross Parry, University of Leicester, UK

Biography: Ross Parry is Associate Professor (Museum Studies) and Deputy Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Digital) at the University of Leicester. He is also one of the founding Trustees of the Jodi Mattes Trust (for accessible digital culture). Ross is leading a major £600K national project (2017–2020), funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council, and working with a network of 17 institutional partners, to develop a digital literacy framework for the UK museum sector. Ross is the author of *Recoding the Museum: Digital Heritage and the Technologies of Change* (2007), the first major history of museum computing, and in 2010 published *Museums in a Digital Age* (both Routledge). He is currently working on a post-digital history of illusion and artificiality in the museum.

Title: *Digital Literacy and the Postdigital Museum: Introducing the 'One by One' Project*

Abstract: The impact of digital media on museums has been pervasive and profound. The notions of visit and object, collection and exhibition, have all been disrupted and renegotiated by the influence of five decades of digital technology. 'Digital' has changed the idiom of 'museum' (Parry 2007 & 2010). And yet, it is widely recognised that the digital literacy of the museum workforce remains one of the key challenges continuing to impede the adoption of technology within the sector (NMC 2015 & 2016). According to Nesta, the Arts & Humanities Research Council (AHRC), and Arts

Council England (ACE) (Nesta et al. 2014 & 2015), over a third of museums in the UK still feel that they do not have the in-house skills to meet their digital aspirations, and rather than improving, some digital skills areas have decreased.

Addressing this pressing issue, the aim of the 'One by One' project is to leverage interdisciplinary scholarship, and specifically the concept of the 'postdigital museum', to understand how to deliver a transformative framework for museum workforce digital literacy. The postdigital is allowing us to think about the museum after the digital revolution, where digital is managed normatively, and where digital pervasively becomes innate within a range of operations and definitions within the museum.

Led by the University of Leicester, the project is an ambitious collaboration of 17 partners, including Arts Council England, Nesta, the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF), the Museums Association, Association of Independent Museums, National Museums Directors Conference, Collections Trust, Museum Development Network, Culture24, and FutureLearn. The project's creativity comes not just from the Design Thinking protocols that organise and drive its activities, but through the network of 'Digital Fellows' embedded (and leading action research projects) within six museums across the UK.



Figure 7: *Cultural heritage in a constant state of digitisation by the public* (Bowen & Giannini 2014). Photograph by J. P. Bowen, Rosetta Stone, British Museum, London, 2017.

4. PANEL SESSION

All speakers contributed to a panel session, chaired by Jonathan Bowen, at the end of the symposium. The session was an opportunity for speakers to comment on other presentations and well as for the audience to raise more general questions.

The symposium was dedicated to Ingrid Beazley (1950–2017) of Dulwich Picture Gallery, who was invited to speak at the 2016 symposium (Bowen & Giannini 2016) but was unable to do so. She was

pioneering and inspirational in the areas of cultural social media (Beazley et al. 2010) and street art (Beazley 2015 & 2016).



Figure 8: Monetisation of cultural heritage for the decoration of digital technology. Photograph by J. P. Bowen, Rosetta Stone motif for a smartphone cover, British Museum, London, 2017.

Digital Interaction Matters by T. Giannini

Digital seeing
Brings meaning
Bright lights
Rising to new heights
So many colours and shades
Real life seems to fade
Digital art sees me
and interacts
I matter in the museum
I'll be coming back



Figure 9: Digital photograph of an interactive exhibit, *The Passing Winter*, by Yayoi Kusama (Tate 2005). Photograph by J. P. Bowen, Tate Modern, London, 2016.

5. CONCLUSION

The Symposium talks have been designed to cover a wide range of issues in digital theory and practice, in the context of art, culture, and humanities, especially with respect to aesthetics. A bibliography of publications by the symposium chairs and speakers is included below for further reading.

It is interesting to note that the co-chairs of this symposium are from the Schools of Engineering, Information, and Humanities at their respective institutions. This reflects the interdisciplinary nature of the topic covered by the symposium. An aim of all the authors and presenters is to help break down these barriers and symbiotically benefit from the wide range of experiences of all those involved in the symposium.

6. Acknowledgements

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We wish to acknowledge, in memoriam INGRID BEAZLEY (1950–2017), who was due to speak at last year's symposium and was a ground-breaking force in social media community building and promoting public street art.

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