States of Being: Art and identity in digital space and time

Jonathan P. Bowen  
London South Bank University  
School of Engineering  
London, UK  
http://www.jpbowen.com  
jonathan.bowen@lsbu.ac.uk

Tula Giannini  
Pratt Institute  
School of Information  
New York, USA  
http://mysite.pratt.edu/~giannini/  
giannini@pratt.edu

Gareth Polmeer  
Royal College of Art  
London, UK  
http://www.garethpolmeer.com  
gareth.polmeer@network.rca.ac.uk

Carla Gannis  
Pratt Institute  
New York  
USA  
http://www.carlagannis.com  
carlagannis@gmail.com

Jeremy Gardiner  
Ravensbourne  
London  
UK  
http://www.jeremygardiner.co.uk  
j.gardiner@brave.ac.uk

Jonathan Kearney  
University of the Arts London Camberwell College of Arts  
London, UK  
http://www.jonathankearney.com  
j.kearney@arts.ac.uk

Bruce Wands  
MFA Computer Arts  
School of Visual Arts  
New York, USA  
http://www.brucewands.com  
bwands@sva.edu

Jon Weinel  
Aalborg University  
Aalborg  
Denmark  
http://www.jonweinel.com  
weinell@hum.aau.dk

This one-day Symposium explored themes of personhood, modernity and digital art, bringing together speakers from a range of disciplines to consider technology, artistic practice and society. It seeks a renewed consideration of the role of art in illuminating human identity in a positive relation with technology, and its transformative effects upon space and time. The concerns for the role of art amidst the forces of a post-modern world are influenced by importantlegacies of the past, by which ideas about human identity and difference have been made meaningful in the relation of history and technology. In the frequently transient and conflicting forces of humanness and forces of modernity, the digital world of the arts emerges as a means by which new ideas of space and time can be considered, with new perspectives of human identity seen as states of being, towards the possibilities of experience, technology, individuality and society.


1. INTRODUCTION

This day-long Symposium of invited talks on the first day of the EVA London 2018 Conference follows on from the previous two EVA London Pre-conference Symposia held in 2016 and 2017 (Bowen & Giannini 2016; Bowen, Giannini & Polmeer 2017). The Symposium started in association with the Pratt Institute London Summer School, with an emphasis on digital culture and heritage (Bowen & Giannini 2014; Giannini & Bowen 2016). A collaboration with the Royal College of Art developed, providing a philosophical angle to the Symposium (Polmeer 2016). Aspects of digital culture (Giannini & Bowen 2018; 2019) and art continue in this year’s Symposium, which also considers educational issues for digital artists.

The 2018 Symposium covers questions about digital theory and practice in the area of art and identity, from both a historical and contemporary context. Presenters come from a variety of backgrounds, including both artists and academics. The Symposium is rounded off with a panel session at the end of the day. This wide-ranging set of
presentations is designed to be contrasting as well as thought-provoking. Summaries and backgrounds of talks and speakers are included in the following section.

2. PROGRAMME

Carla Gannis, Pratt Institute, New York, USA

Title: An Artist, an AI, and an Alchemist Walk into a Bar...

This presentation is on the element of humour that has run throughout many avant-garde movements of the 20th century, Dada, Fluxus, the Situationist International, Pop Art and Feminist Art, acting as a voice of opposition to “high art” culture and exclusionary practices in representation. This ties with her own practice, as a digital artist, where she is using comical strategies, in the guise of an artificially intelligent agent, as tactical social critique. The presentation also showcases the work of other contemporary digital artists who have incorporated humour as biting social satire into their practices.

Background
Carla Gannis is a digital artist who has previously presented at the EVA London 2017 Symposium (Bowen et al. 2017) and Conference (Gannis 2017), where she also exhibited at the associated V&A Digital Futures evening event (Papadimitriou 2017).

Figure 1: Carla Gannis demonstrating her artwork at the EVA London 2017 Digital Futures exhibition (Gannis 2017; Papadimitriou 2017). (Photograph by Jonathan Bowen.)

Jeremy Gardiner, Ravensbourne, London, UK

Title: The Geometry of the Coast

My presentation focuses on my deep and long-term interest with the geology of landscape and how it is shaped by the forces of nature. I explore hybrid techniques that combine painting, drawing, immersive virtual reality and additive and subtractive fabrication. I see myself as painter and digital craftsman, experimenting with the cross-fertilisation of old and new technologies to create new forms (Gardiner & Head 2013; Gardiner 2016). The notion of a single view of landscape is something I seek to dispel. Instead, I consider my images to be like a musical score, composed of themes and variations; a series of views pieced together to create a fragmented multi-layered vision of the coast.

One section might be a view of the landscape seen on a coastal walk, another a cross-section of a fossil found in that location, whilst another element might be the contour patterns seen from the air captured by LiDAR, an optical remote sensing technology that can measure the change in elevation of the landscape using pulses from a laser. I will examine how my working process is influenced by science, geomorphology, new technologies and direct physical engagement with ancient landscapes and how the pictures I make reflect an understanding of different landscapes their underlying structures and unique history.

Biography
Jeremy Gardiner is a former Harkness Fellow of the Media Lab of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. He is a Churchill Fellow and has been awarded a New York Foundation for the Arts fellowship and NESTA grant. His paintings and prints are about spirit and sense of place, particular landscapes, their contours and unique history (Gardiner & Head 2013; Gardiner 2016). His artwork is held in numerous private and public collection including, BNP Paribas, Glaxo Smith Kline, Ente Nazionale Idrocarburi, Government Art Collection and the V&A. His most recent exhibition, ‘Geology of Landscape’, a survey of Painting and prints spanning two decades 1998–2017 was at the Candida Stevens Gallery from 9th June – 7th July 2018.

Figure 2: Jeremy Gardiner and the Fresnel Lens at Start Point Lighthouse.
Jonathan Weinel, Aalborg University, Denmark

**Title: Altered States of Consciousness in Electronic Music and Audio-Visual Media**

The concept of altered states of consciousness informs a range of contemporary artistic practices, from modern psychedelic art and music to ‘cyberdelic’ virtual reality applications (Weinel 2018a, 2018b, 2018e). Yet the imperative of creating work to represent or induce changes in perception is ancient, with some theorists arguing that the earliest cave paintings represent hallucinatory visions.

Building on an interest in this topic spanning almost 20 years, which includes a PhD in creative practice composing music and audio-visual art (Weinel 2018d), Jon Weinel's recent book *Inner Sound: Altered States of Consciousness in Electronic Music and Audio-Visual Media* (Weinel 2018c) is a trek across the creative influence of altered states on music and art. From Amazonian chicha festivals to the synaesthetic assaults of neon raves in Denmark and Croatia; and from an immersive outdoor electroacoustic performance on an Athenian hilltop to a mushroom trip on a tropical island in virtual reality, Weinel ultimately presents a new theory for considering altered states in relation to the design of electronic music and audio-visual media.

At the EVA London 2018 Symposium, Jon Weinel introduces some of the key themes of *Inner Sound*. It is also notable in this context that the book discusses issues of design and perception that are highly relevant for a range of contemporary practices in immersive media and digital arts, including various work that will be showcased by others during this year’s conference.

Jonathan Kearney, Camberwell College of Art, London, UK

**Title: Art Practice and Learning in Digital Time and Space: A dialogue of withness**

Digital time and space often carries with it the metaphors of the massive, the rhizomic, endless intertwined connections.

Drawing on diverse influences from evolutionary biology, learning theories and theology, this paper will explore these metaphors in the context of online art learning and making.

Since 2004 at Camberwell College of Arts, part of the University of the Arts London, we have delivered a small but highly effective fine art practice based masters course (Kearney 2018) with half the students physically based in London and half fully online living anywhere in the world. Drawing on this experience of fine art blended learning and art making, I present ongoing areas of research.

Rather than exploring from the position of certainty, this paper will speculate and raise several questions using the diverse influences already mentioned. Starting with an exploration of interactions between evolutionary biologist Robin Dunbar’s suggestion that 150 is the theoretical cognitive limit to social relationships and George Siemens learning theory of connectivism, which promotes the idea of socially distributed knowledge and learning. This raises questions about digital space and time and whether the massive scale needs to be reconsidered.

I suggest that a theological idea of ‘being with’ might allow a more nuanced and positively ambiguous concept to explore learning and making. A dialogue of ‘withness’, both between learners and materials, suggests the potential to hold together both the minute scale of the individual and the massive potential of the rhizomic network.

**Figure 3:** Detail of ‘dérives’ (2017) by Trystan Williams, an MA Fine Art Digital graduate at the Camberwell College of Arts, London.

**Biography**
Jonathan Kearney is a British artist, Course Leader for MA Fine Art Digital and Postgraduate Programme Director at the University of the Arts London (UAL) Camberwell College of Arts (Kearney 2018). Since 2004, he has pioneered online learning for fine art masters students, uniquely MA Fine Art Digital is offered both as a studio based course in London and as a fully Online option. Research interests; online and blended pedagogy; art practice and theology engagement; fine art practice in a digital environment.
Bruce Wands, School of Visual Arts, New York, USA

Title: A Portrait of the Artist in the Digital Age

While the classic portrait of an artist in the garret is centuries old and still relevant, contemporary artists are establishing new identities using digital tools and media for creating, experiencing, exhibiting and disseminating their creative work. While the digital revolution in art spans several decades, artists have been working with technology since the early 20th century with the emergence of the Futurism, Dada and Avant-garde, Fluxus in the 1960s and 1970s.

While digital art cannot be specifically described as an art movement with philosophical underpinnings, the emergence of making art with technology and redefining the traditional media of drawing, painting and sculpture spawned an interest in what the digital could add to creative self-expression. The pioneers of digital art relied on limited access to computers, partnerships between artists and computer scientists and programming. There are two main pathways of digital art: evolutionary and revolutionary. Evolutionary digital art includes media such as photography and video and revolutionary changes enable artists to make creative work that was not possible before new technology was invented. Two examples of creative work by the author will illustrate these changes.

The first example is an interactive music installation titled Variations. It incorporated DVD-Audio technology, which was invented in 2000. DVD-Audio enabled the playback of full spectrum high-quality audio on six channels, as opposed to 5.1 surround sound, which was a theatrical and video format. By composing music in six channels and playing it back through an interactive interface consisting of tubes and balls, participants could move the balls on and off the tubes and create their own mix of the music. The work was exhibited in the SIGGRAPH Art Gallery, Millennium Museum in Beijing, Belgium, and the UK. Like many technologies, DVD-Audio became obsolete in 2007 and the specialised DVD players used for it are now difficult to locate. DVD surround sound has now become the de facto standard.

Another example is the Buddha Paintings created by the author. Tibetan thangka paintings date back thousands of years and are secular Buddhist Art. By using the underlying geometry upon which the thangkas are based, abstract images using volumetric light created in the software MAYA were created. In doing so, the secular nature of the imagery was transformed into imagery which is accessible to international audiences.

These two examples illustrate how digital art has expanded the creative options available to the contemporary artist. While it is beyond the scope of this presentation to explore all the evolutionary and revolutionary changes made to art making, the Internet contains hundreds of websites of digital artists.

Figure 4: The left image is the “Variations” interface exhibited in the First Beijing International New Media Arts Exhibition, 2004. The right image is the “Buddha Light Painting” in the Art in the Digital Era exhibition in Guangzhou, China, 2010. (Images Copyright © Bruce Wands.)

Biography

Bruce Wands has been working in digital media and music for more than forty years as an artist, writer and musician. His creative work explores the relationship between digital art, mathematics, new forms of narrative, sound art, music and the creation of contemporary American folk art. Exhibitions and lectures include the First Beijing International New Media Arts Exhibition; Decoding the Digital Conference, Victoria and Albert Museum; Electronics Alive, Florida; and the SIGGRAPH Conference and Art Gallery. His books are Art of the Digital Age (Wands 2006) and Digital Creativity by (Wands 2002). Bruce Wands is Chair Emeritus of the MFA Computer Art Department, Founder of the BFA Computer Art Department and the Director of Computer Education at the School of Visual Arts in New York City. He has been awarded grants from the NEA, Rockefeller Foundation, and NYSCA. He has also presented papers at the main EVA London conference (Wands 2017; Wands 2018).

Tula Giannini, Pratt Institute, New York, USA

Title: Creating Art and Identity on the Internet: Digital Reality and States of Being

As life increasingly plays out on the Internet, human states of being, both conscious and unconscious are recast in digital incarnations of self and identity. The Internet, and especially the web as a global creative platform and public space of communication and interaction brings together and juxtaposes diverse identities, places and spaces that more than ever, cause us question who we are in real and virtual life as we seek to evolve towards an integrated self that
is at once physical and digital. This paper considers
the impact of these changes in what is often
described as a paradigm shift by which human
existence is becoming part of today’s digital
ecosystem in which life itself is encoded and integral
to the Internet of Life (IoL) – of sorts. How is this
emerging state of living on the Internet changing art
and culture? As we enter the next wave of the digital
revolution marked by the digital convergence of all
media, we explore these questions from diverse
perspectives, which seem to indicate that we have
reached a digital point of no return. There’s no going
back to pre-digital life, the question is who will we be
in our digital future.

States of digital being and art on the Internet

The future is now (Amerika 1997):

“GRAMMATRON, a futuristic create in “a public
domain narrative environment”…. depicts a near-
future world where stories are no longer
conceived for book production but are instead
created for a more immersive networked-
narrative environment that, taking place on the
Net, calls into question how a narrative is
composed, published and distributed in the age
of digital dissemination.”

Looking back to 1997, eight years after Tim Berners-
Lee invented the World Wide Web, Mark Amerika
created the groundbreaking work, GRAMMATRON,
introducing the notion of “The Virtual Artist in
Cyberspace” foreshadowing 21st century develop-
ments that today have made the Internet a central
platform for seeing, creating and communicating art.
The exhibition, “Art in the Age of the Internet, 1989
to Today,” which opened on 7 February 2018 at the
Institute of Contemporary Art (ICA) in Boston, USA,
is one of the first major exhibitions to focus on the
revolutionary changes to the theory and production
of art brought about by the web (ICA 2018).

According to the show’s curator, Eva Respini, “It’s a
show about how the internet has affected art” (Sayel
2018), noting that (Respini 2017):

“The internet has introduced a new way of seeing
and being – It’s affected how we shop, eat, date,
travel, our social behaviors, our political
machines, and how we create and consider art.”

The show is organised around several themes
including new ways of thinking about the human
body and its enhancement, how the Internet is being
used for surveillance and social causes, access to
information and images, virtual communities, virtual
worlds, social media and performing the self. The
latter theme delves into how we create and perceive
our digital selves in art and on the web as the selfie
takes centre stage in terms of the relationship
between art and identity.

also took up the surveillance theme which was
featured in the 2016 exhibition, “Astro Noise” by
Laura Poitras. The show, which used the entire 8th
floor of the museum, was narrated through the
artist’s personal archive of film, video and FBI
documents which conveyed her experiences in
Russia where she interviewed and filmed Edward
Snowden in Russia, and victims of the Iraq War to
convey her story of being constantly under
surveillance by the FBI. This brings to light social
contexts of contemporary culture and constructs of
gender identity.

The Internet as a creative platform for reimagining
art and the artist

The Met Museum’s Open Access Initiative makes
some 350,000 works of art from its collections
available online adding substantially to the vast art
collections on the web being used to support
scholarship and creative endeavours while inspiring
art works to be reimagined. For example, Simone
Seagle, a web and educational software developer,
has used this open access collection to create
several animations of master paintings that literally
breathe new life into how we view these works.
Seagle’s animated GIFs of Kandinsky’s Violett,
Claude Monet’s Bridge Over a Pond of Lilies, 1889,
and Ōide Tōkō’s Cat Watching a Spider, c.1888–92
can viewed on the Met Museum’s website (Seagle
2018).

Large-scale digitisation of art works is making
possible the use and reuse of works in ways not
before imagined. Although we have no way of
knowing how these artists would view their works
reimagined as animated GIFs, this would seem
beside the point, which is to encourage new ways of
looking at earlier works, through the use of new
digital technologies, thanks to open access museum
initiatives like that at the Met Museum.

Life through the digital lens (by T. Giannini)

Who am I online
In digital space and time
Feeling free
of reality
Looking into the lens
Click
My digital self appears
Sharing myself with friends
press send
entering the digital ecosphere

Background

Tula Giannini is a professor and former Dean of the
School of Information at the Pratt Institute, New
York. She has previously presented at the EVA
London 2017 Conference (Giannini 2013; Bowen &
Giannini 2014; Giannini & Bowen 2015; 2016; 2017)
and co-chaired the previous EVA London Symposia
(Bowen & Giannini 2016; Bowen, Giannini &
Polmeer 2017). She is the lead editor of a

and synergistically benefit from the wide range of experiences of all those involved in the Symposium.

Online information concerning the EVA London 2018 Symposium is available under:


### Acknowledgements

The EVA London 2018 Symposium was generously supported by the School of Information, Pratt Institute, New York. Jonathan Bowen is grateful to Museophile Limited for financial support.

### 6. REFERENCES


Gardiner, J. and Head, A. (2013) Light years: Jurassic Coast: An immersive 3D landscape project. In Bowen et al. (2013), Chapter 6, pp. 75–89. DOI: 10.1007/978-1-4471-5406-8_6


