

Margins of Art Practice: the material¹, the digital, and the hybrid in the context of communication and inclusivity

Abstract

Since computers first became commonplace, the ability to see and manipulate images has led to a vast range of applications capable of challenging our view of what can be considered real by allowing us to tweak and apply changes along multiple dimensions to any importable image, thereby arguably throwing the 'reality' of the image into question. Perhaps it does; but then is a colour seen in morning light more or less real than the same colour seen in mid-afternoon, and does actively choosing to light an exhibit to its best advantage affect its authenticity? I suggest not. Digital technologies, I suggest, do not represent schisms in artistic practice, but gateways to an expanded the range of creative possibilities, able to underpin unprecedented communication and inclusivity opportunities.

Discussion

Hockney argues (Secret Knowledge, 2001), that an explosion of impressive realism in the 16th/17th century came about due to the camera obscura and further observed that painting subsequently became increasingly impressionistic as photography took up the role of documentarian.

Today, we have technologies at our disposal that can drive, enhance or dispense with past processes, and while galleries still largely value the physical, there are signs of change in the form of augmented reality hybrids (eg *Artivive* and Julia

¹ Frieder Nake is said to prefer 'material' to 'physical' on the grounds that art becomes material once presented on an analogue display. (pers comm Meyfroidt 2022 from a dialogue with Nake discussing analogue and digital art).

Dorninger, 2022; and Babs Smith, 2022) which activate physical work, and art traded only as non-fungible tokens, (cf Beeple).

Technology is not new; flint knives were the technology of their day, as was acrylic paint in the mid-20thC (Kloosterboer, 2014). Artists have always made use of new technologies, from scratching tools to draw into rock (e.g. Pettitt and Pike 2022), da Vinci's mathematical approach to perspective (Jones et al, 2019), to Chevreul's (1829) influence on colour theory. Had they not, we would still be blowing pigment over our hands in caves (Gormley, 2019). A purist view of traditional art practice would, I think, be failing to take into account the influence of those past technologies and how they have successively altered the way art is made. Digital painting, animation apps, and the programming code underpinning art made by AI (eg Henrickson and Natale, 2022; Meyfroidt, 2022) are just the latest.

I am not arguing against a place for art relying only on its material presence, but I do see a place for art that adds layers to a viewer's experience via the digital world. In this, some artists are digital purists as makers, Beeple and Casey Reas, for instance, while others such as Hockney have a mixed model approach, although even he tends to make art as one or the other.

My recent work is predicated on material pieces which can stand alone but that also house the digital triggers capable of presenting viewers with added layers of images. The impact of hybridisation was evident at a recent art trail where most of my work was AR-enabled (Conboy-Hill, 2022a), and I find the flexibility of moving among the various modes inspiring in itself. While many result in filmic pieces, some inspire a reworking of the original material piece (e.g. Conboy-Hill, 2022b). That fluidity feels creative in its own right.

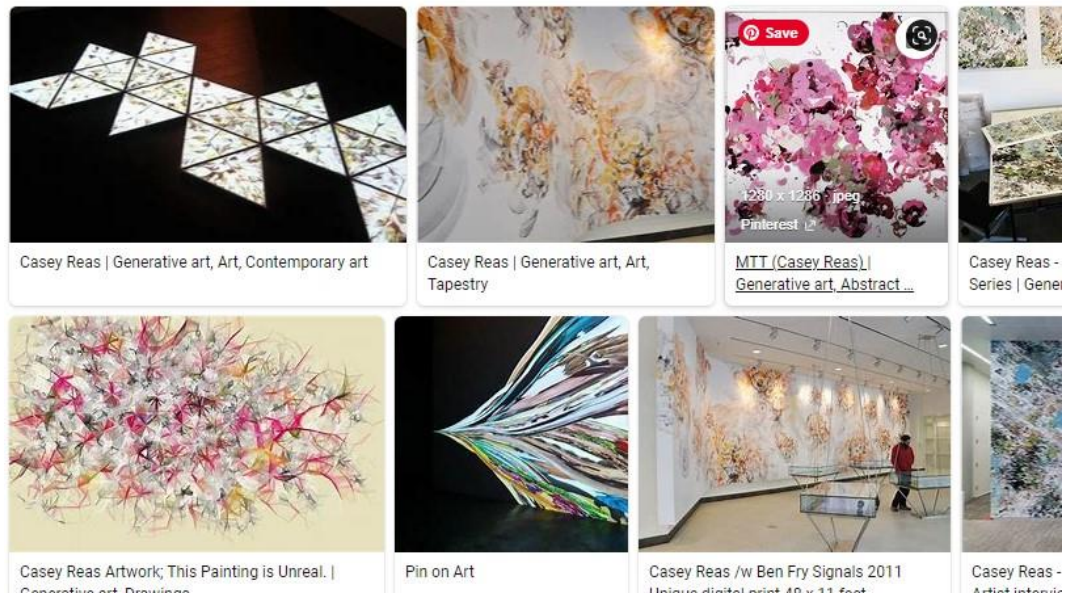
This, I believe, is where meaning sits; an additional element there to engage a wider audience by adding depth to the image's story. In this I differ from Jozwiak (2013) whose thesis focused on samples of the population already sufficiently *au fait* with art to be writing blogs and referencing galleries. I see meaning as another form of language, layered into objects and materials to maximise engagement among viewers who are not often, if ever, in galleries.

I would argue though that this apparent schism between the unspoken/unexplained and the layered experience is an artefact of reactionary thinking; resistance to approaches that some may feel challenge the validity of the past, rather than a new set of tools able to extend and elaborate an artist's creative reach.

I come from a background where good communication is essential because where it fails, people are excluded. The discussion contained in Jozwiak's dissertation describes debate ranging from the case for clarity of meaning, which artists readily provide for their peers, to the idea that viewers otherwise benefit from self-discovery. I can see how this argument might work among the artistically literate, which is Jozwiak's source population, but not among a population that, at best, only passively engages with art.

But 'meaning' is a loaded word. Whose meaning do we mean? What if its packaged delivery stifles an imagined journey in a viewer? I accept there are risks here, but suggest they are no worse than the continued perceived elitism of an enterprise that feels no need to explain itself to anyone due to the "... *notion of self-contained geniuses, whose skills we can no longer comprehend, [...] interpreted for us today by a priesthood of art historians*" as an unattributed February 2000 Guardian article suggests.

Digital art is, I believe, under-valued and marginalised. Much of it borders on film; some of it is 3D, AR, or VR. Casey Reas makes purely digital work that has no material presence except perhaps as prints; Julia Dorninger's 2022 exhibition moves through material to digital expression and AR; and William Kentridge makes animations from drawings.



Screen clip from Casey Reas Google image search taken 19th June 2022.

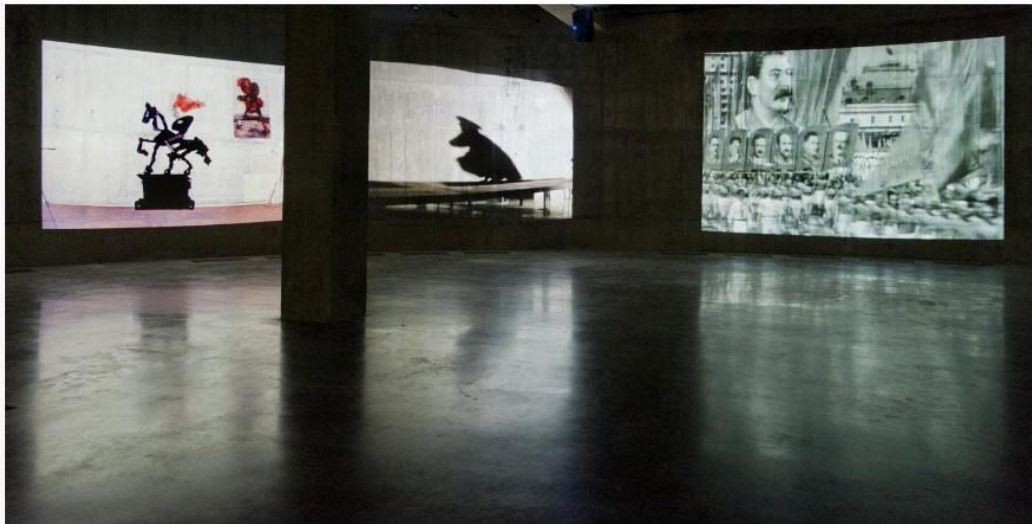
Artist Statement

Die Auseinandersetzung mit Raumwahrnehmung und Raumaneignung sind essentielle Grundthemen meiner Arbeit. Meine Projekte stehen im Kontext relationaler Raumtheorien, in denen Raum nicht als gegeben, sondern als ein sich über die komplexe Wechselbeziehung zwischen Mensch und räumlicher Struktur konstituierender betrachtet wird. In meinen künstlerischen Raumforschungen stelle ich den Körper als Ausgangspunkt von leiblich- sinnlichen Raumerfahrungen in den Mittelpunkt und möchte vor dem Hintergrund der Phänomenologie und ihren Grundsätzen der Intentionalität, der Leiblichkeit und Verkörperung untersuchen, über welche Formen künstlerischer situativer Prozesse die damit einhergehenden Architektur Erfahrungen einen Beitrag zu einer Veränderung der Raumwahrnehmung bzw. zu einem Bewusstwerden von Affordanz bzw. Performanz von Raum führen können.



Screen clip from the artist's website. Taken June 20th

2022. Permission requested.



Screen clip taken from the Tate, 20th June 2022.

Elsewhere, in film title and documentary graphics, artists have enhanced our viewing experience immeasurably but with little recognition. The Game of Thrones opening titles (by Elastic for HBO) are visually stunning, graphically complex, and rich in story-telling in their own right; while the equally stunning graphics for the portrayal of space and planetary systems used in science programmes such as the BBC's Universe, (2021) have prompted some to ask about the camera that captures them.

There is meaning in all of these, but no one needs a written explanation of what that is, and it leaves more than enough scope for viewer imagination to find its own path.

I believe this is the role of meaning in art; an enhancer of both visual experience and storytelling and maximiser of inclusivity and communication; and I would also suggest that digital/material hybrids may be the way to bring in new groups of viewers.



Rift. Fantasy geological. Made in acrylics initially then digitally manipulated in Paintshop Pro, Rebelle 5 Pro, and Flamepainter before drawing out the animations in Photo Mirage and compositing with audio in Filmora.



Red Wall. The socio-political rift in UK voting patterns which put blue holes in the traditionally red Labour wall of the North. Acrylics photographed in low light with animation in PhotoMirage, greenscreen in Paintshop Pro for compositing with video and audio in Filmora.



Blue Passports. The socio-political rift of Brexit. Acrylics and collage on A2 paper, animated in MotionLeap, additional greenscreen effects



No/rmal. The disconnect between the public and private of historical institutions. Acrylics, soft pastels, and collage on A2 paper. The final image shown was taken at night in low light and with LEDs and used in greenscreen compositing with audio in Filmora.

Conclusion

New technology is only new until the next new technology arrives. Digital art seems likely to settle eventually alongside the accepted older technologies as artists' curiosity drives inquiry and creativity forwards. The opportunities for inclusivity are immense and must be a part of this forward momentum or we risk stifling innovation with a blanket of historical elitism.

1074 words of 1000 +/- 10% Includes quotes, headers, abstract, but not title, refs, or text boxes.

Glossary

AI – artificial intelligence

AR – augmented reality

VR – virtual reality

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5. Beeple is Mike Winkelman, graphic designer, who has "been creating a picture everyday from start to finish and posting it online for over ten years without missing a single day" and sold an NFT of his *Everydays* at Sotheby's for \$69 million in 2021 Source [online] Jacob Kastrenakes in The Verge, March 2021, available at [Beeple sold an NFT for \\$69 million - The Verge](#). Accessed 19th June 2022. [HOME | BEEPLE | the work of mike winkelmann \(beeple-crap.com\)](#) Accessed 19th June 2022.
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14. Casey Reas (1972-) is a professor of design media arts at UCLA, “*Renowned for his development of Processing, an open-source, flexible software sketchbook and language for learning how to code within the context of the visual arts*”. [online] Available at [CASEY REAS | UCLA Arts](#) Accessed June 19th 2022.
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22. Universe (BBC 2021). Currently available on BBC iPlayer.

Additional materials

<https://ars.electronica.art/aeblog/en> A diverse and exciting magazine bringing together art and technology; for example, the STARTS project: “**Giulia Foscari**: We are deeply honoured to have been awarded the STRATS prize. We are great believers in the power of artistic production to catalyse global action, disseminate scientific knowledge and accelerate the process of data democratisation, which are at the heart of the STARTS initiative.”

[https://www.rightclicksave.com/article/the-hybrid-art-of-claudia-](https://www.rightclicksave.com/article/the-hybrid-art-of-claudia-hart?fbclid=IwAR00y_BRzTFoDIg-tG0N8WsUSS-kHJ5dOOwaJWIQH19EnlyBsa4Gpo_aNvc)

[hart?fbclid=IwAR00y_BRzTFoDIg-tG0N8WsUSS-](https://www.rightclicksave.com/article/the-hybrid-art-of-claudia-hart?fbclid=IwAR00y_BRzTFoDIg-tG0N8WsUSS-kHJ5dOOwaJWIQH19EnlyBsa4Gpo_aNvc)

[kHJ5dOOwaJWIQH19EnlyBsa4Gpo_aNvc](https://www.rightclicksave.com/article/the-hybrid-art-of-claudia-hart?fbclid=IwAR00y_BRzTFoDIg-tG0N8WsUSS-kHJ5dOOwaJWIQH19EnlyBsa4Gpo_aNvc) Claudia Hart talking about digital combines and NFTs.

<https://ars.electronica.art/newdigitaldeal/en/hybrid-art> Hybrid art; for example the Garden Barcelona exhibition: This exhibition program is articulated around a long-term sedimentation process that emerges from the transdisciplinary collaboration between different institutions (art production centers, the university, scientific and technological centers, citizen lab center), that has led to the awarding of six

scholarships for artistic research-production through an open call and a collective selection process. During the fully funded production and research residency, artists intertwine and situate their respective practices at the intersections of scientific centers (BSC, ICFO, BIST) associated with the Barcelona art, science and technology hub (Hac Te), as well as visual arts and dancing arts centers (Hangar, La Caldera)

<https://shinybinary.com/> Digital artist with a catalogue of high profile clients.

<https://www.vice.com/en/article/ez5zzp/the-gif-mountainsides-and-internet-landscapes-of-mark-dorf> Mark Dorf's use of image breakdown into detail and data sets: "All of *Emergence* was created while I was an artist in residence at the Rocky Mountain Biological Laboratory (RMBL) in Gothic, CO. During my time there, I was working alongside ecologists and biologists in the field assisting them with their research, observing, and creating my own works. All of the imagery seen in *Emergence* explores the ways in which we collect, dissect, and interpret information."

<https://www.erikjo.com/> Surreal photography.

[Virtual | Digital | Physical – HYBR1D ART JOURNAL \(hybridartjournal.com\)](http://hybridartjournal.com) Hybrid

Art Journal invites us to 'make epic shit'.

Applications

Paintshop Pro – image editing. Corel. Desktop.

Rebelle – painting. Escapemotions. Desktop.

Flamepainter – light painting. Escapemotions. Desktop and smart devices.

MotionLeap – animation. Lightricks. Smart devices.

PhotoLeap – Lightricks. Smart devices.

PhotoMirage – animation. Corel. Desktop.

Filmora – video editing. Wondershare. Desktop. One off purchase. Pro version being retired.

Power Director – Cyberlink. Suite including audio, colour, and photo editing/compositing by subscription.

Suzanne Conboy-Hill 521602

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Exploring Media 2022 essay component².

² This publication is an academic, educational, non-commercial work.