Screentech: digital art in context

Darren Tofts

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Opening remarks

[Slide #1: Magritte 1]

Re “Screentech”: defamiliarizing term: in context of digital canvas;
do we speak of canvas tech? Speak of painting; why then do we speak of digital art?
Screentech: to demystify something of the reduction of digital art to computer technology: and to identify the screen as an emergent space for art practice.

Problem of nomenclature: Issue of naming: new media art, multimedia, digital art; my concern with all of them: especially digital.

My preference for intermedia; deliberately drawing on a word that already has currency within art history and assigning it a new connotation and context.

**Question of technology**

[Slide # 2: Gates]

Criticism that dig art is software driven; lacks creative force and integrity

Problem of authority/artistry; part of more pervasive culture of appropriation/sampling, etc.

[Slide #3: Sherman]

Arguably no different to technique within the traditional arts; artists such as Francis Bacon who want to “unlearn” technique.

Problem of intermediary nature of the computer; software; working within confined and defined parameters; what it can and can’t do.

Leads to self-similarity; whizz-bangery of some digital art.

Creative pressure to use the technology to one’s aesthetic ends; cf Jon McCormack: create your own software.
Context

[Slide #4: McKeich 1]

Issue of digital art’s place in context of traditional art practice/visual arts.

Broader issue re cultural production; latter easier to define; re perverse use value of a new technology not designed as an art form; talk of multi-media; use of a medium invented for the processing of information/communication: just as we make literature from writing.

Re context of visual arts: cf Binary Code (1997)

debate re value of digital art: division between those critics who see it as having no place, so much hype and vacuity, Stephen Feneley: not ART, therefore why are we bothering with it; hasn’t established itself/earned its place or has as yet no place;

Don’t have a critical mass as yet, enough writing on it to sustain a genuine critical discourse (Artlink editor Stephanie Britton)

On the other hand, those critics who feel that contemporary art is moribund and actually needs digital art to resuscitate it (Saul).

Some of the key agendas of Binary Code were to do with the idea of multimedia as an add on to established art forms; as well as the appropriate critical language for talking about multimedia.

[Slide #5: McCormack]

Also, charges of obscurantism: idea that there is an elite of digital artists and commentators who are in the know and deliberately concealing from the general art going public. Cf Byte Me (1999)
Discourse

[Slide #6: Innocent 1]

Question of appropriate critical language/paradigm to discuss and frame digital art;

Do we draw on the lexicon of the visual arts?

Or are literary or cinematic paradigms more appropriate? Or hybrid combinations of all three? Do we need to derive a distinctive more of discourse? Perhaps drawn from unlikely sources? Cf Quantum theory; quark, strangeness and charm?

Peter Hennessey (*Binary Code*): need for a syncretic critical language which draws on existing discourses and blurs their conceptual boundaries: thus suited to the hybridity of multimedia art.

My previous writings: my position: need to locate digital art practice within a broader theory/framework of representation (not the same as context of art history); still dealing with narrative, images, signification, animation, etc. Digital art practice, as well as its appropriate critical languages, will emerge from this crossover with tradition.

Philippa Hawker (*Binary Code*): discussion of Baz Lurhmann’s *Romeo + Juliet*: convergent relationships between literary, filmic and multimedia practices: as many similarities as differences between the experience of literature, film and multimedia.

Not to reduce digital art to just another category of traditional art practice/more of the same; have to identify what is distinctive and different about digital art; but in a measured way.
Equally, can’t do it in a vacuum; digital art hasn’t emerged out of nowhere; and it is situated within a longstanding tradition of art practice and theoretical space of ideas about art.

Cf QWERTY: Approaches to A Digital Aesthetic (1997): crossovers between traditional art practices and the digital; artists approaching digital technologies as just another set of practices to be utilised;

computer enhanced images printed as cibachrome images; adhered to silk using C19th development techniques; printing of digital images on rag paper, a staple of watercolour and antiquarian books; or simulation of the texture of paper; pleasure in its tactility, fibrous texture.

All artists exploring question: what is to be the role of the computer in established practice.

Examples; three works, by Alan Dorin, Martin Walch and Julie Christie used the principle of the stereoscope as a perceptive device; in Christie’s case, used the viewmaster as a means of viewing digitally created images;

The work in this exhibition illustrated the creative bringing together of existing media and new media.

Then there’s the problem of location/contexts of reception/formation of audiences, access, etc; cf Burning the Interface (1996); e-media gallery at the CCP.

Can link these ideas to get a picture of the progression of digital art; as it grapples with questions of reception/audience suspicion/bewilderment, location, etc.

Eg: sublimation/concealment of the computer in installation/sculptural arrangements; use of projection technologies; ambient space where computer is unseen or inconspicuous; emphasis not so much on the tech of the computer but the experience of the art work.
Cf *Byte Me: Fuzzy Love Dating Service*: sculptural installations; one like an automatic photo-booth:

Then the larger, projection/ambient experience of Jon McCormack's *Universal Zoologies*; intelligent environment; sensitive to the presence of the visitor; but again, re the forum, irritation for some that it intruded beyond its designated space.

Point here: a number of key exhibitions/forums devoted to digital art have and continue to focus key questions concerning the emergence of art forms associated with the technology of the computer: as well as the crossovers and intersections with traditional art forms; cf AFC Narrative and Interactivity symposia, four to date.

Careful re phrasing here: the emphasis is vital: not art made by computers, or made in computers. Cf indifference of some visitors to *Burning the Interface*.

**Examples**

**[Slide #8: Bacon]**

"The digital canvas"

I want to leave open to debate issue of whether or not the mode of the canvas is an appropriate metaphor or material to invoke in the context of digital art.

Contrast Bacon image with close up of Murray's image: the threads of the canvas/pixels: clearly different: but equally striated:

Canvas good example of Deleuze & Guattari's "striated space"; fabric; something made up of strands;
One of the main contrasts cited between traditional canvas and the digital canvas is that at least on a canvas there is something there, actual, pigment, oil, medium, etc;

Bacon's notion of the canvas "holding" the paint;

[Slide #9: McKeich 2]

In a digital image, there is nothing there in a material sense; just a manifestation of light in a designated grid that is subject to change, unpredictable (re different screen resolutions etc).

[Slide #10: Magritte 2]

But can we sustain this: aren't all images equally fugitive, transient; products of illusion; only a matter of perspective and vantage point that an image appears out of marks on a canvas: cf David Lodge's famous formulation... The image is a matter of a certain threshold of vision; the "distant vision" of Deleuze and Guattari; where the striated is returned or transformed into a smooth space; an aesthetic process in which trompe l'oeil illusion emerges from the roughness of paint and fabric/pixels of light.

In closing: Lodge: "one hundred percent success in this enterprise equals failure. Trompe l'oeil art only becomes art at the moment we recognize how we have been deceived... we cannot simultaneously enjoy the illusion and the knowledge that it is an illusion".