

The Mainstream Treatment Of Digital Art

September 17, 2014

[or, *Thoughts on the Barbican Digital Revolution Show*]

As of about a week and a half ago, I unceremoniously picked up my life in New York and dumped it into London. I had initially planned to move to London a solid two weeks later, but there were some definite perks achieved by coming in earlier. One of those perks is that I managed to make it to London just in time for the closing weekend of the [Barbican Centre's Digital Revolution Show](#). The show, as has been well-documented, was meant to be a “celebration of art made with code.” I attended on literally the final day, at the last time slot that was available (in my defense, I’m Nigerian; we don’t believe in showing up to anything early).

There’s been a whole lot of debate around the show, DevArt, Google’s role in it, and what it all has meant for artists. If you want to know more about that, check out [this](#) Guardian article and some of the ensuing responses on [Twitter](#) and other [media](#). I’m going to swiftly sidestep that whole conversation, not just because I’ve come in late to the party (all the discussion happened months ago) but also because its only tangentially related to the aspects of the show that I was most struck by.

What I’ll focus on instead is a more general view of the show and what I felt that it represented: a surprisingly comprehensive but dismayingly elementary approach to the world of digital art. Here's what I mean by comprehensive: the exhibition covered pieces from the media of film, video games, net art, and fashion. It jumped from relatively recent and mainstream works like the movie *Inception* to '90s interactive art by John Maeda to historical work done by the 1970s Bell Labs crew. Anything and everything appeared to be fair game.

The result? For me, an acute sense of being overwhelmed. My mental response felt mirrored by the setup of the first few rooms: a dizzying maze of screens glowing in the darkness, blocked occasionally by the masses of bodies (sold-out shows are so much more fun in theory than in practice...). I couldn’t quite reconcile jumps like those from James George’s interactive documentary [Clouds](#) to will.i.am’s holograph-inspired music video/art *Pyramidi*.

My biggest takeaway was that it still feels like some of the big names in the art world don’t quite know what to do with the worlds of creative coding and digital/computational art. It's a sentiment I've heard echoed in regards to other shows (V&A's Decode show from 2010, for instance), but even MOMA's more design-oriented Talk To Me back in 2011 brought up a similar reaction for me. I'd sum up the general impulse at the Digital Revolution show with one word: more. It was a focus on exposure, on presenting everything and anything associated with this “new” world of digital things. Such an approach is decidedly standard when anyone

has found something “new”—you want to discover and relay everything about it; sort of like when you find a musician you like and immediately download every album they’ve got.

But the real stage of understanding and acceptance comes in curation: the ability to take “everything” and thoughtfully break it down into themes and ideas, currents and movements, picking and choosing pieces that reflect those things. And of course, this world of computational art and aesthetic isn’t new at all; its been around for years.

I suppose what the Barbican Show really reminded me is that we are past this point. The ethos should no longer be, “Check out this cool stuff these digital people are doing.” It’s high past time that art institutions like the Barbican understand that it’s not just about the production of content, but about what the content that’s being produced is meant to say and do. And I’m not claiming that legitimacy is only achieved when these institutions realize and act on this—I think it’s equally, if not more, important that we already see this in smaller shows curated by people more involved in the scene (like the upcoming [Art of the Algorithm](#) exhibition taking place in London this weekend)—just noting that it’s odd that others have yet to reach the same point.

Let me conclude with something less negative: I was, overall, quite glad that I was able to make it to the exhibition, and there were certainly pieces that were exhibited very effectively (like the work by Cyril Diagne and Beatrice Lartigue, as well as the commissioned artists, and many others) and absolutely deserved the spotlight they received. And like I mentioned before, the exhibition was packed to the brim with people (I had to maneuver the awkwardness that happens when you’ve pre-bought a ticket to a sold-out show but come with a friend who thought he could buy them at the door. Sorry about that, Sam). It’s wonderful to think of a whole group of people being happily exposed to digital themes and ideas. But I still maintain that it’s time that we, as a more general society and art world, begin to treat and acknowledge computational art as the evolved and deep field that it is and has become.

*For all that I wrote here, I still hesitate to use the term “digital art” to encompass this world. Feels limiting, somehow. Is that me being overcautious, or are there better suggestions on what the best term is?

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