**Doing Digital Visual Studies: An Introduction**

**By Laurie Gries**

**Introduction**

In the last 15 years, a number of scholarly books about visual research such as Sarah Pink’s *Doing Visual Ethnography* (2013 [2001]) and Marcus Banks’ *Visual Methods in Social Research* (2001), have emerged on the academic scene,[[1]](#footnote-1) marking visual methodology as a new field of study in and of itself. Sarah Pink, perhaps, describes this field of study best when she writes that the study of visual methodology entails “understanding and engaging not only with the newest and latest theoretical developments in our fields, but also with the ways that these are co-implicated with technological developments and media practices” (*Advances* 3). While content, rhetorical, and semiotic analysis have long been taken up for visual research, advancements with digital technologies are transforming even our most traditional visual research methods. Among other developments, the production of visual search engines, the proliferation of algorithms, advancements in data visualization, and innovations with digital production and recording tools are pushing the invention of new research methods such as digital ethnography (Pink 2016) and iconographic tracking (Gries 2017). When considered alongside the emergence of participatory culture and ubiquitous computing as well as responsive theories about images, materiality, space, and technology, the practice of visual research simply does not look the same as it did even 15 years ago. *Digital Visual Studies* is an edited collection that attends to such methodological shifts in both research and practice. With a targeted audience of scholars interested in visual and digital rhetoric, media studies, and visual culture, this collection specifically aims to open up new possibilities for doing digital visual research.

In order to demonstrate new visual research potentials afforded by emergent technologies and media practices, we have produced *Doing Digital Visual Studies* as a digital book with eight chapters that are unique in content and multimodal format. Typically, visual methodology books survey different approaches through discussions of various visual artifacts. *Doing Digital Visual Studies* is unique in that each chapter takes up a different methodology in relation to one single image. We believe that using one visual artifact throughout book will highlight the distinctions between different methodological approaches and elucidate what each approach can uniquely bring to an object of study. We also believe that using one visual artifact can help highlight the unique affordances that engaging with the digital can bear on visual studies.

The chosen image for this methodological project is Shepard Fairey’s iconic Obama Hope image, which became widely recognizable and impactful during the 2008 presidential election season (see Figure 1). We have chosen this image for three reasons. First, as we discuss throughout this chapter, this book project is grounded in digital experimentation; as such, we needed an image that is methodologically flexible and capable of digital play. Due to the transformative, educational, and critical nature of this digital book project, the Obama Hope image is accessible under Fair Use. It is also simple in design, making remix, 3-D printing, and glitching--the creative practices explored in the collection—both possible and manageable. Second, we felt that in order to assess the value of each included methodology, we needed deep knowledge about our chosen object of study. I have been closely following and writing extensively about the Obama Hope image’s ongoing rhetorical life for 10 years (Gries 2013; Gries 2015; Gries 2017); therefore, as content editor, I had a clear grasp of this image’s circulation, transformation, and rhetorical consequentiality and could thus assess each chapter’s claims about and representations of Obama Hope accordingly.

Third, we needed to focus on an image that has sustained cultural relevance and is capable of educating us about contemporary new media images and practices. Due to its mass appeal and extensive involvement in helping elect the first African American president in U.S. history, the Obama Hope image has been deemed by *New Yorker* art critic Peter Schjeldahl to be the most efficacious political illustration since “Uncle Sam Wants You.” In *Still Life with Rhetoric* (2015)*,* my research with iconographic tracking was able to disclose how this single image was able to go viral and become an integral actor in the 2008 presidential election. My research was also able to recover many other collective activities in which Obama Hope participated between 2008 and 2014, including, but not limited to, its participation in the Arab Spring and Occupy movements, in Greenpeace’s transnational environmental movement, and numerous political elections across the world, including the 2012 U.S. presidential election. Such research, I believe, enabled me to generate many useful insights about, among other things, how viral circulation unfolds with time and space in a digitally networked global culture. Yet because Obama Hope is still circulating in the Trump presidential era and impacting culture in provocative ways (see Figure 2) and because *Still Life of Rhetoric’s* main purpose is to explicate what iconographic tracking and a new materialist approach to visual rhetoric might entail*,* my work with Obama Hope in *Still Life with Rhetoric* is limited. Obama Hope still has much to teach us about visual culture and media studies, especially if studied from the diverse methodological approaches introduced in this collection and other inventive digital research methods.

In taking up Obama Hope as a single object of study, *Doing Digital Visual Studies* aims to explore how “the digital” is inflecting upon and diversifying visual studies in inventive and productive ways. We embrace the idea that visual studies is necessarily interdisciplinary--that the exploration into the interrelations between visual phenomena, visuality, vision, and culture benefits from various methodological approaches and diverse methods. We also recognize that whether taken up in anthropology, media studies, cultural studies or postcolonial studies, each discipline and field of study has something unique to offer as we explore shared questions related to the visual—what is made visible and invisible, how perspectives and communities are shaped by visual culture and vice versa, how knowing, seeing, and power are interrelated, etc. Yet we especially appreciate the work that scholars within the disciplines of Rhetoric and Composition/Writing Studies (RCWS) and Communication have brought to visual studies—from Cara Finnegan’s and Lester Olson’s studies of visual rhetorical history to Robert Hariman’s and John Lucaites’ work with photography and civic spectatorship to Sid Dobrin’s and Sean Morey’s explorations of ecosee to Kristie S. Fleckenstein’s, Sue Hum’s, and Linda T. Calendrillo’s study of shared ways of seeing and most recently Sean Morey’s and John Tinnell’s work with augmented reality. As scholars housed in these same disciplines, we aim to contribute to this ever-growing body of work by exploring how experiments with the digital can enhance our visual studies in ways that we have yet or just begun to explore.

When it comes to “the digital,” we are thinking of it here in general terms as the technologies, systems, and networks that allow for new forms of storing, organizing, analyzing, and presenting information. More specifically, in relation to visual studies, we think of the digital, as Douglas Eyman defines it in *Digital Rhetoric: Theory, Method,* *Practice,* as a broader “organizing principle” of scholarly practice that allows for information to be “articulated and rearticulated, reshaped or recreated” in novel and generative ways (20). To distinguish digital visual studies from visual studies is to acknowledge that research unfolds differently in today’s information environment with emergent digital technologies at our disposal—in design, in implementation, in outcomes, and in presentation. Consider, for example, the following narrative told by Melissa Terras, a Digital Humanities scholar from the University College London, who paints a vivid picture of visual research pre and post digital.

I studied Art History in my undergraduate days, and was thinking of what a career in the humanities meant to students, then. It started with the slide test, where we learnt and memorized hundreds of paintings, and were expected to be able to mobilise knowledge about them expertly. (Note – In the lecture I undertake a slide test here of Degas’ Miss La La at the Cirque Fernando, 1879, National Gallery, London). We would study 35mm slides, cramped round a slide cabinet perhaps 5 students deep, for hours, and back this up through print publications and gallery visits. If you caught the bug, you might do your undergraduate dissertation on, say, Degas and his circus paintings. You may then do a MA dissertation on the Impressionists and their circus paintings. If you were good enough, and fortunate to gain funding, you might do your PhD dissertation on the use of perspective in Degas’ circus paintings, and what this “means” for modern art. Eventually, after stiff competition, you may get a post teaching modern (used in the broadest sense) art, and your research would become highly specialised in perspective in impressionist paintings of performance. After years of hard graft you’d own this area, and write in this area, and have found and read every book and article on this area, and publish the elusive monograph in this area. You may have even travelled widely to see every painting in this area in the flesh, not to mention visiting many archives and libraries. It would take years to even piece together all the information you needed to become an expert in the field.

Let’s contrast that to today’s information environment. You are not sure of the exact painting you are interested in, and rather than remember it, a quick google of “degas circus painting” leads you to the [Wikipedia page of Miss La La](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Miss_La_La_at_the_Cirque_Fernando). You can find a link to it at the [National Gallery](http://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/hilaire-germain-edgar-degas-miss-la-la-at-the-cirque-fernando), London, where you can zoom in in so much more detail that you could ever see in a 35mm slide, or even up close when visiting the gallery. You can see where this fits in to the pantheon of Degas’ – and the Impressionists’ – oeuvre by looking up the complete works of all [Impressionist paintings, online](http://www.impressionistsgallery.co.uk/). The [complete works of Edgar Degas](http://www.edgar-degas.org/) shows you every single known study for Miss La La, and you can see high definition images of a pastel study for the painting on the [Tate website](http://www.tate.org.uk/servlet/ViewWork?workid=3697). You can look up [historical newspaper archives](http://news.google.com/newspapers?id=v0cqAAAAIBAJ&sjid=OE8EAAAAIBAJ&pg=3763,5521007&dq=degas&hl=en) to see if there was anything written about the painting or artist in the past, find [relevant journal articles](http://www.jstor.org/pss/25067359) that refer to the painting from the comfort of your own laptop, and see if it had been [mentioned particularly in any book](http://www.google.com/search?tbm=bks&tbo=1&q=%22miss+la+la%22&btnG=Search+Books) published since the painting was painted. You could even wander up to the painting virtually using the [Google Art Project](http://www.googleartproject.com/museums/nationalgallery/) (well, you will be able to once the NG expand their coverage of Google Art beyond the couple of galleries that have been digitised via street view technology). You can see other’s views and visits of the artwork by [a simple Flickr search](http://www.flickr.com/search/?q=degas%20national%20gallery%20london) (which is something art historians love, in particular, for looking at alternative views of sculptures held in museums, beyond the official viewpoint in the print catalogues). If you are in the Gallery, and want more information about a painting, you can simply take a picture on your phone, and search Google with that image, or use [Google goggles](http://www.google.com/mobile/goggles/) to tell you more about it. (I am aware that I am mentioning Google frequently: a) I am “not-working” from home and therefore unable to easily access other institutional resources, and b) they do provide an easy suite of tools to use in the first instance, even if there are shortcomings and limitations). You can do a reverse image search using [Tin Eye](http://www.tineye.com/search/b888c0105666e52edc2e685db558b403014c8eef/) to see who else is talking about that image/ artwork. If you have the access, and resources, you could use [advanced imaging techniques](http://www.nap.edu/openbook.php?record_id=11413&page=120) to study both the creation and the current condition of the artwork, for conservation purposes and beyond. You could use computational methods to analyse the angles and perspectives of the human figure in Degas’ artworks. You could virtually recreate the Cirque Fernando in 3D to investigate the artist’s perspective of Miss La La. If you didn’t know how to do any of this, you could ask twitter for some pointers, and within minutes someone in the DH community would have responded. Post a [question on DH answers](http://digitalhumanities.org/answers/topic/computational-analysis-of-perspective-in-paintingsart), and within 24 hours you would have the best advice on how to study perspective in modern art, using computational methods.

Now obviously, Terras here is focused on how DH research is transforming art history, a field of study with a much narrower scope of inquiry than visual studies (Dikovitskaya 147). However, the contrast articulated by Terras does a remarkable job highlighting just how vast and varied the affordances of the digital are for every stage of the visual research process. As scholars intrigued by such affordances, we aim to explore how digital technologies--social media platforms, software programs, data visualizations, mobile devices, digital archives, etc---make possible innovative ways of doing visual studies from an interdisciplinary methodological perspective. For the purposes of this collection, we call this work *digital visual studies*, which brings different methodologies to bear on a single visual object of study yet shares a commitment to engage in experimental digital-visual research.

**Digital Visual Studies**

In giving name to digital visual studies, we do not aim to introduce a new area of research per se. But we do hope to underscore the potentiality of digital visual research that is emerging across the humanities and to which we hope to contribute. We are excited, for instance, about Edgar Gómez Cruz, Shanti Sumartojo, and Sarah Pink’s recently published collection *Reconfiguring Techniques in Digital Visual Research[[2]](#footnote-2)*, in which scholars from across the humanities explore how digital visual technologies, such as drone cameras, Go-Pro cameras, eye-tracking technologies, and 360 degrees cameras, are helping to invent new research techniques for ethnographic research—research that we believe scholars interested in rhetorical field methods will particularly find useful. We aim to extend such digital visual research by exploring how digital research operating at the nexus of visual rhetoric, digital rhetoric, and the digital humanities can be as equally productive, particularly for research in RC/WS and Communication.

We envision ourselves working at the nexus of visual rhetoric, digital rhetoric, and the digital humanities because, most simply, we share similar interests with and our research is most directly informed by each of these fields of study[[3]](#footnote-3). With visual rhetoric, for instance, we share an interest in the relations between visual phenomena and public life—most particularly how the design, production, distribution, and circulation of visual artifacts enable collective identification, participatory action, and civic engagement. We are inspired, for instance, by the recent work of E. Cram, Melanie Loehwing, and John Louis Lucaites (2016), which explores how digital photography is transforming civic engagement. Digital photographs, they insist, are unique in that, most obviously, they not only are produced by digital cameras, smart phones or other digital devices but also “circulate through dynamic ecologies between physical places, device storage and clouds, social networking sites, and other forms of digital archiving.” Less obviously, perhaps, digital photographs remediate the conventions of analog photographs, make strategic use of indexicality, circulation, and repetition, and move beyond representation to draw audience attention to both the content of a digital photograph and the form, style, genre, and medium of presentation. In an era of digital culture, they build on Richard Lanham to insist, we no longer, if we ever did, look at and through photographs but rather *with* them--a multiplying perspective that enables “a new kind of civic practice that upends the traditional separation between those who act and those who see, making it possible for acts of seeing to fulfill the political functions of both rhetor and audience.” Digital visual studies recognizes such transformation in civic practice and participatory culture and aims to delve more deeply into how emergent digital technologies and new media practices are fueling this transformation in significant ways.

We are especially invested in exploring how social media, software programs, mobile devices, digital applications, and digital machines are shifting the ways we interact with visual media and what the implications of such shifts are for individual and collective life. We thus also share a strong focus with digital rhetoric, which as a field of study is concerned with the analysis and production of a wide range of digital texts, genres, and practices, including new media images. In *enculturation’s* recent special issue devoted to digital rhetorics, for instance, Jeff Rice explores how the digital aggregation of images, headlines, tweets, etc. leads to phenomena such as “digital rage” that takes place in social media environments. “Digital aggregation,” he explains, “foregrounds already held beliefs by computating them within a current, circulated image” such as the photograph of Cecil--the Zimbabwe lion killed in 2015 by a Minnesota dentist on an African safari hunt. “To compute the digital image of outrage,” in other words, one has to have “other accumulated aggregations stored in memory, emotion, action, personal history, or otherwise.” Such aggregations may develop via personal experiences, but in many cases, they are generated via news and popular culture, in this case for example, movies such as *The Lion King* or *Born Free* that create certain narratives about lions that we internalize. Such aggregations have always existed,” Rice notes, “but digital circulation and social media interactions make them extremely powerful today as technical images.” As scholars interested in digital visual studies, we work toward similar aims, identifying how digitally produced images in conjunction with social media and other digital technologies spread affect, trigger collective identification, alter ways of seeing and understanding, and in some cases, as Rice notes, exacerbate already-existing human emotions and behaviors as well as cultural phenomena.

In addition, alongside digital rhetoric, we value digital experimentation as a mode of knowledge production. We take inspiration from projects such as Sean Morey’s “Deepwater Horizon Roadkill Tollbooth (A MEmorial),” which offers a methodology and virtual model for creating a digital, conceptual, and affective mapping of the Deepwater Horizon oil spill that occurred in 2010. We especially appreciate how Morey acknowledges the conceptual gains from engaging with such experimentation. As he notes, his actualization of the MEmorial, now just “a plan for a virtual, potential Memorial,…is not necessary for the project to succeed.” Morey offers a specific justification for such claim. In order to establish deep ecological relationships, he argues that we have to find ways to write about ecological disasters in ways that affect us and others and help tune us into our complex relations. Producing electrate ecompositions such as the Deepwater Horizon Roadkill Tollboth, Morey insists, can help foster such modes of composition and affective experiences. While we agree with such specific benefit, we also think that, in general, speculative projects such as Morey’s are productive for opening up novel, unexpected paths of scholarly research. Digital visual studies is similarly committed to the potentiality of digital research, the not-yet-realized possibilities that can only come through risk taking and experimentation with digital research and production.

In this sense, we also share a commitment to methodological innovation, a commitment that is indicative of both digital rhetorics and the digital humanities. As Jim Ridolfo and William Hart-Davidson argue in the introduction to *Rhetoric and the Digital Humanities*, digital rhetoric and the digital humanities have developed with parallel and complementary trajectories. One of the parallel trajectories has been the transition from ideologically guided praxis to methodologically focused making and research. In the 2012 edition of *Debates in the Digital Humanities*, Tom Scheinfeldt’s chapter asks if this trajectory signals the “Sunset for Ideology, Sunrise for Methodology?” As a digital humanities scholar, Scheinfeldt explains that he “traffic[s] far less in new theories than in new methods” (125). Scheinfeldt describes this as shifting from “think[ing] about our world in terms of ideologies and our work in terms of theories” (124) to thinking about our work in terms of “organizing activities, in terms of both organizing knowledge and organizing ourselves and our work” (125). Digital visual studies shares similar concerns in that we wonder, most importantly, how our visual research can be enriched by diversifying our methodological perspectives and privileging the digital throughout the entire knowledge production process—from object of focus to research practice to presentation. This is not to say, of course, that digital visual studies is theoretically void; many chapters in this collection forward productive theories that emerge from digital research (genre diffusion; isotropic rhetorics, etc). However, like the digital humanities, digital visual studies simply puts the invention of digital research approaches at the center of methodological concerns in order to expand the scope and potential of visual studies.

We are especially excited about doing digital visual studies because we think that scholars in RC/WS and Communication who are interested in the visual and the digital can make stronger efforts to consult and build upon each other’s research. Largely invested in their own disciplinary conversations, visual communication, visual rhetoric, and digital rhetoric scholars often miss out on the opportunity to forge connections between their already existing research projects and to collaborate on new, innovative ones. As an interdisciplinary enterprise, digital visual studies can help build a community of scholars invested in experimenting with digital objects and digital research to enrich visual studies across our disciplinary domains. In bringing together scholars from both RC/WS and Communication for this collection, we hope to model what productive avenues such collaborative efforts might open up.

**Working Assumptions**

*Investigating Digital Visual Phenomena and Preserving Digital Visual History*

In order to make our shared scholarly efforts as transparent as possible, we work here to identify the governing commitments and assumptions that guide our collaborative efforts. Most obviously, digital visual studies (henceforth referred to as DVS) is committed to studying artifacts that are either born digital or become digitized and to generating new approaches for studying how such digital visual phenomena are shifting public participation and impacting collective life. While we acknowledge that a wide array of digital-visual objects may be appropriate for study (digital political art, digital archives, digital advertisements, video games, etc.), in this collection, we take as our object of study the now iconic red, white, and blue digitized version of Obama Hope. This image was first captured in 2006 by Mannie Garcia in a digital photograph that circulated minimally in news photos on various online websites (see Figure 3). In 2008, Shepard Fairey found Garcia’s photograph in a Google Image Search and then, using Photoshop and other digital technologies, transformed it into the “Faireyized” version that become widely recognized during Obama’s first presidential election season. As my four-part case study in *Still Life with Rhetoric* details, this image experienced not only viral circulation but also viral transformation as citizens from all over the world appropriated and reappropriated it for various individual reasons and collective causes—a phenomenon that, as many chapters in this collection make evident, has not ended (see Figure 4). As such, Obama Hope is an image that has a complex rhetorical history and much to teach us about not only how new media images circulate, transform, and impact collective life but also how emergent technologies, cultural practices, and human thoughts and actions feed into such phenomena.

In our chapter for this collection, “From Hope to Drumph,” for instance, I expand my previous research by exploring how the Obama Hope image continues to make an impact in popular culture and political history in the United States as it manifests in a proliferation of Trumpicons that serve a variety of political and cultural functions (see Figure 5). Making use of digital visualization techniques first introduced in my article “Mapping Obama Hope: A Data Visualization Project for Visual Rhetorics,” I specifically demonstrate how iconographic tracking can help account for what I call rhetorical fluctuation—the spatio-temporal flux that discourse experiences as it waxes and wanes in terms of aesthetic, political, and cultural significance. Such accounting is especially important, I argue, in order to not only explicate how it is that an ephemeral new media artifact such as Obama Hope can continue to be rhetorically reliable in participatory culture despite its decelerated acceleration.

Blake Hallinan’s chapter reminds us that when it comes to digital images, such visual research is often time-sensitive. Due to planned obsolescence, link rot, and problems with the durability of media, many of the digital technologies and related new media practices that fuel certain contemporary civic participation will fade from popular practice before we have a chance to fully investigate them. As Alexander Stille has noted, “[A]s the pace of technological change increases, so does the speed at which each new generation of equipment supplants the last” (301-302). “In fact,” Stille explains, “there appears to be a direct relationship between the newness of technology and its fragility” (302). As evidence, he cites the research of Paul Conway, a Yale University librarian, who has produced a digital graph dating back to ancient Mesopotamia illustrating that “while the quantity of information being saved in the digital era has increased exponentially, the durability of media has decreased almost as dramatically” (302). Such phenomenon is an especially important concern for digital visual studies in that another commitment of digital visual studies is to preserve digital visual history so that we can keep record of the digital technologies, new media practices, and digital visual artifacts that make civic participation and collective action possible in our contemporary era.

In this collection, we offer two methodological approaches to help achieve this goal. First, we offer links to two different digital archives documenting the rhetorical life of Obama Hope. The first, titled *The Obama Hope Archive,* builds off a boutique data set I constructed that contains over 1000 pictures in which Obama Hope has surfaced since 2008. As Cheryl Ball, Tarez Graban, and Michelle Sidler explain, a boutique data set gives name to smaller data sets, based on quantitative and qualitative research, that have proven useful to individual scholars' own research projects but currently are inaccessible to other researchers (5). DVS advocates for publicizing boutique data sets of digital visual artifacts not only so that other scholars can draw on these data sets for their own research but also to ensure that digital artifacts and their related rhetorical activities are preserved before disappearing from the World Wide Web. As part of my and Hallinan’s contribution to this collection, then, we offer this link to *The Obama Hope Archive,* which was produced and hosted with Omeka.com.

Sarah Beck, author of “Pinning Hope,” has also generated a smaller digital archive documenting a visual history of Barack Obama’s relation to LGBT issues during his presidency (see Figure 6). Beck argues that using social media such as Pinterest can be a viable way to queer digital archives and document queer history. While *The Obama Hope Archive* was generated via Omeka.com, a software specifically designed for digital archives, we applaud Sarah’s creative use of Pinterest to produce her own digital archive, especially in that such exercise is a useful means for generating a boutique data set that quickly makes visible patterns and anomalies in visual data. Lev Manovich, of course, has gone to great lengths to produce ImagePlot to make content pattern recognition with large data sets possible—efforts I have tried to enhance by developing different digital visualization techniques that can help identify patters in circulation, genre diffusion, and rhetorical function (see Gries 2017). But while we certainly encourage scholars to use ImagePlot and digital visualization techniques, we also believe that especially when it comes to dealing with small data sets, digital picture boards can be an adequate means for pattern identification of content. In addition, of course, Pinterest picture boards are widely accessible to a public audience, which, as Beck argues, is important for making queer history, which often goes unaccounted, more visible.

In addition to producing digital archives to preserve digital visual history, digital media archeology-- as Hallinan’s chapter “Digging Up Obama Hope” demonstrates--can be a productive means for excavating digital technologies and associated media practices that were once active in cultivating for visual culture but have since faded out of contemporary use. In her chapter, Hallinan relies on infrastructural inversion (Bowker and Star 1999) and the Wayback Machine to recover the Obamicon.me website that made possible the production and sharing of Obamicons, which are largely responsible for the Obama Hope image’s broad circulation and surrounding metaculture in 2009 (see Figure 7). While this website was easily accessible and wildly popular for 2 years, its inventors, Paste Magazine, took down the website, cutting off what had become a popular means of civic engagement for many citizens not only in the U.S. but also the world. Digital visual studies is committed to investigating and documenting such ephemeral modes of civic action so that digital visual history can be properly preserved, and Hallinan’s chapter demonstrates how digital media archaeology can be a valuable approach in achieving such goals.

*Producing Digital Visual Artifacts as a Research Practice*

In addition to investigating digital visual phenomena and preserving digital visual history*,* DVS is committed to digital-visual production as part of the research and theory-building process. Such commitment aligns not only with digital rhetoric but also with critical making--what Matt Ratto calls a connection between two typically disconnected modes of engagement with the world: critical thinking--typically understood as conceptual work grounded in linguistics--and making--goal-based work grounded in socio-material-technical practices (252-260). To be expected, then, digital visual studies does not envision digital research methods, tools, and emergent digital products as divorced from the abstract practice of theory making. Instead, we agree with Roger Whitson (2013) that the digital enters into a recursive and creative relationship with the cognitive, discursive practice of doing theory. In common parlance of the digital humanities, the hacking that entails the adaptation, manipulation, and productive use of a given digital technology merges seamlessly with the yacking of theorizing to develop new knowledge about visual phenomena.

Such commitment to digital visual production also aligns with practice-based research, which advances knowledge partly by means of creative practice. Practice-based research—commonly referred to as “research-creation” in Canada, “practice as research” in Britain and Australia, and “arts-based research” in the United States—typically integrates creative design, experimental aesthetic practices, and artistic works as integral to the research process (Chapman and Sawchuk 5-6). In fact, such creative acts and artifacts are necessary for both research and research-generated-knowledge to emerge. With practice-based research, such creative acts and artifacts are an especially productive means for answering a research question and generating research insights that can be documented, generalized, and theorized (Smith and Dean 7). Deploying artistic and experimental practices as a key component of the researcher’s process also enables scholars to explore and analyze the relationship between technology and visual culture, understanding that technology is not simply a tool for creation but also “a mind-set and practice of crafting” (Chapman and Sawchuk 19). Due such affordances of practice-based research, we think this research approach is especially appropriate for DVS in order to fully understand how digital visual creation can fuel not only our own visual methodologies and theories but also civic participation.

In this collection, several authors engage in critical making and practice-based research, and through their work, exemplify why they are useful for generating new knowledge about and applications of visual studies. Shannon Butt’s work in “Making Hope,” for instance, demonstrates how adding a tactile element to images such as Obama Hope via 3-D printing can accommodate alternative ways of seeing and knowing (see Figure 8). Working at the intersection of visual rhetoric and disability studies, Butts specifically shows how printing a tactile, material portrait of Obama enables users to touch, feel, and see how measured elements such as color, light, slope, or density shape what we experience as sight. We believe such work is especially important in that, as Butts explains, through computer aided design, scholars can begin to explore how 3D printing translates visual data into topographical, printable interfaces that offer hands-on experiences with art and digital discourse - the embodiment of digital theory through material practice. Kyle Bohunicky, on the other hand, models how glitch studies, as a form of critical-creative play and arts-based creation, can enrich our understanding of visual media. Bohunicky specifically makes use of aleatory procedures (Vitanza 2000) to generate visual anagrammatics and cool glitches, a process through which, he argues, we can develop a deeper understanding not only about digital images’ dynamic qualities but also their critical interventional possibilities in the civic arena.

Contemporary research with augmented reality (AR) also demonstrates how digital visual creation can be a valuable means of both research and civic engagement. In their introduction to *Augmented Reality: Innovative Perspectives Across Art, Industry, and Academia,* Sean Morey and John Tinnell succinctly explain what AR entails by elucidating how AR browsers such as Aurasma, Layar, and Wikitude take advantage of smartphones’ camera view to “create a unique visual-tactile interface that blends a person’s gaze of the physical environment with texts, graphics, and other media files that have been “geotagged” to specific coordinates on the Earth’s surface.” In addition, they explain how computer vision and image tracking software are now commonly built into AR browsers, “creating a more precise mode of aligning digital overlays on top of print media, building facades, signage, and other fixtures of the built environment.” In light of these advancements, they insist, the potential for AR applications to enhance education, tourism, and cultural heritage, among other fields of business and design, is quite promising. DVS is especially excited about AR’s promise because it holds the potential for upending the very nature and function of visual digital interfaces as we know them.

While the theoretical possibilities are immense for this work, AR technologies also provide pragmatic applications that enhance both visual studies research and direct participation in public life. While Morey and Tinnell have both modeled such potential in their work with digital monuments and digital museum exhibits, artists and activists working as part of the Manifest AR collective have been creating “interventionist” augmented reality art since at least 2010. During the Occupy movement, for instance, artist Will Pappenheimer created an AR application that uses text from Occupy protester’s signs to generate digital skywriting that is viewable through a free mobile app. Contributing author Jacob Greene has also co-created an AR app that allows visitors of SeaWorld to learn about the hazards of marine captivity that often go on behind the scenes of this entertainment park. Such design, Greene argues, is especially important for generating alternative perceptions about contested places that can help intervene in ongoing problematic cultural practices. For his chapter in this collection, “Remixing Hope,” Greene models how AR can also be a useful means of analyzing and producing counterpublic remixes of the Obama Hope image—a popular remix practice that only continues to play a commentary role in national and international politics (see Figure 9). Through his own critical making practices, he particularly demonstrates how mobile AR can counter what he calls “rhetorical isotropy,” a term used to describe the ways in which public images take on monolithic meanings and associations that could potentially elide more nuanced interpretations of their socio-rhetorical function. In doing so, Greene argues that and models how AR remixing can enrich avenues for rhetorical invention in the physical spaces of everyday life, especially as an emerging mass of mobile device users continue to explore the possibilities of augmented reality as a technology for public writing.

*Inventing Digital Research Strategies and Presenting Research Digitally*

While DVS is invested in visual studies’ applicable values for theoretical production and public intervention, DVS is also committed to inventing digital research strategies to both generate and publish knowledge for visual studies. Surely in this day and age, all research methods deploy digital technologies in some way—whether that entails using Google search to locate secondary research about a particular visual artifact or communicating with artists or designers via Skype to conduct a qualitative interview. DVS pushes beyond such nominal uses of technology to experiment with and sometimes invent new research approaches that are predominantly dependent on digital technologies.

For instance, while all the digital visual studies introduced in this collection heavily rely on digital technologies to collect, produce, and/or analyze data, Harry Archer and Emma Collin’s chapter makes evident how the invention of digital research strategies has potential to yield productive insights about visual practices that unfold in difficult-to-access places. In their chapter “Geolocating Obama Hope,” Archer and Collins forward what they call *virtual geosemiotics* to study the context-dependent meaning of Obama Hope murals that have surfaced in two different locations across the world (see Figure 10). Virtual geosemiotics draws on on visual semiotics and place semiotics and utilizes geo-spatial technologies (GST) such as Google Earth to enhance our understanding of how place contributes to the meaning of visual artifacts. While the spatial humanities have been quick to put digital tools such as Google Earth and Google Maps to work, Archer and Collin’s work makes evident that GST and the practice of geotagging across platforms can also be useful to visual studies, especially for investigating how visual artifacts are shaped by their emplacement in specific locations.

Methodological invention is also at play in “Where is Obama Hope Now,” a chapter in which Aaron Beveridge introduces a digital research method called *macroscopic rhetorical analysis*, which he enacts to study how the conversation about Fairey and Obama Hope has changed and transformed in the ten years since its initial delivery (see Figure 11). This digital research method not only relies heavily on web scraping to collect tweets from Twitter’s API using a software called MassMine that Beveridge co-designed and developed but also text mining to analyze the tweets as well as data visualization to visualize the findings. We believe that cultivating such digital research methods is especially important so that writing and rhetoric scholars can remain relevant as “Big Data” and the visual display of information expands in its pervasive influence over politics and popular culture--in everything from data journalism to the “trending” lists displayed on social media apps.

All of this inventional work, we argue, is made even more visibly important when we present our research and arguments in digital form. In fact, another assumption of DVS is that digital visual research is enhanced through digital delivery. Digital scholarship has long been at the forefront of scholarly discussion, with more and more journals offering digital publication options. Too many digital publication outlets, however, remain married to the traditional academic essay form, with options to simply embed digital pictures, video, and audio of the object/phenomena under study. The chapters in this digital collection, on the other hand, use genres of digital delivery (data visualizations, AR Apps, digital archives, etc.) to facilitate research for the author and create an interactive experience for the reader so that meaning-making can be as co-productive as possible. We especially do so because when it comes to digital visual studies, content and delivery cannot be so easily divorced. They are mutually productive of both the research process and any research findings that may come to bear.

In order to make this digital book as interactive as possible, we have carefully designed each chapter with what we hope are transparent means of tactile reader-text engagement. Whether you toggle data visualizations, follow images on Google Earth, watch tutorial videos, or access augmentations through AR, we ask that you dive into play during the reading process in order to both learn more about the author’s research processes and methodologies but also to activate your own meaning-making processes. Admittedly in this collection, the necessity and expectations for reader interaction varies. In his chapter “Reappropriating Hope,” for instance, readers cannot access Jacob Greene’s remixes to fully understand his creative research process and argument without holding a phone to the screen to access AR. In her chapter “Pinning Hope,” on the other hand, Sarah Beck embeds a Pinterest board and simply invites readers to scroll through her archive in order to discover for themselves the patterns and anomalies that emerge in her digital archive. We argue that no matter their interactive extent, the affordances of each presented methodology are enhanced through digital interaction. We invite you, then, to indulge in interaction with the contributing authors’ experimentations made possible through digital delivery.

**A Final Note**

Throughout this introduction, we keep stressing “experimental” because digital visual studies, as we imagine and enact here, is truly just that. By experimental, we mean that each digital research approach offered here is in many ways a test of a methodological idea. This entire book, in fact, can be thought of as a test to establish the value of visual digital studies for RC/WS and Communication at large. In working at the nexus of visual rhetoric, digital rhetoric, and the digital humanities, we especially hope to keep pushing the boundaries of how RC/WS and Communication *do* visual studies. We believe that diversifying our methods and methodologies will only yield more knowledge about how digital visual artifacts and practices are impacting local and global communities and vice versa. Our theories about the visual, after all, are dependent on the research approaches we bring to our objects of study. As we diversify our research approaches, we diversify the knowledge we can bring to bear about any given study. Such diversification begins with experimentation, and we embrace the risks of experimentation here in order to harness any potential that digital design, research, and delivery may afford visual studies.

Due to such risk taking, we ask for you to approach this collaborative research project with an open attitude toward imperfection, if not failure, understanding the latter to be not an opposition to success but rather a mode of constitutive learning and a productive pathway to alternative research[[4]](#footnote-4). In each of our chapters, my co-contributors and I have reached toward innovation and engaged in experimental projects that are intended to be built upon rather than taken up as finished and completed methodological projects. In their chapter with virtual geosemiotics, for instance, Archer and Collins argue that while virtual geosemiotics certainly cannot replace field work that allows one to do *in situ* research, this virtual method does offer a productive starting point for visual scholars interested in emplacement and the study of signs within local semiotic ecologies. In her chapter, on the other hand, Hallinan models what might be done with the Wayback Machine and digital media archaeology and ends by identifying how others might start their own research projects via this research approach. This collaborative digital research project as a whole, then, is intended to act, perhaps more than anything, as a springboard for methodological invention. We especially hope that readers will adapt the proposed methods for their own research, improving upon them as needed.

Because we are interested in the methodological potential of digital visual studies, we have asked a variety of scholars with expertise in related research interests to respond in video form to the work herein. We rely on these scholars to identify the potential of the enclosed digital projects, but we also invite these scholars to imagine otherwise, to imagine, in other words, how readers might build upon these proposed methodologies to advance RC/WS and Communication in ways we have yet to explore. These contributions, then, act as both a response and a catalyst for future endeavors in both DVS and other fields of study for which DVS may hold promise.

As the editors of this collection, we want to just close by advocating for more experimentation with digital visual studies. While the contributing work to this collection is full of potential, we recognize that we have just touched the iceberg of what can be done when we think creatively to harness the potential of digital technologies for visual studies. We also realize, of course, that new digital technologies are being invented every day. This collection ought to be considered, then, an invitation to take up future digital technologies for inventive play in visual studies. One day, perhaps, digital visual studies will become an obsolete title, as the digital will be so intertwined in visual studies that there is no need to highlight the digital’s inflection throughout the design, implementation, and presentation process. In the meantime, however, we encourage more digital play and more digital experimentation. As we embrace the digital more thoroughly and creatively in our research, we are excited to see where we, as visual studies scholars, can go from here.

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1. See also, among others, Gillian Rose’s *Visual Methodologies* (2010 [2001]) and Theo van Leeuwen and Carey Jewitt’s *The Handbook of Visual Analysis* (2001). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Readers many notice similar arguments made in this introduction and Pink and Sumartojo’s introduction to *Reconfiguring Techniques in Digital Visual Research.* Any similarities are purely coincidental in that this introduction was written before I discovered *Reconfiguring Techniques in Digital Visual Research.*  [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. We acknowledge that these fields of study are much more diverse than articulated here. We also acknowledge that these fields of study have overlapping interests. We simply identify here what we take away specifically from each field of study. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See Hays 110. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)