

Reflection 2: John Maeda

The artist

John Maeda is a technologist, designer, artist, and educator originally from the United States. His work blends computation and visual language in ways that have shaped how we now understand creative coding. He studied computer science at MIT and later pursued a Ph.D. in design in Japan where he learned about Zen aesthetics and minimalism, which would become a foundational inspiration for his work. This dual art/technical background is at the core of his practice. He went on to become professor and then director of the Aesthetics + Computation Group at the MIT Media Lab, where he played a major role in the emergence and shaping of coding as it is today. He is also known for writing *Design by Numbers*, an accessible programming language specifically meant to help artists learn how to code. His ethos is grounded in accessibility and poetic expression, not just technical fluency, which I find particularly inspiring. In his book *The Laws of Simplicity*, Maeda breaks down how simplicity is not about less, but about clarity, which is a principle that grounds his approach to accessibility.

What sets Maeda apart is that he's constantly pushing for clarity and simplicity in both form and message. He's not interested in flashy or complicated design for its own sake. He's interested in how technology can help us communicate better, feel more, or notice something we didn't before. He is highly multidisciplinary, having written books, created art installations, designed software, and more. His work often explores modern digital technologies. One of his most quoted tweets spans back to 2009 where he said: "Design is a solution to a problem. Art is a question to a problem", explaining how he balances these two different, but familiar worlds.

Maeda has also held roles in major companies, including as Head of Computational Design at Microsoft, but despite his shift into industry, he still has a strong philosophical drive. I find his unwavering values around minimalism and accessibility to be most compelling. He reminds us that programming isn't just about efficiency. It can also be about empathy. His impact is quiet but widespread, and many of the tools and design sensibilities we now take for granted can be traced back to his influence.

The artwork

One of Maeda's most important early works is *Tap, Type, Write*, which is part of his *Reactive Books* series. Created in the late 1990s, this project explores the act of writing in a digital format. Instead of treating text as static black marks on a white page, Maeda turns the interface into a responsive environment. As the user taps on the keyboard, letters animate, distort, and sometimes even refuse to behave like letters at all! Their motion and interaction respond to user input in real time, meaning no

two writing experiences are exactly the same. This approach highlights how the computer isn't just a tool for producing text; it can be an active participant in the experience of language itself.

What's really interesting here is how Maeda blends playfulness and restraint. The visuals are stripped down, often black and white, with clean geometric forms, but the behaviour of the text is unpredictable and alive. He uses interactivity to show how technology can make writing feel more tactile, more emotional. The piece asks: What happens when the medium talks back? It breaks down the wall between writer and page, and by doing so, creates a space where expression becomes a collaboration between human and machine. This is a recurring theme in his work: design as conversation, not command.

Tap, Type, Write is also a good example of how Maeda weaves his scientific and artistic sensibilities together. There's a precision to the way it works, but also a deep sensitivity to mood and gesture. The oscillating letters feel almost like breathing. And because this work was made in the early days of the internet, before smartphones and apps, it feels remarkably ahead of its time. It anticipates a world where we interact with text and media through touch, voice, and motion. The screen is no longer neutral, but expressive. I think what makes this piece so effective is that it doesn't try to say something grand. It just invites you to slow down and pay attention to something familiar in an unfamiliar way. And in doing so, it reveals how much potential there is in even the smallest interactions we have with technology.

Bibliography

<https://www.moma.org/collection/works/102220>

<https://x.com/johnmaeda/status/2057122807>

<https://www.linkedin.com/in/johnmaeda/>