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The Outmoded in Contemporary Digital Culture: On Claire Bishop's 'Digital Divide'

Abstract

In a 2012 Artforum essay titled "Digital Divide: Whatever Happened to Digital Art?" Claire Bishop, the well-known art critic and associate professor of art history at the City University of New York, asked: "While many artists use digital technology, how many really confront the question of what it means to think, see, and filter affect through the digital?" Bishop's essay, which provoked much criticism from digital art advocates, reflected on contemporary culture's pervasive interest in "the analog, the archival, the obsolete and predigital modes of communication," as signified by the proliferation of retro or vintage aesthetics. Limiting her argument to mainstream contemporary art, Bishop suggests that, over the last 20 years or so, the artworld has shifted its perspective on digital art – from the hype about virtuality in the 1990s, to the current situation where contemporary artists are more inclined to employ digital media as discrete tools within their installation or sculptural practices. The proposed paper will detail these issues pertaining to Bishop's essay, in attempt to provoke discussion about the nature of contemporary digital art, and its relation to outmoded forms and technologies.

Culture today is infatuated with the styles of the past. We can see this not just in music, music videos, advertisements, film, fashion and a huge array of social media platforms, but, of course, in art as well. The artworld's preoccupation with the nostalgic past has been characterised by some key commentators over the last few years as a kind of *return to modernism*, in part as an attempt to address the perceived inadequacy of postmodernism as a theoretical concept, and the widespread scepticism over the *new*. In turning one's attention to digital art, which is a relatively recent area of concern for art historians, the proliferation of retro aesthetics and outmoded forms is particularly apparent, defying the future orientation often expected of new media.

Digital photography applications such as Instagram, with its filters that imitate the period-look of photographs taken by old film cameras, are emblematic of the nostalgia permeating today's creative disciplines. We could also think of Lana Del Rey's *National Anthem* (2012) music video as a popular representative of this; a video in which rapper A$AP Rocky plays Barack Obama and John F. Kennedy to Del Ray's own Jackie Kennedy and Priscilla Presley persona, filmed in retro settings through Instagram-type colour filters. Del Ray emerged a few years ago at the peak of mainstream interest in 1950s and '60s music, associated with singers such as Adele and Amy Winehouse,

as well as the intentionally derivative work of Lady Gaga, who draws heavily from the 1980s. It is easy to think of a plethora of visual artists who could be similarly placed within this *Instagram mentality* of contemporary culture; choosing to speak to the present moment through obsolete technologies or through retro-looking imagery and materials.

This was the subject, in a roundabout way, of a 2012 *Artforum* essay by Claire Bishop, the renowned art critic and associate professor of art history at the City University of New York. Titled "Digital Divide: Whatever Happened to Digital Art?," the purpose of Bishop's essay was not to show how contemporary artists are uninterested in digital media, but rather to reflect on what she sees as a shortage of artists who really capture, or intend to capture, what it is like to live in a world that has been reshaped by digital media. The essay focussed on the mainstream art world, arguing that artists are less interested in confronting digital media directly, and are more interested in the analogue, the archival, the obsolete and pre-digital modes of communication.

In focussing on the mainstream art world, Bishop's essay – which provoked much criticism over its narrow view of *digital art* – sought to diagnose why artists working with the latest technologies and digital tropes are still very much the fringe dwellers in the dominant discourses and institutions of art. Here I will discuss the essay at length in order to take this argument further than Bishop. I will try to show that the prevalence of outmoded aesthetics and *outmoded* technologies does not so much highlight a division in the representation of digital or new media art, but instead indicates that the outmoded is the most effective language to communicate something of the speed, chaos and uncertainty that marks life in the Internet age.

Bishop begins her essay with a well-grounded passage that is worth reproducing here at length. She writes:

> Cast your mind back to the late 1990s, when we got our first e-mail accounts. Wasn't there a pervasive sense that visual art was going to get digital, too, harnessing the new technologies that were just beginning to transform our lives? But somehow the venture never really gained traction – which is not to say that digital media have failed to infiltrate contemporary art. Most art today deploys new technology at one if not most stages of its production, dissemination, and consumption. Multichannel video installations, Photoshopped images, digital prints, cut-and-pasted files (nowhere better exemplified than in Christian Marclay's *The Clock*, 2010): These are ubiquitous forms, their omnipresence facilitated by the accessibility and affordability of digital cameras and editing software. There are plenty of examples of art that makes use of Second Life (Cao Fei), computer-game graphics (Miltos Manetas), YouTube clips (Cory Arcangel), iPhone apps (Amy Sillman), etc.
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> So why do I have a sense that the appearance and content of contemporary art have been curiously unresponsive to the total upheaval in our labor and leisure inaugurated by the digital revolution? While many artists use digital technology, how many

really confront the question of what it means to think, see, and filter
approach the contemporary through the digital? How many
thematize this, or reflect deeply on how we experience, and are
altered by, the digitization of our existence?"[1]

Here one can imagine the inspiration for Bishop's hypothesis as stemming
from her search for timely reflections on digital culture in leading commercial
art galleries and large-scale exhibitions but instead finding mainly nostalgic-
driven works. It is fitting then that early on in the essay Bishop turns her
attention away from the likes of Arcangel and Trecartin to focus instead on
those artists who seem to avoid the tropes of digital media but nonetheless
still suggest a relationship to our contemporary culture – pursuing what Bishop
calls a "contemporary mode steeped in the analog."[2]

Bishop claims that many of the artists whose work revolves around
obsolescence adopt archival forms, and she goes on to discuss artists such as
Zoe Leonard, Tacita Dean, Rodney Graham, Matthew Buckingham and Fiona
Tan. These artists, although displaying a fidelity to the past, do not obviously
direct their work towards a *critique of medium*, *reinvention of medium* or a
critique of the institutional context of art. This is particularly apparent when
juxtaposed with the archival- and outmoded-themed work of earlier artists
such as Fred Wilson and Mark Dion, who, in reflecting on issues of institutional
context, employ a didacticism that younger artists often try to avoid.

In discussing Tacita Dean's and Zoe Leonard's work in particular, Bishop seeks
to go beyond the readings of Rosalind Krauss which, she claims, reiterate
Walter Benjamin's idea that the critical potential of an object may be
unleashed at the very moment of its obsolescence. In this earlier theoretical
model which is marked by the writings of the Frankfurt School theorists, the
true potentiality of a new technology was considered to be present at its
conception, but is quickly shrouded in its adherence to utility and
commodification. Because capitalist life all things become obsolete within a
certain nexus of capital, technology and labour, obsolescent technologies –
in their very *failure* – were thought to heighten an awareness of State and
capitalist directives that might otherwise be hidden.

In *Reinventing the Medium* (1999), Krauss expanded on Benjamin to show
that, through outmoded media – which, in her argument, concerns the
adherence of photographic and video technologies to the *law of
commodity production* between the 1960 and 1990 – artists are able to
redefine prior determinations of medium. James Coleman and William
Kentridge are understood by Krauss as distinct from those earlier conceptual
and post-conceptual artists who used photography as a critical or theoretical
object – those who were representative of Krauss' *post-medium* hypothesis.
Instead, Kentridge and Coleman employ outmoded technologies in ways
that reinvent the expressive potential of their given technical supports. Such
practices open up "new relation[s] to aesthetic production," and aid Krauss'
claim that *medium* is still relevant to interpretations of art if understood as

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[1] Bishop, 2012, p.436.
[2] Bishop, 2012, p.437.

comprising the given technical supports through which expressive possibilities and aesthetic conventions are performed.[3]

While within the frame of much media theory, discarded technologies remain relevant because they can reveal past ideologies, contradictions, material conditions and failures that contemporary culture might otherwise be blind to (due to the relentless innovations of capitalism), Bishop claims that the use of such technologies in contemporary art no longer speaks to an earlier vocabulary of *re-invention*, *revelation*, *oppositionality* and *critique*. Citing how fashionable it has become to use old film stock in video art, or to use slide projectors and other old-fashioned mediums, Bishop essentially argues for a new way to comprehend the critical directives of these works. In making her point, she refers briefly to Nicholas Bourriaud's essays on relational aesthetics to remind the reader of how he posed old-fashioned face-to-face relations over the virtual and the representational. Here she draws a direct connection between the prevalence of analogue technologies in contemporary art and the widespread shift over the last decade towards more *homespun, unrefined* and *handmade* art activities.

While Bishop cites history as important to contemporary artists, she attempts to show that historical critique is not performed in the same way that preoccupied modernist and postmodernist artists. In discussing the prevalence of "retro-craftiness," she argues that the German artist Isa Genzken is representative of an older model of bricolage because the histories behind her objects are treated as if incidental, compared to the way younger artists such as Carol Bove or Rashid Johnson maintain the "cultural integrity" of their reused artefacts. Bishop's main point is that artists such as Bove, Johnson, Dean and Leonard approach *the contemporary* through disavowal; their works appearing as if they are stuck in the past yet ultimately maintaining something of the "operational logic" of the digital era. Towards the end of her essay she employs the phrase "the new illegibility," coined by Ubuweb founder Kenneth Goldsmith, to describe contemporary art that declines to speak overtly about the conditions of living through new media. This *new illegibility* is in line with Bishop's account of contemporary art's propensity to reject direct classification, and is perhaps yet another term for what many have called the *post-critical* condition of contemporary art.

Works such as Zoe Leonard's *You see I am here after all* (2008) – which comprises more than four thousand postcards of Niagara Falls – attest to the possibilities of internet searchability but are ultimately situated between the historical and the contemporary. In a way, such a work is also caught between critical reflection and pastiche or formal play –staging a spectatorial condition characterised by the skimming or scanning of a work or an exhibition for information, similar to how we skim or scan online information. Following this line of thought, Bishop refers to the expansion of festival-style art exhibitions over the last decade to claim that they enact a similar mode of interaction, with exhibitions that are so large no one could

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[3] Krauss, 1999, p.296.

ever possibly see their entire contents, and so viewers are compelled to view works quickly.[4]

While Bishop discusses many artists who favour anachronism over more direct confrontations of digital media, she refers to just a few artists, including Ryan Trecartin, Cory Arcangel and Thomas Hirschhorn as "exceptions [that] just point up the rule."[5] However, a cursory glance at their work would actually suggest that these artists similarly rely on outmoded, retro or out-of-fashion aesthetics, belying her diagnosis of a *digital divide*. Against many of the harsh responses to Bishop's article by proponents of new media and online art, my understanding of Bishop's essay is not, despite its flaws, that she is ignorant of the value of new media or experimental online practice – which was not her focus anyway – but that she could have gone even further in claiming that outmoded and anachronistic forms dominate mainstream contemporary art.[6]

Ryan Trecartin, who was named by the *New Yorker* critic Peter Schjeldahl as the "most consequential artist to have emerged since the nineteen-eighties," clearly has a preference for late-1980s and early-1990s digital graphics, old-fashioned editing techniques and clunky post-production.[7] Although prompting reflection on contemporary digital culture, his aesthetic sensibility draws from many earlier digital forms, and exploits what the *New York Times* critic Holland Cotter has called "the retinal extravagance of much 1980s art."[8] Like Trecartin, Cory Arcangel's work is similarly steeped in early digital nostalgia; an artist best known for his hacked computer games *Super Slow Tetris* (2004) and *Super Mario Clouds* (2002), the latter comprising just the blue backdrop and slow moving clouds of a Super Mario Brothers landscape. The humour of past (failed) technologies and past critical visions forms the thrust of Arcangel's work, emphasising the re-use-value of tools such as Photoshop, 1990s plotter machines, and early video games, in dialogue with an art-historical vocabulary of readymades, Pop Art, Abstract Expressionism and the avant-garde.

Less ironic than Trecartin and Arcangel, the Swiss artist Thomas Hirschhorn can similarly be situated in terms of this outmoded trend. While unquestionably tackling the effects of digital culture on our perception of social change and social injustice, he often expresses this through forms such as old mobile phones, old television sets, pixelated prints from the Internet and numerous other symbols of outdated, outmoded or cheap technologies. Signs of the historical are often blended with the Amateur or Makeshift; as in his ongoing series of altar works that memorialise historical figures such as Piet Mondrian and Raymond Carver. Sharing an affinity with Trecartin's own experiments in

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[4] Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev's Documenta 13 – with its side events in Afghanistan, Egypt and Canada – is indicative of this trend, as if emulating what might be termed the *curatorial sublime*.

[5] Bishop, 2012, p.436.

[6] See: Paul Teasdale, "Net Gains," Frieze, Vol. 153, March (2013). A collation of online responses to Bishop's article can also be found here: http://artforum.com/talkback/id=70724 (accessed 14/1/14).

[7] Schjeldahl, 2011, p. 84.

[8] Cotter, 2011, p. 56.

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DIY sculptures of human figures and domestic objects, Hirschorn's work stages a gulf between the act of detachedly trawling through online information and the more difficult reality of being able to effect social change or prevent social injustice.

Perhaps if Bishop addressed the language of the outmoded in those artists who she believes do confront what it means to live with digital media, she could have focussed more explicitly on why the contemporary moment finds its expression through older forms, and her essay might have been less polemical. Because I began studying visual art at a tertiary level in 2000, this shift in the representation of digital art – from a futuristic vision to a tool for revitalising the past – seems particularly clear, so too the diminishing of artworld hype about its revolutionary future. Digital technology has in many ways moved away from being associated with big utopian or dystopian themes – as in the digital works of, say, Mariko Mori or Patricia Piccinini – to its more normalised representation today, in which digital technology typically appears more as a tool than as a central theme. I could go further to say that mainstream examples of digital art have shifted from being located around *virtuality* – as an ideological remnant of postmodernism – to in more recent years being located around obsolescence and technological precursors.

The British cultural critic Simon Reynolds has noted this fundamental shift towards retro forms of cultural expression, stating in his 2011 publication, *Retromania*, that "never before has there been a society so obsessed with the cultural artefacts of its own immediate past."[9] Reynolds makes the distinction between *vintage* and *retro* in his analysis; the former referring to an interest in the actual objects of the past, the latter referring to the simulation of past styles. From this generalisation we can understand Bishop's essay as focussing primarily on those artists who adhere more to a *vintage* aestheticism; those who stage obsolete media in order to "maintain the cultural integrity of the reused artefact – to invoke and sustain its history, connotations, and moods."[10] However, this prioritisation of technical apparatuses over imagery has resulted in Bishop overlooking some of the more pressing questions raised by her premise. Whether *retrieved* or *simulated* – which might correspond to a distinction between *historical* and *pastiche* treatments of media – why are past forms so ubiquitous in contemporary art, and why do their invoked histories often appear as at once factual and indeterminate?

In an increasingly connected world in which digital technologies are rapidly evolving, artists can be understood to be employing outmoded aesthetics in order to beat the inevitable *out-of-fashion-ness* of their work to the punch. In this fast-paced context we are living in, such artworks are not *relegated* to history so much as immediately aligned with a history of the artist's choice. However, as Bishop alludes to, these artists rarely seek to explicate a singular message, or to essentialise their relationship to the past. Taking advantage of the speculative possibilities of signs that have already been deemed *dead*, many contemporary artists portray historical context as both real and imagined, treating their historical analogies open-endedly.

[9] Reynolds, 2011, p. 351.
[10] Bishop, 2012, p. 438.

In the 2013 film *Her*, Spike Jonze tackled the speculative genre of science fiction to produce a vision of our future aesthetic that was informed by the tastes of early-20th-century sophisticates. This is typified by Joaquin Phoenix's character, Theodore, whose clothes and glasses are suggestive of the 1940s, and whose Smartphone-like device that he falls in love with was based by Jonze and production designer K.K. Barrett on an Art Deco cigarette lighter. Loss and the contemplation of death are prominent themes in the film that Jonze used to structure his account of artificial intelligence and the ways in which the body might make an inexorable contribution to cognition and being. While toying with the idea of technology as alive, *Her* ultimately poses life with technology as a (paradoxical) sense of ease with the uncanny. Both dead and alive, digital technology is depicted as a mode of animation – programmed yet not bound by the intentions of the programmer, and with the capacity to animate us in turn.

The proliferation of outmoded forms in contemporary culture might be considered along similar lines, with past tropes being animated to shape our present in ways that acknowledge both their factual (programmed) historical status as well as their relative agency. This contemporary stance is somewhat different from the heady revisionism associated with postmodern art, and is in keeping with the relevance of less prescriptive and more pragmatic accounts of culture in recent years; suggesting an impasse with critical reflection that strangely manifests itself in our seemingly endless conversations with the past.

Biographical Statement

Wes Hill is an art historian, critic, artist and curator who is currently employed as a lecturer of Art Theory and Curatorial Studies at Southern Cross University (SCU), NSW. He has a PhD in Art History from the University of Queensland (supervised by Dr. Rex Butler), and his critical writing has appeared in magazines and journals such as Artforum, Frieze, Broadsheet and Art and Australia. Hill has conducted extensive research on digital art which underpinned the curated exhibition This is What I Do (Metro Arts, Brisbane, and Contemporary Art Tasmania, Hobart, 2012) and the paper Self-Broadcast Aesthetics delivered at the Pop Culture Association of Australian and New Zealand (POPCAANZ) in 2013.

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