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Silicon Valley has colonized every corner of the globe. Art has been eclipsed by engineering; the Dadaists have all become Big Dataists. Surely it’s time some anarchic, soulful spirits emerged to romance the binary, says ROBERT URQUHART.

Why does contemporary art and design so often fail to translate the void between technology and emotion? Has digital art fallen into the trap of sidelinining intuition, perception and sensitivity in order to mimic the cash-rich world of production-line produce? Or is Western art tied to a limited palette, rendered obsolete by continued blind subservience to outmoded twentieth-century means? I’ve been interested in the link between the squeaky-clean tech-engineer approach to creativity and the dirtier, hands-on approach to art for some time. During trips to the West Coast of America I’ve spent a disproportionate amount of time hopping in and out of studios, meeting designers and artists with a view to writing up a status report that feeds back on the state of this relationship. This is just that: a status report, for which I visited Los Angeles and San Francisco, then Dutch Design Week in Holland to get a European perspective on the matter. I start inside the hollow mall that is the ‘Blue Whale’, aka the Pacific Design Center, on Melrose Avenue in West Hollywood. I’m there to meet curator Paul Young about an exhibition I’m going to see at the Depart Foundation, on Sunset Boulevard, by Petra Cortright. I met Cortright at Frieze Art Fair in London a couple of years ago. We spent an enjoyable time talking about the merits of how art, mixed with quantities of overt-the-counter enliveners, can open the doors of perception and that the concept of selling her video work based on YouTube hits seemed like an interesting move. Young’s primary area of expertise is in moving-image art forms, with a special emphasis on video art, digital works and computer-based practice. Some of his recent curatorial efforts include The Silicon Valley Contemporary 2014, Art Miami’s international contemporary art fair headed west. Young is fairly downbeat about the turnout for last year’s event, saying, ‘People that are the innovators, people that are the money people, they don’t have time to go to galleries, that was the problem with that art fair. It’s like Hollywood: people don’t go to galleries very often, they usually send art advisors.’ Young is a perfect mode of induction for the quest I’m on: to discover the play-off between ‘traditional’ practice and contemporary Silicon Valley interest in, and disruption to, creativity. The theme of time creeps in at every stage of the journey. Surely sending art advisors to a show is a positive?

What do collectors look for in contemporary digital work? ‘Collectors understand that new media is part of the language of contemporary art. They are keen on this notion of longevity and obsolescence,’ says Young. ‘They want to make sure that this work is valuable and will run in 20, 40 or 100 years because that’s how they value traditional work.’ Does that affect Young as a curator when he approaches an artist? ‘Not as a curator’ he says. ‘A lot of artists don’t think that way, artists are interested in “hot right now” and pushing borders to the extreme, they are not always thinking long term. In fact, most of them aren’t. I’m the one that has to remind them, as a gallery, that this is important, that we do have to think about things that last as long as possible, as opposed to simple plug and play.’

What about time as a muse and medium for the artists that Young deals with? ‘It’s a primary medium,’ he notes. ‘Video has a cinematic tempo to it, so a lot of artists like to affect you with montage, but I’ve noticed that a slower tempo is happening in digital. Digital is about the tempo of your heart; it’s calm, it’s meditative, it works alongside emotion.’

Surely sending art advisors to a show is a positive? Digital is about the tempo of your heart; it’s calm, it’s meditative, it works alongside emotion. Newer digital artists like Petra Cortright understand the pacing and the way the work can inhabit time and space.

After spending time with Young, I walk up the road to the Sunset Strip to see Petra Cortright’s solo exhibition. Sunset Boulevard is the perfect seedy backdrop for a show with the coquettish name of Nika, Lucy, Lola & Vada. Inside I’m greeted by a hypnotic, writhing sea of semi-clad porn stars, animals and painterly landscapes all superimposed, repeated and manipulated to great effect by Cortright. Time to head north, to San Francisco, for some gentle old-school conversation around the theme of “refined chaos” with Martin Venezky of Appetite Engineers. Venezky is a associate professor in the graduate design program at California College of the Arts (CCA) in San Francisco,
Venezky, Jacek has worked with Adobe, on a brand-awareness project entitled Adobe Ramin that saw the Adobe logo manipulated by user-generated audiovisual content. But unlike the softly spoken, gentle Venezky, Jacek is a brash, outspoken totem of design: his much-coiffured hair has its own Twitter account. Thankfully, the moon, fuck-it, rock’n’roll attitude is alive and kicking in an increasingly sepias, Instagram-Architecture landscape.

‘For me, creativity is about knowing the craft, we are not there yet in the US’ notes Jacek. ‘The way things are taught here is about short-term thinking and short-term projects: “make something in a second.” That’s not how things work. Design is a real craft. I’m here because I want to pursue what happens when you meld the craft, the thinking and the business side of things, and go and make something.’

Jacek is currently hiring a studio team. ‘We have an influx of Europeans right now because that’s where they are at home,’ she notes, partly blaming the arts-funding crisis for the exodus. How does Jacek feel about working increasingly on technology-driven projects, having come from a largely European print background? ‘I seek simplicity. We [creatives] know the craft, we are not kicking in an increasingly sepia, rock ’n’ roll attitude is alive and kicking in a city where the only angels are the investors, still manages to be the interesting future of things after album covers. It wasn’t.’

The period in LA wasn’t completely dry, though. As executive director at Frankfurt Balkind Partners, Wickens produced the highly memorable logoype for the mighty The Sopranos. But perhaps he just got to town too early…’his interest in futuristic electronics and digital design was only just beginning to make itself felt in a commercial environment, and it was arriving further north, in the Bay Area.

‘I arrived in San Francisco in 1998, before the first dotcom bus,’ he explains. ‘My interest at the time was in digital design. Finally everything collided; my interests, passions and the commercial side, plus, the internet became “a thing”.’

For Wickens, who’d been raised to look, think and create on behalf of a generation of futurist electronica aficionados for whom the works of New Order and Joy Division are still graphic design in musical form, the move towards Silicon Valley was compelling. Wickens had started his career as a pioneer of electronic music in Canada. He’d illustrated the cold-sweat, thousand-yard-ssate of defiant, new-wave England and the emotive sensation of digital, tasted the entertainment industry in Los Angeles and now, as communication, product and aesthetics became computing, he found himself a namechecked man in a gold-rush town.

Ammunitions is now one of the most successful design firms in the Bay Area, partly due to its interesting business model which sees it financially investing in many of the companies that it works with. The company designs software, hardware and graphic identities for many companies including Adobe, Beats by Dre, Polaroid Corporation and Square, Inc. Wickens, based in a city where the only angels are the investors, still manages to retain a cool, artistic detachment from the Silicon tribe with their
“I CAN’T THINK OF ANY INTERESTING OR IMPORTANT ARTISTICALLY INSPIRED RESPONSE TO WHAT SILICON VALLEY ACTUALLY IS”

I think Branson is an early model for the whole thing but he was a total shit-stirrer from the early days with a record shop. That’s really what’s missing.

We finish our discussion talking about the role of photography in digital media. I mention my conversation with Paul Young and how Silicon Valley views the art world. Wickens flips the discussion. “I don’t think people have really studied the fabric of Silicon Valley as art,” he says. “It’s all business, it’s all money, it’s all product, it’s all deals. I can’t think of any interesting or important artistically inspired response to what Silicon Valley actually is.”

Wickens is planning to work on a self-initiated photo series in this vein. “That’s the thing I’m working on. I feel a little bit out of date because I think it will be subversive, which in light of the day job, which is all about avoiding subversion, is quite a thing to do.”

As I leave, Wickens passes me the details of a person who, he says, has successfully bridged the gap between Silicon Valley designer and free-spirited artist: Keith Cottingham.

By this time, I’m up in Portland, Oregon, so I have to make do with an early morning call on the last day of my trip, to Skype Cottingham back in San Francisco.

I’m going to show my age now,” reverberates the voice of Cottingham over Skype. “There used to be a big difference between fine art and commercial art, especially in the schools. We used to call commercial art selling out. I don’t really see any difference except if it’s personal art then it’s me, if it’s commercial I’m solving someone’s problem.”

Does your personality come through in commercial art? “Yes, I think the personality comes through. I think that’s why Brett likes working with me. He just gives me certain parameters, and so my personality comes through, but it’s not work I’d do on my own,” he notes. “I used to work for Apple, I’ve worked on their logo and some of their packaging for them, and it definitely had “me” in there.”

Cottingham, originally from Los Angeles, studied at Ucater, the Center for Computer Art, San Francisco in 1987–88, then at the Center for Interdisciplinary Programs, San Francisco State University, 1988, and finally attended Computer Arts Institute, San Francisco in 1989.

“By the time I finished school we were in a bad recession so I had a crappy job and a liberal arts background didn’t help. I’m an outsider, but I just wanted to work. Back then “computer” was a dirty word. Apart from the course titles we didn’t even really use the word in art, but that’s what got me into design world I was the first guy at Landor Associates that could use Photoshop 1.0. I’d been using it for my artwork, and that’s what got me into Landor because I was the only kid that had done that kind of stuff. They didn’t know what to do with it, but they knew they wanted it for something.”

After Landor Associates, Cottingham moved to c3i Partners/Marchest, where he created marketing material for Apple, before joining the company in Cupertino in 2001 to work on the original 3D illustrations for the graphic design group, including their new Apple and QuickTime logos. After three years, Cottingham moved on to top design firms in the Bay Area, working as a digital artist for MetaDesign, Autodesk and TBWA/Chiat/Day before pursuing his own interests, and sometimes working for Wickens at Ammunition.

Cottingham has managed to build a career both as a commercial artist and as a notable fine artist. From an early group show in 1994, at the Christopher Grimes Gallery in Santa Monica, to being taken on by Ronald Feldman Fine Arts in New York via numerous awards along the way, Cottingham has managed to walk the line between technology and art and still be taken seriously.

“There is a really huge void between technology and art. There is so much potential, and people have got nothing on it here and I don’t know why,” says Cottingham. “I went to a huge art show in Stamford recently, famous for technology and computer science, and it was horrible. Even for a college show it was terrible. It was all traditional media and, I don’t want to sound like a bitter old cynic, but I was shocked that none of it was bleeding technology and art.”

Was it any better when Cottingham started out in the mid-90s? “There was a division, there were certain shows like Ars Electronica that tried to bring things together, but then a lot of times that work would be interesting technologically or...
Silicon Valley communication involves some narrative time and how most I’ve been thinking about recently ably alienated as many people as Timeline, an addition that argues the bittersweet arrival of Facebook that was responsible for the technology for which I make money, others don’t. And even when you make money with data or exposure like YouTube views, for instance, there is still very little recompense for the content provider. Artists need to focus their emphasis on developing their own currency transaction that suits the act of art. It’s back to Petra Cortright. I’m reminded of the conversation I had with her in London in 2013 about YouTube being a barometer of both fame and financial worth. ‘I had no reference point whatsoever for selling my webcam works, but they were already all on YouTube by the time I had my first exhibition,’ said Cortright at the time.

“When we were coming up with a price list for the show I said: ‘Threading hate this. I wish it could be tee per YouTube view’, and the gallerist laughed and said he’d never heard of anyone doing that, and so we just went along with it. I’ve always been uncomfortable about this kind of decision. ‘Some artists like to be in control of how their work is distributed and how the price is fixed, but, in general, the value of your work is not up to you, it’s up to the world. It’s decided by other people.’

means for people to completely “get” our art without the need to even purchase it.”

A concept adopted in 2012 seems militant for the art world. Here, visitors’ emotional responses to the artworks are measured and visualized by software using cameras. The data is then purportedly (this is a concept piece)—sold to generate income for all participants involved in the exhibition, presumably as research, although it’s not a stretch to imagine that other formats of data could be harvested. Koert van Mensvoort, who wasn’t part of the exhibition but entered the debate, states: ‘Data is only valuable when you can access the meta-data. The only winners of the future economy are the infrastructural big guys. With infrastructure you make money, others don’t.’ And even when you make money with data or exposure like YouTube views, for instance, there is still very little recompense for the content provider. Artists need to focus their emphasis on developing their own currency transaction that suits the act of art. ‘It’s back to Petra Cortright. I’m reminded of the conversation I had with her in London in 2013 about YouTube being a barometer of both fame and financial worth. ‘I had no reference point whatsoever for selling my webcam works, but they were already all on YouTube by the time I had my first exhibition,’ said Cortright at the time. ‘When we were coming up with a price list for the show I said: “Threading hate this. I wish it could be tee per YouTube view”, and the gallerist laughed and said he’d never heard of anyone doing that, and so we just went along with it. I’ve always been uncomfortable about this kind of decision. ‘Some artists like to be in control of how their work is distributed and how the price is fixed, but, in general, the value of your work is not up to you, it’s up to the world. It’s decided by other people.’

Design-wise but usually didn’t have much substance to it.”

What’s the scene like now, aside from Stanford? ‘Painting is still the dominant art form today in the US,’ he says. ‘And I love painting but you’d think computer work would be further as the min. I guess computer work is still mostly transitory. Collectors collect the stuff but it doesn’t last for very long, or perhaps digital media is seen as disposable landfill?’
Back in Europe, I visit Graphic Design Festival Breda where I meet infographic designer Nicholas Feltron who is in town to give a lecture. I am struck by his thoughts on the role of digital as a true, poetic and creative language. Is data strictly for accounting tabular? Or a medium that can make people laugh or cry? asks Feltron. ‘Who says what painting, art, novels and films do? Can we have that same kind of experience through data?’
Feltron was part of the development team at Facebook that was responsible for the bitreerseal arrival of Facebook Timeline, an addition that arguably alienated as many people as it brought together. ‘One thing I’ve been thinking about recently is narrative time and how most communication involves some compression,’ he explains. ‘If I’m going to relate a story to you then I’m trying to condense it in a way to express it to you, and that’s basically what you see in a movie. A concern for this kind of compression and ways of relating things more quickly is more evident in the kind of technological products and communication that we are witnessing right now.’
How does Feltron see the work associated with data ordering and infographics aiding the art world? ‘Our camera rolls are overflowing with the amount of photos we take,’ he says. ‘Expressing to someone what you’ve seen is a really daunting problem. Finding new ways to condense photography, besides just pure, straightforward curation, is, I think, a pressing concern.’
Just how Feltron plans to curate without curation based on emotive response remains to be seen, but if anyone is likely to have a go at it, it’ll be Feltron. He has continually surprised with his in-depth annual reports that have detailed his life with ever-increasing precision and analysis since 2005. Using data as a tool for personal discovery with almost poetic abandon has led to him journeying far beyond the conventional modus operandi of an infographic designer, into the realm of digital infographic performance art. Feltron is the data, and the data is Feltron, he is a “dataist”.
My final destination is Dutch Design Week in Eindhoven. Here I visit an exhibition called OXI which aims to draw debate on how artists and designers are punished by the creative industry into a financial black hole where work is offered up for free, or next to nothing, due to the byproduct of Silicon Valley technology: neoliberalism.

The curators and participants of OXI argue that alternative business models for designers and artists are urgently needed to address the balance between consumption of creativity and compensation for a craft. ‘Anna Krall, an exhibitor at OXI, states: “We have the opportunistic artists and independent designers” don’t protect each other from exposure, and we don’t create the rules for how we provide services including being published, exhibiting, participating with events and providing access to our intellectual property. The creative industry acts as if the exposure it provides is a reason for us to work for free, to be organizers of art events, galleries, blogs or magazines. In the process of “not selling”, we’ve already created all the