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## SILICON VALLEY VERSUS CREATIVITY

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 sidelining intuition, perception and sensitivity in order to mimic the cash-rich world of production-line product? 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 jet lag, mixed with quantities of over-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 gallerist, 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 more like painting or photo collage, you can bring your own time to it. Cinematic work tells you that you have to spend x amount of time engaging. 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 sleazy backdrop for a show with the coquettish name of *Niki, Lucy, Lola, Viola*. 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 associate professor in the graduate design program at California College of the Arts (CCA) in San Francisco,





where he has taught since 1993. His studio on Bryant Street, just off Market Street, is sandwiched between car mechanic garages and picture framers, the perfect setting for a grafting artist. Venezky’s studio is curated with an expert eye for what I can only describe as ‘Californi-copia’: Not quite kitsch, not quite chaos. Aside from teaching, Venezky has made a name for himself in the world of books: a recent collaboration on a Wes Anderson book, entitled *Grand Budapest Hotel*, sums up his attachment to highly stylized, thoughtful absurdities. But throughout Venezky’s work there runs a deeper path, perhaps unwittingly. He stands at the threshold of what digital art deals with today. Even though the majority of his work is hand rendered and stems from physical interaction with materials, his process mirrors that of digital. ‘People say my work looks random, I never thought it was. There was a school of design during the mid-90s where people would just throw random stuff down. I really work hard to find resonance between things, so

it isn’t random. It’s no more random than when a crowd gathers; they start to gather and form groups,’ says Venezky. ‘I look at my work as a crowd organizing itself. I like to make it feel like the images found their way next to each other and not like a designer came along and forced things to happen.’ Aside from his work in publishing, Venezky often deals with physical space, hence his constant, obsessive additions to his studio interior design layout. On the back of an exhibition organized by fellow CCA tutor Jon Sueda in 2013, Venezky was approached by Adobe to create a temporary exhibit for their San José headquarters. ‘I think a lot of this is to do with them liking *real* material. Everyone there works with virtual stuff,’ muses Venezky. ‘This was a chance to push against that, and to show work that was about artefacts, about the real things.’ The result was an outdoor installation of 3,000 images collected by Venezky: a vastly time-consuming piece that took far longer to orchestrate than the time it then spent on

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**Left**  
Brett Wickens  
*Palomarin 06*  
1 February 2015  
Camera: Olympus EM-1

**Opposite**  
Brett Wickens  
*Big Rock 31*  
12 July 2015  
Camera: Canon 5DS

**Overleaf, left**  
Petra Cortright  
*Forest Range w Aqua Sky 2*  
2009  
Digital collage

**Overleaf, right**  
Petra Cortright  
*Cropped\_masked\_final*  
2015  
Video, 120 mins  
From *Niki, Lucy, Lola, Viola*

display. Where does the notion of time come into play with his work? ‘One of the important things to me is “slowing down”,’ he explains. ‘In Silicon Valley, the profession is about speeding up, so I intentionally try and slow it down. Putting these things up on the walls is a slow process, putting pictures next to each other and spending time with them is a slow process. It’s a lot quicker to have a whole plan and slip everything into place; it’s a lot slower just to see what the images are saying to each other.’ Back near Venice Beach in Los Angeles, Nicole Jacek of NJ(L.A.)™ is busy growing her new studio. A serial immigrant, first from Germany to the UK via Ian Anderson at the Designers Republic, and then to New York to work for Stefan Sagmeister and, latterly, Karlssonwilker Inc, Jacek headed west to set up a studio in 2013. Jacek is part of the new-wave talent between USA and Europe where craft meets the ‘fail forward’ mentality in culturally led commercial projects. Like

Venezky, Jacek has worked with Adobe, on a brand-awareness project entitled Adobe Remix 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 stardom: her much-coiffured hair has its own Twitter account. Thankfully, the neon, fuck-it, rock ‘n’ roll attitude is alive and kicking in an increasingly sepia, Instagram-filtered landscape. ‘For me, creativity is about knowing the craft, we are not there yet in the U.S.’ 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 they are stuck 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 working in technology in the US] will have to reach the point of

absolute simplicity. It’s far too crazy at the moment.’ How to combat the stress of the constant barrage of digital? ‘We are aiming for sustainable plans in everything we do, it’s now the key. For a long time, design was just about creating something “pretty”. What does pretty *do* now?’ Back to San Francisco. Here Brett Wickens, partner of Ammunition Design Group, awaits. Wickens, a Canadian-British expat, moved to LA from London with his then-design partner Peter Saville in the early ’90s for a short period, creating posters for the movie industry before departing, on his own, for San Francisco. Speaking of his time in LA, Wickens states: ‘We thought the entertainment industry was going to be the interesting future of things after album covers. It wasn’t.’ The period in LA wasn’t completely dry, though. As VP creative director at Frankfurt Balkind Partners, Wickens produced the highly memorable logotype for HBO’s *The Sopranos*. But perhaps he just got to town too early—his interest in futuristic electronica 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 bust,’ 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-steel, thousand-yard-stare 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 entwined, he found himself a namechecked man in a gold-rush town. Ammunition 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 hardware, software and graphic identities for many companies, including Adobe, Beats by Dre, Polaroid Corporation and Square, Inc. Yet 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





artistic sensibilities that only stretch as far as their IPO.

Talking to Wickens about the link between sometimes hedonistic, artistic vision and current commercial entrepreneurship brings this response, ‘Going back to the late 1990s, Peter and I took very different paths. Peter has really gone into fine art more than commercial design, but I always knew he would. He always wanted to be the Andy Warhol of the twenty-first century, so he had to do it. I didn’t, I was always more interested in design as a tool for change, whether it was commercialized or not. I wrestle with this business because you can go to the lowest common denominator with design, just slip into the world, or you can try and take a stand and make a point of

view. I almost always try and do the latter but at some point in the process I realize it’s not appropriate. But unless you keep on trying to push the language of design, why are you getting out of bed in the morning?’

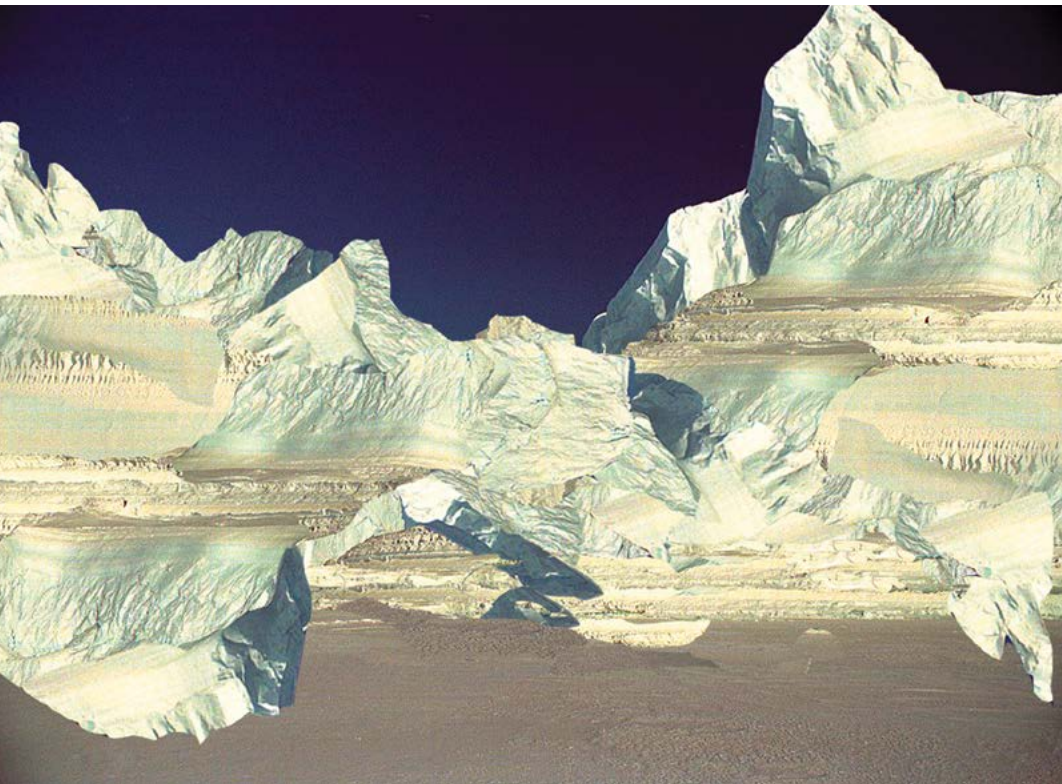
What about the ‘characters’ associated with twentieth-century creativity, where are they in today’s creative line-up? Isn’t Silicon Valley run by the new suits that have swapped a tie for a tee-shirt? ‘It is a bit weird,’ says Wickens. ‘It’s a squeaky-clean environment full of clean-cut, smart engineering types that now sit on top controlling the world’s data, entertainment, delivery mechanisms, transportation, whatever. There is no “shit to stir, what can I fuck up?” vibe. There is no Richard Branson here.

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

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at odds 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 Suite 3D—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 CKS Partners/Marchfirst, 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 Stanford 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 blending 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



**Right**  
Martin Venezky  
*Photo Construction*  
2014  
Media: Photograph (the process starts as a series of photographs, then I assemble and pin them together physically, then reproduce the result as a single photographic image)

**Opposite**  
Martin Venezky  
in collaboration with  
Barbara Levine, *Project B*  
*Horizon*  
2015



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 in the mix. 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’m 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. ‘Can we do 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 bittersweet 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 relaying 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 curating based on emotive response remains to be seen, but if anyone is likely to have a go at doing 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 pinioned 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 redress the balance between consumption of creativity and compensation for a craft.

Tessa Koot, an exhibitor at *oxi*, states: ‘We [contemporary 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, be it organizers of art events, galleries, blogs or magazines. In the process of “not selling”, we’ve already created all the

# “CAN WE DO WHAT PAINTING, ART, NOVELS AND FILMS DO? CAN WE HAVE THAT SAME KIND OF EXPERIENCE THROUGH DATA?”

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

A concept adopted in *oxi* seems militant for the art world. Here, visitors’ emotional responses to the artworks are measured and analysed 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 forms 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: “I fucking hate this, I wish it could be 10c per YouTube viewer” 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.’

