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The last digital revolution?

The Barbican Centre's 'Digital Revolution' exhibition (3 July - 14 September 2014) has generated a fair amount of debate in mainstream newspapers as well as on more specialized corners of the internet, in particular the DevArt section, commissioned by Google.¹ Its critics, including the instigators of the 'Hack the Artworld' alternate virtual exhibition, argue that Google behaved exploitively in inviting less established developer/artists to labour for free competing for a commission, ultimately awarded to Cyril Diagne and Béatrice Lartigue, where more established developer/artists including Karsten Schmidt and Zach Lieberman were funded from the early stages of their projects.² Its defenders argue that rather than corporatist manipulation, in this case the work was facilitated by well-meaning individuals employed by Google who perhaps mis-judged a few details.³ This debate, and the curation and partnership arrangements behind the show, involving Bloomberg and the Technology Strategy Board in addition to Google, are important because they call attention to an increasingly pervasive slippage in how we perceive art, business and technology.

The title 'Digital Revolution' is somewhat of a cringe-worthy contradiction in 2014. Such a cliché begs the question of what motivations underlie the decision to host this kind of exhibition, if not to convey some new or distinct insight. Over the past few years, the Barbican Centre has been establishing a pattern of large scale digital installations installed in the Curve Gallery and the foyer spaces with works and events such as 'Various Self Playing Bowling Games' by Cory Arcangel (2011), 'Rain Room' (2012) by Random International and 'Momentum' (earlier in 2014) by United Visual Artists. The joyful and accessible experiential qualities of 'Rain Room' in particular drew massive crowds and one could imagine that this inspired the Barbican to look for ways to expand their profile as a large scale cultural institution that can carry off projects with extreme technological underpinnings. Part of the reason that the on the ground experience of 'Digital Revolution' was less than satisfying, however, was a breakdown of the Centre's ability to cope with the technology. At almost every point during what was a large and ambitious exhibition some portion of the work was malfunctioning or down for one reason or another. Some of this was due to the need to display software on consoles and PCs corresponding to the times in which they were originally developed.

Where it was working however, in this regard, the exhibition served as a reminder of the importance of how we archive and document our digital history. Actually getting to try *The Aspen Movie Map* (Andrew Lippman, 1978), navigate the first pages of the *World Wide Web Project* on a genuine Next (Tim Berners Lee, 1991) or re-experience the anarchy of the original experiments of *jodi.org* (Joan Heemskerk and Dirk Paesmans, 1995) was both personally pleasurable and a productive reminder of how easy contemporary culture allows the kinesthetic experience of pixels and programs to slip through its fingers. The wide scope of the eight sections, titled 'Digital Archeology', 'State of Play', 'We Create', 'Creative Spaces', 'Sound + Vision', 'Our Digital Futures', 'DevArt', and possibly the most modest but meaningful section, the 'Indy Games Space,' is best described as concurrently overwhelming and incomplete, albeit with enough examples of interesting and important more and less known works (too many to list here) to make it worth a visit.

The only specific questions that 'Digital Revolution' raises however are about the blended relationship between independently initiated work and corporate production. This was partially addressed by the curators directly in their decisions, for example, to showcase the computer generated special effects in Alfonso Cuarón's blockbuster film *Moon* (2013) in the same exhibition as the work of Anttirom's 'interface as medium' experiments (1994). This aspect of the exhibition was exciting for its celebration of a perceived porosity and enthusiasm for the agency and inventiveness of independent creators. This idea is not scrutinized carefully enough though, especially when one notes that, in addition to providing support for the exhibition and commissioning / curating work, with the inclusion of Chris Milk's video for Arcade Fire's 'The Wilderness Downtown' (2010), which is the best and most famous of Google Creative Labs' Chrome experiments, Google is a defacto exhibitor. This positioning of artistic practice as corporate crowd-pleaser is reinforced by the dedication of an entire room to *Pyramadi*, a musical projection-based installation by Will.i.am and Yuri Suzuki that celebrates a future of high velocity collaboration between musicians, music technologists, and music business (2014). The imaginary of such a well lubricated and uncritical interchange between artistic production, technological transformation, and corporate power is of deep concern because it places in jeopardy the role of art in future revolutions. 'Digital Revolution' will travel to museums and galleries internationally over the next three years.

Author Biography

Rebecca Ross is Senior Lecturer and MA Course Leader in Graphic Communication Design at Central Saint Martins. She works at the intersection of Communication Design and Urban Studies with a specific focus on how pictures, media, and data, are actively intertwined with urban conditions. Rebecca has published in *Journal of Planning History*, *Camera Constructs* and is an editor of the *Urban Pamphleteer*. She has a PhD in Architecture and Urban Studies from Harvard and an MFA in Graphic Design from Yale.

¹ Jonathan Jones, 'Hack the Art World: the dissident techies tackling Google' *The Guardian, On Art Blog* (21/07/14)

<http://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/jonathanjonesblog/2014/jul/21/hack-the-art-world-digital-revolution-barbican-protest> (accessed 01/09/2014).

² See 'An open letter to Larry & Sergey' <http://hacktheartworld.com> (accessed 01/09/2014).

³ See <http://pastebin.com/0pbbL72y> (accessed 01/09/2014).