



*Moveable Type*, by Mark Hansen and Ben Rubin, 2007, at The New York Times building, New York City.

# Art for a DIGITAL AGE

TECHNOLOGY CONTINUES TO TRANSFORM THE PROCESS OF HOW ARTISTS CREATE AND THE WORKS THEY PRODUCE.

By Tanya Selvaratnam

Recently, a friend told me a story about taking her young cousin to a museum. There was a bank of TV monitors showing videos, and her cousin started pressing the glass surfaces; she thought they were touch screens.

Technology has transformed the way we make, see, and remember art. Jackson Pollock said in 1951 that artists have to identify new forms to express the world in which they live: “Each age finds its own technique.” Over the years, as our gadgets have become our constant companions, contemporary artists have been finding ways to incorporate emerging technologies—like in Mark Hansen and Ben Rubin’s *Listening Post* (composed of fragments of seen and heard online communications), David Byrne’s paintings made in PowerPoint, and the smartphone visual interventions of Manifest.AR. Even before these 21st-century applications, artists have mined our complex relationship with technology for material; I think of the mediated presence of Joan Jonas, and the manipulated voice of Laurie Anderson (“O Superman”) still haunts me.

In 2013, this investigation is abundantly evident. At the Venice Biennale, a video by Hito Steyerl, *How Not to be Seen: A Fucking Didactic Educational .MOV File*, gave

viewers various strategies for avoiding being filmed or photographed in an image-saturated age. In the fall, Mariko Mori opened two solo exhibitions (“Infinite Renew,” at the Espace Louis Vuitton in Tokyo, and “Rebirth: Recent Work by Mariko Mori,” at the Japan Society in New York) that continued her exploration of the intersection between technology and art. Her triptych of sculptural columns, *Infinite Energy*, was built through digital imaging and 3-D printing. Relying on cameras and LEDs, the columns change color by drawing from the energy of people in the space.

Here at Art Basel in Miami Beach, in the Positions sector, Wang Yuyang has re-created an office composed of hyperrealistic silicon sculptures, including a mobile phone and computer, which should be inanimate but appear to be breathing. And in the Nova sector, Aleksandra Domanovic presents a variation of her “printable monuments,” originally composed of inkjet-printed sheets of paper and now including materials like Plexiglass and plastic. She is also showing “From you to me”—a research and film project tracing the history of the .yu Internet domain through interviews, archival footage, and 3-D animations.

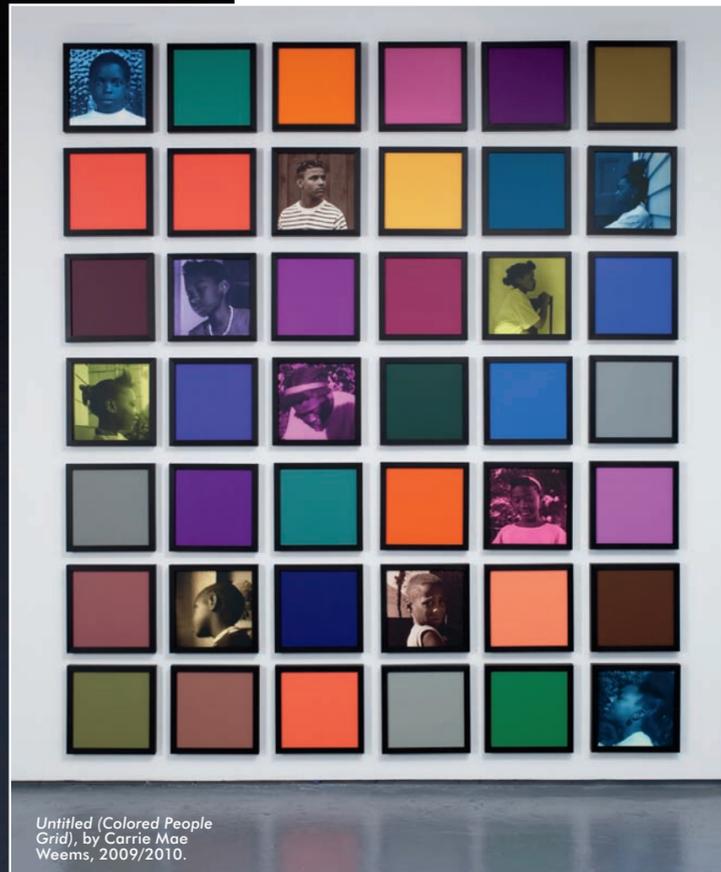
But are we at risk of losing our own sense of presence

PHOTOGRAPHY COURTESY OF MARK HANSEN AND BEN RUBIN



“NO ONE IS REALLY PRESENT ANYWHERE. WE ARE PLAYING WITH SOMETHING THAT IS CONSTANTLY IN FLUX.”

—MARIANNE WEEMS



Untitled (Colored People Grid), by Carrie Mae Weems, 2009/2010.

in the midst of all this technology? Marianne Weems, a performance and media artist most known for her work with The Builders Association, has been constructing a cultural critique through technology onstage for over 20 years. For her next project, inspired by *The Wizard of Oz*, she is working on a smartphone app through which audience members can access additional layers of the performance—a riff on the wonder felt by Dorothy as she stepped into the color frame of Oz and a contrast to the typical request to turn off your cell phone before a show. As Weems says, “No one is really present anywhere. We are playing with something that is constantly in flux.”

And this flux can be embraced. Shari Frlot, curator and founder of New Frontier, a program of new media artworks at the Sundance Film Festival, which has presented Bruce High Quality Foundation, Hank Willis Thomas, and Lynn Hershman Leeson, believes that digital art “uniquely addresses the realities of life in the digital age in ways that reflect and feed the needs of our contemporary society.” She also points out that it takes creativity to figure out the programming code, or, as she puts it, “to reinvent the alphabet” on which the artwork is based.

Indeed, technology-based art is not only gaining in credibility but also in value. In 2013, an inkjet-printed painting by Wade Guyton sold for \$1.1 million, and auction houses have begun to sell digital art. But these

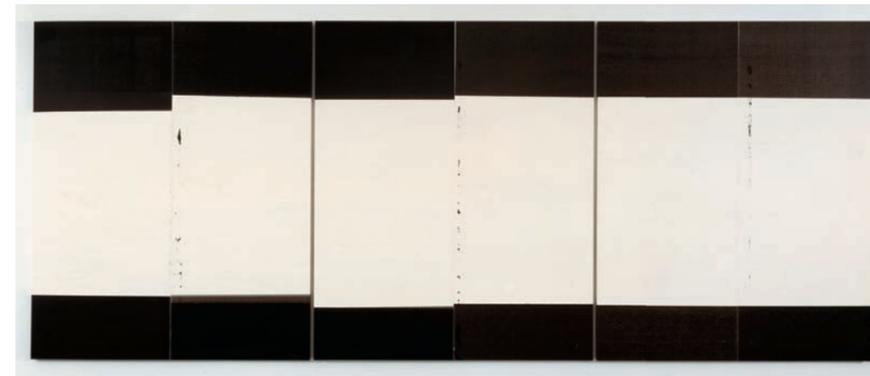
new forms of art come with unique problems. In June 2013, Melena Ryzik wrote in *The New York Times* about the dilemma of Douglas Davis’s *The World’s First Collaborative Sentence*, donated to the Whitney Museum in 1995. This early interactive computer artwork was composed of opening lines contributed by 200,000 users from around the world between 1994 and 2000. In recent years, the Whitney discovered that the code and links were out of date and that “the 1s and 0s of digital art degrade far more rapidly than traditional visual art does, and the demands of upkeep are much higher”—though it eventually debugged and reposted the piece.

Another problem, as digital art becomes more collectible, is how to prevent the piracy and irrepressible sharing that brought the music and film industries to their knees. The rhythms of our lives have changed. Technology has recast the ways we can access art. We’re texting, typing, and documenting as fast as we can. Those of us who are artists and arts professionals are racing to keep up with expectations for more dynamic engagement that digital technologies have precipitated. Media scholar Henry Jenkins writes about “convergence culture,” the collision of old and new media where consumers can get entertainment the instant they want it.

For the past seven years, I have produced director Chiara Clemente’s films, many of which explore the lives of artists and their creative processes. Our preoccupation with instantaneous digital images viewed on our devices concerns Clemente: “With all the technology around us, no one will have memories based on senses—the smells, colors, our feelings in that moment. Everything might be based on a frozen instant.”

Carrie Mae Weems, a 2013 MacArthur “Genius” Award winner, is known for capturing provocative and poetic images (a retrospective of her work has been traveling around the country and will be at the Guggenheim Museum in New York in January). Though she depends on digital technology to make her photographs, Weems values the in-person art experience: “With time fast-tracked and expectations for instant gratification at an all-time high, I’ve come to appreciate the contemplative space and slow pace of a well organized and deeply considered exhibition,” she says. “I enjoy the careful arrangement of objects and their relative proximity to one another. Nothing tops the experience of the real, the live, the touchable.”

One day, we might be able to step into a portal and feel as if we are walking through the Prado without actually flying to Madrid. We might even be able to conjure organic and spontaneous emotions of being in the same room with other people. But even when that happens, there must always be a place for full-sensory



Untitled, by Wade Guyton, 2011.

“WITH TIME FAST-TRACKED, EXPECTATIONS FOR INSTANT GRATIFICATION [ARE] AT AN ALL-TIME HIGH.”

—CARRIE MAE WEEMS

participation and the collective experience so that we don’t only rely on eye-mind connections, devoid of human interaction.

Designer Shimi Cohen created an infographic short animation inspired by MIT professor Sherry Turkle’s book *Alone Together*. In *The Innovation of Loneliness*, Cohen artfully explains how our virtual hyperconnectedness has resulted in the advance of artifice, narcissism, and, as the title suggests, loneliness. The credo of today is “I share, therefore I am.” Mike Milley, the global director of lifestyle research for Samsung, told me that in the Bay Area where he lives, he senses a backlash against living through online correspondence and digital gadgetry. An example of this, he says, is “to go to dinner parties and show up with an LP as a gift for the host.”

One day, after many months of working on a book, I ventured out. My first stop was the Guggenheim Museum to catch the final hours of the James Turrell exhibition. When I entered the atrium, the circular mat on the floor was full of people lying down and looking up. I found an empty spot on a bench beside a man, nodded hello, and then fell into a reverie gazing up at the concentric

circles of halcyon light—powered by technology, but triggering a sensation that could only happen in person. I was imagining the most glorious sunset or dawn, or the birth of a fantastical solar system. When I snapped out of it, there were dozens of people around me who had also succumbed to the enveloping beauty of art we had seen with our very own eyes.

As we go deeper into a digital age, I wonder: Are we heading towards a world in which no one goes to museums or galleries, critics and curators are unimportant to how we choose and understand art, and 3-D printers can perfectly create artworks and make the artist’s hands unnecessary? I hope not.

But I consider what Miami art collector Mera Rubell said: “I can’t predict where and in what medium I will collect in the years to come. Technology is the medium of our time. As a devotee of contemporary art, I go where the artists take me. I trust them, and I trust the art.” ABMB

PHOTOGRAPHY COURTESY OF CARRIE MAE WEEMS AND JACK SHANNAN GALLERY NEW YORK; UNTITLED (COLORED PEOPLE SERIES), © MARIKO MORI, COURTESY OF SEAN KELLY; NEW YORK; TOM NA H-IU II, COURTESY OF WADE GUYTON AND FREDERICK PETZEL GALLERY; UNTITLED, COURTESY OF WANG YUYANG (BREATHING SERIES-OFFICE)

Breathing Series-Office, by Wang Yuyang, 2013.

