

Melissa Langdon

The Work of Art in a Digital Age

Art, Technology and Globalisation



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Preface

Globalisation is one of the most important phenomena of our times, and yet one of the least understood. In popular and critical discourse there has been a struggle to articulate its human affects. The tendency to focus upon macro accounts can leave gaps in our understanding of its micro and particular experiences. This book argues that globalisation's spatial, temporal, and kinetic changes are impacting upon individual bodies and consciousnesses.

Digital art is introduced as a platform of articulation: a style borne of globalisation's *oeuvre* and technically well-equipped to converse with its flows. Digital art works are explored through an historical lens to show how they share similar discursive functions with earlier art forms. The capacity to re-centre globalisation around the individual is explored with reference to sensory works that encourage subjective and experiential encounters.

By exploring globalisation through digital art, this book moves away from universal and totalising approaches, in favour of personal and affective accounts. It shows how digital art can offer individual expressions of globalisation. Through discussing a wide array of international artworks that feature immersive, interactive, haptic and responsive technology, digital art's tools of articulation are examined. This book reveals how digital art works can facilitate new articulations of globalisation: as enactments and modes of expression.

*The amazing growth of our techniques,
the adaptability and precision they have
attained, the ideas and habits they are
creating, make it a certainty that profound
changes are impending in the ancient craft
of the Beautiful.¹*

Walter Benjamin

¹ Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in The Age of Mechanical Reproduction', in H. Arendt (Ed.), *Illuminations*, Fontana, Collins, 1970.

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The feedback received from David Savat and Ian Saunders, during the completion of my doctorate informed a number of the approaches and ideas that were later developed in this text. Thank you for this support. My editor Hector Nazario also provided valuable input and guidance, which made for a far more lucid and readable text.

This book has been written over endless cups of coffee. Thank you to the cafés that allowed me to sit writing at their tables, sometimes for hours: *Gertrude and Alice Book Café* and *Paris Le Go Café* in Bondi NSW, *The Reid Library Café* at the University of Western Australia, *Bookplate Café* at the National Library, ACT and *Greens and Co* in Leederville, WA.

My family have given the greatest support, particularly Tom who has provided invaluable input and suggestions throughout the writing process. To you, my love and thanks. From sourcing articles to debating ideas, my father John was an inspiration. I dedicate this book to him—for giving me a lifetime of education—and an education for life.

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Chapter 1

Introduction: Towards New Understandings

Introduction

Globalisation and digital art are complex phenomena. Because of their historical coincidence, they can be used to inform understandings of each other, with each having the potential to function as an affective and experiential construct. Conceptualisations of globalisation have dramatically changed in response to the rise of digital technology. Writers have engaged with the spatial and temporal conditions of what has been variously termed the ‘network society’.¹ This book explores these altered conditions and posits that new languages are required to articulate globalisation’s individual affects. It reveals how digital art can function as a loupe for observing and expressing globalisation, as a human phenomenon (Fig. 1.1).

The presentation of globalisation as a human and ‘felt’ phenomenon is a critical breakthrough in the understanding and conceptualisation of globalisation. It is important because it provides new ways of accessing difficult concepts often discussed in large-scale, systemic and intangible ways. In popular media and texts, globalisation is often expressed in terms of the expansion of financial markets, the proliferation of Western capitalism, the growth of global consumption and the rise of Americanisation. As Jonathon Xavier Inda and Renato Rosaldo argue, there is a strong pattern of thinking about globalisation ‘principally in terms of very large-scale economic, political, or cultural processes.’²

Many popular readings present globalisation as being synonymous with Americanisation and the rise of advanced capitalism. These articulations are often centered upon the idea that ‘the United States is the dominating global nation, powerful to a degree and to an extent never before seen.’³ As Clark Judge claims in the *Hoover In-*

¹ See: Manuel Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society*, Cambridge, Mass., Blackwell Publishers, 1996.

² Jonathon Xavier Inda and Renato Rosaldo (Eds.), *The Anthropology of Globalisation: A Reader*, Malden, Blackwell Publishing, 2002, p. 5.

³ Clark S. Judge, ‘Hegemony of the Heart: American cultural power threatens old orders worldwide,’ *Hoover Institution Policy Review*, No. 110, Vol. Dec-Jan, <<http://www.hoover.org/publications/policyreview/3462301.html>>, 2002, (accessed 12 October 2008).

Fig. 1.1 Marnix De Nijs, *Beijing Accelerator*, 2006. (Image courtesy of the artist, 2006)



stitution Policy Review: ‘[a]gain and again in everything from the pronouncements of statesmen to the chants of anti-globalization demonstrators to the manifestos of terrorists, a fourth factor of American power keeps coming up ... This elusive factor is American cultural power.’⁴ A core assumption underlining this view is that Americanisation underpins globalisation.

Equally, the term ‘globalisation’ is often interchanged with Western capitalism. As *BBC News* reported, the debate on whether globalisation is simply ‘capitalism at its most evil or a promising way to reduce poverty is now raging wherever world leaders gather to discuss trade or economic issues.’⁵ However, both positions are underscored by senses of globalisation as an economic transformation, occurring after the post-Second World War boom came to an end.⁶ Several writers, such as Robert Went, present it as a distinctly new stage of capitalism.⁷ Yet, the categorisation of globalisation in macro economic terms draws the focus away from micro experiences and articulations.

The reduction of globalisation to a series of generalised, systemic impacts overshadows the contradictions and iterations of human encounter, experience, memory, and response. This text challenges meta-narrative approaches of globalisation that have inhibited understandings of personal and individuated experiences. Influenced by Fredric Jameson and Masao Miyoshi’s reluctance to define or delimit

⁴ Clark S. Judge, ‘Hegemony of the Heart,’ <<http://www.hoover.org/publications/policyreview/3462301.html>>.

⁵ No author, BBC News, ‘Globalisation: Capitalist Evil or a Way Out of Poverty?’ *BBC News: Talking Point*, 6 February 2002, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/talking_point/1791105.stm>, 2002, (accessed 12 October 2008).

⁶ Robert Went, *The Enigma of Globalisation: A Journey to a New Stage of Capitalism*, London, Routledge, 2002, p. 93.

⁷ Robert Went, *The Enigma of Globalisation*, p. 93.

globalisation,⁸ it seeks find new ways of ‘knowing’ this ‘unclassified topic’⁹ by presenting the phenomenon as a series of flows rather than a single system.

When understood in this way, globalisation necessitates a method that is fluid in its facilitation of different voices and expressions, as reflected by the diverse artworks selected. This approach is sympathetic to Okwui Enwezor’s notion that the ‘value of the global paradigm for me—if it means serious interaction with artists and practices that are not similarly circumscribed—is its allowance for greater methodological and discursive flexibility.’¹⁰

A key rationale in writing this book is to facilitate more personalised understandings of globalisation. By exploring how different artworks engage participants in conversations with globalisation, it seeks to provide far less totalising accounts, framed by notions of engagement and affective experiences. To this end, the book will explore perceptual and intuitive approaches to art and technology, which might facilitate what Shauna M. MacDonald terms ‘new modalities of reflection.’¹¹ In a review of Susan Kozel’s *Closer: Performance, Technologies, Phenomenology*,¹² MacDonald engages with more nuanced and cross-disciplinary approaches to experiential digital works. She observes how Kozel, in particular, is able to effectively mediate ‘multiple, complex concepts (i.e., flesh, the virtual) of (sometimes) divergent thinkers from diverse disciplines (i.e., dance, philosophy, performance, art, robotics, feminism) and even paradigms (i.e., art, science, technology).’¹³

The aim of this book is to encourage open and flexible discussions around globalisation’s human impacts, which counter universalist approaches. International digital artworks will be explored in terms of how they express these micro affects through interactive, immersive and responsive media. This book will show how digital art, as a practice shaped by globalisation, has an ability to express its human impacts, and to present it as a dynamic cultural phenomenon.

In the following chapters globalisation will be discussed in terms of how it influences the way we think about and respond to the world. Globalisation’s spatial, temporal and kinetic flows will be described in terms of personal experiences and articulations. Articulation in this context is used to refer to the dual processes of voicing and connecting, or as Alison Kooistra expresses, ‘of joining together and in the sense of speaking out’.¹⁴ Kooistra argues further that an ‘anatomical articulation—the joining together or “membering” of distinct parts to form a larger whole—is accomplished through a verbal articulation—speaking out, claiming a

⁸ See: Fredric Jameson and Masao Miyoshi (Eds), *The Cultures of Globalization*, Durham, Duke University Press, 1998.

⁹ Fredric Jameson and Masao Miyoshi (Eds), *The Cultures of Globalization*, p. xi.

¹⁰ Okwui Enwezor, ‘Global Tendencies: Globalism and the Large-Scale Exhibition’, in *Art Forum International*, Vol. 42, No. 2, November 2003, p. 154.

¹¹ Shauna M. MacDonald, ‘Book Review: *Closer: Performance, Technologies, Phenomenology*’, Vol. 5, Issue. 1, 2007, *Liminalities: A Journal of Performance Studies*, <<http://liminalities.net/5-1/rev-closer.html>>, 2007, (accessed 16 March 2012). This link is no longer active.

¹² Susan Kozel, *Closer: Performance, Technologies, Phenomenology*, Mass., MIT Press, 2008.

¹³ Shauna M. MacDonald, ‘Book Review’, <<http://liminalities.net/5-1/rev-closer.html>>.

¹⁴ Alison Kooistra, ‘Speaking into Sight: Articulating the Body Personal with the Body Politic’, *Explorations in Anthropology*, Vol. 8, No. 1, 2008, p. 1.

label or banner, or constructing a coherent narrative.’¹⁵ This book introduces digital art as a style that shares an intimate history with globalisation, and one that is technologically equipped to facilitate new understandings of the phenomenon. Digital art will be located in continuity with—not in rupture from—earlier art forms. This marks a shift in the consideration of digital art, and challenges the tendency in digital art criticism to locate these works as essentially ‘new media’ works distinctly borne of the new millennium period.

As ‘art of the times’ digital art can provide lens for the viewing and contemplation of globalisation. In historical terms, it is well placed to comment upon the particular conditions and human responses brought about by globalisation. It also operates as an instance of globalisation, emerging from its flows of media and technology. Unlike other forms of static art, it is technically equipped to emulate globalisations dynamic spatial, temporal and kinetic affects. Digital artists are converting passive art spectators into active users. Through tactile, interactive and responsive media, participants experience globalisation’s replicated and at times, contradictory effects: temporal dislocation, human connection, sensory overload, urban acceleration, remembrance of home and a sense of global action and citizenship. In this way, digital art might be seen to serve a similar function to Situationist works that used their particular social and historical locations and palettes of techniques to chronicle the times.

Key works from around the world will be used to show how digital art can reveal individual enactments of life under globalisation. To this end, digital art will be read as both an expression, and an element, of new global flows. Its ontological and affective qualities that connect it to the realm of art will be seen as creating new ways of understanding the external world, and articulating happenings and responses to globalisation. At the same time, this book contends that meta-narrative accounts are unable to account for the subjective nature of art production and human experience. The same partiality is reflected in the way that works are approached and interpreted by the author in this book.

The Approach

This text is constructed as a two-way conversation between globalisation and digital art. The objective of this book is not to provide categorical definitions for these terms, but to generate conversations around these concepts, informed by digital art examples. In keeping with this open and flexible approach, each chapter will draw upon discourses from cultural studies, media theory, communications and art history, framed by the sense that some of the more illuminating accounts have emerged from cross-disciplinary enquiry, with writers such as Okwui Enwezor, Marc Augé, Arjun Appadurai and Saskia Sassen employing eclectic discourses and approaches in their explorations of globalisation.

¹⁵ Alison Kooistra, ‘Speaking into Sight’, p. 1.

Historical analysis will be used to contextualise digital artworks and their methods of production. While the nature of globalisation's impacts has historical precedents, the book will argue that the scale is unprecedented. By focusing upon the new millennium period, this text will suggest a need to address key changes in the style of digital art production in connection with the consciousness of globalisation and its histories. Senses of *fin-de-siècle* before and after the Millennium's turn, and the heightened awareness of globalisation and digitisation's cultural, political, technological, ideological, and economic impacts will be explored. By confronting the eclecticism and vibrancy of digital art, the book aims to offer new insights into why digital art operates as an affective platform for describing responses to globalisation.

A case study approach is used to enable the artworks to be sequenced historically, and to draw attention to key dialogues that are informing understandings of globalisation and digital art. In its purest form, case study research involves an iterative process of collection, contextualisation and analysis. By its nature, digital art lends itself to this form of induction. Given the unique ways in which individuals experience and describe art, the scope for generalist or constructivist theories seems limited. The artworks will be presented as individual constructions rather than general accounts, and will be examined in terms of the different perspectives offered on globalisation's human impacts and their moments of production.

Each chapter explores digital art in terms of a particular theme emerging from current discourses, for example, art and cultural commentary; political protest; or space, time and speed. The examples have been deliberately chosen and sequenced to reveal an historical and stylistic progression in the practice of digital art, and new conceptualisations of globalisation. They will be explored in terms of their production methods and references to other art practices. Artworks from diverse locations, employing eclectic media, and constructed in different cultural contexts will be discussed. In this way, the book aims to provide a more critical and readable account of digital art and its development in connection to globalisation. Ultimately, this book poses the question: what understandings of globalisation can digital art provide?

This text will also contest the claim that digitisation produces only detrimental affects: an assumption that underscores fears that the 'unremitting flood of numbers, codes, letters'¹⁶ is 'replacing real bodies and real persons, threatening to make both obsolete',¹⁷ as conceptualised by Anna Munster and also expressed by Jean Baudrillard in terms of the real being 'no longer real, but of the order of the hyperreal and of simulation'.¹⁸ In her text *Materializing New Media: Embodiment in Information Aesthetics*, Munster posits that '[t]hought about the body and actual sensory par-

¹⁶ Anna Munster, 'Low-Res Bleed: Congealed Affect and Digital Aesthetics', in *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Art*, Volumes 2–3, 2001–2002, p. 82.

¹⁷ Anna Munster, 'Low-Res Bleed', p. 82.

¹⁸ Mark Poster (Ed.), *Selected Writings by Jean Baudrillard*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2001, p. 175.

icipation and engagement must be re-examined in our analysis of digital culture.’¹⁹ This book will contend that these generalised readings offer reduced or simplistic understandings of globalisation’s variable and often contradictory human affects.

This text will also disrupt the notion that digital media is hostile to the body or necessarily borne of a hard, masculine and de-sensitising technology. Or as Munster expresses, new media technologies are held to be responsible for privileging consciousness over embodiment in virtual environments, or for favouring the human over the machine in the design of ‘computer interfaces.’²⁰ It will explore the rejection of the idea that ‘in its obsession with developing a “machine” aesthetic digital artwork might stand accused of neglecting affective, aesthetic experience’,²¹ and instead show how many digital artists are engaging with sensory, perceptual and bodily experience in their art. Artists like Joanna Berzowska, Jung Si, Kaho Abe and iCinema will be discussed in terms of their use of technology to present qualities of softness, tactility, sensuality and femininity. As such, digital art will be shown to have the means to generate affective and particular critiques of globalisation.

In using the term ‘affect’ this book focuses upon subjective and bodily responses to globalisation and art. Affective approaches create space for the shifts, iterations and contradictions of human responses, in ways that counter static, universal or objective methods. To this end, we might use Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s ‘rhizomatic’ languages to account for the ‘variation, expansion, conquest, capture, [and] offshoots’²² of affective encounter, as a construct that is ‘always detachable, connectable, reversible, modifiable, and has multiple entryways and exits and its own lines of flight.’²³

Simon O’Sullivan converses with Deleuze’s conceptualisations by arguing ‘[w]hat we’re interested in, you see, are modes of individuation beyond those of things, persons or subjects.’²⁴ In his article ‘The Aesthetics of Affect’, O’Sullivan explores Deleuze’s notion further that ‘[t]his is art’s function: to switch our intensive register, to reconnect us with the world.’²⁵ He contends that the spectator might become an active participant that is engaged with an artwork at the level of representation. To this end, we are ‘involved in a dance with art...and art does what is its chief modus operandi: it transforms, if only for a moment, our sense of our “selves” and our notion of the world.’²⁶ O’Sullivan similarly engages with Félix Guattari’s notion

¹⁹ Anna Munster, *Materializing New Media: Embodiment in Information Aesthetics*, Dartmouth College Press, New Hampshire, 2006, p. 10.

²⁰ Anna Munster, *Materializing New Media*, p. 10.

²¹ Anna Munster, ‘Low-Res Bleed’, p. 78.

²² Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, Trans. Brian Massumi, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1987, p. 21.

²³ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, p. 21.

²⁴ Simon O’Sullivan, ‘The Aesthetics of Affect: Thinking Art Beyond Representation’, *Angelaki: Journal of the Theoretical Humanities*, Vol. 6, No. 3, 2001, p. 128.

²⁵ Simon O’Sullivan, ‘The Aesthetics of Affect’, p. 128.

²⁶ Simon O’Sullivan, ‘The Aesthetics of Affect’, p. 128.

Fig. 1.2 Forest and Kim Starr, *Chick with Marine Debris at Eastern Island: Midway Atoll*, 2008. (<http://www.starrenvironmental.com/images/image/?q=080605-6576&o=birds>)



that ‘by allowing individuals access to new materials of expression, new complexes of subjectivation become possible...In such a pragmatic, and aesthetic, reconfiguration one creates new modalities of subjectivity in the same way an artist creates new forms from a palette.’ This is the function of aesthetic affect. To this end, digital art might facilitate affective encounters with globalisation, as an interactive mode of articulation (Fig. 1.2).²⁷

Digital Art as a Critical Language

A further objective of this book is to offer new understandings of digital art, as an expressive language that can be contextualised in terms of art history. Digital art has been variously termed net.art, new media art, media art and new media, with each category re-orienting the practice according to technical, aesthetic or stylistic concerns. Whether we see digital art as being evolutionary to or revolutionary from earlier art styles, what is clear is the need to develop a means for locating it. This is particularly so if we agree with Mark Hansen that the formal traditions of art theory and criticism have limited application for the articulation of digital works.²⁸ Arguably, the intimate and experiential natures of digital artworks can provide challenges for those seeking to locate them. Formal categorisations of art governed by strict notions of authorship, aura and originality, seem to preclude an art characterised by replica, misappropriation, freedom of access and anonymity.

In contesting these formal tenets, digital works often subvert conventional requisites for production, artistry, and display. Digital artists often oppose formal notions

²⁷ Simon O’Sullivan, ‘The Aesthetics of Affect’, p. 131.

²⁸ Mark B.N. Hansen elaborates on this idea in his text *New Philosophy for New Media*, Cambridge Mass., MIT Press, 2004, p. 3.

of artistry with its makers ‘biologists, engineers, designers, and hackers rather than the newest crop of fine-arts graduates.’²⁹ As Joline Blais and Jon Ippolito observe, ‘[f]ar from the traditional epicentres of artistic production and distribution, creative people sitting at computer keyboards are tearing apart and rebuilding society’s vision of itself.’³⁰ These writers question whether the boundaries have ‘become irrelevant in an age when art and science, commerce and fashion are whipped together in the global culture blender we call the Internet?’³¹ While the practice of defining art may seem problematic or irrelevant, the function of digital art still serves a critical purpose.

This book shows that there are strong grounds for locating digital works as art, for they creatively converse with the external world in ways that are reminiscent of earlier practices and styles. Digital art’s ability to critically reflect upon social, political, and historical phenomena—and generate new ways of seeing—is an essential characteristic of social art. Rather than abandoning the category of art or placing digital works on the outer, we might expand the field to account for different and emergent modes of expression. This step has been a necessary process for all novel and revolutionary styles throughout history, ranging from Modern cinema to Dada performance. In the face of formalist dissent, artists have engaged with the backlash and incorporated the criticism into their works. It is this engagement and resistance that has often made works understandable as art, and provided grounds for applying understandings from art history.

In choosing the term ‘digital art’ this book seeks to provide less a definition and more a language for locating creative works mediated by digital technology in one of three ways: as the product, process or subject thereof. Digital artworks incorporate eclectic media from interactive film and video to gaming and wearable technology. As a broad category of classification, digital art incorporates any expression mediated by digital technology. The computer, it will be argued, is central to production, operating as an interface, facilitator and/or canvas for display. However, unlike technological determinist accounts it will be contended that digitisation influences rather than determines the message. Digital art will be located in continuity with—and not in rupture from—earlier artistic discourses and styles.

Chapter Summary

Through a case study approach that features diverse artworks from around the world, the book will elaborate on how digital art is technically, philosophically and historically apposite to critique globalisation’s flows. It will link this expressive platform to the realm of affect and show how digital artists can facilitate subjective interpretations and bodily responses, and voice diverse experiences and perspec-

²⁹ Joline Blais and Jon Ippolito, *At the Edge of Art*, London, Thames and Hudson, 2006, p. 7.

³⁰ Joline Blais and Jon Ippolito, *At the Edge of Art*, p. 7.

³¹ Joline Blais and Jon Ippolito, *At the Edge of Art*, p. 7.