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Big Pixels: Pictoglyph to Favicon – A History of the Pixel

The Pixel has become the fundamental building block of digital New Media. It looms as large as Kazimir Malevich's Black Square, 1913, Oil on Canvas Painting and it as expansive as Ray and Charles Eames' Powers of Ten, 1968 film. The Pixel has become so ubiquitous that the very nature of visual language seems to exist on a near cellular level where it syntactically requires ever-increasing density to transmit detail and nuance.

Yet in the Pixel's ever decreasing size along with a corresponding increase in density, it can never achieve the reality that we need, so we continue, as in ancient times, to define ourselves through abstractions, symbols and icons which require less, not more data, to represent people as pictorial forms and to create pictorial forms from people. [Fig. 1]



Fig. 1: Petroglyphs Aqua Fria National Monument, Arizona. 2002 Photo: Hazopelli

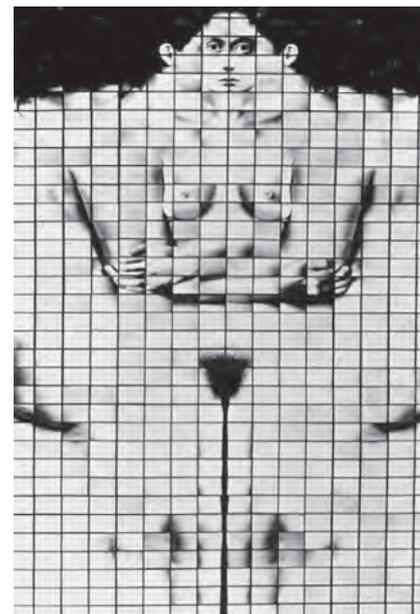


Fig. 2: Susan, Photograph. 1971 Photo: Tetsu Okuhara

The term pixel was first used in publication by Frederic C. Billingsley in 1965. It derives its name from Picture and Element and at its most elemental it is a building block, in between which is the mortar of our imagination. It is the space between the Pixels where synaptic connections are made and where our mind decodes meanings and makes meanings of the message. [Fig. 2]

There has been an extended history of artists that have been enamored with the breaking down of elemental forms, long before the advent of the computer. But with the advent of digital technology, graphical depictions had to be built back up on a new platform that was initially crude, less tactile and less connected than previously known media. Yet in the 45 years since the term Pixel came into being, a whole generation that grew up with EGA and VGA graphics came to understand and appreciate their own ability to be interactive with digital media. They envisioned themselves as Buddy Icons, Forum Avatars and Pixel Art. They saw themselves as Pixels.

Yet what happens when humans gather together publicly acting as living Pixels and are reduced to picture elements in mass political demonstrations and mass games? Is it to express their unified strength and power as a rehearsal for revolutionary change? Or is it to find a place in the mass of human structure? [Fig. 3]

One of the largest Pixel representations was the exhibition of the AIDS Memorial Quilt, as part of the annual World AIDS Day held in 1992 on the National Mall in Washington D.C. Each panel that comprises the AIDS Memorial Quilt measures about 3 feet by 6 feet about the size of a human cemetery plot. Each individual quilt is then stitched together to form a block.

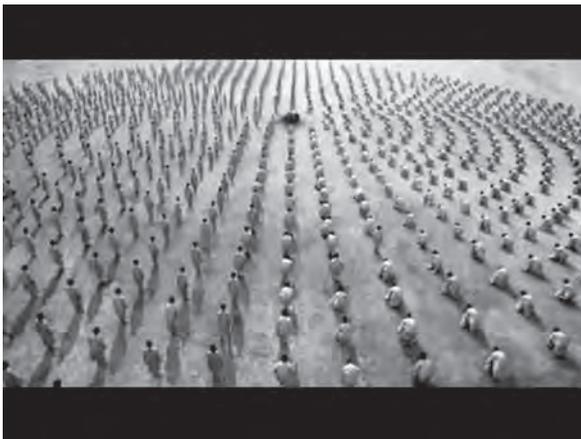


Fig. 3: Palm Pre television commercial by Modernista! Boston, 2009 Photo: Palm, Inc.



Fig. 4: National Mall, Washington, DC, 1992 Photo: Courtesy The NAMES Project Foundation, Photograph by Mark Theissen

Just as basic Pixels are grouped together to create graphic elements. The grouping of the individual quilts speaks to the larger meaning of a community lost to AIDS. The fact that the individual quilts are crafted by hand speaks to the larger community of those touched by this disease. [Fig. 4]

The AIDS Memorial Quilt as exhibited, weighed 54 tons and was comprised of more than 48,000 individual panels dedicated to 90,000 people and serves as the documentation to those who have lost their lives to this pandemic. The documentation in the form of the AIDS Memorial Quilt continues to grow in size is raising issues in storage and long term preservation much in the same way that digital media must be stored awaiting a proper reading and decoding from their binary state.