

# DATA DISINFORMATION: DATA MANIPULATION AND IMAGEMAKING

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Written in parallel with the exhibition *Uncontainable: Broken Stillness* and the panel *Data Disinformation* this paper examines the ways in which artists are diversifying the role of imagemaking through data manipulation, bespoke software and hacking.

The relationship between technology and speed has been closely associated with the development of progressive technology in the 20th Century and now in this century with the ubiquity of personal computers, mobile devices and networks with rapidly increasing capability. It has been an expectation that machines will work faster and more seamlessly in the service of making society more flexible and agile. Unless procedures go wrong in the mainstream, data transfer, manipulation and creation are rarely questioned. Notably Paul Virilio commented on these developments observing that speed is so much a part of our engagement with society that we are dependent on it while apprehensive or even fearful that the technology of speed may break, stop or cause accident and disaster. [1]

Concurrently with these developments there is a global economic turning point, dwindling planetary resources and a shift in the ecology of practices from the individual to the collective - these socio-economic changes offer both positive and negative positions for creative and artistic practice in the scheme of broader societal change.

The exhibition *Uncontainable: Broken Stillness* and the panel discussion *Data Disinformation* implicitly engage with these current broader societal issues through a deliberate investigation into the relationship between new creative practices and older analogue pursuits such as painting and pre-digital photography – the exhibition suggests that the temptation to discard art history in the digital era may be misguided.

*Uncontainable: Broken Stillness* is a celebration of an artist's signature work and style. The exhibition does not suggest an alternative for shared working but that there is space for individual practice to make a contribution. The pioneering work of imagemakers such as John Heartfield [2] and later Peter Kennard [3] left no doubt that their influence on imagemaking of the time and their political context was extensive. Richard Hamilton [4] and Victor Burgin [5] among others appear to have used their predecessors' techniques. The rise of photoshop and other image manipulation packages introduced a tacit acceptance that this form of imagemaking was no longer particular to the individual imagemaker but a technical enhancement of the photographic process accessible to all. In some respects this was a very positive development for users, but as packages were readily available it was and now is often too easy to spot general characteristics of Photoshop, Director, Flash and Eyecon for example that have been imposed on any unique image.

The artists in both the panel discussion and the exhibition at ISEA were selected for their use of digital techniques embedded in the development of a visual language begun in earlier forms of image-making. The artists are using the unique value of technology to increase the spectrum of markmaking, landscape,

media and gesture. Their work involving bespoke programs, hacked packages and mediated imagery enhances the role of the image both aesthetically and politically at the hands of the artist.

Tim Head, a forerunner of the contemporary trend towards fusion of art and science and producer of politically driven imagery and installation, strips data back to the material of the OS and the screen with a program written in C that randomly generates lines of colour (in some of his works randomly generated colours are produced pixel by pixel) on screen in his conceptual works such as *Laughing Cavalier* shown in the exhibition. Peter Hardie, a pioneer in computer animation, has dedicated years to studying the properties of water and the representation of its movement in animation. His *Ripple* series shown in the exhibition combines his interest in impressionist painting with animation. This work strives to find marks and techniques that can only be produced through computer programming. His study of water and light has combined mathematics, the study of molecular movement and light with the observational techniques of the impressionists. It is this combination that has enabled the artist to extend the range of techniques possible for describing movement of water and reflection of light on it.

Susan Collins has worked since the 1980s in computer and electronic arts and is recognised as a leading UK artist in this area of practice. *Glenlandia*, a contemporary investigation into landscape art, is an archive of images gathered from pointing a webcam at Loch Faskally. The work shows images on screen generated by changing pixel by pixel over approximately 21 hours in a day. This piece provides a time-frame as well as an in-depth study of a single landscape. Presented on the screen in landscape format the artist introduces representation of time showing simultaneously day and night views of the same scene studied and recorded over two years. She has produced a series of archives in the UK and internationally that explore the subtleties of the landscape tradition. boredomresearch continue the landscape theme using Processing to develop artificial life for their playful diptych *Lost Calls of Cloud Mountain Whirligigs*. The work generates fictional beings (Whirligigs) set in an environment combining landscape with mechanical technology. Each viewer experiences the piece differently as the Whirligigs exhibit individually generated behaviours and lifespan. boredomresearch rely on the generation of unique images and behaviours so that no two people will see exactly the same image and are interested in the way that viewers engage with landscape and the ability of digital media to develop fictional fantastic landscapes for the viewer to engage with.

Sigune Hamann, photographer and video-maker, uses analogue 35mm stills photography adding movement to the image by shooting a still film in one take. The resultant *film-strip (Whitehall 9.12.10)* made at the Student Protests in December 2010 stunningly combines moving image, panoramic photography and painterly gesture. This work develops her interest in the role of the camera and subject in standard narrative in film and photography and the application of digital techniques to old media to question and subvert these narratives. For example the student protests were a mix of dreary, dynamic and subversive atmospheres and yet here film-strip shows a beautiful painterly scene that seems removed from the reality of the subject. David Cotterrell's work also subverts context by challenging our understanding of war through media images. His recent body of work assembled from footage taken during his residency in Helmand Province, Afghanistan, deliberately looks at images of war that represent the waiting for action rather than the much publicized activity of war. *Green Room* is a video loop showing the anticipation of the arrival of casualties to the medical room in Helmand. Treated in post production and heavily mediated, *Green Room* creates a sumptuous image that enhances anticipation of action – a very different tableau from media and cinematic representations of casualties of war.

Susan Sloan has researched extensively the use of motion capture in animation. This technique most associated with gaming and cinema special effects typically focuses on the production of stylised and standardised movements of characters. These are achieved through a post production 'cleaning' process erasing glitches in movement. Through the inclusion of individual signature gesture and character in her subjects, *Mary and Annie*, Susan Sloan develops the language of portraiture and likeness through image and movement. Her short loop of each character provides an image that occupies a place somewhere between a painting and an animation.

Relevant to this discussion is the most recent work of Terry Flaxton with whom SCAN worked in 2010. His pioneering research into the production of HD moving images and changing audience engagement (due to a different physiological response to the one with SD images) has called him to question the way in which HD images should be produced - research shows that audiences remain with HD much longer than SD. His new images are rich, often appearing to be slowed down or completely still to compensate for this change in engagement. [6]

Whilst the artists in *Uncontainable: Broken Stillness* suggest movement or animation, these movements are understated falling in between the language of moving and still image. It is the power of the subtle suggestion of movement, the place the work occupies in art historical, cinematic and media representation and the role the pieces play in the development of image-making that is the focus of the exhibition.

#### **References and Notes:**

1. Paul Virilio, *The Aesthetics of Disappearance*, trans. Philip Beitchman (Los Angeles, CA: Semiotext(e), 1991).
2. More information on John Heartfield can be found in David Evans, *John Heartfield: AIZ/VI 1930-38* (New York: Kent Fine Arts, 1992).
3. More information on Peter Kennard can be found at his website <http://www.peterkennard.com> (accessed June 1, 2012).
4. For general background to Richard Hamilton can be found at [http://moma.org/collection/artist.php?artist\\_id=2481](http://moma.org/collection/artist.php?artist_id=2481) (accessed June 1, 2012).
5. Bibliography of Victor Burgin is at <http://www.egs.edu/faculty/victor-burgin/bibliography/> and discussion of his photomontage is in David Evans, *Appropriation* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2009).
6. More information on Terry Flaxton can be found at <http://www.flaxton.btinternet.co.uk/> (accessed June 1, 2012).