



TECHNICAL DIFFICULTIES

Claire Bishop asks: "Whatever happened to digital art?" ["Digital Divide," September 2012]. It is a troubling question for the artists, critics, curators, funders, and nonprofit administrators who have observed or participated in the growth of this field over the last decade. Why does this work remain invisible to Bishop? It is partly due—as per her own admission—to her focus on a "mainstream," which she defines as the art that appears in "commercial galleries, the Turner Prize, national pavilions at Venice." Still, we would argue that even here the "divide" she describes is actively being bridged and, because of a critical blind spot, she is forcing it back open.

As art that critically engages network technologies proliferates and art institutions recognize the undeniable importance of the Internet, Bishop's comments feel badly timed. Today we are seeing funding agencies, museums, and curators realizing digital initiatives, some of which have been planned for years. In the past

year alone, many institutions rebuilt their web platforms and restructured their archival policies and publishing departments. These efforts are evidence of a strong interest in digital technology, and of an awareness that the support structures for contemporary art need to coordinate the art world's "mainstream" with broader developments. Bishop says that the art world simultaneously "disavows and depends on" digital media. To be sure, there has also been a tension between art and changing social and technological orders. But the situation described in "Digital Divide" is out of date.

Bishop says she "can count on one hand" works that confront and thematize network technologies. This is a claim that can't be substantiated. She would quickly run out of fingers if she continued her count while flipping through the pages of *Artforum's* September issue—or if she had researched the countless organizations, publications, and artist communities dedicated to this work. It seems as though Bishop lost interest in digital art in the early 2000s—which was indeed

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a period of backlash against the complex introduction of the field in the late '90s—and has ignored the recent development in the field. Digital art continues to be made and shown online, but art engaging networked technologies unfolds across multiple versions. A web-based project can take other forms, such as an installation, a video, or a book. Digital art is no longer confined to "cyberspace." Concerns about networked technologies have been absorbed by artists who draw on their knowledge of painting, sculpture, performance, and installation, as well as an interest in computers and code. To Bishop, these latter fields may be "alien," but they have become essential to understanding the world. Rejecting them as easily as Bishop does means choosing ignorance over literacy rather than articulating a creative preference.

It was discouraging, after reading several pieces on *Artforum's* history of developing critical languages to address emerging art practices, to then arrive at an essay that is clearly not rising to the challenges of contemporary art practice and our new visual environment. The current rise of amateur cultural production and the accessibility of tools for creating visual media pose new challenges for the art world. Institutions should serve not only as custodians of the past, determining how art from their collections is shared and experienced online; they must also work with artists to become guides to the present, shaping

conversations around developments in visual culture and identifying critical moments. From her position, Bishop can only picture such a situation as a "utopia," and not as the thoughtful response of cultural workers to their social and technological environments. She ends on an apocalyptic note: "At its most utopian, the digital revolution opens up a new dematerialized, deauthorized, and unmarketable reality of collective culture; at its worst, it signals the impending obsolescence of visual art itself."

What exactly does "visual art" mean to Bishop? When she discusses Kenneth Goldsmith's conceptual poetry in the paragraphs immediately preceding this dire conclusion, she clings to the traditional barriers between literature and art. With poetry, she writes, "the flow of capital is meager," whereas "visual art's ongoing double attachment to intellectual property and physicality threatens to jeopardize its own relevance." Digital technologies limit the distinctions between words and images to file formats, and artists who work with them take advantage of this flattening. Bishop, however, strengthens the divisions between visual and verbal arts, while erasing the distinction between art and its market structures—a narrowness of perspective that goes along with her easy dismissal of digital art as a "specialized" field. Most professors of art history can attest that the social contexts within which art can exist are far more varied than today's art

market and high-profile institutions. Art isn't in danger of irrelevance. Positions like Bishop's are.

—Lauren Cornell

Curator of the 2015 Triennial,
Digital Projects and Museum as Hub,
New Museum, New York

—Brian Droitcour
Writer, New York

Claire Bishop responds:

This letter is typical of the online feedback that has followed the publication of my article, so I will use this as an opportunity to answer both. To recap my argument: "Digital Divide" examines the mainstream art world's disavowal of digital media in its ongoing fixation with the analog, the archival, the obsolete, and predigital modes of communication and presence. I argue that contemporary art's attachment to these modes is largely a consequence of its being wedded to a market that prefers and privileges auratic forms. The article is first and foremost a critique of the dominant tendencies in contemporary art since 2000, as found in museums, galleries, and biennials: those that receive the majority of curatorial, critical, and art-historical attention. It's not an article about new media or digital art.

And yet, surprisingly, the overwhelming response to this article has been one of indignation from proponents of new media, who protest that I did not seize this opportunity to celebrate the unsung creative forces in digital arts. I'm sorry to disappoint, but this is beyond the purview of my article—and, as many people rightly point out, my expertise. I am not opposed to new media art, but the article's core question was why so little mainstream art

reflects on what it means to think, see, and filter affect through the digital. The key word here is affect, but also effect: I'm not talking about individuals and institutions using new media, but about how new media changes us. And a work does not necessarily have to use these technologies to address the effects and processes of digital media. Equally, many works may use all manner of digital technologies but still avoid the key questions. It is telling that none of the many responses to my essay took the time to write a compelling critical

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defense of a particular work (either digital or in any other medium) that articulates the contradictions and specificities of our present moment through such a lens.

To make a historical analogy: When we look back to the early days of video art, there was no shortage of artists using this new technology, but the majority of these artists have disappeared into the swamps of time. One artist whose work stands out among these experiments is Vito Acconci, because his videos of the period use technology to infer—in the most simple, direct, and obvious ways—the effect of technology upon narcissism, desire, and social relations. In *Theme Song*, 1973, Acconci croons and whispers to the camera, a sleazy, adorable, creepy, and pitiful character, allowing us to feel the vanities of televisual seduction and the cruel anonymity of its intimate solicitations, exploring

the ways in which perception and interpersonal relationships are being altered by television and the video camera.

Similarly, what is most striking about Thomas Hirschhorn's *Touching Reality*, 2012, is not that it comprises a digital video of an iPad, but that it shows us, with horrible vividness, how we consume images today and how images consume us. A finger scrolls idly through photographs of dismembered and decapitated victims of war and terrorism. This aloof, distracted consumption is galling because

it mimics the manner in which we share innocuous pictures of our family and friends, parties and holidays. It reminds us that photographs are no longer intimate fetishes, crumpled at the edges, stuffed in a wallet, but a publicly exhibit-able stream of information, existing in a repetitive glut (we take tens of photos where previously one would have sufficed). The work speaks to the character and speed of image consumption today, as well as pointing (literally) to the lost materiality engendered by the touchscreen interface, signaled by the moving finger. Politically, it uses images that mainstream media self-censors as too distressing, whose potency would presumably engender opposition to US military intervention overseas, but which are nevertheless available on the network, for a price, at specialist sites that trade in a por-

nography of violence. Through the connections that this work extends into the world, we start to understand what we are becoming through digital technology.

This type of engagement with the social, political, and perceptual ramifications of new technology is more complex than merely acknowledging the presence of "digital initiatives" in museums and other corporate phraseologies in the letter above. Rather than simply affirming new media's ubiquity, we need analyses of the way in which—as Hito Steyerl suggests—we are becoming one with the pixel, and of what this implies for anthropocentric models of perception. Without these investigations, the "apocalyptic" conclusion to my article only remains corroborated by Cornell and Droitcour's argument. Because as long as there is a mainstream art world that is still invested in the analog, the archival impulse, and "dead tech" and that is slow to invent new vocabularies with which to talk about perception in the digital era, there will have to be a self-marginalizing alternative called new media art that asserts its own relevance for the future. One is obsessed with the technology of the past, the other with the technology of the present; they are mutually constitutive products of similarly blinkered thinking. In this light, the inability of both to speak meaningfully about our contemporary experience of the digital seems to be a structural blind spot, produced both by the mainstream art world's insistence on individual authorship and auratic materials and by new media niche advocacy that misses the point, fixating on the centrality of digital technology rather than confronting it as a repertoire of practices and effects that increasingly lodges capitalism within the body. □