Interview: Curator of "Poetic Codings," Donna Napper, Explores the Intersection Between Art and Technology

BY EVA RECINOS | JUL 6, 2014

Image via the San Jose Institute of Contemporary Art / Exhibition View, Photo Credit: David Pace

Last year, Tumblr and Phillips auction house joined forces for a digital art auction called "Paddles ON!" that caused quite a buzz. The auction presented a strange situation; mostly non-physical items were being sold for similar prices as more traditional art items. For instance, a website by digital artist **Rafaël Rozendaal** sold for $3,500.

The question of what makes something art will always stay in the current conversation. But today's technology makes it even trickier, especially because it plays such as a large role in our lives. Is a GIF art? What about an app?

To explore the relationship of art and technology, the **San Jose Institute of Contemporary Art** has opened the exhibition "Poetic Codings," which previously toured Los Angeles and Boston. Put together by artist and critic **Jody Zellen**, the show explores what happens when art integrates itself into familiar forms of technology.

"Poetic Codings" features interactive works by **John Carpenter**, **Casey Reas**, **Jeremy Rotsztain**, and Zellen. At the end of the exhibition, iPads on a table contain apps by Rozendaal, Zellen, **John Baldessari**, **Jason Lewis**, and more. The interactive works range from a projection of a dandelion by Carpenter, which is controlled by the viewers' movements, to Zellen's projection that portrays the unemployment rates of different countries through little animated figures. A separate table features poetic, cryptic, and funny apps by artists such as Baldessari and **Scott Snibbe**.

On a particularly sunny day, curator **Donna Napper** walked Complex through the exhibition and gave her thoughts on the intersection between art and technology. Napper previously owned a gallery in Los Angeles and moved to San Jose to take the position of curator with the San Jose ICA. Check out our interview with her below.

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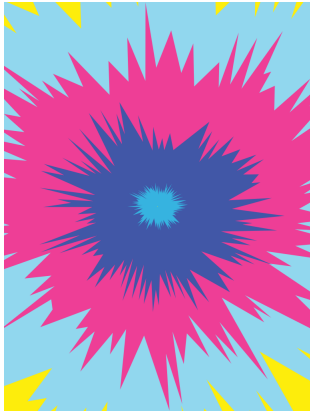
Rafael Rozendaal, Hybrid Moment

I feel like some people think this is a new category of art, and other people think, "I can't relate to this as art." Why are we having this conversation now?

Something that interested me about this show was to raise the question of art and technology—is it art *as* technology or technology *as* art?

It's one of the first shows to juxtapose apps that are created by visual artists. MOMA recently acquired an app and that's by Scott Sibbe, and we have some of Scott's apps here. Here it is a world-recognized museum acquiring this app, and we're only paying attention to it now because everyone's familiar with apps. Everybody has apps on their phones, iPads, and computers, so now the question is coming up. I think that's one of the reasons why Jody organized this show, to pose the question: Is that considered art? And she believes it is. And obviously MOMA believes it is. I think it's a slow going conversation as far as considering technological pieces as art, but it's almost like with any medium, it depends on the quality of the work and the quality of the artist.

There's one app by John Baldessari. It's based on a 17th century Dutch painting of a still life. You're able to create your own art. It's from a 2001 exhibition idea that he had with the actual painting at LACMA. Next to the actual painting, he projected an antique frame of the painting, and through the computer, people could rearrange the objects. Eventually he turned it into an app that people can play with. I like how it references art history and is educational that way. Baldessari has a great sense of humor.

John Baldessari, Still Life, 2012

Have you been able to see people's reactions or the way people have been interacting with these pieces? Have you noticed anything interesting?

The younger they are, the more comfortable they are to just go right to these iPads and just start playing with these apps and exploring them, which is great. There were a couple of elderly visitors that I observed because I didn't know if they were going to be interested initially. This one man, he was just by himself, and he plopped himself down. I think one of our interns guided him a little bit, saying, "Press this, hold this down," and next thing you know he was just immersed in it, and he sat there for a long time. At one point I went up to him and asked, "Are you enjoying yourself?" and he said, "Yes!"

For this kind of show, it is helpful to have somebody, a docent or myself, to take people around and talk a little about what's going on. But I think it also stands on its own visually. All of these pieces are visually interesting. They're captivating. They're beautiful without even knowing some of the interactive-ness or what exactly these images are from.

What were some of the challenges of laying out the show?

One of the challenges was just the equipment—coordinating what kind of equipment we needed, how much equipment we needed, what kind of pieces would run.

Another thing during installation was the lighting, the placement of the work in relationship to the light. From the front door we get a stream of light during the day, and it's darker at other times. It's still beautiful, but it would look a little bit more dramatic if it were darker.

Erik Loyer, Strange Rain

I'm curious about your experience as a curator and dealing with the shift to digital objects. How did that change the way you approach a show?

When I had my gallery in LA, I showed video art. I showed it projected on the walls, on a monitor, in different sizes. I showed one artist whose work was on the iPad, so I came with an understanding already that we had to tackle those questions ahead of time. I knew we could do it, but it's more about the quality of these works. It was more about getting a show here that opened up the questions related to art and technology.

This show would be completely different, and we would have completely different conversations if the apps were not included at all. Or the other way around: if it was just the show with this table of iPads and not the projects.

That's what interesting about using apps. We know to swipe, we know to zoom in—

You say "we," but there's a demographic out there that doesn't.

That's true. There are all these things that certain generations are growing up with. I have this iPad, and I know it reacts to my touch.

The reaction, the physical experience of having these is more intimate. They can be just solitary, but you still have the action. That's the other juxtaposition we have with the interactive installations. You're using your whole body, your body is in movement, and there's a reaction to the body. More than one person can be playing with the same pieces versus the apps. So the show is also bringing up that question, that comparison of the different experiences people have.
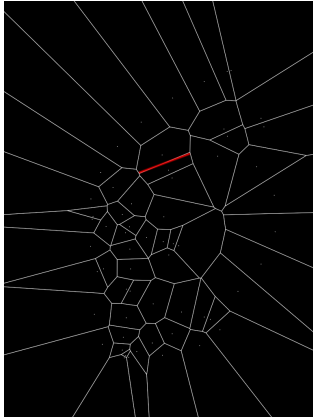
Scott Snibbe, Bubble Harp

How do you think technology might affect the way younger generations see art in general?

I remember when I started working at this gallery as an assistant. At the time, we were emailing JPEGs of artwork, but seeing artwork just in images was not common at all. And now it is very common, and at the time I was one of those people who said you couldn't get me to buy an artwork just from seeing a photo. Having worked with some of the images myself, I can feel pretty confident with a lot of art, not all. Some I will definitely recognize right away that I need to see it in person if I'm going to purchase it or even show it.

But it's happening more and more. People all over the world can see art but not necessarily be able to get there and see it in person. I think the next generation will be more comfortable with art on computers, whether they are JPEGs or they are apps. It's all about acceptance. I feel like we're at a time where people don't and will not consider apps art. But to have the conversation "Is it art?"—to just consider maybe it could be art— I think it's just that step that's needed.

Jody Zellen, Spine Sonnet

"Poetic Codings" runs until September 6 at the San Jose Institute of Contemporary Art.