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Artists and designers as collectors: the aesthetics of digital journaling

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Abstract

The visual journal has been a constant companion to artists and designers. It fulfils the multiple functions of a scrapbook, a sketchpad, an observation notebook, a filing cabinet and an archive. Collecting ideas and artefacts using digital devices is an important process for artists and designers today. However, the accessibility provided by these tools also leads to problems in traditional visual journaling. The increasingly diverse formats (such as, audio, video, or digital codes) can pose difficulties when working in conjunction with tangible materials. The storage, access, and usage of materials also need to be reconsidered. The key question is not whether digital production tools or software systems can replace physical journals, but: how can digital artefacts be accessed fluidly along with other tangible materials? How can we further journaling by taking advantage of the possibilities offered by digital mediums? Can artists/ designers reclaim the contemplative stillness of the visual diary in the ceaseless streams of materials?

This paper approaches these questions from a practice viewpoint. It explores the possibility of digital journaling by developing an appreciation of the aesthetics of interaction and association. This examination is supplemented by analyses of practices that assemble materials in response to their physical and digital environments. We conclude by discussing approaches in working across different mediums and materiality in the context of journaling.

Keywords

Visual diary, digital journal, collecting

Introduction

Artists and designers work in an open system of exchange, mining materials from fields of knowledge, cultural and social interrelations, economics, and political discourse.¹ The interaction within and across different spheres is crucial to the creative process. The visual journal acts as a platform where active engagement between concepts, materials, mediums, and tools can take place. Collecting ideas and artefacts using digital devices is an important process for artists and designers today. The accessibility provided by these tools, however, also leads to problems in traditional visual journaling. For example, the increasingly diverse types of formats can pose difficulties when working in conjunction with other physical artefacts, and the storage and access of materials needs to be reconfigured. The key question is not whether digital production tools or software systems can replace physical journals, but how can digital artefacts be accessed easily along with other tangible materials? How can we further journaling by taking advantage of the possibilities offered by digital mediums? Can artists/ designers reclaim the contemplative stillness of the visual diary in the ceaseless streams of materials?

This paper approaches these questions from a practice viewpoint. It explores the potentials of digital journaling principally in two ways. First, we focus on the key qualities of journaling by examining creative practices that assemble materials in response to their physical environments. Secondly, we examine the aesthetics of digital materiality and its possibilities by analysing works of digital artists and designers that explicitly deal with digital environments. We conclude by discussing approaches to working across different mediums, and materiality in the context of journaling.

Elaborating on the problem: relationships with technologies

As creative practice embraces different digital production including computers, cameras, audio recorders, and mobile phones, the artist's/ designer's collections become more diverse in forms but at the same time more complicated to store, access, and handle. A blunt 'digital-analogue' divide separates these artefacts and working across the divide necessarily involves translating from one form to the other. This translation process causes a loss of immediacy that makes it difficult to work quickly and intuitively.

Different types of digital systems such as blogs, vlogs, Flickr.com, Apple's i-Life series, and Microsoft's Entourage offer useful platforms to store and access materials. Software packages, like the i-Life series, are designed to make it simple to assemble digital materials for sharing. Beyond this, however, their capacity generally does not cater for experimentation. Users must also conform to pre-determined (and sometimes restricting) working methods and have little control over their design or functioning. Online systems like blog sites and Flickr.com provide useful formats for sharing ideas, thoughts, and works. They allow users to create entries and upload materials that can be accessed chronologically or through customisable tags and links. However, these sites are designed for the user to upload self-contained pieces and not for actually working on the materials.² Moreover, despite random accessibility, blog sites tend to be displayed and retrieved in a linear fashion. In software systems such as these, although tagging, textual search, or random starting points suggest alternative experiences of content, organization of data rarely diverges from hierarchical systems. In addition, when accessing materials pauses necessitated by software, hardware and protocols (e.g. searching algorithm, communicating with databases, or limited processing speeds etc.) often interrupt the flow of interaction and concentrated thought.

Apart from the practicality of processing materials, there are deeper issues when working with analogue and digital artefacts. As educators, we encounter the problem where computer use greatly eases the production, while paradoxically reducing the involvedness in the actual creative process. Although students demonstrate competency and dexterity in digital production, their works exhibit a certain reduction in complexity (such as in the use of textures, contrasts and overall aesthetics). The limiting factors posed by approaches to digital technologies are apparent in the difficulty in reconciling physical gestures (of handwriting and drawing, for instance) with the fundamentally pixel-driven computer system.

Anne Odling-Smee explores the junction between digital and analogue methods of production in contemporary practices in *The New Handmade Graphics* (2002). She points out that graphic arts and design have a long history of responding to technological invention and innovation by challenging established conventions with renewed approaches. She argues that to successfully make use of digital materiality and its hands-on counterparts, 'new ways of thinking' are required. Such approach must take into account the following three aspects of technology's role in creative production.

First, when the aim of the technology is to eliminate mistakes or to 'save time', possibilities are also limited. Instead of performing a task over and over again to allow natural variations in forms, the endless computer manipulation of elements overwrites previous work-in-progress leading only to one final version that is 'just right'. The role of serendipity is therefore greatly reduced. Second, technological deterministic thinking subjects creative practice to the limits of the technologies employed. For example, one asks, 'what can I do with this technology?' instead of 'what do I want to do and what tools can I use?'. Technology takes precedence over concepts and processes. This approach limits itself to the possibilities offered by the technology rather than the conceptual ability of the artist/ designer. Third, technology is not neutral. The dominant proprietary software and

operating systems are laden with inherent aesthetics and ideologies.³ In particular, users are required to comply with ways of thinking pre-determined by the software's design/er(s). This can be restrictive as testified by the designers interviewed by Odling-Smee, who congruously complain of being 'fed up with using other people's image-making systems like recipes, where ultimately any creativity is down to the software's programmer' (Odling-Smee 2002, 11-12).

The aesthetics of interaction and association

Journaling provides a potential key for finding renewed ways of thinking that allows fluid interaction with tangible and digital materials. In examining the practice of journaling, we identify two fundamental aspects for consideration: the aesthetics of interaction and the aesthetics of association. We interact with the world everyday conceptually and materialistically and make meanings through observation, exploration, reflection, and creation.⁴ A journal provides such a platform for interaction and making associations.

As human beings we are adept at finding patterns in our surroundings, and similarly, when supplied with raw materials we unconsciously create simple artefacts, working the materials into recognisable shapes or objects. This constant interaction is essential in creative work and is at the heart of journaling. The practice of Andy Goldsworthy presents an excellent example in examining this form of interaction. Goldsworthy's practice takes the form of a daily activity, in which he responds to his surrounding by making a sculptural/ installation work. He writes, 'I take the opportunities each day offers: if it is snowing, I work with snow, at leaf-fall it will be with leaves; a blown over tree becomes a source of twigs and branches' (Goldsworthy 1990, unpaginated). This approach is sensitive to the seasons as well as the locations. His works take a myriad of forms such as a bright yellow dandelion circle hovering above a field of blue bells, or a chain of red Japanese maple leaves dancing along a waterway. He documents each work with photographs and notes describing materials used, methods of constructions, process, place, and date. For example, he writes of his knitted striated leaf 'cloth':

Horse chestnut leaves
sections torn out
pinned with thorns to sticks pushed into pond bottom
muddy black clouds stirred up around where I worked
over the week leaves fell and pond rose slightly
work gradually disappeared
LOUGHBOROUGH, LEICESTERSHIRE
22 September 1986
(Goldsworthy 1990)

Inherent in Goldsworthy's work is a reflection of rhythm, motion, and constitution of his environment. Each work is marked by the specificity of the day, the place, and his interaction with what is around him.

The works of Sarah Sze can be compared with Goldsworthy's in their interaction with artificial materials and environments. Sze's works are intricate constructions that result from working intuitively with common household products 'to activate the poetry in these things' (Kastner 2003, 147). She relates how her working method initiated:

I was interested in anything that was around, but not trash; things that had a use
[...] So the next thing I did was take a roll of toilet paper and try to figure out how I
was going to use it. [...] I just decided I would sit down and make whatever came

into my head; not name it, just make things, just be with the materials (Kastner 2003, 147).

This type of critical engagement with the surrounds and with materials at hand is a disciplined interaction that frequently takes place when working in visual diaries. The key here is immediacy – that is, an intimacy with the materials established through play where tactile interaction provides the avenue for working intuitively.

Joseph Cornell, like Sze, worked intuitively with the materials he collected, operating ‘in “an automatic or semi-automatic state” especially when beginning a series of boxes and collages’ (Hartigan 1999, 223). Joseph Cornell is the archetypical artist-as-collector. Lynda Roscoe Hartigan writes of his legacy:

At Cornell’s death in 1972, some three thousand books and magazines, hundreds of record albums, thousands of pieces of paper comprising his diaries and correspondence, and truly uncountable numbers of two- and three-dimensional ephemera all coexisted in his modest house – from cellar studio to attic, on shelves and table tops, along the floors and stairs (Hartigan 1999, 222).

For Cornell, the acts of browsing, collecting and making are fluid. ‘Exploration’ is an encompassing term he used to describe these activities. He housed his ever-expanding collections in handy household receptacles: folders, envelopes, paper bags, boxes, tins and so on. In addition to taxonomic groupings, his cataloguing processes were conceptually based, bringing diverse materials together according to his interests (such as actresses, historical figures, stories etc.). Logical ordering of materials was not important. The accretion of notes, photographs, illustrations, and scraps gave rise to random mingling and associations, allowing materials to congregate into expositions. He ‘associated [...] the literal “sweepings” from his studio floor with “all the rich cross-currents ramifications [...]”’ in his works (Hartigan 1999, 223).

Cornell’s artworks, mirroring his processes, take the forms of assemblages (in constructed boxes, suitcases, or slip cases). Working in a surrealist tradition, the idea of association is important in both their making and presentation. Nevertheless, Cornell ‘had no intention of leaving these encounters [between the audience and the works] completely to chance’ (Hartigan 1999, 233). He took care to provide keys or starting point for his explorations. In fact, he came to see his works (and his processes) as museums of a sort where viewers may freely make associations between the elements in the works, gaining ‘direct access to the projects browsing through them as if through a Victorian album, a bookstall, or even a second hand store’ (Hartigan 1999, 233). Cornell’s practice provides an ideal model for a visual journal.

The aesthetics of digital materiality

When working with digital artefacts, we are one level removed from the tactile immediacy offered by physical interaction and association. The linear presentation, hierarchical retrieval, and imposed pauses of current digital tools further interfere with our ability to mentally retain nebulous connections and threads of thought, vital to creative inquiry. When John Maeda writes that ‘computers [...] have nothing to do with design skill, or design education for that matter’ (Maeda 1999, 19), he is advocating the necessity of developing a fundamental understanding of the mediums we use.

Yugo Nakamura believes that, ‘In the face of the many different concepts embraced by the Internet [...] we should also be experimenting with different approaches to the field itself’ (Nakamura 2000, 293). His revelation that ‘things I see are determined by the relationship, the *interaction*, between

me and the environment' is central to his work (Nakamura 2000, 290). Taking the essence of different interactions, such as inertial, connecting forces, actions and reactions, he transposes and translates their qualities into the digital medium. His programs are not mere 'digitalisation' of physical activities. Rather they are unique experiences that express familiar qualities through digital codes.

Nakamura's inquiry into the interface environment, as absolutely intrinsic to an individual's complete communicative freedom, has expanded to the development of 'reactive fields'. Nakamura's experiments focus on the development of an interface that responds 'instantaneously to any user action, in a manner entirely appropriate to that particular user's pattern of actions and behaviours...' (Nakamura 2000, 293). His ideas on interaction are very close to descriptions of the use of a conventional visual diary. We can further this concept by suggesting that the 'reactive field' can be extended to the design of a digital journal where the user can enter content and develop the multiple associations as they occur to the user, or as the relationships of the content are perceived via customisable algorithms.

It is in this way that Josh On's *They Rule* (1999 & 2004) allows hidden connections to be visualised through user interaction and online databases. The advantage of a database is its essentially 'nonlinear form... a system of elements that can be arranged in countless sequences' with the potential to favour spatial arrangement over linear flow (Lupton 2004, 69). When we consider that '[d]atabases are the structure behind electronic games, magazines, and catalogues, genres that create an information *space* rather than a linear *sequence*' (Lupton 2004, 69) it is clear that they also provide for the special requirements of a visual diary. The greater difficulty is to consider the difference between linear flow and spatial arrangement, and the emphasis on interaction and association over sequence.⁵

Benjamin Fry's thesis investigates visualisation processes of digital data along the line of 'Organic Information Design'. He writes, 'the resulting systems employ simulated organic properties in an interactive, visually refined environment to glean qualitative facts from large bodies of quantitative data generated by dynamic information sources' (Fry 2000, 3). In the *Valence Visualization Engine*, Fry demonstrates the potential of his organic system to create elegant visual structures that represent thousands of 'nodes' of information, visually emphasising popular nodes and visually atrophying unused ones while still maintaining connected relationships. The data-streams considered by Fry generally belong to a single data type (e.g. text, numbers), which is evidently different from that of a visual journal. However, the wealth of data collected in a visual diary is also 'large bodies of quantitative data' whose qualitative associations can potentially be gleaned using a system like Fry's given the appropriate settings.

His investigation into nine properties of primitive organic systems that can be 'simulated by simple rules in a centralized system' (Fry 2000, 43) provides an opportunity for interaction in a 'reactive field'. As data is entered into databases, each of the nine properties: structure, appearance, metabolism, growth, homeostasis, responsiveness, adaptation, movement, reproduction, can be stimulated by simple rules determined by the designer of the system. In addition behavioural rules, such as the importance of the property 'appearance', can be mapped onto individual entities in the system allowing for individual 'independent' modification (Fry 2000, 43). The inclusion of user controls in altering the rules and determining links between items would allow two levels of associations – organic and personal.

The strengths of the digital medium lie in the potential for collection, data storage, and access to vast resources. Working at the level of codes, artists and designers, like Maeda, Nakamura, On and Fry, are able to sculpt the digital medium like the malleable raw materials manipulated by

Goldsworthy, Sze, and Cornell. Furthermore, programs written by artists for artists are proliferating. Pursuing the goal set by Maeda, Benjamin Fry and Casey Reas initiated and wrote the *Processing* program - a digital sketchbook of sort where simple scripting allows the users to manipulate the medium directly. *Processing* garners strong community support from artists, designers and programmers with contributors adding other open-source freeware such as *Wiring*. The lack of immediacy in the digital medium, therefore, can be compensated for through thoughtfully designed systems that allow for the formation of different types of associations as determined by the user.

Conclusion

The purpose of the visual journal is to provide a repository allowing for the multiple functions of filing sketches, scraps and images, thoughts and observations, and retrieving them in such a way that allows for active engagement of concepts and interactions between materials. It is a work in progress, a space that allows for the accumulation of data that incorporates the possibility of future collaborations. The strength of a physical journal lies in tactility and interactive immediacy; the proximity of the materials—overlapping notes, items clipped together, accidental collage—allows for unexpected relations to emerge. As recognised in Cornell's work, it is the sifting of materials that gives rise to random or deliberate interactions. The journal fundamentally relies on the wealth of data collected—without which there can be no interaction and association—however, the ability to make and maintain multiple connections between elements can be limited.

In *Envisioning Information* Edward Tufte (1990) eloquently describes the potential of instant visual comparison. He argues for images placed within an eye span that 'reveal, all at once, a scope of alternatives, a range of options' (Tufte 1990, 68). The equivalence in a visual diary is the ability for comparison through proximity and, through interaction in the visual space, consideration of alternatives and options. The digital visual presentation methods developed and investigated by designers such as Yugo Nakamura and Benjamin Fry demonstrate potential for such comparative investigation, while their investigations into 'dynamic queries' have opened the potential for the user to create and maintain nebulous links. These are first steps toward the integrated use of digital artefacts and tactile materials in an open system where the possibilities of defining relationships allow users to interact and associate collected items in an intuitive way.

There is a growing recognition that a useful art and design education should guide students towards an approach that allows fluidity across the two modes of production (as suggested by the advocacy in art and design schools to re-incorporate and preserve technologies that have been deemed redundant such as photographic darkroom facilities, analogue film equipment, and letter presses, as part of the working process). By the same token, rather than replacing the physical journal, the digital medium can help extend both the useful and problematic aspects of journaling beyond expanding access to mediated artefacts. The possibilities of more organic representations of relationships and, more importantly, the potential for the user of the digital visual diary to add their own associations (and additional materials) would allow for a more intuitive interface. The development of relationship-driven visualisations reclaims playfulness and exploration, diverting the expectation of productivity associated with database retrieval to contemplative processing through association and interaction. Contemplative stillness can be reached in the heart of chaotic collation.

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Biographical Notes

Jo Law's works include films, videos, photographs, installations, multimedia projects and critical writings.

Jo's films and videos have been shown widely across Australia and internationally in screenings such as the *22nd Hong Kong International Film Festival* and *45th Melbourne International Film Festival*. She has received awards including the Silver Spire Award in New Vision at the *San Francisco International Film Festival: Golden Gate Award*. Jo's installations have been exhibited in Australia, Mexico, Hong Kong, and Taiwan. She has published reviews, essays, and referred articles, in national publications, and recently received a number of grants to carry out practice-based research and development projects in the new media area.

Jo has a Master of Fine Arts (by research) from the University of Western Australia and is currently a phd candidate at Murdoch University. Jo teaches new media at the School of Art and Design, University of Wollongong.

Gonni Bruekers has 20 years professional experience as a designer and art director in a diverse range of creative fields spanning advertising, graphic design, publishing, multimedia and information architecture. She is the coordinator of the BA Multimedia Design course at Curtin University.

Gonni received a Master of Design from Curtin University, and has presented papers on design knowledge and design education at international design conferences.

Her practical interests and skills cover a number of design areas, with a particular interest in expressive calligraphy. Her research interests encompass design knowledge, visual rhetoric, articulation of practice, and research methods for design.

¹ We use the term 'system' to infer a holistic way of thinking that is based on complexity theories. Bruce Mau also talks about design as systems of exchange or "design economies". See Bruce Mau Design, *Massive Change*, (London and New York: Phaidon Press, 2004).

² Most blogs do have an editor and like *Word Press* type systems they allow users to create html pages without having to code. Nevertheless, the control is only on par with a basic word editor.

³ Science fiction novelist, Neal Stephenson, offers an analogy between operating systems and cars: Microsoft represents the family car (perhaps a Commodore), Macintosh presents a European car (maybe a Saab), while Linux is a tank. See Neal Stephenson, *In the Beginning is the Command Line* (New York: Avon Books, 1999), 5 – 8.

⁴ These are the four categories identified in Jennifer New's *Drawing from Life*. See Jennifer New, *Drawing from Life: Journal as art* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2005).

⁵ A number of digital designers have developed digital equivalences for non-primary associations at different hierarchical levels. For example the Plumb Design's *Visual Thesaurus* is a visual representation of the English language, rendering associative meanings in a three-dimensional form. The system of connections is just as enabling as the nebulous associations demonstrated in a physical visual diary; relationships of varying degrees are made visually apparent, through hierarchy of size, colour, tone, and atrophying words, but the organic and non-linear representation allow the user the sense of choosing personally meaningful connections. The *Visual Thesaurus* is purely text based with information extraneous to the relationships appearing in panels and popup information windows.