Visual Digitality: Towards Another Understanding

Martin Constable, NTU, Singapore
Adele Tan, NTU, Singapore

ABSTRACT:

Given the assumption that the way an image is put together affects how we see it, this paper will seek to explore how art, image, photography and painting can be talked about since the advent of digital painting, especially in Asia. Faced with a composited image file that is located somewhere between the histories of painting and of photography, we need therefore to ask what exactly is the digital image. How do we as viewers from the age of film and photography come to the age of digital visuality, which is intrinsic to the vision of an Asian renaissance? The present trove of digital lexicon has gifted us with new metaphors to imagine this visuality: layering, channel operations, re-sizing, alpha channels and masking, etc. At the same time, we are, as mass-media consumers, seduced by the familiarity of its surface declaration and the seamless integration of disparate elements. Using examples of digital artwork from artists such as Jason Wee, Miao Xiaochun, Issei Yoshida, we ask if the logic and politics of representation has changed from the days of the disjunctive modernist avant-garde collage. Can we locate the impact of digitality in Asia through a newfound intractability of the digital image, which is situated within a necessary excavation of the profundity of its construction processes?

KEYWORDS:

Digital image; Asian artists; Digital lexicon; Originality, New media.

With the expanding lexicon of digitality, many words have been adopted or created to accommodate new methods of working with the digital medium. As such, a digital image which we might take for granted as innocently similar in its make up to a photograph or painting has its birth enabled through operations that have been technologically and thus conceptually differentiated. The accelerated rise and proliferation of digital tools in art making has meant that there is a lag in the material comprehension of the work. Perhaps as a defense against such ignorance we latch onto the subject matter as the primary way of explaining the image and we neglect the specific histories and processes that have informed the digital art object. The digital image demands now an archaeological examination that has previously been given to the treatment of artefacts. Hence, this paper begins by asking whether or not the concomitant development of the language of digital art has, or even should have, substantively affected the way we as artists and/or viewers approach the digital image. Our initial conclusion here is affirmative although we would like to restore an atmosphere of productive ambivalence to the ambit of the digital by teasing out its difficulties and contradictions. More interestingly, we find that such an elaboration has consequences also for the understanding of digital practices of Asian artists, some of whom might be paradoxically closer to the ethos of the digital.

The first question under consideration is that if a certain visual outcome is achievable via traditional means such as painting or photography, why then use the digital to create it? The lay viewer who comes to the digital image will not care too much about the essential differences between two images which look the same to the eye but really have quite distinct origins in their production. But for the interested audience, we can further proceed to ask what other meanings and ideas can be accrued by the insertion of the digital process? In short, one can even begin to say that the meaning of the digital image resides in the fabric of its making, a notion that had already been promulgated by process-orientated art from the 1970s. One thing about digital art is that it is given short shrift by the greater art historical establishment whose principal job is to investigate images. Art history views digital images with some suspicion as digital tools has popularly been seen as enabling swifter and relatively liberated ways of working and one that is less encumbered by history than say if an artist practices with a brush or a camera. Thus, the digital has been tarred by the

charge of expediency and disingenuity.[1] Yet as soon as the digital image begins to emulate or approximate traditional painting or photographic techniques (a tromphe l'oeil of sorts), the scenario actually becomes more complicated than first thought and throws into relief old chestnuts and biases about the category of art itself.

Digital art programs do have a democratic intent, allowing access and feasibility to a mass public, however, they also carry forth the misguided thinking that this ease of application is a constant case and that it contributes to the waning of originality when cut-and-paste is the modus operandi of this current generation.[2] It must be said here that no one has yet accused the collagists of high modernism to be lacking in originality and certainly a YouTube mash-up can exhibit more creativity than the source materials that go to make up its fabric. The digital artist is not someone who though in possession of a brilliant idea then dumbly sits down at his computer and presses buttons. But what pervades our appreciation of the digital is yet again the anxiety about creative genius, virtuosic skills and the necessity of a work of art to be a groundbreaking paradigm shifter. These aims have not been forsaken in digital art, only much harder to achieve in our postmodern age, and more importantly for our paper, we want to suggest that what needs to change is the ways we go about seeking and describing it. [3]

Also, the emphasis of this paper on the medium of digitality is not to rehash old modernist arguments about medium fidelity, autonomy and anti-mimesis, but rather to cast this gaze in a different direction. It is one closer to what Jacques Ranciere has proposed that we read as the true 'anti-mimetic aesthetic revolution', which is not a forswearing of resemblances or verisimilitude but a 'principle of "each to everyone else's"', the 'constitution of a shared surface in place of separate spheres of imitation'.[4] Therefore, to read off the digital medium in image making necessitates a relational thinking that partakes in the adjacent discourses of painting and photography.

For our purposes we have selected three Asian artists: Jason Wee (Singapore), Issei Yoshida (Japan) and Miao Xiaochun (China), all of whom have very different ways of working within the digital but each contributes to the problematic which we have identified above, namely that perceptual equivalence endowed in the image replicable in old media does not lead to conceptual equivalence. Each artist illustrates for us some of the key working methods available in digital art such as 'generating'; 'compositing'; 'rendering' and even 'painting'. The terms may look familiar but in the digital realm they describe a very particular menu function, and accordingly, these terms then supply the conceptual levers for the viewer to unlock the inner workings of the digital image. Compositing alludes to the work of 'cut-and-paste' from already available materials and to generate an image, one begins usually with a pre-given visual 'noise' made by algorithms where one can steer the general terms of the image but is not able to specify it. Creative control

---

1   The ease with which digital objects can be multiplied draws many parallels with the act of printing and there is a similar rootlessness behind much of the decision making. When Mark Wallinger's video installation *Angel* was first shown at Anthony Reynold's in 1997 it was on a small monitor. In the same year it was shown at the 'Sensations' exhibition at the Royal Academy but as a large video projection.

2   The studio of the digital artist is also subsequently transformed, a multi-tasking space that can double as your entertainment station and keep you in contact with the outside world, quite unlike the connotations of the conventional studio as difficult and expensive to maintain, and often tiresome to get to.

3   The digital image does not always indicate an advance of art critical paradigms even if it uses the most advanced technologies but can rather present the informed viewer with a list of conundrums. For instance, the Duchampian mantra of dislodging the optical of retinal art is strangely reinforced and undermined all at the same time, if we think in terms of digitality as inserted within a linear progression of avant-gardist sentiments.

4   Jacques Ranciere, trans., Gregory Elliott, *The Future of the Image* (London and New York: Verso, 2007), 104-5. 'The anti-mimetic, modern aesthetic break is not a break with art that is a slave to resemblance. It is a break with a regime of art in which imitations were simultaneously autonomous and heteronomous: autonomous in that they constituted a sphere of verbal or visual creations not subject to the criteria of utility or truth operative elsewhere; heteronomous in so far as they imitated in their particular order – in particular, through the separation and hierarchy of genres – the social distribution of position and worth.'
(106)

can be wrested back by the act of 'painting' or 'authoring' a digital image yet this by no means guarantees the desired outcomes or success of the picture as artistic intention contends with the controls of the program that can throw the image into disarray by an application of the artist's own accord. And certainly, the digital program in its rendering function is able to magnify and accentuate the degree of detail and complexity that is humanly achievable such that pictorial complexity supplants authorial control as the desired aim.

Our choice of Asian artists here is not to draw a conclusive arc about the Asian artists adoption of digital tools but rather because the surrounding, and often pejorative, discussion about copy and innovation in Asia usefully highlights the broader and similar responses to digital art, and also because in each of the artist's specific modes of working, they undercut our expectations about the place of the digital in their oeuvre and complexify the surface declaration of their images. Our three artists also share similarities in that they all produce two-dimensional, figurative, photographically-rooted prints, and their proximity to painting and photography serve to lever the associative terms of the digital into a territory that is unique but not self-sufficient.

THE ARTISTS AND THEIR WORKS

Between them these artists delineate the three possibilities on offer to a digital image maker: the generative, the composited and the authored though it is usual for an artist to employ more than one of these solutions. These strategies are each different in their nature yet the act of compositing brings them all seamlessly together within the same image.

Wee first started to take photographs as a way out of a writer's block (he was a poet) and his earlier black-and-white landscape photographs have a formal polish reminiscent of high modernist photographic practice. His recent work is entirely digital with his seascapes generated within a mathematical noise editor. This method is a distant cousin of the platonic solid: a mathematical expression that has been given shape and form. In his series *The Waters Of Indonesia Towards Australia*, Wee replicates the surface of a large body of water to the point of near verisimilitude, tricking our eye into the illusion of photography. Natural phenomenon such as coastlines, trees and the undulating surface of the sea all lend themselves very well to such mathematics. Yet even though in themselves they are astoundingly complex forms, the control the artist has over them is like the control a film director has over a crowd scene: general (able to determine its density, range, frequency etc) but not specific (able to place particular players in particular places).

In contrast, the images from Yoshida are themselves composed of many images that have been composited into a single image. Compositing is, at its most primitive, a simple cut and paste, but it will be obvious to anyone who has attempted to graft a picture of Madonna's head onto their grandmother's body that the result always requires extensive visual massaging before it can become convincing. This is usually done with digital paint and is analogous to the old-school authoring that a painter would do. Yoshida assembles his compositions from multiple sources mostly obtained via web searches but when need be, culls from his own photographs. These he renders seamless with skilled painterly intervention. Viewers cannot immediately apprehend the technological intervention here because they are busy working out the dense narratives of melancholic loss in Yoshida's images which are heavily influenced by a familiar nineteenth-century European romantic aesthetic.

Miao in his latest monochromatic series *The Last Judgment in Cyberspace* recreates old master paintings in a 3D program, populating his renderings with models of himself, replacing each of the 400 figures in Michelangelo's iconic work with his own image in correspondence to each pose and position in the original painting. He then moves the virtual camera into several vantage points so that it can grab an approximation of what Michelangelo would have seen in the Sistine Chapel had he shifted his point of view 20 metres over to one side. For all its technologised visage, there is something rather retrograde about the look of his piece that is out of step with the degree of accomplishment that the software can produce in the hands of digital aficionados. Miao's figures are relatively un-textured, his lighting perfunctory and his rendering basic. However, this unsophistication enforces the fact that these are digital artefacts and our gaze is consequently never entranced by duplicitous seamlessness.

WHITHER DIGITAL?

In each of the above cases, the 'generated', the 'composited' and the 'rendered' have not merely been the results of technical applications but also used as modifiers and addendum to what might be received as painted or photographed. For Miao, the appropriation of a wall painting into a digital domain has assisted in the interpretation of his vision of man's progression into a malevolent industrial dystopia and the verb 'to render' becomes a threat to painting, restoring the word's antiquated sense of submitting to inspection, to hand over or surrender.[5] This also feeds into the notion that rendering, as an operation 'surrendered' to the computer, is the handing over of artistic reins to an impersonal medium and yet multiplies the artist's precision and detail many times over. Miao, whose works are described as illustrating the evils of a technologised society, sits uneasily with technology, not as its celebrant but its adroit exploiter. Yoshida's compositing of photographs indicates that any attempt to insinuate the unity of its image will be a foreclosure as we are consistently made aware that its body is made up of constituents if we look hard enough, elements which can always return to subvert or destabilize meaning, where the intentionality of the source material can return to trump or haunt the newly composited work. Most intriguing of the three is Wee's subterfuge where the generated image (its facture simulating the photograph) from an antipodean technology is deployed to comment on another medium — photography. To 'generate' an image calls up an assumption that the visual product is externally derived (unlike the indexical quality of a photograph), its existence the result of a procedural performance of logical operations that can produce not a unique item but rather a set or sequence of items. Wee is not so much interested in the digital as how it can be used to query the taxonomy of photography and landscape, both recognisable only through its constructed elements (i.e. where things are placed) instead of content. The digitally generated nature of his process aids in Wee's exploration because digital ontology is aligned with the fact that he thinks the history of photography is also the history of modernity, and that Asia's experience of both these histories is through a series of fractures and interruptions parlayed via randomized foreign popular culture.[6]

Implicit within our analysis is the return of this anxiety with regards to medium identity, singular authorship and intentional control, which is prevalent in Western discourse and downplayed in Asian ones. 'To copy' and 'the copy' are not as disparaged in the East where quality of execution not originality holds an esteemed place. Painting, and to some extent, photography, assumes a Promethean nature of the artist, eager to verify the God-creator and the history that stands behind him/her, whereas digital art implies a guiltless appropriation and pure referencing. It might be now that we can state for digital art that 'God is in the edit', with the comfortable relinquishment of control through editing as the prime creative act (rather than authoring). Dispensing with the utopia of pixel-perfect intentionality, perfection and complexity are nonetheless easier to achieve in the digital and hence the almost evangelical pursuance of high-definition accuracy that is a pitched battle between program, familiarity and luck. So for the author/painter and the opportunist/photographer (who waits for the right moment) we now have a third stable mate: the editor/digital artist, who is never allowed to forget that his digital image is made from exogenous bits.

Fundamental to digital practice is its facilitation by *editing* software. This editing is not just in the fabric of the acquired material, it is in the editing of the many presets, templates and defaults that that are the controlling aspects of the software.[7] Thus, a piece of digital art is inherently the end result of many

5   A description of the work is as follows: 'Miao's photos conceive the celestial as a silvery futuristic tableau that's enchantingly serene and threateningly industrial. In combining the sublime awe of religious painting with malevolent science fiction theme, Miao uses photography to engage the viewer in an ultra-modern way. In using digital process to create his subject 'from scratch', Miao's photographs authenticate a virtual world rather than document reality. Similar to video game graphics and 'screen shots', Miao's images involve the viewer by casting them as 'avatars' within the action. Presenting his scenes at obscure angles, Miao positions the viewer as seraphs, saints, or in the case of *The Below View*, the damned.' Quoted from The Saatchi Gallery, http://www.saatchi-gallery.co.uk/artists/miao_xiaochun.htm.

6   Conversation with artist, 14 July 2009.

7   It is easy to forget that at its heart digital manipulation software is a manipulator of numbers (hence digital) and just as a mathematicians can perform in number-space operations that would be impossible in the real world, so this software can perform magic upon forms and behaviours at the same time as mimicking them: gravity can be inverted, movement can be converted into colour, colour can be converted into sound, negative lights can be shone upon an object to cast darkness upon them. However, this magic is heav-

edits which are driven by default actions and values such that its uniqueness is questionable at best. By functioning within default values, the digital artist is necessarily constrained by what was previously imputed; it is now not history per se that is the bugbear of the artist but the retention of the defaults the next time you open the program. The cost of this ease of use is twofold: that many of the creative decisions have already been made on the user's behalf and that the artist is removed from the numerical roots of his work (the 'digit' of digital art). A layering operation in Photoshop 1.0 required

an explicit awareness that an addition, multiplication or subtraction operation was in order. Since version 3.0 of Photoshop these decisions have been hidden from the user and they are faced with the altogether illusionary impression that they truly are layering one thing on top of another[8]. Though our three artists use three completely different programs it is, again, the vernacular of the edit that unites them all.

So digital artists find definition through the edit, yet is this taxonomy a useful one? The software might be an editor but that doesn't mean that the artist follows suit. It is possible that just as the artists are unsure, mistaken, or ambivalent as to how to describe themselves that they also are not using the software within the given limits of its nature. They have not been told that it is not a brush or a camera so they mistake it as such. Mediums are often used in a manner that goes against their inherent properties especially when that medium is still in its nascent form. Yet this mistakenness might rather be the nature of digital image making at the present. The fudged nature of the digital artist is such that artists who engage with digital practices still exhibit a reluctance to identify themselves as such. The author/painter and the opportunist/photographer are at two ends of the practice spectrum and digital art is not yet old enough for an artist to be able to come to it without a history in one or other of these practices. But despite having affiliations to both painting and photography, it is neither. It is of note that our three artists all have the roots of their practice in photography and their work frequently masquerade as photographs for the unsuspecting viewer.[9] Miao defines himself as a photographer and his work is often printed as c-prints (a photographic process) as opposed to the more usual inkjet (the traditional medium of the digital print) and Yoshida has come to his practice from early beginnings as a photographer and has even spent some time as a dealer of old cameras. Despite this he has said that he really does not mind what he is called, though he admits to a certain pleasure at being described as a digital painter.

The digital artist can be said to revel in this categorical fudge, his images registering not just contextual meaning but also the larger ontological and epistemological questions about the subject and object in the digital realm. Can a photographer be a photographer if no camera, developing fluids or photographic emulsion has been employed? Can the object be itself if no original constituent part of it remains? And if we regard painting as being an act of authorship (with the artist responsible for every nuance of form, colour and tone) and photography a taking advantage of opportunity (with the photographer waiting to chance upon the right optical configuration) then where along this line, or in tangent to it, does the digital image lie? Perhaps one answer to this would be to forgo such tired definitional contestations with the extant terrain and look to what the expanded lexicon of digital manufacture can bring to the interpretation of the digital image.

---

ily tamed. Most digital manipulation software is consumer orientated, with much of the nitty-gritty elegantly hidden behind well-designed interfaces. In 1994 Adobe released Photoshop 3.0. The thing that made this program different to its predecessor was the ability to place separate images on top of each as layers. This simple facility was responsible for an explosion of interest in the software and in image manipulation in general. However, it offered nothing that Photoshop 1 and 2 did not already offer (a layering operation was possible through something called a channel operation) however its uniqueness was in making these things easier to do.

8   Transparency in a digital image is impossible as all colours are expressed as values between zero and one and that zero data (i.e. transparency) equates to black. The illusion of transparency is achieved through a simple mathematical operation called pre-multiplication.

9   When Wee showed his work in a recent group show of contemporary photographers he was nearly excluded when the organizers found out that his work was entirely digital in its fabric and manufacture. He successfully defended its inclusion by pointing out that his formal focus was the same and it mattered not how he addressed it.