

Beyond Human: Arts and identity between reality and virtuality in a post-Covid-19 world

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This Symposium Panel explores themes of arts and identity with respect to the boundaries of reality and virtuality, especially with respect to changes in attitudes accelerated due to the restrictions of the Covid-19 pandemic. Each panellist provides a position statement from their point of view. The viewpoints cover artistic, curatorial, and academic issues. The effects are rapidly changing the digital culture in which we increasingly live.

Digital arts. Digital culture. Digitalism. Digitality. Identity. Reality. Virtuality. Covid-19.

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper records position statements for a Symposium Panel of invited panellists at the EVA London 2021 Conference. It continues a series from the previous four EVA London Symposiums held since 2016 (Bowen & Giannini 2016; Bowen, Giannini & Polmeer 2017; Bowen, Giannini, et al. 2018; 2019; 2020), which have been supported by the EVA London Conference (Bowen 2020).

The Symposium series initially started in association with the Pratt Institute London Summer School, with an emphasis on digital culture and “digitalism” or “digitality” (Bowen & Giannini 2014; 2021; Giannini & Bowen 2019b; 2019c). A collaboration with the Royal College of Art developed, providing an artistic and philosophical angle to the Symposium (Polmeer 2016; 2019). Aspects of digital culture (Giannini & Bowen 2018; 2019b) continue in this year’s Symposium, which considers identity in the digital arts, crossing between reality and virtuality, and the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on developments in this area. The panellists for this 2021 Symposium Panel come from artistic, curatorial, and academic backgrounds.

Covid-19 has dramatically accelerated the pace of change across our digital ecosystem while ushering in major advances in computing concurrently within the expanding virtuality of art and identity (Bowen Giannini 2021; Giannini & Bowen 2021). These converging forces shine new light on digital art set in the context of today’s social and cultural revolutions on a global scale where diverse cultures converge and collide demanding that cultural institutions re-imagine professional practice and replace legacy systems, as art and human identity shifts to a beyond human state augmented by computing and technology, and life lived on platforms and networks as our human identity morphs into a new state of being human, where art and human identity become one with computational culture.

Each participant interprets the symposium panel theme in the context of their own life and work. Then looking from the present into the future, how has art, identity and human digital behaviour been transformed and what will it mean to be human in a post-Covid, post-digital world?

2. POSITION STATEMENTS

Rachel Falconer

Goldsmiths, University of London,
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Transmuting Realities

New modes of curatorship; disrupting solid-state binaries of the real and the virtual and the refiguring of the distributed identities of the artist.

The assumed binary relationship between the virtual and the physical stands on shaky ground and is treated with increasing suspicion because of our technology-driven soporific cross-inhabitation of both lived states. The real and the virtual exist suspended in an entangled fuzzy logic of ambiguity where the previously solid walls and distinctive architecture of these separate realities have become hazy and porous – accelerated by the Covid-19 pandemic – but arguably a transmutation that was already inevitable.

As the figure of the curator navigates their way through these permeable realities and representations, they must also develop a finely sutured remodelling of the logics and politics of aggregation and display. New forms of agency emerge as the sole curator becomes less of the sovereign gatekeeper and tastemaker, and more of a collaborative agitator. This provokes new attitudes and hierarchies of engagement with creative artefacts across the digital commons and beyond, filtering into other imaginations of our new hybrid lived experience. Consequently, the status of the artist is refigured as an amorphous, elastic set of identities operating across a multiverse of platforms, portals, and recast “white cube” constructs. Signalling a point of identity crisis, but also of emancipation, radical curatorial strategies are progressing the adoption of new apparatus for networks and modes of exchange with creative artefacts and knowledge production.

Biography

Rachel Falconer is a curator, researcher, and educator who is operating at the critical intersections of contemporary art practice, feminist technoscience, emergent technologies, civic data infrastructures and networked culture. Drawing on her sustained interest in networked art practice and alternative curatorial strategies to inform her systems-based practice, Rachel has conceived multi-scale interdisciplinary public programming, alternative exhibition models, and innovative public



research platforms spanning a diversity of critical modes of engagement with technology. She is a lecturer in Digital Arts Computing and Creative Computing at Goldsmiths, University London, and PhD Researcher in collaboration with CSNI/LSBU and Whitechapel Gallery.

Michael Takeo Magruder

The National Archives, UK
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Virtual/Physical Art for a Post-Pandemic World

The Covid-19 pandemic has unquestionably triggered far-reaching shifts within wider society and catalysed the rapid integration of network technologies within numerous aspects of everyday life. For many, the prolonged absence of physical interactions and encounters has led to an increased reliance on social media and online platforms to remain connected during these strange and difficult times. Consequently, digital behaviours have progressively moved towards environments focused on engendering rich communal experiences. Collaborating with colleagues via Microsoft Teams, joining international conferences through Zoom, and gaming with friends on Discord is no longer exclusive or exceptional; such activities are now the new normal.

Despite the widespread uptake and general acceptance of these digital surrogates, the current crisis has not pushed society towards permanently adopting wholly virtual lifestyles and mindsets. Rather, the enforced stretches of physical distancing and separation have rekindled a yearning for the analogue world. The desire to consume real-world offerings from sectors ranging from hospitality and travel to arts and culture is readily apparent, and although innovative digital productions from the latter have provided much-needed lifelines during this period, they will surely not remain the de facto choices as humanity emerges from lockdown. However, it is equally inconceivable that such novel developments will just be set aside, and that society will revert to its pre-pandemic expectations of artistic enterprise now that so many individuals have enjoyed these creative applications of technology. As communities reopen, people will of course seek to reconnect with long-cherished physical spaces, collections, and performances that have been unavailable for so long, but they will do so in ways that are now highly informed by a wide range of first-hand virtual experiences. With this in mind, artists will undoubtedly strive to actively blend the unique qualities and potentials offered by the analogue and digital realms in ways that reflect the accelerating virtual/physical landscape of the coming post-pandemic world.

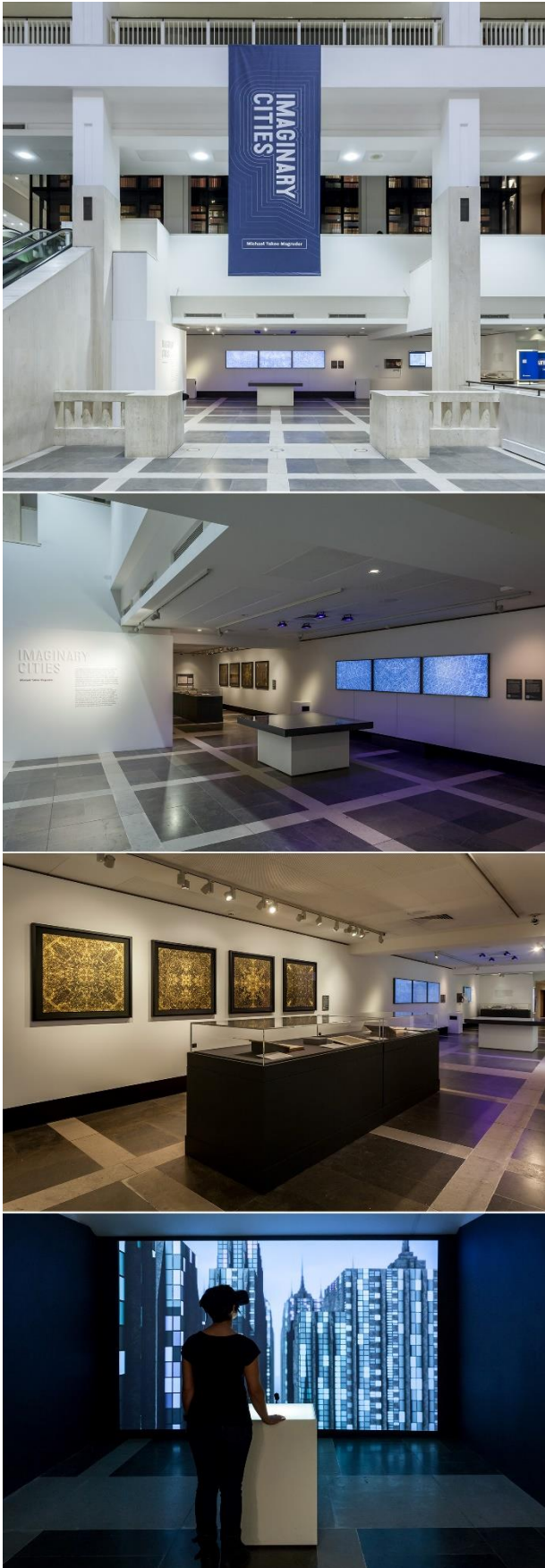


Figure 1: Michael Takeo Magruder, *Imaginary Cities*, British Library, London, UK, 2019. An exhibition blending virtual/physical artworks and collections. Images copyright and courtesy of the artist.

Biography



Michael Takeo Magruder is a visual artist whose work uses Information Age technologies and systems to examine our networked, media-rich world. His art has been shown in over 300 exhibitions in 35 countries and has received extensive support within the UK, USA, and EU. Michael's recent projects include *Imaginary Cities* (Magruder 2019), a solo exhibition creatively exploring digital maps drawn from the British Library's One Million Images from Scanned Books collection on Flickr Commons (see Figure 1). He is the first-ever artist-in-residence at The National Archives, UK, where he is reflecting upon the institution's ongoing digital transformation and what constitutes an archive in the 21st century. At present, Michael is virtual artist-in-residence at the Henry Luce III Center for the Arts and Religion (<http://www.luceartsandreligion.org>) in Washington, DC, where he is investigating social and ethical issues surrounding the current Covid-19 crisis.

Emanuele Marconi

Musée des Instruments à Vent, France

A Silent Museum towards a Digital Resurrection

The lack of sound does not belong to a museum, especially one with musical instruments (see Figure 2). Voices, noises, music, are all part of the aural landscape with which we are familiar when walking through the entrance. Covid-19 (ICOM 2020; UNESCO 2020) has silenced most of these, and new sounds have replaced the old familiar ones, symbolising the transition from inertly suffering the consequences of the pandemic to a resilient reaction.

The silence caused by absent public and empty galleries has slowly been replaced by the noise of High Definition (HD) scans, digital cameras, and strobes, in a collective effort to digitise as much and as quickly as possible the collections, to exploit the imposed suspension of traditional museum life. To fight the state of uncertainty, we decided to launch the ambitious project to catalogue and digitise the entire collection, a project needed for years and always previously postponed for logistical and organisational reasons.

A partnership between *Google Arts & Culture* (<http://artsandculture.google.com>) and the Musée des Instruments à Vent (Woodwinds Museum) has allowed the museum to make accessible online new documents from the archives, create stories and presentations, translate them into English, and share them worldwide. When the museum reopens,

it will benefit from being georeferenced on the Google Arts & Culture app. The lack of public has allowed the museum to use the two galleries as working space. The staff, as well as an intern, have been working on cataloguing the objects with newly acquired database software and, in parallel, a website project has started, which will become the main access point to the collections, thanks to an integrated Online Public Access Catalogue (OPAC).



Figure 2: The silent gallery of the Woodwinds Museum, La Couture-Boussey, France.
© Musée des Instruments à Vent.

During this pandemic period, regular social media activity has allowed the digital public to keep in touch with the museum and discover some behind the scenes aspects of the museum. The collective effort has been possible thanks to traditional digital technology and the will of the staff in reimagining the museum. At the reopening, visitors will be able to download gallery guides and other material from the website or access extra contents on the online catalogue while visiting the museum, enriching their visiting experience.

The pandemic situation has accelerated a process that was already perceived as necessary for a long time. This includes making available the collections to the public worldwide, enabling the study of woodwinds instruments and preserving, promoting, and keeping alive the memory of all people who have worked in the region of La Couture-Boussey in northern France (<http://www.lacoutureboussey.fr>).

Biography

An organologist, conservator, and curator, Emanuele Marconi is Director of Le Musée des Instruments à Vent (Woodwinds Museum) of La Couture-Boussey, as well as webmaster and advisory board member for the CIMCIM (ICOM International Committee of Museums and Collections of Instruments and Music). He has worked in Italy, Switzerland, France, and the USA. His research interests include the history and philosophy of restoration, through the study of the written and sources, and investigating all aspects related to the understanding of the relationship between society, culture, technical evolution, and aesthetic perception, and analysing myths and symbolism related to musical instruments.

3. CONCLUSION

This paper records the position statements with respect to reality and virtuality in the arts, as affected by the Covid-19 pandemic (e.g., see Figure 3), for the three EVA London 2021 Symposium panellists, together with their backgrounds, from varied viewpoints: curatorial, artistic, and academic. It acts as a starting point for presentations during the panel session, aimed at promoting further discussion.

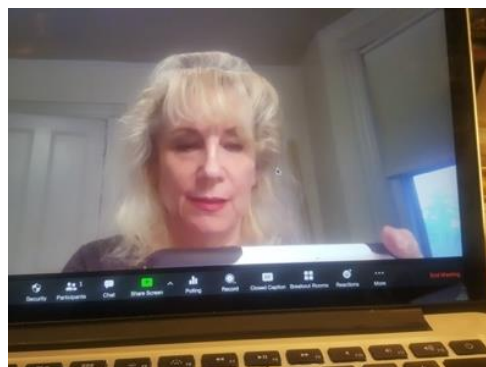


Figure 3: Tula Giannini, at home, looking through Zoom, 3 April 2020.

Online information concerning the EVA London 2020 Symposium is available under:

<http://www.eva-london.org/eva-london-2021/symposium/>

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