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Systems Interference: arguments, samples, new work

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This presentation paper, prepared in advance of the first Digital Art in Ireland symposium, in June 2022, problematises received wisdom about what can constitute digital art, and provides background to my set of approaches to the technological landscape. Specific attention is given to new work commissioned by the Arts Council of Ireland (O’Connell 2022d) for a touring exhibition to open in September. Rather than fixating on image manipulation, and the capabilities of latest digital tools or apps aimed at designers, my practice encompasses interaction with the ubiquitous technologies about us. For the most part anyway, the former results in what Joanna Zylinska terms mere ‘style-transfer’ (2020, 11, 50, 62). The positions adopted in her AI Art book fit with longstanding concerns of my own:

By the 1990s it had become unimpressive to point out that ‘art’ could be produced using computers too. The suggestion that hardware and software amounted to an additional tool in the box like a set of brushes or musical instrument revealed naivety on two fronts. Firstly, new media and the emerging network represented not just a change in degree but one in kind. Secondly, the fact that a self-critiquing and at times self-destructive ‘art system’ had evolved during the twentieth century was overlooked (O’Connell 2015, 1).

Not to be critical of all the activities which take place under the banner of digital art or technology art, but the significance of computing, with respect to creative endeavours, began to be foregrounded as far back as pioneering exhibition Cybernetic Serendipity (Reichardt 1968). Of course, there have been numerous technological developments since that time, not least the emergence of the internet and today’s astonishing computational network, but rather than politely consent to what are ultimately corporate imperatives, to utilise certain tools aimed at so-called creatives, isn’t the omnipresence of general technologies and the encapsulating network intriguing to engage with in its own right? Generative art (Tate 2016a), makerspace/hackerspace culture (Sebrechts 2022) perhaps, and Net Art (Tate 2016c) were more knowing means of harnessing computational power and adapting to the internet and the web as it emerged. Nevertheless, many digital artists not unlike photography artists before - speculatively reflecting qualms about their media and practices being recognised as legitimate in institutional contexts - appear prone to a fundamental conservatism.

Still, 3D animation (O’Connell 2005) using digitally scanned mug pieces, Mocksim.

The more challenging twentieth-century end-of-art tendencies have been alluded to above. It is over a century since Marcel Duchamp’s - or was it Baroness Elsa von Freytag Loringhoven’s (Hustvedt 2019)? - famous gesture (Howarth and Mundi 2015), and over
fifty since Douglas Huebler stated, ‘The world is full of objects, more or less interesting; I do not wish to add any more’ (Levin 2017). (In retrospect, Huebler’s words sound curiously attuned with today’s environmental concerns.) In his important 1980s series *Secret Languages*, Irish polymath Joseph Ardle McArdle too, had challenged quaint notions about what art could be (RTÉ Archives 2017). McArdle did so mainly from a pop-art perspective but with a philosophical dimension. In one episode, entitled *The Everywhere Gallery*, he held up an orange plastic bowl and stated,

> I am not attacking the good, the true and the beautiful but I am merely objecting to that false romanticism, which while it recognises quite justly, let’s say, the attractiveness of a Celtic brooch, fails to see that a plastic bowl like this has its own beauty. But imagine if you had never seen plastic in your life, and suddenly you came across something like this: bright, smooth, perfectly circular, for you that would be a real work of art (MacMahon 1982b)

It is not fashionable nowadays to extol the wonders of plastic, though arguably, the pop-art phenomenon could be interpreted as unconscious parody of developed-capitalist consumerism. McArdle’s point is relevant, nevertheless.

 Appropriation has been key to my own activities during the past two decades, employed as an attempt to unearth the poetic in everyday, often dysfunctional, technologies and systems. Strategies include misuse, misunderstanding, lampooning, tinkering and ethical, or what I call ‘mild’, hacking. Also, whilst much attention is given to the straightforwardly digital and algorithmic, it is interesting to note that computational flows are directly reflected in changes to older tangible networks, such as the road system. Technology then incorporates not only the much talked about software, code, algorithms, the digital, and pervasive hand-held devices or surveillance apparatuses, but the older and heavier, mundane machineries and, thirdly, the analogous bureaucratic codes and systems could be included. Regarding the latter point, much of the language associated with software development; terms such as application, code, instruction, method, procedure, program, and routine, along with script, existed before, and still have meaning beyond the realm of computing’ (O’Connell 2021a, 54–55). The various systems are linked to each other, but some are the subject of critical conversations, whilst others are ignored or taken for granted. Heavy goods vehicles move materials from distribution centres, through warehouses; courier companies of many sorts are in operation, shifting real packages in ways that are analogous to ‘packet switching’ (Naughton 2008) in communication networks.
precarious employment, to deliver what is already “fast food”, even faster (O’Connell 2021a, 54). And, in keeping with a key argument in this paper, the agreements between corporations and governmental bodies referred to above, including any standards and regulations that result, and without which the apps would be useless, can be considered a form of software too. One activity of mine, in fact, involved being ‘onboarded’ as a Deliveroo rider (O’Connell 2018). Another project used courier company parcel-tracking information, and specifically collections of ‘point of delivery’ signatures (Greslé 2014; O’Connell 2012). Supermarket self-checkout machines were used, but to buy nothing, and a short instructional video produced to demonstrate how (O’Connell 2016b; 2014). Money was sent flowing unnecessarily between bank accounts, daily, via standing order (O’Connell 2020b). A phone handset was set up as speed camera (O’Connell 2016c). And acoustic symphonies were created through simultaneous use of sat-nav software and maps-apps whilst driving in the opposite direction to the programmed destination (O’Connell 2017).

The Arts Council commissioned new work which would use similar ‘Systems Interference’ approaches, for a touring exhibition which would open in September 2022, as stated, at Uillinn: West Cork Arts Centre involving peripheral events and dissemination beyond the institutional spaces (O’Connell 2022c). Unsurprisingly, the relationship between landscape and technology has been a point of focus. During residencies and periods in West Cork since 2019 I have been looking at the increasing, and dramatic presence of wind turbines for example, as well as the giving over of space for the purposes of sport and leisure: golf for instance, and the old, arguably bottom-up-disruptive, Cork and Armagh, game of road bowling. One aspect of the new work arises from the thought experiment, or entrepreneurial idea if you like, that golf courses could be turned into, wind farms. The suggestion is that the changes would not only fit with environmental imperatives but would make the game more interesting. Already there are traditional obstacles such as ‘rough’ and bunkers; most courses will either have penalty areas, trees, bushes, or sometimes water, that present a challenge to the player. And let us not forget, that in many countries there exists the sport of crazy golf.

I have been posting this ‘TurboGolf’ proposal (in the form of reviews) on TripAdvisor sites for golf courses, golf links and resorts in Ireland (O’Connell 2020a, 14) and around the world, together with rudimentary mock-up images, to give an artist’s impression of what the new and improved game would look like. Sometimes these proposals are removed, and in other cases they stick (O’Connell 2021c; 2022a). Human gatekeepers are clearly involved, and algorithmic policing is a factor too. Google Translate is useful for converting the text into the local language. Trump International Golf Course in Dubai wrote back in Arabic thanking me for the visit and inviting me to come again soon. This, though I had been clear that the visit was a virtual and not real one, but perhaps it can be claimed, in keeping with the current preoccupation with the metaverse (O’Brien 2021), that looking at photos online and through maps counts as an actual trip nowadays. Another resort was discovered in the Amazon rainforest - or more correctly in what was once part of the Amazon rain forest - and the proposal was posted there successfully, in Portuguese.

Thinking about aesthetics, as artists are expected to do, links – excusing the pun - could be made with nineteenth century...
romantic-art concerns, and notions of the picturesque. Garden, park, and golf course design, exploits methods such as prospect-refuge-theory which emerged then, and design principles such as Savannah-preference are relevant, as they were in the very successful children’s TV series, *Teletubbies*. Golf might be *Teletubbies* for adults, but I would like to stress that in no way is the activity intended to mock those who play the sport. The elitist connotations of golf may still be a factor, but women and working-class people made claims on the game long ago, and the situation is different now. Who is to say that, wind turbines, one on every green, would not make golf a more stimulating experience (O’Connell 2021c)?

It would be reasonable to presume that education for designers, artists, or to use the contemporary parlance, ‘creative practitioners’, encompasses learning theories, rules and principles, about best practice, and means of achieving certain qualities via tried and tested craft-skills. And of course, this knowledge does form part of the training. Not only that but now it is possible to have access to a plethora of tools which allow, at least in principle, high production-value artefacts to be created on a low budget. Nevertheless, it would seem ridiculous if individual practitioners were expected to compete with professional studios and industrial-scale filmmaking or advertising organisations. Second, it would surely also be a mistake to presume that such standards, often simply conventions or related to the language of commerce and spectacle, be deemed compulsory. As Joseph Mc Ardle put it decades ago, ‘there is no standard culture or artistic language, there are only dialects’ (MacMahon 1982a; RTÉ Archives 2017). In certain cases, there will be a rationale to embracing given principles. University of Goldsmiths, London, based group Forensic Architecture are consciously ‘thorough and data-obsessed in the stereotypical manner of engineers or lawyers say. Their reappropriating a corporate look is ironic…

[but] imaginal thinking as a route to understanding clearly plays a huge role in the investigations too’ (O’Connell 2020c, 26; Weizman 2022). Hito Steyerl employs footage from different sources in her filmmaking and has written positively about the agency of poor images (2009). Sophie Calle, who in ground-breaking early work, was happy to represent the photographs supplied by a jobbing private detective (Calle and Auster 2007), is often categorised as an art-photographer. An artist like Glenn Ligon re-presents historical materials in thought-through unconventional arrangements (Ligon 2014; Camden Arts Centre 2014). So, what constitutes accomplishment, and the terms of ‘craft’, vary dramatically from artist to artist.

Poster produced as part of the #camponagolfcourse work. Mocksim, 2021.

Qualities in my own works, as they are presented, typically arise directly from the line of inquiry, or augmentations are carried out only to amplify the inherent characteristics of readymade items, or in connection with a relevant concept or degree of ‘institutional critique’(Tate 2016b). Presentation scales for ‘found’ assets or digital materials may be taken to unusual extremes for instance, as was the case with an exhibition entitled *Contra-Invention* comprised of the images traffic wardens capture during their policing activities (Sheerin 2011), and with one project mentioned, which resulted in a collection of
receipts accumulated as proof of buying nothing (O’Connell 2016a). In keeping with another habit, initially a practical decision on my part, to use day-to-day lived experience as a kind of studio (O’Connell 2022a), whilst camping in Skibbereen, Co. Cork during summer 2021, the idea of pitching the tent on a golf-course occurred to me. Wouldn’t this also, potentially, be an efficient use of such facilities? To begin, I edited a photograph of the actual tent in question, into an easily obtainable image of Old Head Golf Links in Kinsale, Co. Cork. As it happened the construction of this exclusive course had been a source of much controversy, because it prevented access to what had been seen as a ‘beauty spot’ and right-of-way (The Irish Times 2001; Buckley 2013), so it seemed like a reasonable target. Whilst I went to a certain amount of trouble to embed the tent photo into the found landscape picture, I was consciously not being too meticulous either. The objective was to be expedient in communicating the idea and experimenting with an approach. It was surprising, then, once versions of the image had been posted on Instagram and Twitter, how many believed I had actually camped on the course in question. In fact, the background photo of the course, was of the standard promotional variety aimed at tourists, and one of the first to appear when searching. At any rate, due to the history of protests and trespasses, Old Head Golf Links is heavily secured, so it would be highly unlikely someone could gain access for an overnight stay. The reactions are understandable of course as a reflection of how little attention is generally paid on social media, the ease with which people believe what they want to, and in what amuses. The montaging of tent with landscape had been done on a workstation, with 4K screen, but viewers using handhelds, would have been swiping, and observing for very brief periods. Some were sceptical, not least my own daughters, to whom I had sent postcard versions from Cork, but others just accepted the images at face value. Following this first action, further similar images were produced but I also looked into carrying out actual guerrilla camping with the intention of evading any questions as to whether this could actually have happened. In addition, I approached clubs about pitching a tent legitimately, for photography-shoot purposes only. Conversations were friendly but club managements never got back. Media channel Cork Beo made contact and conducted an interview during which, whilst not deceiving, it was possible to maintain an ambiguous stance. I suggested that for obvious reasons, it would be difficult to confirm whether the ‘wild camping’ had taken place or not. Another impression, consciously given, was that the photographs could have resulted from genuinely having camped out, but then afterwards been carefully manipulated so that they appeared Photoshopped (for self-protection). Other experiments included promoting these campsites on Google Maps, with interesting results:

Old Head of Kinsale Golf Course... asked Google to remove it so Google phoned me to confirm that 'you guys' have got a golf course there. 'Can you camp there on the golf-course?' he asked. I responded by saying that 'It depends on your conceptual framework'. A short peculiar conversation ensued... (O’Connell 2022b)
An aspect of the activity, not mentioned so far, has been to interrogate or hack the West Cork Arts Centre itself and immediate surrounds, almost as a series of warm-up exercises. After several attempts, for example, I successfully managed to remain within the sights of the security camera at the front of the building, as it cycled through its default automatic routine. The resulting piece, footage captured at the camera’s resolution, was given the title *Insecurity Camera Dance* (O’Connell 2021b). The intervention was carried out, aptly perhaps, on the same day Skibbereen rowers, including one of the famous O’Donovan Brothers, won their gold medals at the 2021 Olympics (Kelleher 2021).

These are elements of work in process, observations and interferences, some inherently ‘digital’, and also connected with technology in a broader sense.

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