

Loss, Meaning, and Melancholy in the Digital Age

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Abstract

As society has absorbed the cornucopia of digital technologies of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, artists have also absorbed these technologies and used them as tools for art production. The use of the technology as a tool can be said to be a first reaction to a new form. However, when the technology itself and the society that absorbs the technology go unexamined, it is problematic for the subsequent growth of the technology, the society, and the art produced in concert with those technologies. My artworks attempt to use digital technologies in alternative ways to explore the technologies themselves and their impact on our society.

Our digital society is often viewed through the lens of hyperreality, the theory that argues that symbolic meaning is excessively detached from reality. This is an obvious, but likewise obviously superficial analysis of the complexities of our contemporary digital lives. Much of the analysis of digital art focuses on the digital as a medium that is detached from reality. There is a certain materiality that is lacking in digital art, and the modes of consuming digital art are significantly different from non-digital modes of reception. My thesis is not to dispute this apparent disconnect between digital art and the “real” world, but to suggest that there are more profound human issues within digital culture. In my art, I draw on the theory of the permanent present, nostalgia, and melancholy. In the era of the permanent present, the experience of life is marked by a yearning for a rupture to break through the flatness of the present.

Hyperreality

In the last twenty years, media theorists have spent many hours debating how the influx of technology has changed how we engage and understand the world around us. One thing that is generally agreed upon is that there is increasing mediation of our daily lives. At the most basic level, mediation is a fundamental concept in language, culture, and communication. There is a separation between the individual and society; the connection, and generation of meaning, lies at the level of the exchange of symbols, or mediation. However, contemporary theorists such as Jean Baudrillard have suggested that the amount of mediation has become excessive, causing a disjunction between an idea and the layers the idea must travel through before it is registered in an individual. A simple example of an article written for the *New York Times* shows how mediation has increased over the years as technology has changed, causing a hyperreality.

A hundred years ago an article for the *New York Times* newspaper would have been typed on a typewriter and a copy given to the printers who would have laid out the type. Thereafter, the paper would be printed and distributed throughout the city. There are several levels of mediation. The actual event, to a reporter's impression, then from thought to type, type to print, and text to the reader. Today the same article would be subjected to the additional mediation of computer, database, web, and other syndication streams. Now again, the mode of readership varies from reader to reader. Not only is there a paper, but there are mobile phones, computers, tablets, print outs, and reproductions through other digital media forms such as Twitter and Facebook. This adds a number of steps and contexts for the information to flow through before the message is received. There are many things that have changed in this example, but I would like to point to two which I have engaged in my art. 1: A hundred years ago, everyone reading the article would see it in largely the same context: on the printed newspaper page, which would look like all of the other pages that the same article was printed on. Now the contexts in which people may read the article have multiplied to include the print version, the web version, the iPad version, the iPhone version, the RSS reader version, the email version, etc. The actual text might be the same, but the delivery contexts have diverged. Even the images on the various versions are shown in different manners. Furthermore, the fonts and layouts are no longer controlled by the publisher. 2: There is more information being produced, distributed, and absorbed than there was a century ago. The sheer scale of this increase has caused a dilution of reception as it becomes more difficult to distinguish individual messages from the deluge of information.

While the first point refers to the idea of mediation, the second stems from the idea of mediation, but is actually the concept of hyperreality. There is so much information being transmitted and received, and so many steps between the initiation and the reception, that the underlying signs have been destroyed causing a reality that is beyond reality. Jean Baudrillard theorized hyperreality as a key change driving post-modernism.

Hyperreality can be seen in a variety of ways but the basic description comes from Baudrillard and Eco. The seminal example they use is Disneyland as an imaginary place that actually reflects the hyperreality of the space surrounding it. Disneyland tries to create a reality for the imaginary, letting adults be children. In this aspect it points to the fact that there is childishness outside of this space and therefore the space surrounding Disneyland must be a place of hyperreality. In hyperreality the signifiers are floating. Instead of reality being constructed out of the real, in hyperreality the real has been replaced with the signifiers that point to the real, causing a loss of reality. Just as the presence of Disneyland means that our larger lives must be in a hyperreality, so too does the adoption of digital technologies. As our lives move inside the digital world the real breaks down and the world is only filled signs of the real.

My piece *Modern Methods of Book Composition* examines this increase in mediation and the ensuing hyperreality through the transformation of a book from physical to digital and what is

lost in the process. The piece consists of two books, one physical and one digital. The digital book is simply the digital Amazon Kindle version of the book *The Practice of Typography: Modern Methods of Book Composition* by Theodore De Vinne (1904). The physical book is a representation of what remains of the original book after the content was extracted using automated digital techniques. The original book by De Vinne is a signifier for all books, book publishing, book design, and the techniques for creating a book. Upon transfer to digital and entrance into the contemporary hyperreality, these signs breakdown. The Kindle with its deformed version of the original cannot be a signifier for the history of books. The physical version comes closer to referencing the larger space of books in that it still has the physical characteristics (context or shell) of a book, but it has lost the content that references the composition of a book. In this way the increase in mediation has caused a hyperreality for the book.

Permanent Present

Eric Hosbawm (1994) laid out the concept of ‘Permanent Present’ in the book *Age of Extremes*. In essence, Hosbawm described our current society as existing in a post-historical age where the overwhelming mediation in our lives has made us unable to feel the past or the future because they are constantly around us in the present moment. I see this also in the way in which the internet has flattened time. Take the Wikipedia articles for the French Revolution of 1789 and the Egyptian Revolution of 2011: both are about the same length, both have over 150 references in the bibliography, and both fit within the Wikipedia format. The structure of the digital world has flattened these two events and made them very similar in how they look, feel, and how we engage with them through the internet, but these two events occurred 200 years apart, and the French Revolution happened before the internet existed. The access to the past has become the same as the access to the present. An event can occur one day and the next be archived and consumed via the structure of the digital world. The past lives “now” with the same power and influence as the present.

In much the same way, our future has already been displayed to us and internalized. As Peter Lunenfeld (2005) suggests in *User*, the twentieth century constructed images of the future through film, comics, and other types of popular culture in the form of science fiction. This future was constructed out of techno-mechanical ideals that now dictate how we envision the future. These possible futures have become archived in the digital world and have become complicit in the present. This creates a future that is impossible to escape. Our futures can only be envisioned in response to the futures that were previously imagined. Essentially the future has already happened and is now part of our past, leaving us in a permanent present. Both the past

and future have been archived in the digital world and now we stand in the present moment that is automatically being absorbed into the system.

Most real-time digital artwork is complicit in the permanent present. For example, Ben Rubin and Mark Hansens' piece *Listening Post* shows, in real time, text fragments from chatrooms, forums, and public bulletin boards on the internet in a physical installation of hundreds of small screens. This piece is in the present, and the past and futures are referenced, but only as more of the same displayed present. The present expands infinitely in both directions.

In a similar sense, reading news on an iPhone or Android phone is the epitome of permanent present. When the *New York Times*, *AP*, or any news syndication application is run on the phone, current news is displayed. There might be various categories of what the current news is from sports, to national news, to cultural news, but in all circumstances the news of yesterday is gone and one is presented only with the news in the present. There is no way to connect to the archive of past news under these circumstances. The archive is hidden and inaccessible from view. Yesterday's news and the news from a week ago have been moved into the digital archive and placed at the same level as everything else in the archive. An article from yesterday exists in the digital archive in the same spot as an article from 100 years ago. This diverges from the physical way a newspaper "archive" works. When reading today's newspaper, yesterday's and perhaps the last week of newspapers exist around you (assuming yesterday's newspaper is not thrown out immediately after reading). Furthermore, the physical way in which a library archives newspapers is a highly temporal organization system, where the most recent papers are easily accessible and the last few months of papers are still on the shelves and reachable. In the older, physical model of news, the archiving resembles human memory, with more recent information being more accessible. On the other hand, the new form of digital archiving diverges from the traditional memory model and is based on the idea that all information is held at the same level of accessibility. This is the permanent present.

My recent works can be seen in direct relation to the permanent present. Each piece plays with the flattening of the memory and holds within the object's past, imagined future, and present moment. The piece *Modern Methods of Book Composition* contains within it the archived history of the book as a printed medium for holding information in the physical volume, the envisioned future of the book in the Kindle version, and the present moment in the juxtaposition and the tension between the two objects. All three historical visions of the book sit side by side, informing one another. Just as the digital news archive has flattened the relation of past, future, and present, this piece forcefully integrates all three together and the viewer cannot escape any of them. The past, present, and possible futures of the book are engaged simultaneously: the permanent present.

The piece *Botanical Loss* engages the permanent present in a different way, namely through subtractive methods. *Botanical Loss* is a series of prints derived from the 1799 book *Temple of*

Flora, by Robert Thornton. Each botanical print shows what was lost as the original image was scanned in and converted for the Missouri Botanical Garden's online archive. Very little quality was lost in the transfer but a subtle color shift between the two images is visible, making the new very dark. This work engages the permanent present through subtractive methods, reducing the past, present, and future to one image that references all three. The past is seen in the original floral image, the idealized future in the digital reproduction of a 200 year old image, and the present in the loss between the two.

In a similar way, *Reimagining Will Bill* encapsulates the three points in time together, but through additive methods rather than subtractive. The permanent present is expanded to express various aspects of the piece through multiple parts. This piece is derived from an 1867 *Harper's Monthly* article by George Ward Nichols about Wild Bill Hickok. It describes Wild Bill's killing of Dave Tutt in the first documented quick-draw style duel. This article was digitized along with *Harper's* archive. However during this process the sixth page of the article was not scanned and is lost from *Harper's* digital archive. In *Reimagining Wild Bill* fifteen new pages were written by various authors in various styles and each is presented within the context of a complete thirteen page printed article. The fifteen page large format print was displayed during the installation. Taken together, the gesture of having fifteen new pages written for a missing interpretation of a past event is a direct engagement with the permanent present. Since it's description in the 1867 *Harper's* article, Wild Bill's duel has been ingrained in the present and in society's understanding of the wild west. How it has been embedded in the mythology of the west has changed over time. However, in our current culture it is attached to every single representation and reference to the wild west, from Levi's jeans and video games such as *Red Dead Revolver*. The root of our understanding of the west stems from this duel. Where my work diverges from it is through the re-injection of the present and future of the duel back into the initial description of it. The past, present and future of the wild west condense within the artwork, adding to the present understanding of the article, man, duel, and myth.

Individually, each of the new pages plays with time in a different manner. A few of the new pages attempt to reflect on Wild Bill as a character using the similar style to the original article, while one even uses historical facts from the courthouse in Springfield, MO to clarify some of the fictitious points in the original. These reimaginings all play directly with the past. Two of the articles push Wild Bill into a scifi futuristic past, which incorporates the idealized future of the past. Finally, a number of new pages use contemporary popular culture themes to reflect on the origins of the culture. This is the present. Taken altogether, the new articles place Wild Bill in the permanent present, referencing all periods at the same time.

Melancholy

Having established theoretical frameworks with which to engage my art, in this last section I intend to be more speculative in placing my art in the context of the emotional aspects of life in the digital era. My artworks have engaged questions often associated with post-modernity, such as dehistoricization, disfiguring, disconnection, and simulation. These are all key issues in the digital era and key issues for my art. To see these processes as simply a negation of false simulations, and distancing from reality, is too simplistic. As I have laid out here, the permanent present moves beyond the idea of hyperreality in trying to explain our current digital age. The point that both hyperreality and the permanent present neglect is the emotional response to the digital age. The hyperreality and the permanent present of the digital age create a kind of warm, and strangely connected solitude in the onslaught of information and the flattening of history. It is in this ambiguous solitude that the space for emotional response fits, namely melancholy.

My work attempts to engage with the complex emotional response to life in the digital era. At once, the digital age is information rich and connected, and through the very same apparatus, discontinuous and disconnecting. Psychoanalytic theory can provide some insight into culturally contradictory responses from the loss that is generated by digital reproduction. In *Mourning and Melancholia*, Freud (1917) examined the melancholic response to loss. The key distinction between melancholy and mourning, is that object is lost in the former. Additionally, the experience of melancholy, is that of ambivalence between hate and love for the lost object. This suggests that there could be a rich way to understand how my art engages with the emotional response to loss generated by the switch to digital.

Melancholy is a unique emotion or mood in that it is two-faced. It is not simply sadness or depression where there is no end in sight. On the other hand it is not the sublime. Melancholy has sadness in loss, but is in concert with happiness through the recollection or contemplation of a pleasurable memory or fantasy. As well, the pleasure of the wandering mind is undermined by the isolation and the knowledge that the recollection or contemplation is in the mind, not in reality. Sigmund Freud, and more recently Julia Kristeva, have argued that one aspect of melancholy, or the melancholic response, is in excessive narcissistic contemplation of the lost object. Indeed, the concept of Narcissus is a perfect metaphor for the digital age of hyperreality, the reflection in the pool overtakes reality. As Kristeva notes, for the melancholic, the process of signification threatens to overcome consciousness (Kristeva 1987: 11).

In her article “On the Melancholic Imaginary” Kristava examines melancholic works, including Fyodor Dostoevsky’s *The Devils*. She finds one of the key aspects of melancholy in the writing of Dostoevsky: “Suffering here seems to be an ‘in excess’, a force, a sensual pleasure.” Don DeLillo’s more contemporary novel *White Noise* is said to be centered around the ideas of

consumerism, death, and the way the two fold back upon one another. I would argue that these ideas could be seen as a melancholic response to the permanent present. In the 1980s with the rise of the diagnosis of depression and its prescribed solutions, society was consumed with the idea of death, not necessarily death as the act of dying or what it was to be dead, but the signs associated with death. However, *White Noise* is not so much about depression, but an examination of loss that encapsulates an infatuation with suffering. The main character himself seems to be in a desperate quest for meaning. A Professor of “Hitler Studies,” he obsesses excessively over minute details of a time when there used to be a textured world history.

In *White Noise*, the characters yearn for dramatic events, but end up only with “The Airborn Toxic Event,” a strange, invisible, and harmful gas that escapes and triggers an evacuation. The characters are left only with the secondary experience of “event.” That is, they sit on the expressway, in clogged traffic, and are told an event is happening. This can be read as a metaphor for events in the digital era. Unseen, unheard, and unexperienced. As the millennium approached, our techno-saturated, melancholic digital culture yearned, much like the characters in *White Noise*, for something to happen. As Freud notes, there is a tension between love and hate, desire and loathing. The largest “event” of the digital era was Y2K. Lunenfeld writes that Y2K was a fear of the technical breakdown of the digital age and the possible salvation for atheists. I agree with these points and suggest one: by the end of the twentieth century, our digital society had removed religious faith from its belief system, its absence has been filled with melancholy. People knew of the impending disaster of Y2K and harbored a secret desire for something to happen. Therefore, Y2K can be seen as the first mass melancholic yearning for a disaster to break the permanent present. Society was focused on the possibility that an event would be large enough to break through the collapse of history and create a new orientation point. The disaster did come, but its form was not Y2K, but 9/11.

The events and responses that occurred on September 11th, 2001 were so powerful that they formed a new symbol around which to structure the national identity of America. An ideology was formed and a breakdown of the permanent present occurred, if only for a short period of time. This is in contrast to the first Gulf War (2003) which became a disconnected entity in the national identity of America. When one compares the two events across Wikipedia and digital archives, they are very similar. However when one looks at them as influencing America and the ideology of America, the attack on the World Trade Center (9/11) was much more profound. An emotional response and an ideology was created around the event. ‘Homeland Security’, ‘Insurgents’, ‘Terror’, became words that signified the emotional response of a nation. In this case the permanent present was broken down, if only for a short time. It is the longing for these types of events that we seek in our digital age. This was omitted by Hosbawm and Lunenfeld, emotional yearnings for a break that can bring people outside of the permanent present. The melancholic yearning for disaster.

My work is produced in the context of the permanent present, but it offers the concept of a rupture between physical archives and digital archives as a possible event horizon that can destroy the flattening of the past and the future. This is the point of melancholic reflection that my work instills in the viewer. Just as the imagination of Y2K was focused on the possible collapse of the digital society, my work focuses on the tangible destruction in the transition of our archives to digital, and the guilty pleasure that we derive from this idea of destruction. In the digital era, we can produce and reproduce endlessly, sitting by the side of the proverbial pool, much like Narcissus in Greek mythology. The endless reproductions are seductive, endlessly pulling us in. There is enjoyment in abandoning the self for these endless reproductions. In much the same way, digital archives are a type of abandonment of reality. There is an assumption that digital material can be effectively and endlessly reproduced, yet it can't. Take for example the common .jpg file, which is the most commonly used image file. Every time an image is opened and saved, information is lost in the process and degradation occurs. The transition of physical objects into a digital archive is a destructive process, the endless contemplation and degradation.

In the work *Modern Methods of Book Composition*, the book is the lost object upon which the love and contemplation is focused. The physical shell of the book is presented but this only references the original as a faint memory of what a real book is. In the same way the digital version on the Kindle is a faint memory of what the future of the book was supposed to be. The two together create a space for contemplation around the past and future of the book. In their juxtaposition, though, is the melancholy for the rupture or trauma that will push the book in one direction or the other and remove it from the permanent present. My piece brings in this idea of rupture, but can not actively destroy the past or the future. The viewer sits in contemplation of the idea of the book, lost in the future, past and present of it. Just as Narcissus stared at the pool, the viewer is absorbed in and lost with the thought of the fragmentation of the book. Upon first encounter with the piece, it appears to be information rich and connected, but quickly it is seen to be an incomplete object. It is disjointed, unable to replicate the original book.

In the way that Y2K was a longing for the break in the digital world, *Modern Methods of Book Composition* directs the contemplation towards destruction. Only through the destruction of the digital will the real book return, yet this is an impossibility. Just as Y2K failed to produce a real trauma, the breakdown of the digital archive will not rupture the permanent present. Could I be so bold as to say that a disaster to a real library would make our society remember why we have physical archives? Would a book burning reaffirm what a book is and what its place has been in our society, or is it already too late, the book having been forever fragmented?

Botanical Loss plays with melancholy through the seduction and faintness of the image. The images are dark and reference the memory of an old floral print, but the actual details are too dark and too faint to be able to fully recall them. This causes a reflection point at the loss of the object itself, namely the original print. The sweetness of the image is soured by the viewer's

inability to clearly see the image in the darkness. Instead, the viewer becomes enthralled in the beauty of the death in the reproduction, the destroyed aura. The viewer wants the original or the multiplicity of the reproduction, but is instead left to contemplate the failure of the reproduction. The desire for the original under these circumstances is fictitious. For what is the original, but a reproduction from 200 years ago. Is this how time treats reproductions by making them unique? I would argue that this is true of the physical reproductions of the past but not the case for contemporary digital reproductions which lack physicality and aging because they are locked in the digital framework. Thus, the viewer yearns for the physical “real” aura of the object because of the presentation of the loss.

The piece *Reimagining Wild Bill* uses the reverse strategy. The aura is multiplied within the piece, making it unclear where the original is situated. These new pages create an overwhelming number of signs, but because the original page is lost, the new pages are disconnected signs. This is exactly how the cacophony of the digital world works, too many disconnected signs. In the face of this, the viewer becomes lost, unable to find the original, and the melancholic reflection sets in. The viewer tries to locate the object, but it is lost. Out of the three, this piece comes closest to rupturing the permanent present and fulfilling the melancholic longing for a disaster. Through the act of creation from loss and the multiplicity of the pages created, the piece breaks through the permanent present and creates new forms that are not directly situated in the past or envisioned future.

Taken together my works evoke a melancholic yearning for a rupture in digital archivization. *Modern Methods of Book Composition* and *Botanical Loss* both set up the yearning, while *Reimagining Wild Bill* actually begins to rupture the permanent present. Just as Y2K failed to break the flatness of time, *Modern Methods of Book Composition* and *Botanical Loss* are not powerful enough in their forms to rupture the space. Only through multiplicity is *Reimagining Wild Bill* able to build upon the loss and break Narcissus away from the pool.

Conclusion

I have outlined a post-modern theoretical framework through which to view the digital world generally and my work specifically in hyperreality. Hyperreality is limited in that it is an obviously superficial analysis of the complexities of our contemporary digital lives. The concept of the permanent present as a richer way in which to understand our digital society through the collapse of history and the future upon the present. This theoretical view brings us one step closer to having a fuller picture. Yet, in the end both hyperreality and the permanent present fail in their lack of human emotional response to the digital. The idea of melancholy, and specifically the melancholic yearning for disaster, is proposed as a framework to understand our digital

culture and how individuals live within and respond to the digital world. I have discussed my artwork in response to each of these frameworks and shown that my work is engaged in unexplored territories in the digital space. I hope to see more artists approach digital in an inquisitive way, exploring why, how, and what are the problems associated with the development and unquestioning acceptance of digital technologies.

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