

Everywhere - Right Now by Max Eternity

Must incorporating the new be synonymous with a disconnect to our past?

Emerging Technology, Art and Anthropology

Scholarship has changed. Indeed, with the new technologies on demand the whole world is changed . . . forever. The Internet has wrought creative interconnectivity to its zenith, allowing one to experience everything—everywhere—right now. Writing a recent commentary for Art Digital Magazine (AD MAG) Scott Ligon , Coordinator for the Digital Foundation Curriculum at the Cleveland Institute of Art, said, "Fully realizing the enabling potential of digital technology requires fluidity of thinking. It requires the ability to consider the potential relationships between elements rather than subdivide them into increasingly arbitrary categories."

Ligon is the author of Digital Art Revolution . He’s also an artist, scholar and filmmaker, representing “Generation Now” and its splintered, yet holistic approach to learning— disseminating information on a variety of platforms, simultaneously—synergistically.

Scott Ligon speaking about Digital Art Revolution

Yet, for however radical this new scholarly vision that Ligon espouses is, he and many others hold still a core value of traditional principles to heart. This Ligon articulates in the final paragraph of his Digital Art: Medium or Metaphor AD MAG article, saying: "Interestingly, in spite of all this change, there are no new visual elements. We continue to work with line, shape, color, etc. Digital technology simply provides new and unprecedented ways to combine and synthesize these elements into something unique and personal."

Understanding this, what happens when an individual, institution or community gets left out, failing to grasp the urgency of the dramatic, contemporary, anthropological shift humanity is now undergoing as a direct consequence of the digital revolution? And must incorporating the new be synonymous with a disconnect to our past; losing touch with cultural heritage and/or centuries-old traditions—losing sight of the earned reverence and respect of our elders?

Depending on who is being asked, a response to those questions might bring a variety of conflicting responses. However, one thing that seems universally understood is that access to opportunity equals empowerment, achievement and ultimately wealth. Which is to say that whether one is seeking to read a book, plan an exhibition, research an archaeological site or correspond socially with academic colleagues, those without continuous access to broadband at work and at home, are considerably less likely to enjoy the benefits of their labors, because they are not able to stay in the loop in real time.

Cutting-edge thinkers, a decade ago, coined a term for this. It’s called the digital divide. And here’s what venerated elder Nelson Mandela had to say on the subject a few years ago: "In the twenty-first century, the capacity to communicate will almost certainly be a key human right. Eliminating the distinction between the information-rich and information-poor is also critical to eliminating economic and other inequalities between North and South, and to improve the life of all humanity."

This is a new paradigm shift for quality of life concerns, informing of a broad spectrum of wealth potentialities, whether collective or individual. And though there are no pie-in-the-sky, ready made solutions, there are those making headway through entrepreneurship, rising up to the challenge of demonstrating new symbiotic relationships between the old and the new, like Stephen Burns , an African-American artist and author who teaches at the University of California in San Diego. When South Africa abolished its political apartheid, Burns was one of an international group of artists invited to participate in the Johannesburg Biennial. He created a digital print called “African Fury” for the show.

An abstract work of art with splatterings of color bursting through a blue-black background, the piece seems both wild and highly-disciplined. In the work, Burns captures the anguish of a people, their trials and tribulations—their eventual liberation. The juxtaposition of shape and color, creates tension and angst, while the continual coolness of the black surround stabilizes divergent elements with calmness, wisdom and relaxation. At a different point in history, this print would likely have been rendered as a color carbon print or lithograph. However, for Burns, logic stood to reason that a radical revolution in contemporary, anthropological survey of that galvanizing moment in world history, the fall of Apartheid, dictated a need for a visual art medium that was equally as radical, fresh and powerful.

Stephen Burns African Fury

Burns's painting on a virtual pallet, then rendering a physical, digital print made the perfect parallel, thus cementing in history a scholarly time capsule of art, technology and anthropology.

Jean Chiang, a New York artist of Asian decent, who spends half her time in her Miami studio, said to me in a recent late-night conversation:

"Putting a humanistic approach to it is important, because all that technology by itself, it can be so impersonal I find. What I see is a lot of technology, with anthropology, being used to make statements in shows. Like the Brooklyn Museums's Infinite Islands exhibition from 2007-08. It was the first major Caribbean show in a major museum, curated by a South African."

Chiang, a trained anthropologist with an interest in archaeology, claims as much Afro-Caribbean heritage as she does Chinese. And it's her belief that "there's no way to escape the link between art and anthropology—it has to come through."

Yet in the age of now, technology determines how it comes through—who it reaches and when—determining what gains attention and thus becomes truth, versus what gets forgotten, dies and rots away.

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