

Kissing at the Intersection

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Mentored by Tristen Harwood

1 Matthew Shen Goodman
'Seven on Seven,' *frieze*,
May 24, 2016
2 See [acca.melbourne/program/
acca-open](https://acca.melbourne/program/acca-open).

IMAGE 01
Mocking SpongeBob
meme, screenshot
taken from SpongeBob
SquarePants S9 E182a
titled "Little Yellow
Book."

IMAGE 02
Screenshot of Twitter
user @decafdana aka
Dana Kopel's "i know
a spot" meme.

IMAGE 03
what if we kissed at
the intersection of art
and technology meme by
Jillian Zhong aka ada.
wrong, sold as an NFT
to Foundation user @
aito March 17, 2021.

It is on screen that a society that has lost its gestures attempts to reclaim and record what it has lost, Giorgio Agamben proselytises in 'Notes on Gesture' (1992). Since March, many of us have been converted to the belief that social life has shifted online, with the federal and state government's mandated lockdown accelerating these already accelerated processes. The hasty decision by major art institutions to make their collections available online through virtual tours and social media platforms, in response to COVID-19 restrictions, suggests that little time was spent reflecting deeply on what gestures might be lost in this turn to the virtual, and how best to preserve such a loss. These clumsy responses fail to fully comprehend the current moment, and they miss an opportunity to support an already-existing digital art community.

Perhaps what hasn't been accounted for is the reverse of what Agamben theorised in 1992. We unwittingly accept that society is different online than it is offline, yet we don't attempt to reclaim or record online gestures in real life with the same intensity. This reluctance to hold space needed to understand and therefore genuinely support digital practices and artists comes from an institutional

fear of not being the first to respond to an issue, event or cultural phenomena. This neglect has become startlingly evident through the way in which the art world has struggled to meet the need for critical and timely digital work during the COVID-19 pandemic, inspiring memes that gesticulate the cringe that proffering *the InTeRsEcTiOn*

Of ArT aNd TeChNoLoGy (cue SpongeBob SquarePants' mocking meme) in 2020 produces.

In June, Twitter user @decafdana tweeted: "curators are like 'I know a spot' and then take you to the intersection of art and technology." Defined by internet meme database KnowYourMeme, 'I Know A Spot' is a phrasal template that "mocks people who claim to know a special place for a date or romantic activity, but the place turns out to be disappointing." During the pandemic, art institutions have increasingly

promised some mythic treasure at the 'intersection of art and technology' but, as the meme holds, what turns out to be at this intersection is merely disappointment. Describing Rhizome's 'Seven on Seven' conference as having a "whiff of desperation," critic Matthew Shen Goodman crucified the event in 2016. I imagine Goodman rolling his eyes as he wrote: "everywhere is the intersection of art and technology now, and there may be nothing to be found at that junction besides ourselves."¹

However trite this Lovecraftian 'the window is in fact a mirror' sentiment might be, Goodman makes an important point. These social media responses to the term 'at the intersection of art and technology' express frustration with a half-baked unknown but, more importantly, they imply a search for connection. Like the "What If We Kicked" meme, kissing at this intersection signifies the search for an unparalleled sensorial intensity. It is attached to the notion of relational exchange, one in which there is a shared desire for an ideal that does not exist. At the same time, the institutional flogging of this intersection – ramped up by the need for a digital crutch during the pandemic – reveals their fear of not capturing this fleeting moment, as evidenced in the feverish attempt at materialising something, be it anything.

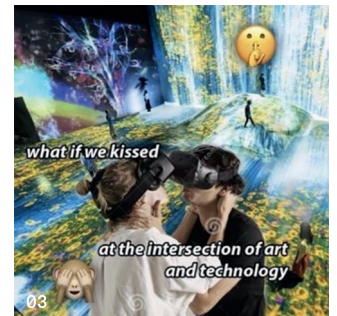
The vagary of the intersection has developed a lexicon (both verbal and visual) that is being used by institutions to catfish audiences and artists into believing that they are delivering new work and providing genuine support. This is why the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art's *ACCA Open* sought to commission "contemporary art projects in the digital realm," rather than simply digital art projects, and why this mission was to (drawing ironically upon Apple Mac's 1997 marketing platitude "think differently") "Do Art Differently," as if to further cement the idea that digital art is not art but something other, a relationship to define on their terms.² Even the



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National Gallery of Victoria (NGV) director Tony Ellwood described the institution's response to the pandemic as an attempt "to think differently" – which involved pushing the hashtag #NGVEveryDay in order to get their existing collection onto social media.

One thing we know for certain is that panic drives the decisions of the art institution for, as Ellwood explained, "being quick to respond has been very important." Rushed by a need to respond first to the conditions of the pandemic, the NGV's April announcement of virtual tours delivered an incredibly dry and exclusionary project. Considerations of accessibility did not include those with visual or aural impairments (bar a handful of audio descriptions for certain works), or people who do not own a computer or have access to the internet. It also failed to consider critically what the experience of visiting a gallery space or encountering an artwork feels like beyond a virtual-literal. It is the intersection of art and technology par excellence, insofar as 'here is the art and there is the technology.' And in the spirit of the early conversations around virtual reality's promise of empathy, it showed a lack of preparation or studied attempt to catch up with or simply support existing digital art practices.

American artist Brad Troemel's @bradtroemel Instagram content, in a Hal Foster turn of phrase, situates the 'meme-lord as critic,' and it's hot-headed, deeply cynical and confessional delivery of critique speaks to the toxic social media and relational bubble I mentioned earlier. It breaks down, according to Hito Steyerl's argument for a sustainable art world, any progressive prospect for digital technology by transforming art criticism into "call-out clickbait."³ This nihilistic narcissism, weirdly coupled with a desire for social conformity, has come to stand in for considered critique, and the immediacy and virality of social media leaves no time or space for criticism to emerge.

Though I believe Troemel's Internet-savvy institutional critique does to a certain extent represent a progressive discussion around contemporary vernaculars, it is true that much of the art world, now "under constant waves of affect and outrage manipulated by monopolist platforms," has entered into a phase in which such outrage replaces organisation.⁴ Mark Fisher discussed this in 2013, likening the rise of online cancel culture to a Vampire Castle, its exit requiring organisation around economic class rather than identity.⁵ This structure is "driven by the priest's desire to excommunicate and condemn, an academic-pendant's desire to be the first to be seen to spot a mistake, and a hipster's desire to be one of the in-crowd."⁶

Amid the rise of the global Black Lives Matter movement, the NGV's decision to honour four Victorian police officers who died while on duty in April 2020 by colouring their building blue and flagging their entrance with the Victorian Police logo was mind boggling. Weighing-in on the offensiveness of its display coinciding with the *Keith Haring / Jean-Michel Basquiat: Crossing Lines* exhibition, considering those artists' well-known stance against police brutality (here I'm thinking of Basquiat's *Defacement* (1983) and Haring's *Michael Stewart - USA for Africa* (1985), both responses to the death of young, Black artist Michael Stewart at the hands of New York City transit officers), members of the public were later silenced by the NGV after they turned off the comments section of the memorial's

Instagram post. As a moniker for Vampire Castle, the NGV did cross a line and at this intersection revealed an uncomfortable attempt to capture two ideologically opposed markets – members of the art community who support police, and those who don't.

Though plenty of digital art exists, Balenciaga's Fall 2021 collection launching as a "futuristic" video game suggests that the intersection should focus less on what classifies a project as digital art, and more on what separates it from product marketing. Video artist Tiyan Baker's interactive video game, titled *A Short Term Shock To The System* (2020), as part of *Panic Buy*, an online exhibition supported by Tasmanian ARI Sawtooth, did this by giving users a virtual space to relive and reflect upon the fears of 2020. Navigating a bare-boned grocery store, we collect items that reveal documents of the pandemic – the "zero tolerance of aggressive behaviour" sign at Woolworths or Scott Morrison's comment that "panic is un-Australian." In the spirit of meme criticism, Baker mocked Australian's panic buying behaviour at the beginning of the pandemic to critique its racist undertones (or rather overtones), and connect their behaviour to theories of product consumption.

As one of many attempts by artists to explore how intimacy can be achieved without human interaction during the pandemic, multi-disciplinary artist Zara Sully's *Angel Exchange* (2020), as part of Bus Projects' online platform Island Island, asked artists to engage in a swap via post, exchanging a resin-cast angel from Sully for an artwork that would then be presented online. The project, in a bid to foster relational intimacy, was an Agamben effort doubly reversed. *Angel Exchange* captured communal gesture offline and translated it back online, with nothing lost at the intersection of art and technology. Except, finally, the art gallery's smoke and mirror marketing around what made this art *but different* and therefore what makes the intersection (which is simply the institution itself) interesting in the first place.

The pandemic has revealed (or rather reminded us) that despite the accelerated bleeding of the digital into every aspect of contemporary social life, major art institutions wantonly struggle to understand digital art because to do so would be to support a future in which the value of their existing collection is challenged. This threat is already present, with meme-culture serving as gestural conduit for our disappointment in the lack of true connection at the intersection, as well as our cringe at their uncomfortably turgid attempt to make fetch happen. If we did kiss at the intersection of art and technology, would it be in the comments section of the NGV's Instagram? Only to be deleted several months later? The institution needs to start responding to Australian audience's desire for digital engagement by genuinely supporting digital art and artists through critical reflection, increased funding and a willingness to accept criticism.

3 Despina Zefkili
'Hito Steyerl: How To Build a Sustainable Art World,' *Ocula Magazine*, October 18, 2019

4 Ibid.

5 Mark Fisher
'Exiting the Vampire Castle,' November 24, 2013

6 Ibid.