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2010-07-26T11:38:38Z
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Research Report

The Digital Self-Portrait: A Malleable Image and a Post-Medium.

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Master of Arts in Fine Arts by Coursework and Research Report
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Johannesburg, 2010

Abstract

This study investigates the impact of digital malleability on the self-portrait, where the digital self-portrait as an image is layered and ambiguous, and when, remediated and exhibited, it becomes a new subject and a post-medium. This report forms the discussion of a research project, which is part of an ongoing visual art practice, where a series of exhibitions of self-portrait images were installed to construct notions of complex and layered digital image expressions of the self.

The first chapter is an introduction to this study and will briefly describe my own work to situate it within the postmodern condition. This broad account of a postmodern style will be contextualized within South Africa, where notions of flux, dislocation, complexity, vulnerability, ambiguity, the layered and the unfinished are related to expressions and identities in the self-portraits of this project. David Harvey, Fredric Jameson and Rosalind Krauss's notions of the post-medium will be noted, so as to situate my work post 1980. Reference to a new syntax in sculpture will be made, where I will unpack Krauss's account of the post-medium with regard to my own practices and self-portraits.

The second chapter will discuss the malleable digital image, within an account of digital culture, convergence and remediation. The digital self-portrait, it is argued, becomes a new subject with both a painterly interiority and a photographic exteriority. When the digital self-portrait is exhibited, as an installation, it inhabits a post-medium condition.

The third chapter consists of a discussion of my own practice as a major part of this research, and describes the process of making, which includes selection, remediation and exhibition installation, where notions of the complex, unfinished, layered, and ambiguous, affect the image and identity in the self-portraits. Three exhibitions are discussed, where the self-portrait project has been presented, and where the site or installation is explored as a contribution to the post-medium condition.

Aim

The aim of this research report is to explore aspects of practice in a digital self-portrait project. The creative works in this project are supported with a discussion of digital culture and the image, particularly the ways in which the digital has affected the contemporary self-portrait and how, as a convergent and malleable post-medium, it has become layered and ambiguous. The creative works, which are processed digitally, are printed and exhibited in specific sites in the public domain. The processes employed in this post-medium practice are varied, and broad. They respond across disciplines and discourses, intuitively and consciously, resulting in configurations of image that are progressions in a critical art practice.

This research, it is hoped, will establish a better understanding of the contemporary in critical art and digital culture, and to further develop a creative practice that is informed by notions of a post-medium condition, where the digital image as a convergent and malleable new medium is complex, layered and ambiguous, and where, as a self-portrait image, it progresses and constructs relative notions of identity.

The literature reviewed is introduced through citations from key texts, which claim broadly that the digital age affects and influences current visual art practice. The theories read for this study have informed the direction the practice has taken and the practice in turn has affected the direction of the texts read. This creative practice is thematically linked to the theoretical investigation, employing a system of praxis.

In the creative work, the camera-phone and the computer are used to store, select and process digital self-portraits, which are printed for exhibition. The result is an explorative process of visual content exhibited in the public domain, where site and appropriately-mediated visual material construct a new configuration or a post medium. The theoretical research is interdisciplinary. Although the theoretical framework is located within the field of visual art, this research also draws from work in the disciplines of new media, including digital

media and culture studies.[1] The theory examined broadly refers to the anti-reductive post-modern condition, digital culture, the digital image, its convergence and malleability, remediation, and the post-medium.

The methodological framework is one of practice-led research, where the practical and theoretical research is interdisciplinary, located in the fields of the contemporary visual art and digital culture. This research is qualitative with some aspects of visual and discourse analysis, this research should expose certain assumptions that may be embedded in the art works and texts referred to. Through this analysis, my own creative practice is contextualized and located in the theories referred to.

[1] It is no longer possible to evaluate contemporary art developments in isolation from other areas of culture according to Charlie Gere (2002), who claims that “the computer is a paradigmatic technology of our times, and that it is a product of multiple phenomena with sometimes contradictory purposes.”

Declaration

I declare that this dissertation is my own unaided work. It is submitted towards the degree of Master of Arts in Fine Arts by Coursework and Research Report in the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. It has not been submitted before for any other degree or examination in any other university.

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Marc Damon Edwards

19th day of February 2010

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