LIBERAL ARTS ROXBURY

ANNIHILATION HOLIDAY
THEODORE DARST & KATE STECIW

Kate Steciw and Theodore Darst position themselves as digital flâneurs of sorts—assuming that the digital is something that can be "traversed." We can at least watch our avatar, a pulsating blue dot, move across the screen of a phone as we're traveling down a highway, as Darst's diaristic practice advocates, melding together embodied life with digital experiences. Steciw, who employs comparatively more found imagery, takes the digital environment of her computer workstation as its own ecosystem—a hermetic image-space for one, where she alone is master. Both artists approach digital media as an expansive landscape where attentions seamlessly cascade from one perspective to the next. Their treatments of this landscape explore its construction, prospecting its fissures, its multitude of layered images, the simultaneity of vision, and its "higher ground" in terms of visual language.

Their productions employ sets of divergent yet interrelated skills, each of which are uniquely the domain of labor (typically freelance), formerly performed by each artist respectively. The formal qualities of their practices exist in an ever grayer spectrum between labor subsumed by capital and self-determination.[1] Steciw, who recruits photographic source material from varying databases—stock photos, archives, social media accounts, image searches, etc.—considers the mark making that establishes the borders of her collaged layers to be a welcome mediation, explicating the peripheries of machine-human interaction. Darst privileges the mobility afforded by contemporary software. Using a powerful laptop machine built for gaming, he is able to simulate complex physics and render frame-by-frame animations in 3D on the fly and at any location. He works across the spectrum of the moving image, producing videos for fashion houses and working with DJ's and producers to create and perform real-time, projected visuals. And yet, as an artist, his practice pivots off of the robustness of daily lived experience, flattening various arcs of cultural language.

Falling into what is typically considered to be the matrix of post-studio practice, each artist makes use of their computers as the site of production. Even as much of their photographic source material is the result of a camera and lens transported to a location, work in this arena is essentially "digitally-born."[2] The photographic material being edited is divorced from the environment where it is produced. From the outset of the process, images enter a wholly new situation—one that is not beholden to the rules of the camera or of light as its levers of manipulation. The software employed

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[1] Greaves, Matthew. "Cycles of Alienation: Technology and Control in Digital Communication." *New Proposals: Journal of Marxism and Interdisciplinary Inquiry* 9, no. 1 (2016): 49–63.
    Matthew Greaves proposes that maintenance technological competencies by the proletariat does not intrinsically constitute a capitalist mechanism of control. He states that, "Technologies created for the accumulation of surplus value online do not require the separation of proletarians from appropriative skill." Darst and Steciw resist Subsumption, and thus alienation to some degree, by using their skills--co-developed through class and capital--in a playful manner, and outside of the arena of the work day. The result is the dissolution of human-technology relations into one "hybridized unit."

[2] Paul, Christiane. "Histories of the Digital Now." Histories of the Digital Now | Whitney Museum of American Art. Whitney Museum of American Art, September 2018.
    Christiane Paul describes "digitally-born" artworks as containing "intrinsic elements of objects," while acknowledging that a contemporary understanding of theories of digitally engaged artworks "attempt to describe a condition of artworks that are conceptually and practically shaped by the internet and digital processes," and "often manifest in the material form of objects."

by the artists is a fully contained organizational structure within what Lev Manovich calls the "media machine."[3] The acknowledgement of this source material as such, divorced from its initial conditions, provides a translucent barrier, compartmentalizing its elements. This barrier is a special feature of graphic computing, the psychological aspect of which engenders tandem feelings of social isolation and togetherness—or, as artist Jens Haaning states, "a possibility to be alone together with other people."[4] This feeling predicates de facto assumptions relating to the objecthood of an image, allowing for the photographs to become source material. They are objects held and fully surrounded by the container of the software, to be manipulated by the robust toolset at the artists' disposal. This directed process effectively outmodes the camera.[5]

More than her source material, Steciw considers her prints to be *objects*, no longer mere images, which in this scenario are hallmarked by mutable continuity. In fact, her prints are quite heavy—large panels produced as dye-sublimation prints on aluminum, and in wooden frames. Additionally, the reflective qualities of the surface mimic that of a glass computer screen (an appearance which manufacturers make attempts to avoid), capturing vague reflections of their surroundings, reinforcing their physical presence. Darst coincidentally produces an ongoing body of work (not on display) comprising digital prints on aluminum. These pieces are the product of long-term efforts, with sessions interspersed throughout his day-to-day life, often working with painting software from his phone, and reworking later with a more powerful machine.

Darst's casual, yet work-intensive, process of making prints on aluminum attends to the speed of contemporary mass production and distribution. This interest manifests in his video works. His video *Cloud Requital & The-Grift* (2019) has a total runtime of five minutes. The single-channel work was produced with over four machines, with all of its files stored server side. *Cloud Requital & The-Grift* is Darst's eighth collaboration with Kevin Carey, a musician based in Massachusetts. The video is a futuristic mediation on the artist's recent trips between New York, his grandfather's western Massachusetts painting studio, and the Catskills. Like his geospatial peregrinations, the video loops seamlessly from end to end, providing the viewer with an experience that can be taken up or left behind at any moment. Despite the flow of visitors, the loop also offers a certain sort of stability: it is constantly present, giving it ideological weight, like an object.

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[3] Manovich, Lev. "Alan Kay's Universal Media Machine." Lev Manovich - Alan Kay's Universal Media Machine. Manovich.net, 2006.
    Lev Manvich argues that the media machine--the computer--is also a "remediation machine," which has the potential to simulate all possible media. During the process of simulation, media undergo an experiential flattening resulting in an existential crisis, foundational to interpretation.

[4] Haaning, Jens, and Pécoil Vincent. *Hello, My Name Is Jens Haaning: If You Dont Want to Buy This Catalogue but Are Interested in Reading or Looking in It You Will Find Its Entire Content on This Address: Www.jenshaaning.com*. Dijon: Les Presses du Reel, 2003.
    Jens Haaning's conceptual artwork entitled, *Certificate* (1999), proposes an "unfinished homepage"--a domain which does not exist online. The quotation from the artwork here, reads in full: "To see the internet only as a extension of the possibility of communication is an extreme oversimplification, seen from an Existential point of view the internet gives the possibility to be alone with other people, 1999"

[5] Manovich, "Alan Kay's Universal Media Machine,"
    Lev Manovich proposes that remediation itself, as a container, offers a more robust toolset. He states directly that "a digital photograph offers its users many affordances that its non-digital predecessor did not." He goes on to discuss the immediacy of the digital photograph as "an object," claiming that this status facilitates interaction with other photographic images, and other simulated document types.