

Chapter 3

The Tangiality of Digital Media

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ABSTRACT

This chapter introduces the concept of Tangiality, a defining characteristic of digital studio practice. It proceeds by illustrating how Tangiality is present in the work of contemporary interdisciplinary, hybrid media and multi-modal artists by providing several case studies regarding how Tangiality manifests in artworks. We conclude this chapter with a detailed discussion of how the emergence of Tangiality demonstrates that artists engage with post-digital materiality.

INTRODUCTION

Paradoxical contradictions of virtuality and materiality have undergone a contemporary transformation; the concept of *Tangiality* addresses a radical shift in our sensory perceptions as they are evolving to absorb, incorporate, and adopt the immateriality of the virtual. This evolution is catalyzed by the intervention of materiality with digital media. As our sensory experience of virtuality embodies the emotional, physiological and the kinesthetic, digital materials too are imbued with resonant, visceral, kinetics. This shift has precipitated hybrids: digital artworks that manifest in myriad

forms that contradict their origins as choreography, visual artifacts and substance. *Tangiality* addresses the inherent, ongoing re-examination of the idea of material and its use in contemporary art practice. Concomitantly, digital media embodies a multitude of dimensions that have been explored and expanded on, such as: transparency, opacity, immersion, immediacy, translation, malleability, novelty, play, illusion, interaction, multimodality, narrativity, hypermedia and virtuality. Artists give palpability to experiences with virtual materiality, or *Tangiality*, a defining characteristic of digital studio practice.

The term: *Tangiality* was introduced by Dr. Slavko Milekic in his paper “Towards Tangible Virtualities” presented at the 2002 *Museums and*

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the Web conference in Boston. In his paper, Dr. Milekic outlined *Tangiality* as a proposed domain between physicality and virtuality where “interactions with virtual data produce tangible sensations” (Milekic, 2002). While Dr. Milekic’s primary focus applies *Tangiality* to a conversation about the potential for additional dimensions of feedback for human / computer interface devices, the domain between the physical and virtual is an intriguing threshold in the context of artists’ materials.

Tangiality in digital media is embedded in digital raw materials; the gesture and performance of studio practice infiltrates and transforms the entropic, itinerant, nomadic, transitory code. Interrogating the construct of materiality inherent in the practice of digital media precipitates a theory of art practice that does not strictly represent media, fine or performing arts, but instead migrates among these classifications using the capabilities of the digital realm to embrace the potential of a hybrid art practice. Artists whose work exemplify this approach include *Wafaa Bilal*, whose durational performative installation work allows the public to remotely interface and interact with him; *Dr. Angela Geary*, who has developed input processing systems for virtualizing the engraving process for printmaking; and *The Resonance Project* which conducts performance as research creating dance with real-time 3D movement scanning for tele-presence choreography. In addition, artists whose work illustrates additional aspects of *Tangiality* that we will be discussing in this chapter include *Ann Hamilton*, *Catherine Richards*, *Thecla Schiphorst*, *Koosil-ja Hwang*, *Scott Killdall* and *Victoria Scott*, the artist collective *Blast Theory*, as well as examples from our individual art practices. In the artists’ work we will be examining, the virtuality of the screen erupts as intervention with the materiality of paper, video projection, performance, and objects or space in installation. These artists negotiate the tension between an impulse to create by hand and the ingrained framework of the Cartesian system

that pervades construction processes of computed form, by employing novel conceptual strategies that privilege the physicality of experience. As the hand reaches through the liminal space of the screen, the physicality of these connections is critical to the hybrid practice of digital artists, the process of constructing meaning and the relationship between perception and the body.

Case Study: Dr. Angela Geary

Dr. Angela Geary has conducted extensive research on the affects of computer technology in the material realm of traditional processes in drawing and printmaking, and as it transforms into digitally driven processes. Despite pervasive virtuality, the sustained importance of physicality and tacit intelligence for artists is clear. Using digital interfaces in the creative process finds the digital embedded in the artworks. Digital processes leave distinctive

Figure 1. In this image, an artist uses haptic computer interaction to work with a carvable, virtual 3D block for printmaking. © 2006 Angela Geary. Used with permission



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