

**Title**

Neomateriality: Beyond the Textures of Post-Digital Aesthetics

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## **Abstract**

This paper provides an overview of the evolution of the Post-Digital Aesthetic paradigm in the context of Australian art practice; conceived in Australia, the term has been used by artists and thinkers for more two decades. However, discourses around the expression in abundance in the northern hemisphere are rarely considered in our great southern land. To stimulate further discourse and to enable critical discussions in order to reinvigorate conversations an event

Vvitchvave: Post-Digital Aesthetics symposium was convened in 2019. Practitioners were selected principally for their artisanal approach to computational mediums, through yarnning circles, rituals, performances, artist talks, and installations, the political, social and cultural contradictions faced in the age of designed obsolescence were addressed, uncovering the power relations lurking behind the digital. Dialogues around the ambiances of event were significant in bringing to light how artists working with twenty first century artforms embrace curious imperfection, mawkish 'neomateriality' rather than sterilised or consumer influenced digital ideals of perfection.

## **Biographies**

Dr Marcia Nancy Mauro-Flude

Dr Nancy Mauro-Flude's creative arts research contributes to the interdisciplinary space of feminist **science and technology studies** (STS), and **performance art**. Through these fields of she advances broader understandings about the relationships between somatic **literacy** and **digital culture**. Contributing to new knowledges of visceral systems through experiential pedagogy Dr Mauro-Flude conducts large-scale performances and poetic assemblages, revealing the impact automation has on our embodiment. Her artistic research challenges the value systems of internet culture and crucially feminist philosophies applied in her work plays a role in making visible a more diverse representation of subjectivities in the field of 21C artform production. She is currently writing about the history of the automaton in theatre, its relationship to the

computer and the planetary consequences of truly self-determined machines. Dr Mauro-Flude leads the Holistic Computing Aesthetics research network and coordinates emerging digital cultures, RMIT. <http://sister0.tv>

Dr Tom Penney

Dr Tom Penney coordinates the Games Cluster in the Digital Design program, in the School of Design at RMIT University, Melbourne. His contemporary art practice involves 3D imaging, games technology and digital design as well as traditional art media. Conceptually Tom is interested in how digital platforms and tools exacerbate individual prejudices and judgements through a framework he calls 'digital micro-fascism'. This builds on his PhD research project "Critical Affection" which expanded the notion of "critical play" through an analysis of gay online dating apps and the production of critical interactive works about them. He has shown work and published through exhibitions, journals and conferences including Media International Australia, The Feminist Journal of Art and Digital Culture, The International Journal of Contemporary Humanities, Perth Institute of Contemporary Arts, Siteworks, Federation Square, Utopian Slumps and the International Symposium of Electronic Art. Tom previously taught art and design at Curtin and Monash Universities and was a project manager for the augmented reality fashion company, Metaverse Makeovers.

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## **Neomaterialities: Beyond the Textures of Post-Digital Aesthetics**

**Keywords:** Aesthetics, Digital Art, Net Art, World-Building, Australian 21C Art History.

### **Introduction**

This paper examines the use of the term Post-Digital Aesthetics (PDA) in the context of Australian art practice through a case study of *VvitchVvavve* (2018) a symposium that surveyed work challenging this paradigm. Through our tracing of the term, we reflect upon how the digital is (still) inaccurately considered alongside established artform practices. Post-Digital Aesthetic theorists and practitioners often rely on the sentiment that digitality is so ubiquitous as to be entirely embedded into other forms and practices of everyday life. Digital phenomena are assumed as a given, as neutral rather than ideological or embedded with cultural politics. The products and reactions to this attitude, both implicitly and explicitly in contemporary art have manifest through nostalgia for analogue technologies and raw materiality, and on the other hand, *Post-Internet-ism*. These approaches by practitioners apply creative agency differently, either by denying the digital and returning it to the analogue artist, or by playing within (but still against) corporate-controlled social-digital systems using popularly available vernacular tools such as *Instagram*, *Tumblr*, *Youtube* and *Facebook*. Pedagogically such attitudes have seen digital literacy and skills handed to traditional studio fields, because digitality is assumed to be so accessible or user-friendly as to not require explicit training. We present that to move beyond the temporal politics of 'post'-ness we must adopt an attitude of *presentness*, world-building and consider neomateriality as a more useful framework moving forward.

### **Post-Digital Aesthetics (PDA)**

Practitioners who engage with PDA are concerned with processes in art-making and conceptual frameworks that assume digitality as banal rather than treat it as an exception. Whilst the term Post Digital was conceived in Australia, discourses around its expression have been more abundant in the northern hemisphere and rarely considered

locally.<sup>1</sup> The definition can be traced to Negroponte's 'Beyond Digital' article in *Wired* (1998). Shortly after Kim Cascone coined the term in *The Aesthetics of Failure: "Post-Digital" Tendencies in Contemporary Computer Music* (2000), inspiring Ian Andrews (2000) — an Australian media artist to theorist about it, instigated by conversations with Cascone on the 'Microsound' mail list in regard to glitch aesthetics in sound.

Generally, however, when artists in Australia discuss their work there is almost no mention of the genre, although in practice there are ubiquitous elements of Post-Digital practice everywhere. Florian Cramer (2015, p. 19) a philosopher of visual culture, acknowledges PDA's inherent Australian origin, and posed the question 'What is Post-Digital? conceding 'that the term 'sucks' but is still useful.' He intimates the messy nature of the aesthetic:

Returning to Cascone and Andrews, but also to post-punk, postcolonialism, and Mad Max, the term 'post-digital' in its simplest sense describes the messy state of media, arts and design after their digitization.

Within this broad sense of the hokey mawkishness, it can be identified that PDA clusters around two inclinations in its contemporary art manifestation. The *first* is a retreat from the digital through a desire for agency (as separate to digital control) and nostalgic preference for legacy analogue media. This was reflected upon by Claire Bishop (2012) in her *Artforum* essay *Digital Divide*. The *second*, is an adoption or disappearance into vernacular digital systems typified by, but not limited to, Post-Internet Art. This inclination often sees artists from established artforms taking up consumer technologies by using digital tools on popular platforms where such platforms are so accessible or user-friendly as to not require explicit training. This approach treats in-depth engagement with the design of digital systems typically as someone else's problem; the artwork is a product that exists within such a system and is produced by its user-friendly tools. Other nascent approaches in Australian art practices that align with PDA are vernacular or internet folklore modes of cultural phenomena such as *Vaporwave* typically unidentified in the national art cannon. In response *Vvitchvvave* (2018) practitioners were invited to situate themselves within this dialogue, posing a series of core questions to participants:

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<sup>1</sup> See for instance this *collection of resources related to Post-Digital Aesthetics*, accessed 9 December 2019, <[https://monoskop.org/Post-digital\\_aesthetics](https://monoskop.org/Post-digital_aesthetics)>

- Why doesn't Australian art and design continue to contribute to the PDA conversation?
- What nuances do we have that are different to our Northern Hemisphere peers?
- How do artists counter or propagate existing structures of digital power and materiality?
- Which ethical questions are raised when we consider Indigenous lore in PDA space?

Through observation of these propositions unfolding in *Vvitchvvave* (2018) it is advanced that 'post' is also a misleading and arbitrary prefix to use in the case of either mode. This is because 'post' inherently carries an implication that we are somehow *beyond* either digitality, or in the case of *Post-Internetism*, the internet, when in reality contemplating the intensity, complexity, variability and overwhelming abundance of emergent technologies reveals we have a long path to traverse. In being 'beyond' PDA it is suggested that a temporal shift away from 'post'-ness to *presentness* frees us of the assumption that the work has been done, alerting us to the fact that there is plenty of work still to do, and in which deep engagement is vital. Bishop's (2012) central question of embodying digital ubiquity still has resonance: 'While many artists use digital technology, how many really...thematise this, or reflect deeply on how we experience, and are altered by, the digitization of our existence?' In consideration of these tensions our proposition is that that two aforementioned trends do not go far enough in terms of critical value, and that, beyond and in parallel to these trends, a constructive agency toward the digital exists that will become sought and critically required now and in the and coming years, especially in the face of deep fakes, socio-political polarisation, climate and pandemic crisis. These phenomena requires more expert *hands on* engagement with the 'neomaterial' (Paul 2015) methods needed to construct or critically simulate bespoke digital systems - from the ground up - with a desire for world-building rather than retreat, or performing within digital spaces controlled and owned by consumer conglomerates, as well as a turn away from the identity politics typified by *Post-Internet-ism*.

### **VvitchVvavve: Post-Digital Aesthetics Symposium**

To stimulate critical discussions on post-digitality locally, on December 8, 2018, the authors, co-curated *VvitchVvavve* exhibiting digitally-engaged artwork, critical design

projects and theoretical presentations on post-digitality. *VVitchVVavve* (2018) aimed to connect nascent local Australian digital arts practices to discussions in the northern hemisphere via our international guests Florian Cramer (R'dam), digital curator and archivist Annet Dekker (A'dam), mixed reality performance and installation artist Theo Trian (LA) and speculative designer Markéta Dolejšová (Cz). National guests included Claire Field (Syd), Angie Abdilla (Syd) and Richie Cyngler (Tas). Local Melbourne practitioners included: artists Kate Geck, Patrick Hase, Mohamed Chamas, Kim D'Amazing, J. Rosenbaum, Tim Dwyer, Ben Byrne, Adrian Lucas-Healey and Denby Smith. The objective was place the spotlight on a group of young contemporary art practitioners coming through the Digital Media and Games Design disciplines, as well as showcase postgraduate projects from RMIT University. Many of these graduates are operating at a cutting edge contemporary art context but have not been exposed to a fine art school. As such they have a more in-depth understanding of the technical skills required to construct bespoke digital experiences and engage with them differently to the broad PDA trends of returning to 80s retro cultures or *Post-Internet-ism*. Artists were curated principally for their artisanal approach to computational mediums, including, but not limited to design fiction, net art, indigenous digital engagement, algorithmic approaches, use of artificial intelligence and Virtual (VR) and Augmented Reality (AR). Through yarnning circles, rituals, performances, artist talks, and installations, the political, social and cultural contradictions faced in the age of corporate ownership of creative digital content were addressed, subverting the power relations lurking behind their production.

None of the *VvitchVVavve* (2018) artists fit the broad trends of either rejecting the digital, or completely dissolving into it. Their attitude is much more akin to the spirit of 90s internet art or new media art, in solidarity with a '...hacker attitude of taking systems apart and using them in ways which subvert the original intention of the design (Cramer, 2015)'. Artists in *VVitchVVavve* engaged with technology and exhibit technical skilling, notably their in-depth understanding of how to develop their work that grants them the ease, and position of craftsmanship, to work with their mediums culturally, socially and critically. Practitioners who possess technical, conceptual and digital literacy upend the position posed by *Post-Internet manifesto* writer Artie Vierkant who stated that media art is 'too narrowly focused on the specific workings of novel technologies [...] It can therefore be seen as relying too heavily on the specific materiality of its media (Vierkant,

2010)'. Rather, when digital artists have enough skill in their craft, the work becomes less about getting something novel working in the first instance but taking a mature approach to how its use makes valid critical interrogations through a greater understanding of the possibilities of the medium. By technical skill, we mean the ability to, for example, construct an app from the ground-up, write code and script such as C# or Python, or produce a virtual reality environment that has been entirely produced by the artist, from individual models through to building the executable file. These skills lie far beyond the Post-Internet approach to posting status updates, recording webcam videos, or taking selfies.



Figure 1: Theo Trian (2018) *Studio Visit 09: Painting Preview*. Image: Screen Grab.

### **Neomateriality**

As a result of this level of digital craftsmanship, the artists present in *VvitchVVavve* (2018) operate through a range of idiosyncratic non-utopian, non-transhumanist, and gritty aesthetic textures that reflect each individual practitioner. In moving beyond *Postness*, these textures can be seen as confluent with Christiane Paul's (2015) framework of *neomateriality*. We seek a framework that is embracing the more dynamic ecology of digital practice and idiosyncratic production that compliments bespoke *presentness* rather than self-building or surface tool-use.

The concept of neomateriality strives to describe an objecthood that incorporates networked digital technologies, and embeds, processes, and reflects back the data of humans and the environment, or reveals its own coded materiality and the way in which digital processes see our world (Paul, 2015).

Neomateriality captures on the one hand, 'the confluence and convergence of digital technologies in various materialities', and on the other hand, 'the ways in which this merger has changed our relationship with these materialities and our representation as subjects' (Paul, 2015). Such a neomaterial engagement can be experienced in the artwork of Theo Trian, *Studio Visit 09: Painting* (2018) (fig. 1). This work featured in *VVitchVVavve*, where Trian streamed a speculative studio session of himself, embodying his amusing 'Orc Avatar', painting in virtual reality and commenting on the aesthetic decisions that he (or his evasively taciturn *Orc Avatar* persona) were making during the process. The portrayal was a playful performance providing a critique of the art world's tendency to uphold raw materiality as so often insisted to be a more convincing material encounter. By satirising typically conceived orthodox textures through a virtual reality performance, Trian (2018) by making a mixed media painting in his digital studio environment questions the objecthood of the materiality of the act of painting extending this to the notion of 'self' by manipulating how digital data and the object are inscribing and performing through each other.

Mastering digital objecthood and the manipulation of these processes and materiality is attained through technical creative coding dexterities that are rarely gained within visual or fine art disciplines. The example of Tria (fig. 1) the artist models the 3D world, objects and forms from scratch; program, script and code the interactions; light and arrange the environment and master the virtual reality hardware and video streaming setup. Tensions lie in the fact that it is mostly the case that artists are not taught generic computer principles and skills, hardware and software basics in art school; they are taught how to operate makes and models of a specific brand (Mauro-Flude, 2010). In 'Teaching Technology as adjunct to core practice in Traditional Arts' Alistair Riddel (2012, p.5-7) writes how this topic is incessantly deliberated: 'Technical integration with an idiosyncratic aesthetic can be attained and importantly, that technology allows an artist to think about their core practice in an entirely different way...'. 'It certainly exists in other creative education contexts such as Design' (as many *VVitchVVavve* artists

have gone through design performing arts academies, rather than artschools). But within a traditional arts education, as it stands, rigorous integration of twenty first century artforms as mediums are eternally contemplated or slavishly applied and thus their affordances neglected. The event *VvitchVVavve* (2018) provided the opportunity to observe aesthetics anew, and thus broadly operate amongst the following taxonomies of neomaterial textures:

- ***Dystopia***: situated, grimy, textured, glitched, warped and embracing imperfection rather than ideals of perfection often imposed by corporations owning and dictating users habitus.
- ***Loss of Self***: not focused on 'identity' or, if so, as satirical performance and by extension not self-empowered entrepreneurship.
- ***Diabolical satire***: born from an irony and tension, that of being inside and outside of the technology and its implications simultaneously.
- ***Temporary Autonomous Zones*** (Bay, 1990): constructing other spaces to ubiquitous digital systems - influence from 3D and digital spatial environments - the artist has subjective remaking worlds, and its rules of operation and participation - critically, rather than total immersion in the online space as a given.
- ***Occult speculation***: witchiness, paganism, spirituality - creating work from the tension of elements such as plants as forms of software, raw materiality of computational media as minerals, and earth.
- ***Queerness***: gender-diverse themes, participants wishing to see things on their own terms rather than through biased normative arrangement.
- ***Alterity***: a primary point of subversion art as a site for political transformation or/a genuine interest in such emergence.
- ***Critical Algorithmic engagement***: automated decision making, pointing to a lack of accountability and instances of algorithmic discrimination
- ***Digital Literacy***: emphasis on knowledge to do build and influence systems, rather than working on the surface of consumer off the shelf products.
- ***Decolonised Digital***: implementation of algorithmic processes from non-Christian faiths and non imperialist backgrounds.

## **Digital World Building**

The play theories of feminist game designers and thinkers Mary Flanagan (2009) or Pierce (2009) are useful to our conception of world building; one does not just represent a possible world, but actually builds one that operates through time, right down to the rules that define such a world and govern the systems within it - of movement, economy, socialisation, or whatever such systems are needed. By 'unplaying' the world (Flanagan, 2009) and its systems through subjective manipulation, an artists' influence alters its logic (of representation and operation, particularly concerning, the agency of young women) through its status as a simulation.

Reflecting on neomaterial textures, we propose that another holistic, critically productive way that artists who engage with contemporary art and digital media through an awareness of *Digital World Building*, which is defined as:

- Reconstructing our relation to the digital through direct manipulation of the systems that underpin our engagement, such as in the work of Markéta Dolejšová or Angie Abdilla.
- Building separate digital worlds that act like game environments or simulations that call us to reflect on existing systems, and parody existing ones, such as the virtual reality work of Theo Trian, Tom Penney, Mo Chamas, Denby Smith or Patrick Hase.
- Building bespoke, low-fi, off-the-grid or autonomous peer-to-peer digital systems such as in the work of Nancy Mauro-Flude, Ben Byrne or Richie Cyngler.
- Building augmentations to the physical world through augmented reality pieces that change our perception of our existing practices, such as in the work of J. Rosenbaum

These artists evidence ecologically constructive awareness of social, cultural and political issues, bolstered by knowledge of technical skill that empowers them to know what might actually be done creatively, without being restricted to social media's vernacular tools and thus relying solely on an identity politics born from digital disempowerment. This new attitude is born from the desire to break the general malaise surrounding a situation that Celia Pierce reflected on in which 'While people may feel

empowered by their new communities in the global playground, the bottom line is that their communities, their property, indeed their very bodies, are owned by corporations (Pierce, 2009).’ Upholding Geert Lovink’s (2013) view that ‘dismissing social media as neutral platforms with no power’ is ‘implausible’. It is proposed that a core feature of the next generation of contemporary artists diverge from the temporality of *post-ness* to one of *presentness*. It is posited curators and educators should foster, less focus on constructing, writing and promoting selves (*and followers*) in social media chambers, but a decrying of the corporate control of identity politics, and a move towards the building and promotion of a better world to live in, or engaged autonomous digital self-community networks. Instead of retreating to the ease of binaries often defined as ‘analogue media’ (Cramer 2015). Numerous pathways to enact this was typified by the *VVitchVVavve* artists. In this conception of digital world building artists approach this through systems-thinking rather than a logic of posturing. Arguably, fine arts often lose to the dismissal of emergent aesthetic developments are critical ideas that come from younger fields such as games studies and internet folklore. Digital environments and simulations, as opposed to mere representation, are the ‘imitation of the operation of a real-world process or system over time (Banks et al, 2001, p.3)’.

To conclude the parallaxes of neomateriality is a framework that swirls the raw material world and the speculative world, thus creating nascent spaces for 21C artists to perceive the lived world in a new light. In this way artists can find themselves modifying systems they are not typically given access to in the realm of the orthodox whose implied norms and protocols limit and constrain worlds as mapped, known and traversed. By world building through simulations and assemblage artists bring about nascent possibilities and thus have the chance contemplate things otherwise.

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