

Simon Denny

Art Versus Silicon Valley: Are Artists Losing the Conceptual Advantage? | Frieze, 24.09.18

Frieze

Art Versus Silicon Valley: Are Artists Losing the Conceptual Advantage?



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As startups looks towards increasingly abstract schemes, where is the art that answers to today's deeply networked structures?



In 1968, the conceptual artist and critic Jack Burnham published an essay entitled 'Systems Esthetics'. Burnham began with an acidic critique of the modernist formalism of the day, championed by the likes of Clement Greenberg and Michael Fried, comparing the artistic contributions of 'formalist invention' to the "'new" car of the automobile stylist'. For Burnham, the progression of the modernist art object, like the release of a new iPhone, was all icing and no cake, promising transcendence but always circling back to the same. Instead, he felt that the

artistic practice should concern itself with the deep structures forming the cultures around it. Writing at the dawn of the digital age, Burnham argued that information, not objects, would form the structuring paradigm of the emerging socio-cultural environment. He wrote: 'We are now in transition from an object-oriented culture to a systems-oriented culture. Here change emanates, not from *things*, but from *processes*.'

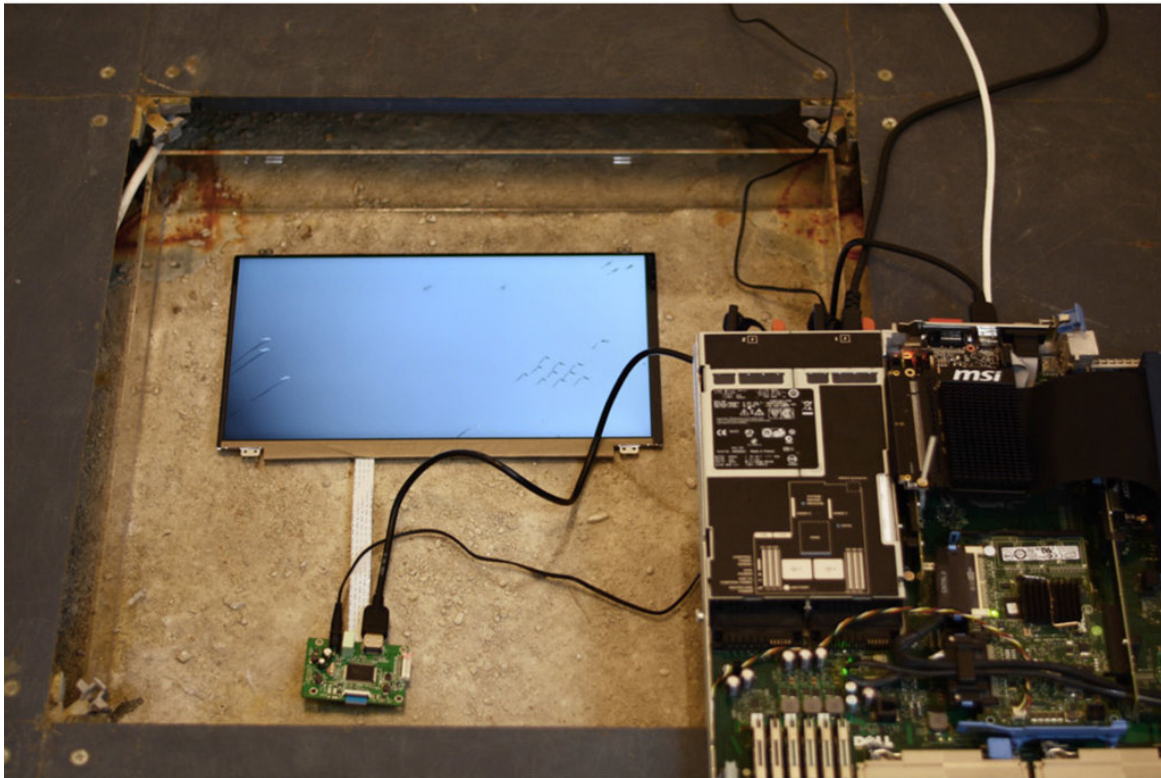
Fifty years on, Burnham's intuitions remain incisive, though to say that we live today in a 'systems-oriented culture' would be a truism that hardly scratches the surface of our entrenchment in complex, interconnected networks of information and capital. Where is the art that answers to these deep structures today? For sure, artists are deeply interested in technological culture (if those two terms can even be separated), but by and large, artistic strategies, and the scarcity-oriented economy that undergirds them, have remain doggedly bound to objects and surfaces.



Simon Denny, *Business Insider*, 2016, installation view, WIELS, Brussels, 2016. Courtesy: the artist and T293, Rome; photograph: Jens Ziehe

On the gallery scene, many contemporary practitioners position themselves as savvy techno-cultural operators through gestures of aesthetic quotation, crystallizing stylistic and affective

details suggestive of a wider system at play. The curation of micro-signifiers – a typeface, a technical fabric, a particular type of shelving – is staged as an ethnographic texture. One thinks of Simon Denny’s installations, which trade enthusiastically in visual detritus scavenged from ‘innovation’ cultures ranging Silicon Valley to Shenzhen. Like a ‘starter kit’ meme for startup culture, Denny appropriates these artefacts for the amusement of the gallery audience in depthless displays that echo the gung-ho futures they promise. Perhaps implied by artists’ fascination with Silicon Valley aesthetics is that these codings reveal something of the architecture, and the architects, of our techno-capitalist present. Take, for instance, Yuri Pattison’s 2017 exhibition ‘context, collapse’ at Mother’s Tankstation, in which the artist populated the London gallery with stripped down LCD displays, perspex server cases and a corporate workspace-style ‘meeting pod’ featuring documentary ‘real-time’ footage from Burning Man (the temporary-autonomous-zone-cum-festival in the Nevada desert, popular with the San Francisco tech community), overlaid with live news feeds. With fluent postmodern craftsmanship, these precisely deployed material signifiers and modes of display offer a dystopic glimpse into the masculinist austerity and luxury utopianism that characterises the contemporary techno-cultural operating system.



Yuri Pattison, *peace mode (off)*, 2017, customised WebGL crowd simulator, Dell PowerEdge R610, NVIDIA GeForce GT 710 graphics card, TFT monitor, plexiglas, scale models, 120 x 100 x 90 cm. Courtesy the artist and mother’s tankstation limited, Dublin / London

But like a good nightmare, it feels as though reality is overtaking fiction. Contemporary artists and software engineers (the young, largely male, white/East Asian, startup-employed kind) share certain affinities: a taste for grand conceptual architectures, science-fiction utopias, unbranded uniforms. Both form classes of cognitive labourers who make their living in a privileged state of relative placelessness, working from MacBooks on borrowed wifi, more or less irrelevant to their immediate context or community. Indeed, both worlds are largely underpinned by financial speculation, with the occasional presence of a billionaire patron or backer at the high end. Pattison has spoken of his interest in the co-optation of modular design, which originated from 1960s DIY culture, by consumer capitalism, 'becoming slightly stripped of their ethos as a result.' In the world where 'platforms' pointedly blur the line between commercial services and social design, there emerges a kind of feedback loop between the artistic valorization of technocapitalist aesthetics and the technologists' embrace of increasingly abstract schemes. One might recall an advertising campaign in which Uber situated its services as a stepping stone between the marriage of bits and atoms and a fully automated future society. The subscription service model, in particular, reiterates the trope that companies are not in the business of producing products, but practices. Launched in 2017, the fashion company **LOT2046** <<https://www.lot2046.com/>> offers a subscription for a minimalist all-black wardrobe, with monthly deliveries of algorithmically curated commodities from underwear to backpacks to hair bleach. Like Soylent for clothes, LOT2046 offers a live/work uniform that's never out of style, as long as you style yourself like a young artist in Berlin or tech worker in San Francisco.



Decentralized Web Summit, San Francisco, 2018. Courtesy: Decentralized Web Summit

Arguably, some of the more hopeful engagements with our 'systems-oriented culture' have lately emerged from the tech world itself. In August, the Internet Archive organized the second Decentralized Web Summit in San Francisco, an international gathering that brought together technologists, artists, lawyers and activists who shared a conviction in the need for a decentralized web – a 'locked open', peer-to-peer version of the internet immune to the monopolization of data and power by the likes of Google and Facebook. These included nascent programmes such as the web browser Beaker (running on the Dat protocol) and Interplanetary File System (IPFS): systems which operate on a principle of peer-to-peer exchange and storage of information amongst a community of users (not essentially dissimilar to torrenting/file-sharing protocols), instead of many users relying a centralized server. The summit also featured a considerable artist presence (co-organized by Mindy Seu and Sam Hart), including the Cybernetics Library, a 're-contextualization' of cybernetic thought and practice shepherded by architect-librarian David Hecht, and Distributed Gardens, an ambitious project by a loose collective of New York-based artists and designers (Melanie Hoff, Callil Capuozzo and Dan Taeyoung, Arkadiy Kukarkin), comprising a self-organizing 'knowledge eco-system': a series of kiosks for sharing live documentation of the summit, with the resulting 'data seeds' growing into a rhizomatic visualization of links, conversations and objects. Connections to a certain nostalgic desire for digital utopia were revived by a generation with a more critical and reflexive politics. In workshops, artists Laurel Schwulst and Kyle Mock discussed peer-to-peer personal websites as intimate and public spaces, in an interconnected 'neighbourhood, forest, or galaxy', while Omayeli Arenyeka taught attendees how to design browser extensions to make the web more

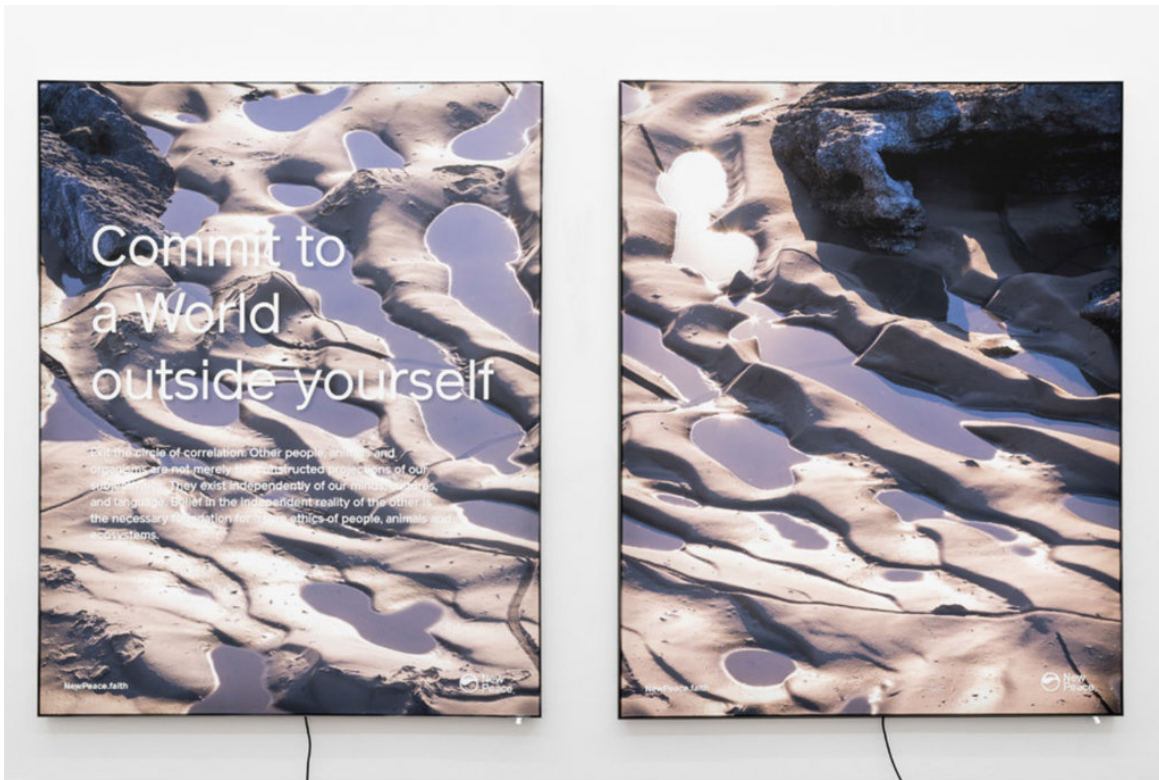
personal and accessible. Gathering the old men who engineered the 'first web' together with a group of younger, (somewhat) more diverse technologists seeking to re-build the internet without political naivety of the former, the summit felt like hopeful step towards a common understanding that internet is not only a technical challenge, but a question of fundamental cultural structures – how knowledge might be stored, navigated and organized; how manifold identities are constituted; how we want to live together.



Christopher Kulendran Thomas, *New Eelam: Tensta*, 2017–18, installation view, Tensta Konsthall, Spånga. Courtesy: the artist and Tensta Konsthall, Spånga; photograph: Jean-Baptiste Beranger

How might forms of artistic practice answer to these cultural urgencies? The speculative fiction, a now-familiar narrative vehicle for alternative imaginaries in these uncertain times, also struggles to meet the demands of the actual. Recent projects such as Christopher Kulendran Thomas' *New Eelam* (2017–ongoing), or Timur Si-Qin's *Campaign for a New Protocol* (2018, as part of *New Peace* (2014–ongoing)) adopt the visionary language and seamless aesthetics of the futuristic startup. Indeed, the 'long-term artwork' *New Eelam* exists as a startup, proposing to parasitically engage the art economy in order to build a subscription-based model of distributed global citizenship and housing (so named after the self-proclaimed state of **Tamil Eelam** <<http://www.tenstakonsthall.se/?new-eelam-by-christopher-kulendran-thomas>> in the artist's native Sri Lanka, which lasted 30 years before coming to a bloody end with the 2009 civil war). Meanwhile, in Silicon Valley, the notorious startup Urbit proposes to build an entirely new

software stack that replaces the internet as we know it with a 'virtual city', which users navigate using personal servers as immutable digital identities. Its underlying goal, like that of the decentralized web movement by and large, is to restructure the world of information in such a way that redresses the balance of power between individuals' data and the corporate cloud. However, Urbit is the brainchild of Curtis Yarvin, a computer scientist and leading 'neoreactionary' ideologue whose prolific writings have variously expressed sympathy with the Nazis and suggested that Africans 'made good slaves' due to their genetics. Yarvin's political ramblings, which imagines something between neo-monarchy and a theory of corporate city-states, quietly suffuses the design of Urbit, an otherwise unremarkable-looking startup fronted by CEO Galen Wolfe-Pauly, a fresh-faced Cooper Union-educated architect. Urbit's libertarian politics become clear once it is established that the 'virtual city' comprises hierarchically organized system of real estate, with 4 billion 'planets' (individuals) populating a finite number of privately owned 'galaxies' owned by Yarvin himself and his employees – because 'most theories of property agree that anyone whoever creates or discovers new property starts out by owning it.' While there is likely no shortage of megalomaniacal racists in Silicon Valley, Urbit has been notably successful in securing funding (from Trump-loving billionaire Peter Thiel) as well as attracting talented young designers to its highly ambitious – and largely speculative – enterprise. (A number of them were in attendance at the summit: the unnerving reality is, whether they're crypto-fascists or they're just happy to work for one, they would pass for anyone else.) In alternative universe, this might have been a speculative artwork about a techno-fascist conspiracy of Pynchonesque proportions. Unfortunately, in this universe, we've simply got Urbit. As startups and systems designers engage with political theory and social engineering, are artists losing the conceptual advantage? Against the bleak absurdism of Silicon Valley, artists' mimetic engagements with the systems, ideologies and aesthetics of technocapitalism seems to produce a kind of toothless accelerationism that barely anticipates the dystopic arrival of the real thing.



Timur Si-Qin, *Campaign for a New Protocol, Part 1*, 2018, installation view, Soci t , Berlin. Courtesy: the artist and Soci t , Berlin

Elsewhere, artists are building platforms of their own. The website Are.na was founded by artist-cum-CEO Cab Broskoski and friends as a way to visually organize information, images, texts, into a collection of interlinked conceptual clusters. In time, each user grows a meshwork of associations which, in turn, are linked by other users into their own indices. Begun in 2011 as a tool for artists' research, the platform has now gathered more than 50,000 users – predominantly artists, architects, designers and developers who find its way of organizing thought conducive to their own conceptual practices. (It's worth noting that the Are.na demographic overlaps significantly with all the tech-forward cultural producers mentioned above, including Urbit employees.) It's a simple idea that is essentially inspired by key concepts invented by the internet visionary Ted Nelson long before the web actually existed: *hypertext* (texts that link to other texts) and *visible connections*, two-way links which made the structural relations of the information system apparent. While Broskoski has for some time now disavowed describing himself as an artist, tools like Are.na do what good art could, cultivating cultures, communities and conceptual models that allow new constellations of thought to emerge. Perhaps, if artists are to navigate a 'systems-oriented culture', then they must become more than mere users and fetishists, capitalizing on our fascination with the tech world's eccentricities and grotesques, and engage constructively in the systems that produce culture. Navigating such systems might mean operating outside the institutional topographies, aesthetic currencies and communal vernaculars

of the art world. In an interview with Ted Nelson, he recounted to me his first encounter with computers: 'I said that's it, the interactive computer screen will be the new home of the human race. This was 1960, was I wrong? It is my duty, my solemn duty, as a humanist, as an author, to create the documents of the future. *Because the techies won't get it right.*'

1 Jack Burnham, 'Systems Esthetics', *Artforum* 1968.

Main image: Simon Denny, Business Insider, 2016, installation view, WIELS, Brussels, 2016. Courtesy: the artist and T293, Rome; photograph: Jens Ziehe