Whitney Biennial 2014

ESSAYS

ARTISTS

Ken Okiishi

gesture/data, 2013. Oil on flat-screen television and video transferred to USB flash drive, color, sound; 35 5/16 × 21 × 3 1/16 in. (89.7 × 53.3 × 9.4 cm)

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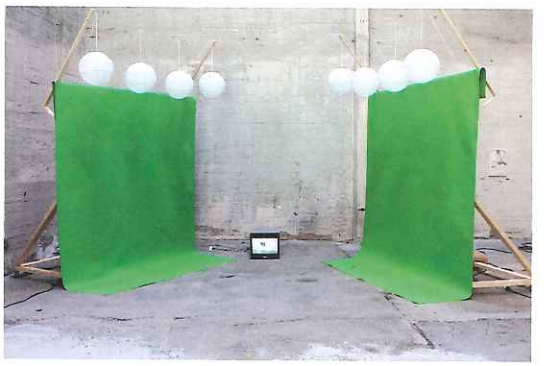
Painting and Screen Otherwise
Michael Sanchez



paraplus/paraplyer/'nobody can tell the why of it'/1857/ oslo/2011, 2011 (installation view, *Nobody Can Tell the Why of It*, 1857, Oslo, May 27–August 14, 2011). Digital video, production monitors, paper; wood; wheels; lamps; sandbags; and speakers; dimensions variable

Although painting has always accommodated the technical requirements of different media of distribution, from tapestries to engravings to photographs, the ascendant medium now is the IPS screen produced in various forms by Apple and its competitors. While historical attempts to distribute art through new media like television met with only limited success, the distribution of painting through the touch-screen interface is today largely a fait accompli.

While this shift from print to blog and feed began some time ago, the complex accommodations and counteractions of art in relation to it have only recently become visible. Painting, for example, underwent a series of mutations at about the turn of the current decade. At that time, browsing through one of the major art aggregators would have revealed a profusion of abstract, monochrome, and pattern paintings flowing through the channels of the art market, frequently in diminutive styles and formats. This is, I believe, the result of several factors. A market disproportionately concentrated on young artists demanded that these artists make small, investible works. Compounding this fact were the ways in which the market converged with the portable media technology that gained momentum at the same time.

Since the technology presents images of paintings both in a grid of thumbnails and as high-resolution images, the most successful paintings work equally well in both of these scales. The scalability of monochromes and pattern paintings make them the most strategic forms: their scalar flexibility means that they can be viewed in any size, from thumbnail to wallpaper. They are low-information forms, which means that they function well as thumbnails. But they also accommodate large-scale viewing through both their all-over informational structure and their incorporation of subtle textural and relief effects that can only be appreciated in high-resolution, pleasantly offsetting the flatness of the touch screen.

Even the new gestural vocabulary that portable devices taught the population at about this time—tiny swipes and taps—migrated into painting. The work of the painter G. is paradigmatic here. His work is made of newspapers affixed to canvas, from which is torn a continuous gestural script of short U-shaped gestures and dots. The paintings come in different sizes but always with the same scalable motif and always in a vertical format, mirroring the default vertical orientation of the phone. The newspapers reverse-remediate the screens onto which they are distributed. Like all old media distributed through a newer medium, they provide a therapeutic visual effect. Their gray tones counteract the brightness of the screens; the layered effect of newspaper on newspaper counteracts their flatness. By staging installation shots with a gray cat roaming around his paintings, G. draws an explicit parallel between the experience of viewing his work and viewing photos of cats online (an activity that accounts for an enormous percentage of internet traffic). Paintings as cats: gray, modest, friendly, and in styles designed to

trigger the instant affective response that keeps the image in circulation; images of paintings to be petted like cats as the fingers of the viewer scroll from one gray image to the next.

In G.'s work, painting and its screen image fuse. Again, the reasons for this are both economic and media-historical. As galleries began to use tablets not only to show their inventory to collectors physically visiting their sites but also to sell works solely on the basis of JPEGs, it has become increasingly necessary that the painting and the JPEG look exactly like each other. Assuming that works are purchased solely for investment purposes on the basis of JPEGs, it is not difficult to imagine an instance in which even their buyer never sees them in person and sends them straight into storage.

The artist's palette

Indeed, for certain segments of the market, it seems likely that rising urban rents and the new ubiquity of internet distribution may transform the gallery in dramatic ways. At this point it is not difficult to imagine a world in which the gallery becomes the off-site digital photo studio of a more flexibly engaged advisor. Video walkthroughs of gallery shows are already becoming more common, perhaps presaging the rise of virtual-reality exhibition views in conjunction with image aggregators. We may soon find ourselves in a situation where *no one* involved in the transaction views an artwork in person. From an artist's offsite fabrication facility to an advisor's photo studio to a collector's storage unit, the object withdraws entirely from human eyes.

This is still largely hypothetical. Within the very actual distribution logic of painting since the turn of the decade, however, painting is already made to look as much like its screen image as possible. But in order to pull off this trick, it cannot be materially identical to the screen. Painting must be separate from it in order to be mediated by it: to appear properly *on* a screen, painting cannot already *be* a screen.

In a series of works on view at the Biennial, O.'s crucial move is to conflate these two, fusing painting and screen on the level of a chemical bond. This conflation unleashes a whole series of paradoxes. Whereas a painting usually generates a single image, an infinite number of images can be taken of these screen-painting hybrids. No one JPEG can capture them. Yet their status as unique objects that must be seen in person is achieved precisely by the fact that they are painted onto their medium of distribution. And even this move, perverse as it is, is complicated by the fact that O. retroactively displaces the IPS touchscreen back onto the HDTV, mimicking painting's mimicking of touch-sensitive gestures on a surface that cannot respond to them.

Within an art media system currently tooled for scrolling image distribution, painting that literally takes the form of a screen poses a problem. Although video footage can be taken of these works and distributed through platforms like Vine, the interaction of the paint with the screen beneath is almost impossible to capture on another screen, particularly for a viewer habituated to platforms that privilege the still JPEG. Oscillating between the painted marks on the surface and the video beneath, the eye perceives the moving video as pure information, aggregates of shapes and color, rather than as people or objects. The paint changes both in relation to its backlighting and frontlighting, the screen-like fluorescent lights of the gallery complemented by warm spotlights designed to activate the effects of the paint (aptly named "interference").

The emphasis that these works place on irreproducible visual experience registers the current anxiety about a certain distribution logic that renders a visit to the gallery or museum superfluous. As such, they are products of this liminal media-historical moment, circulating in two convergent but fundamentally incommensurate systems. The oddness of these objects results from how, in moving through these systems, they rearrange their terms.

gesture/data, 2013 (detail). Oil on two flat-screen televisions and video transferred to USB flash drive, color, sound; 35 5/16 × 21 × 3 11/16 in. (89.7 × 53.3 × 9.4 cm) each. Collection of Pedro Barbosa