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Event and Meaning

Reading Interactive Installations in the Light of Art History

While theoreticians of digital media have stated that AI-controlled environments take the “body language” to a new level by controlling and reacting to its movement, mimics and gestures, theoreticians of interactive art have conceptualized “behaviorist” or “relational” art as a shift from content to event (Roy Ascott), from “*private* symbolic space” to the “realm of human interactions” (Nicolas Bourriaud). It is important, however, not to ignore the content of the event and the symbolic of the interactions. My paper explores the meaning of two interactive installations, which require very difficult bodily actions. While *Still Standing* by Bruno Nadeau and Jason Lewis demands the participant’s body to be immobilized as a condition for the reading and contemplation of its linguistic content, *Mondrian* by Zachary Booth Simpson and his collaborators allows the audience to generate Mondrian-like images by drawing lines on a screen with one’s hand and coloring sections with one’s finger. These pieces do not only offer two different concepts of the interactors’ action and hence body experience but also engage in a very complex way with the issues of inter- and transmediality as well as avant-garde. While *Still Standing* uses new technology in order to enhance the cultural practice of reading endangered since the arrival of electronic and digital media, *Mondrian* promotes craftsmanship and parodies the aesthetics Mondrian represents. Both interactive installations, I will argue, do not simply create “a period of time to be lived through” (Bourriaud) but have to be understood in the context of art history and as a specific contribution to it.

1 The Problems of Code, Body and Close Reading

There are two problems in researching digital aesthetics: Scholars emphasize too much either the code or the body.¹ With no doubt, code is an indispensable aspect in every discussion of digital arts. Since it is code what makes everything happen on the screen or on the scene, everything happening is subject to the grammar and politics of code. In many cases and in many regards it is important to understand what can be done and what has been done on the level of coding in order to understand the semantic of a digital artefact, just as

with film one needs to understand the potential of the technology (camera, sound, cut) in order to determine the value and meaning of a given action.

There is also no question that the body is an important element in any analysis of interactive installations. With respect to the perception of traditional arts such as literature and painting theorists focusing on the reader or spectator acknowledge that the physiological specificity of the lived body (gender, race, age, weight, health) contributes to the way an artifact is perceived. If the audience is physically engaged in the art and the body becomes the central subject of the aesthetic experience (i.e., as agent *and* subject matter), the body obviously plays an even more significant role.

However, a preoccupation with code and body threatens to override our attention to the deeper meaning of an artifact and may produce declarations that are hardly helpful if not completely misleading. Such declarations are for example the notion that everything in digital media is actually literature since everything is based on alphanumeric code or the proclamation that digital spaces represent a strong desire for control over the messiness of bodies and unruliness of the physical world, since everything in digital media is coded and computed.²

While such proclamations are not principally wrong, they are not very helpful for their formalistic approach and focus on the technology behind the interface, which neglects the actual experience of the audience. If we look at the scenery of an interactive installation such as David Rokeby's *Very Nervous System* we easily realize that this closed-circuit-installation in which the physical action of the interactor alters the acoustic information sent from the system neither is literature nor intends to control the messiness of bodies but presents an interactive performance that entices the interactor to "produce" a body completely different from the controlled body of everyday life.

The other problem is the focus on the body's action at the expense of the meaning of these actions. Such perspective is put forward when interactive art is described as a shift from content to event, from the communication of a certain message to the production of a space that inaugurates dialogue (Ascott 110ff.; Bourriaud 166). When the British artist and theorist Roy Ascott, in his 1989 essay "Gesamtdatenwerk: Connectivity, Transformation, and Transcendence," writes the audience no longer can be at the window looking in on a scene composed by another, but instead is invited to enter the doorway into a world where interaction is everything (226), he suggests that there is no longer a scene one could look at. When the French theorist and curator Nicolas Bourriaud in his 1998 book *Relational Aesthetics* conceptualizes interactive art as "a period of time to be lived through" in contrast to the private symbolic space traditional art provides (14f.), he neglects that this lived through time itself embodies a symbolic space to be reflected on.

The celebrated openness and formlessness of interactive art has been subjected to strong criticism. Hal Foster for example notes in reaction to Bourriaud: “for all its discursivity, ‘relational aesthetics’ might be sucked up in the general movement for a ‘post-critical’ culture—an art and architecture, cinema and literature ‘after theory’” (195).³ Foster’s conclusion may sound conservative or at least anti-avant-garde and reminds us of Adorno’s aesthetics. It is remarkable that it comes from a left-wing intellectual known for his criticism of the contemporary aesthetic of spectacle and for his insistence on the political engagement of art. The charge of post-criticisms refers to the conceptualization of interactive art as an unstructured event to be experienced rather than to be analyzed; it refers, to quote Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht quoting Susan Son-tag, to the “farewell to interpretation” advocated in some contemporary aesthetic theories.⁴

To be sure, even an open interactive system like Rokeby’s work has an underlying structure and generates a specific symbolic of the interactions. In this case the underlying message of Rokeby’s “systems of inexact control,” as he calls his installations, is the deconstruction of the illusion and fantasy of total control set up by the medium computer. Rokeby considers the fetishization of control an unhealthy paradigm for real-world encounters and thus creates systems which do not allow the interactor to gain complete control. The question, however, is, how scholars and art critics approach such open interactive systems. The question is how we understand or *read* the experience of such interactions, which brings me back to my notion at the beginning that code and body are emphasized too much in the discussion of digital arts.

While I consider it important not to ignore the general role of digital technology on digital art, I am afraid the focus on this technology obstructs the access to each artwork’s aesthetic singularity.⁵ Hence, I advocate a close reading of the artwork, which on one hand sticks to the “surface” of the code, i.e., to its materialization as text, sound, image, and action on the screen or scene.⁶ On the other hand, such close reading should look behind the surface of the body, i.e., it should inquire the meaning of the body’s actions within the framework provided by the code. Such reading must take technology into account where it is important but also discuss the connections to philosophy and art history where they are obvious or helpful.

To give an example of such reading I am going to discuss two interactive installations which require rather diverse bodily actions and refer in quite different ways to technology. While the first work contains text and thus can be seen as an example of digital literature, the second does not and rather seem to belong to the genre of digital painting. However, my purpose is not only to present a close reading of digital *literature* but also to exemplify an approach to digital art that carries out the main principle of literary-critical training, i.e., to

follow up on each aspect of a text that is unfamiliar and strikes us as significant. My intention is to carry out such follow-ups on linguistic as well as non-linguistic aspects of two digital artworks that strike me as significant.

2 Détournement and Inter-Media-Competition: *Still Standing*

Still Standing (2005) by Bruno Nadeau and Jason Lewis from OBX Labs Concordia University puts the interactor in front of a big screen and features letters reacting to her movements (fig. 1). Nadeau explains on his web site:⁷

the installation consists of an amalgam of characters projected on the wall as if they were resting on the floor. when a participant walks in front of the projection, the first reaction of the text is to act as if it was being kicked, pushed by the person's feet. when the participant stops for a short moment, the text is attracted towards his position and moves up, like water soaking his body. the participant can then enjoy a motionless moment and contemplate the textual content that becomes more and more legible. when the user is done and decides to start moving again, the text falls back to the floor and wait for a new interaction.

The "grammar of interaction," i.e., the modus of interaction the artist made possible within the interactive environment,⁸ insists on the immobilization of the interactor, making this a key for accessing the text which reads:

five chapters of addiction for my perpetual commotion bring my brain to a stop. the inception of sedation is needed for the waves to break and the spin to reduce. letters to literal the motionless moment hides for my sight to seduce.

The message of *Still Standing* is quite evident and directly expressed at Nadeau's web site:

nowadays, designs are created to be decrypted and enjoyed at a glance, requiring no attention span. the piece evolved as a response to the "collapse of the interval." a phenomenon of fast pace culture that rarely allows us a moment to stop and observe.

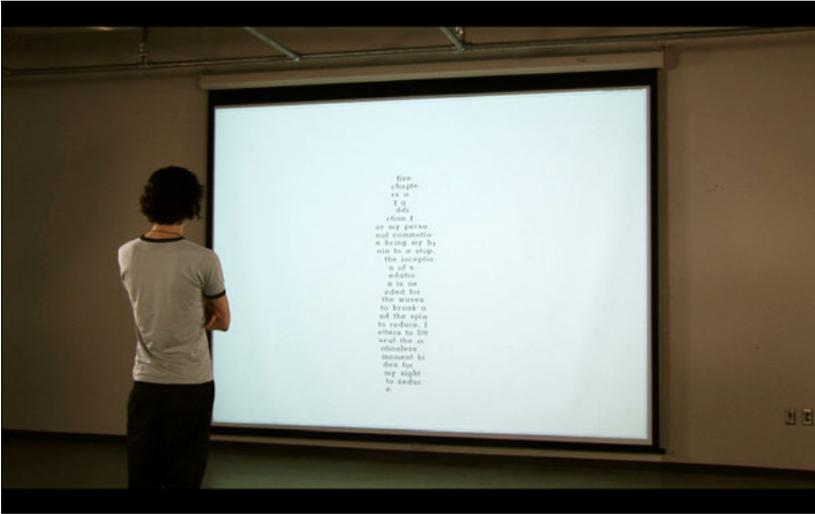


Fig. 1. Bruno Nadeau and Jason Lewis: *Still Standing* (2005).

The underlying subject of *Still Standing* is the “cannibalistic” relationship between the semiotic systems of text on one hand and visual art or interactive installation on the other hand: The “consumption” of text by replacing it with images or by transforming it into image, sound, action depriving it of its linguistic value.⁹ In contrast to such consumption, *Still Standing* applies sophisticated digital technology not to marginalize text but to demand attention to it by commanding the viewer to stand still and concentrate on text. Paradoxically, the piece using new technology enhances the cultural practice of reading, otherwise endangered since the arrival of electronic and digital media. New technology turns out to be a kind of Trojan horse containing an old-fashioned paradigm of communication. The letters standing in line inside the user’s silhouette in *Still Standing* resemble the Greek soldiers lined up within the Trojan horse.

This strategy reminds us of the use of cinema by Guy Debord in the 1950s to protest the transformation of the world into a society of images. After World War II image production increasingly occupied the conscious and unconscious processes by means of which the subject sensed, desired and understood the world. According to Debord the cinema had become the cathedral of modernity, reducing mankind, previously an autonomous, contemplative subject, to an immobile, isolated, passive viewer, sitting in the dark and fixed in front of the shining screen. In reaction to this voyeuristic fixation Debord declared war against cinema not, as his 1964 film *Contre le cinéma* shows, by renouncing film but by appropriating it and freeing it from the dominance of the spectacle. An example of this iconoclastic reappropriation of film is Debord’s

Hurlements en faveur de Sade (1952), an eighty minutes long film without pictures and with almost no sound; only from time to time three voices recite, without any expression, fragmentary sentences taken from bodies of laws, modernistic literature and newspapers during which the screen changes from black to white.

With this film Debord temporally occupied the cinema and interrupted the circulation of false images with the intention to use the suspended film to create critical awareness. Such “hijacking” of the new medium in favor of the old is part of Debord’s concept of *détournement*, a subversive “turnabout” of the meaning of an object, space, image, or idea. It comes as no surprise that the audience was not interested in spending eighty minutes this way in the cinema. The premiere on June 30, 1952 ended in chaos and scandal, the film was stopped after less than ten minutes.

In *Still Standing* Debord’s iconoclasm translates into the critique of bustling activity in front of the screen. Nadeau and Lewis interrupt the business of action and interaction which not only has become the new religion in art but also an integrated element of the *Society of Spectacle* that Debord described with regard to image production. Part of this trend is the abandonment of reflective, contemplative reading. Forcing the audience to stand still in order to read text on the screen of an interactive installation is similar to having the audience watch an empty screen in the movie theater.

The irony, however, is that *Still Standing* sends an almost empty horse into Troy. It does not, for instance, refresh the text once the interactor has finished reading it. Tracking the eyes should be no problem, nor replacing one text sequence by another. But could *Still Standing* have kept the interactor still standing still after three, ten or even a hundred text fragments have been presented? Could it have told an entire story this way? Could it capture its audience longer than Debord’s film did? It doesn’t dare to try. For good reasons. The prospects of a text’s survival in a “hostile” environment such as an interactive installation are limited. In fact by not refreshing the text, by not testing the patience of the audience, this installation actually utters exactly this belief and essentially portrays its own undertaking as futile. To put it this way: the almost balanced proportion between the time the text needs to build up and the time one needs to read the text allows to experience this moment of standing still as an *action* in its own right. By abstaining from requesting a longer period of immobilization and thus requesting a long attention span, *Still Standing* undermines its own agenda and contributes to the fast pace culture it criticizes.

3 Avant-garde and Recuperation: *Mondrian*

The interactive installation *Mondrian* by Zachary Booth Simpson and his collaborators allows the audience to generate Mondrian-like images by drawing lines on a screen with one's hand and coloring sections with one's finger. Simpson's "company," Mine-Control, claims "art can be both playful and thought-provoking."¹⁰ *Mondrian* is certainly playful. To what extent is it thought-provoking?



Fig. 2. Zachary Booth Simpson et. al.: *Mondrian* (2004).

The accompanying text on the web site states: this work "permits participants to simply sketch out and edit compositions in the style of the great abstractionist Piet Mondrian. Create your own composition in 10 seconds!"¹¹ There are two interesting aspects to this statement: The homage to Mondrian as a great abstractionist and the promise to imitate him in 10 seconds. As for the homage, it should be noted that Mondrian is named a great "abstractionist," not a great painter or artist. While this may be a random, insignificant detail, Mondrian's position as artist is certainly undermined and trivialized by suggesting the audience could do in 10 seconds a painting that would have taken Mondrian considerably longer.

While we don't know how long it took Mondrian to create his paintings or "compositions" as he called them, we know that it took him a while to overcome his naturalistic and impressionistic style and find his own voice. His style became an important milestone in the history of art, together with other movements in painting that signaled the shift from the mode of representation to pure abstraction. Mondrian's work contains—in a similar manner to the manner Duchamp carried more than just a "readymade" into the museum—a complexity that belies its apparent simplicity. What makes Mondrian's, and even more so Duchamp's, work art is not something that meets the eye but something that happens in the intellect. This art is not perceptual, in terms of *sensual* perception, but conceptual. It can no longer fully be appreciated on the visual level—though spectators did and do visually appreciate Duchamp's urinal as well as Mondrian's compositions—but requires an understanding of its historical and conceptual references.

Nonetheless or rather for that reason, Mondrian's work was often parodied and even trivialized. The Rock band Botch released a song entitled "Mondrian Was a Liar" that speaks of the hardship of life and work with your hands. Mondrian only appears in the title of this song. However, the lyrics imply that he was not a hard manual worker, in contrast, say, to the painters of the *trompe l'œil* school who aimed at such virtuosic craft that their paintings could fool the audience into taking them for reality. Does Simpson think Mondrian was a liar?

By allowing the audience to paint just like Mondrian with a few clicks and flicks of the hand and finger, Simpson's piece unavoidably lends weight to the idea that Mondrian's work is so simple a child could do it. The fact that this installation effortlessly generates artifacts that "look just like it did in the museum," as participants may think, mocks the famous artist. But it goes further, because it is not a canvas on which people "unchain" the inner Mondrian in their soul but an interactive screen with highly sophisticated programming behind it. The programmer is Simpson and his team. While the participants may change their conception of Mondrian's talents, they will appreciate the achievement of the creators of the *Mondrian* machine. This achievement is based on excellent coding. It is based on craftsmanship, which is what Mondrian was denied when he was parodied, mocked or even called a liar.

Simpson's work not only mocks Mondrian, it actually offers a better candidate for homage. It establishes the fame of the programmer at the expense of the painter or rather it praises "real" painting (based on virtuosity) over conceptual art. Simpson does not really honor Mondrian with his *Mondrian* machine, but uses Mondrian's abstractionism to position himself against it and to celebrate his superiority over Mondrian with respect to craftsmanship. Simpson's work turns out to be an example, deliberately or subconsciously, of

deconstructing the avant-garde. In the terms of Debord we may speak of *recuperation* which is the commodification and incorporation of the subversive results of a *détournement* within mainstream society.

Simpson's *Mondrian* machine functions as a toy, which is fun to play with for a brief time. The discussion, however, reveals that it is more than simply a toy and raises the question: Can it also be art? According to Danto, for the evaluation of an artifact as art or non-art neither craftsmanship nor visible quality is important but "aboutness." He explains this aboutness with respect to Andy Warhol's *Brillo Boxes*, an arrangement of the branded cardboard cartons containing scouring pads that are sold in supermarkets. In Warhol's installation these boxes contain more than the scouring pads. They are not only about their content but also about the boxes themselves, about their visual pleasure, about their possible status as art. Warhol's boxes comment on the original boxes and thus *become* art, as Danto states in his essay "Art and Meaning." Can we say the same about Simpson's *Mondrian*?

The answer may be Yes and No. It is No if we see this work only as an example of coding, i.e., artistry and virtuosity. Coding, understood in terms of craftsmanship, would be a very problematic foundation for art and could certainly not bear comparison with the conceptual complexity of Mondrian's work. However, the answer may be "Yes, Simpson's *Mondrian* machine is art," if we see it as a comment on Mondrian's lack of craftsmanship. Simpson's work could be understood as being *about* (and against) a concept of art that approaches art only from an intellectual perspective rather than on the basis of technical virtuosity. This model of art is adequately described by Sol LeWitt who, in his *Paragraphs on Conceptual Art* (1967), holds that in conceptual art "the idea becomes a machine that makes the art" (12). LeWitt, in his *Wall Drawings*, consequently delegates the execution of the idea to a draftsman.

The "aboutness" of Simpson's work may be a critique of this liberation of art from any skill of the artist as a craftsman. It is a critique of the "philosophical disenfranchisement of art," as Danto entitles one of his books. It is the end of the expulsion of the technical. While Mondrian presents his intellectual sophistication by reducing painting to its utmost simplicity, Simpson presents, in a kind of counterstrike, his technical sophistication by creating a machine that imitates that simplicity: an objection to the intellectualization of art which is itself conceptual and intellectual.¹² Of course, it is the simple shape of the grid in Mondrian's work that allows its imitation within the digital medium as matrices of discrete values. And it is exactly this paradigm of the grid which allows us to eventually see Simpson's turn against Mondrian as continuation of what Mondrian represents.

As Rosalind Krauss points out in her essay "Grids": "The grid functions to declare the modernity of modern art" and announces "modern art's will to

silence, its hostility to literature, to narrative, to discourse” (9). Similar to the database in Manovich’s account (Manovich 225), the grid is the enemy of the narrative and represents, as Krauss continues, “a naked and determined materialism” (10). As Lutz Koepnick asserts in his essay “[Grid <> Matrix]: Take II” grids, with their conceptualization of the world as a predictable system of horizontal and vertical lines, “energize sensation of control, power, and omnipotence” and thus “arrange the perceptible world as something that more or less excludes the possibility of chance and surprise” (53). As Koepnick continues, the grid “removes the messy, strange, and the mysterious and entertains the modern subject with sensations of unmitigated presence and wholeness” (54). His words recall the notion of coding in digital media as control over the messiness of bodies and unruliness of the physical world. In fact, the grid is seen as having exactly the same effect as the code when Koepnick states: “To ‘go digital’ is to reconstruct the world within a grid of discrete values” (48).¹³

Insofar as the grid signifies control and represents one of the “most stunning” myths in modernity—as Koepnick states, in line with Krauss (54)—Simpson’s *Mondrian* does not actually oppose Mondrian but reconfirms his practice. Simpson radicalizes the concept of Mondrian’s grids by expanding it from the surface (of the canvas) to the level of code thus applying the modus of “discrete values” even to the process of constructing the grids on the screen. In light of this doubling of the emblem of control and its “declaration” of modernity we may understand the code as first-degree relative of the grid and consider *Mondrian* the inheritor to the avant-garde represented by Mondrian. The irony of this view is the return of craftsmanship (as software engineering) in art which had been fundamentally disregarded by the avant-garde.

4 Conclusion

As has become clear, both interactive installations do not simply create “a period of time to be lived through,” as Bourriaud holds for artworks belonging to relational aesthetics (14f.), but create a symbolic space which can and needs to be made to the object of interpretation. This is especially the case since in both installations the grammar of interaction makes the interactors doing exactly what the artist expects them to do. In addition, the use of text in *Still Standing* and the direct reference to art history in *Mondrian* contain a statement by the artists that already calls for interpretation.

However, as *Still Standing* demonstrates, interpretation is needed also beyond the text, namely with respect to the experience of the body. Interpretation is even needed beyond this experience of the body considering the fact that the text does not refresh and thus the body’s experience of immobilization

is not extended into an area where this immobilization doesn't feel like an action anymore. If we want to understand the deeper meaning of a work, we have to factor in the experiences the work does *not* allow the body to encounter.

In the case of the *Mondrian* machine I consider the role of the body rather neglectable. One does not really need to physically experience the creation of one's own Mondrian in 10 seconds in order to understand the allusion and implications of such parody. To put it this way: Who does not get the allusion and implications hearing how this work functions will not do better having played with the piece in person.

As far as the focus on code is concerned, in the case of *Mondrian* the discussion of the general nature of digital technology does not impede the access to the artwork's aesthetic singularity but *provides* it on the ground of a comparison of code and grid as well as coding and craftsmanship. In the case of *Still Standing* I take coding only into account insofar as I assume it is feasible to refresh the text, though, I don't consider it unlikely that an exhaustive investigation of the code underlying *Still Standing* and *Mondrian* would generate different results. I would certainly welcome such readings. However, I will wait until they arrive and prove that such investigation allows new insights into the nature of these artworks, before I renounce my claim that code is overrated in the discourse of digital arts.

Notes

- 1 "Code" here is understood as alphanumeric code used on the operational level of computers. "Body" refers to the physical entity in contrast to the mind as conceptualized in dualistic philosophy. While here is not the place to engage in a discussion of the mind-body dichotomy (debating for example to what extent mental processes are the result of sensory organs or on the contrary physical experiences may result from mental properties), for the discussion at hand it is useful to differentiate between the perception of an artifact which makes the body itself the ground of immersive participation and the cognitive reflection (interpretation) of this very interaction and immersion.
- 2 For the notion of any artifacts based on software as literature cf. the essay "Software Art and Writing" by Florian Cramer and Ulrike Gabriel: "If 'literature' can be defined as something that is made up by letters, the program code, software protocols and file formats of computer networks constitute a literature whose underlying alphabet is zeros and ones. By running code on itself, this code gets constantly transformed into higher

level, human-readable alphabets of alphanumeric letters, graphic pixels or other signifiers. These signifiers flow forth and back from one aggregation and format to another. Computer programs are a literature in a highly elaborate syntax of multiple, mutually interdependent layers of code. . . .” For a critical response cf. Trevor Batten’s annotations at: <http://www.tebatt.net/SAT/RESOURCES/SOCIAL/Cramer_SoftwareArt.html>.

For an account of the arguments on body and control cf. Munster (1ff.).

- 3 Foster maintains that politics are sometimes ascribed to such art on the basis of a shaky analogy between open work and inclusive society: “as if a desultory form might evoke a democratic community, or a non-hierarchical installation predict an egalitarian world”; Foster notes that the artists and theorists in question frequently cite, without justification, the Situationists who valued precise interventions and rigorous organization above all things (193).
- 4 For a critical discussion of the announced farewell to interpretation in contemporary aesthetic theory in the context of digital art cf. Simanowski, *Against the Embrace* and Simanowski, *Digitale Medien in der Erlebnisgesellschaft* 246-275.
- 5 In the same spirit John Zuern concludes in his discussion of the appropriate methods in the study of digital literature: “Special pleading for the digital impedes our access to each artwork’s ‘literary singularity’” (238).
- 6 For the concept of surface cf. also Noah Wardrip-Fruin: “The surface of a work of digital literature is what the audience experiences: the output of the processes operating on the data, in the context of the physical hardware and setting, through which any audience interaction takes place” (48).
- 7 The web site also provides a video of the installation.
- 8 “One could say that interactivity is the field for constructing sentences. This field is regulated by a kind of grammar which is not same as the grammar for writing sentences, but rather a grammar that tells you how to use it.” (Fujihata 319)
- 9 I have discussed this phenomenon elsewhere as competition between the new media and the old with reference to the concept of remediation and cultural anthropophagy (Simanowski, “Textual Objects”).
- 10 <<http://www.mine-control.com>>.
- 11 <<http://www.mine-control.com/mondrian.html>>. The web site also provides a video of the installation.
- 12 This notion raised the question whether Simpson really intended this kind of statement and points to the issue of the relationship between meaning

and intention, which cannot be discussed here. No matter whether we insist that the “aboutness” is intended by the artist or accept that it is simply present in the artwork, the *Mondrian-machine* is exactly what Simpson’s team states art can be: “both playful and thought-provoking.”

- 13 Koepnick further discusses the relationship between grids and digitality on pages 60-63.

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