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Framing Digital Art

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FRAMING DIGITAL ART

Ever since the artwork became indiscernible from the everyday object, context has played a key role in the perception of art. In 1964, art critic and philosopher Arthur Danto stressed: "To see something as art requires something the eye cannot decry—an atmosphere of artistic theory, a knowledge of the history of art: an artworld."[1] Danto reached this conclusion after his visit to Andy Warhol's solo exhibition at the Stable Gallery in New York, where the artist had filled the gallery space with what appeared to be packing boxes of supermarket products, among them the now famous Brillo boxes. According to Danto, Warhol's artworks, as any other that very closely resembled an ordinary object, required the proper atmosphere and context in order to be experienced as a work of art. Twelve years later, Brian O'Doherty stated in a series of influential articles published in *Artforum* that the gallery space creates this particular atmosphere: "The ideal gallery subtracts from the artwork all cues that interfere with the fact that is it 'art'. The work is isolated from everything that would detract from its own evaluation of itself." According to O'Doherty, the context is so powerful in this space that "things become art."[2]

Just as artworks need to be subtracted from the landscape of the everyday and placed in a particular context, so has all screen-based art found itself in the need to distance itself from other contents with which it shares a common, multipurpose environment. Digital art made for the computer screen, the browser, or handheld devices, such as smartphones and tablets, is embedded in a complex ecosystem that includes different aspects of the user's daily activities, including work, leisure, play, study and socialization. Design and productivity apps, video games, music and video players, social networks and the endless possibilities of web browsing all come together on the same device, inside the same screen. They all obtain a part of the user's divided attention, as obligations, spare time, hobbies and the need to interact with others determine the different uses of the computer throughout the day. For many people, there is a computer at work and another at home, which serve different purposes, or maybe the tablet or smartphone are solely used for entertainment, but in all cases the screen at which the user is staring defines an environment that can serve many different purposes, sometimes simultaneously.

The problem of context for a screen-based digital artwork has long been addressed by theorists, curators and artists in different ways. Net art has had a particular struggle in its (un)desired dependency on the browser window and the computer screen, which can be traced back, for instance, to *documenta X* in 1997, where a selection of net art works were displayed on several computers inside a room that was described as "a classroom with a big IBM logo on the wall."[3] According to curator Christiane

Paul, exhibiting different net art works on a single computer screen is the worst possible model, while it is preferable to display these works as installations or projections. Paul has also noted that visitors to digital art exhibitions often reject an artwork that is displayed on a computer screen, because it is the same environment they see every day at the office.[4] Several attempts have been made at "escaping" the computer screen. Usually, as suggested by Paul, a screen-based artwork may be replaced by a projection on the wall and a mouse or another controlling device on a plinth. In other cases, the artist finds creative ways of integrating the screen into the artwork in the form of an object or sculpture. Other notable examples regarding the use of screens can be found in two exhibitions curated by artist Aram Bartholl at the XPO Gallery in Paris: *OFFLINE ART: new2* (2013) displayed net art works via local networks that were accessible through a series of routers hung on the gallery walls, as if they were the artworks to be observed. Users could select any of the local networks on their own smartphones, laptops or tablets and view the corresponding artwork on their private screen.[5] A year later, Bartholl invited several artists to present their work on a series of smart watches for the exhibition *FULL SCREEN* (2014) at the same gallery. Artists adapted their works to the small, high-resolution (320 x 320 px, 275 ppi) screens of the watches, which were displayed in the gallery as objects that could be observed and worn.[6]

Bartholl's experimental exhibition formats point towards another aspect of the dependency on the screen: the relative inconvenience that it implies for the collector. Usually, digital art collectors who acquire screen-based artworks must consider how to display them in their homes. An obvious solution would be to have a computer and a dedicated screen for this purpose. In 2003, at the Ars Electronica Festival, Steve Sacks, director of the bitforms gallery in New York, presented a series of "Software Art Stations," which consisted of a touch-screen with a hidden CPU, wireless network connection, mouse and keyboard.[7] These devices allowed collectors to select and display the digital artworks in their collection, in a similar way to a playlist on any digital music player. While this solution did not catch on, years later Sacks stated that he envisioned "an art world where many collectors will have dedicated screens in their homes that will rotate a number of different artworks."[8] Sacks's prediction still seems reasonable, although until today it has apparently been hindered by technical limitations.

In 2014, companies Electric Objects (US) and FRM (Japan) launched crowdfunding campaigns on Kickstarter to produce the first run of two competing displays for digital art. Coinciding in the need to create a new device to display digital content, both companies developed screens solely dedicated to this

purpose and equipped with an interface that allows one to purchase and select the content being shown. Electric Objects was founded in 2014 by Jake Levine, a former Betaworks employee who raised $1.7 million in venture capital to start producing the first prototypes of its device. Following the Kickstarter campaign, the EO1 was funded on August 7th with a total $787,612 pledged (3150% of the desired amount).[9] The EO1 is a 23-inch, 1080p display with a white or black frame (a designer wooden frame is also available), an integrated CPU, Wi-Fi and Bluetooth modules. It can be mounted on a wall (only in portrait orientation) and is controlled by a free smartphone app for Android and iOS. Electric Objects has designed its device to "fade into the background": minimal brightness and the absence of speakers ensure that the screen will be perceived as a picture frame and not as a TV. Therefore, it can only display static or animated images, also artworks that might feed from data on the Internet, but it does not allow for a direct interaction between the user and the screen.

FRM was founded in 2011 by creative director, designer and engineer Yugo Nakamura and producer William Lai. In 2012, they created FRAMED 1.0, "a new form of art frame" consisting of a 55-inch LED display with an integrated PC unit, webcam/microphone and Wi-Fi module. Their second release, FRAMED 2.0, was successfully crowdfunded on August 20th with a total $529,339 pledged (706% of their original goal).[10] FRAMED 2.0 is a Full HD display with built-in PC, 720p camera, microphone, stereo speakers and Wi-Fi module, as well as motion sensors and gesture recognition. The device has a handcrafted walnut frame and comes in two sizes, 24-inch and 40-inch. It can be mounted on a wall, either in landscape or portrait orientation. Unlike the EO1, FRAMED 2.0 allows the user to control the interface with hand gestures, as well as to interact with artworks that include this possibility. This implies a more active relationship with the device, which can also emit sound and is therefore less likely to "fade into the background." FRM has also enhanced the possibility of displaying any type of content from the web by simply accessing it on a smartphone and sending it with a swipe towards the screen.

Notably, both companies advertise their products as a platform for art, pointing out the difficulties in finding a proper display for screen-based art. According to William Lai, FRM's objective is to "create a simple way for visual artists to physically frame their work and experience it in the same way we would with a traditional art piece or a painting in a room." Electric Objects's Jake Levine states that "there's more art on the Internet than in every gallery and museum on Earth. But many of these beautiful objects are trapped […] inside of devices […] de-

signed for distraction. So we wanted to make a new way to bring art from the Internet into your home." Electric Objects has partnered with several institutions, such as the Museum of the Moving Image and the New York Public Library, and features the work of artists, such as Casey Reas, Aaron Koblin and Nicolas Sassoon. Additionally, it has started an Artist-in-Residence program that invites artists to create original works for the EO1 in exchange for a stipend and a prototype. FRM's FRAME 2.0 also features the work of Aaron Koblin, along with other artists, such as Takashi Kawashima, Universal Everything and Mirai Mizue, and is commissioning artists and curators to create original artworks and collections for its platform. As is now usual in the IT industry, particularly in the case of Apple products, the device does not simply serve as a tool but creates its own ecosystem: in this case, both Electric Objects and FRM must provide the most interesting selection of artworks in order to attract consumers to their respective platforms. Therefore, not only the technical features of each device but also the contents that may be viewed on them become key factors in reaching out to customers. Attracting a wide range of consumers with content will probably work for eye-catching, cool design animations or apps. But it is unlikely that the work of artists, no matter how popular they might be, will attract thousands of customers, mainly because art is based on difference and exclusivity. In this sense, including artworks

and other types of content in the same device may finally result in a disadvantage for the perception of the artworks, which must adapt to the screen format (particularly in the case of the EO1, which only allows for portrait orientation) and are placed on the same level as any other visual content on the web. Electric Objects and FRM have developed a product that will probably become ubiquitous in homes and offices, the new frame for digital content. While this should solve the problem of displaying art on a computer screen, to the extent that these devices are identified as tools for the visual display of any content, in the same way that mp3 players play music or multimedia players reproduce video files, they will not be proper platforms for art. The atmosphere described by Danto and identified by O'Doherty in the gallery space will be lost: the artworks will simply add to a collection of digital content and lose their specificity. Paradoxically, it is by limiting their features that they can be useful to the art market, either by displaying only one work or a carefully curated selection of works, and ensuring a limited number of copies of each piece. It remains to be seen, then, if these digital frames will be relegated to the category of consumer electronics or if they will be adopted by the art world.

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Pau Waelder is an art critic, curator and researcher in digital art and culture. Among his latest projects are the conferences *En_lloc (Now_Here)*, *Digital Culture* (Fundacio Pilar i Joan Miro a Mallorca). As reviewer and editor, he has collaborated with several art magazines. He is New Media Editor at *art.es* magazine.

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