Packet Switching

Joelle Dietrick & Owen Mundy

Essay by Eduardo Navas

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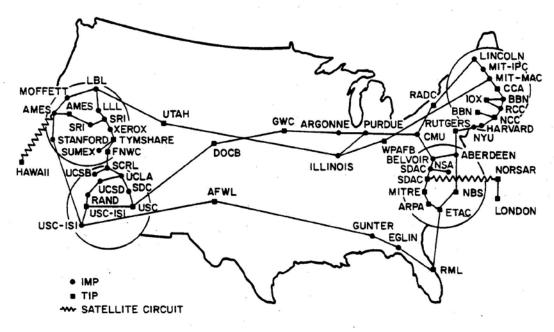
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ARPANET / MILNET Geographic Map, July 1975

Art Packets & Cultural Politics: A Brief Reflection on the Work of Joelle Dietrick and Owen Mundy

By Eduardo Navas

Joelle Dietrick and Owen Mundy's ongoing body of work titled *Packet Switching* focuses on the relation among information exchange, architecture, and social issues. They examine and appropriate the action of data transfer across networks to show the major implications that these three cultural elements have at large. Packet switching, in technical terms, is straight-forward; it is designed to be practical, to transfer information over a network, broken into small pieces at point A then to be sent to point B, where it is put back together. Each packet does not necessarily take the same route, and may even go through different cities around the world before it gets to its final destination. The technology that makes this possible was first introduced as a strategic tactic by the U.S. Government to win The Cold War.

Throughout the 1950s and 60s the relation between the military and research universities was the foundation of our contemporary networked culture.¹ Packet switching was used to send information from and to

¹ Paul Edwards, *The Closed World* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1996), 43–74.



Naval Ordnance Research Calculator (NORC), Columbia University Watson Scientific Computing Laboratory, 1954

various centers across the United States. Such a decentralized system of intelligence was developed in case of a Soviet attack. The network used for this information exchange eventually became the foundation of the Internet.² It is evident that delivering information from point A to point B was politically motivated, and in this sense its cultural implementation was predefined by the struggle for global power.

Packet switching, then, in cultural terms, is complex; when it was introduced to the world with the use of the Internet, it came to redefine every aspect of daily life from the way people communicate with others to the way people understand themselves as part of a society. Packet switching in effect is both a technological and ideological action. The relation of these actions is the driving force behind Dietrick and Mundy's ongoing body of work. Their production consistently points to the history and politics behind a seemingly straight forward functional act of information transfer. Their work connects real aspects of daily life to aesthetics, making evident that they are intimately linked and therefore must be understood as parallel elements that reshape cultures not only in the United States but all over the world. In the realm of aesthetics. Packet Switching is a worthy contribution to the ongoing relation between art and culture, as well as the complexity of art practice, itself, following a line of inquiry that goes back to the days of minimal art throughout the 1970s.

Art Packets

Dietrick and Mundy's work in its most reductive form is data which is reconfigured for specific exhibition settings. So far different projects have been shown in a few cities including Kassel, Germany, Washington D.C.; Fresno, California, and Orlando, Florida.

² For a concise history see "Brief History of the Internet," Internet Society, http://www.internetsociety.org/internet/what-internet/history-internet/brief-history-internet, accessed December 15, 2013.

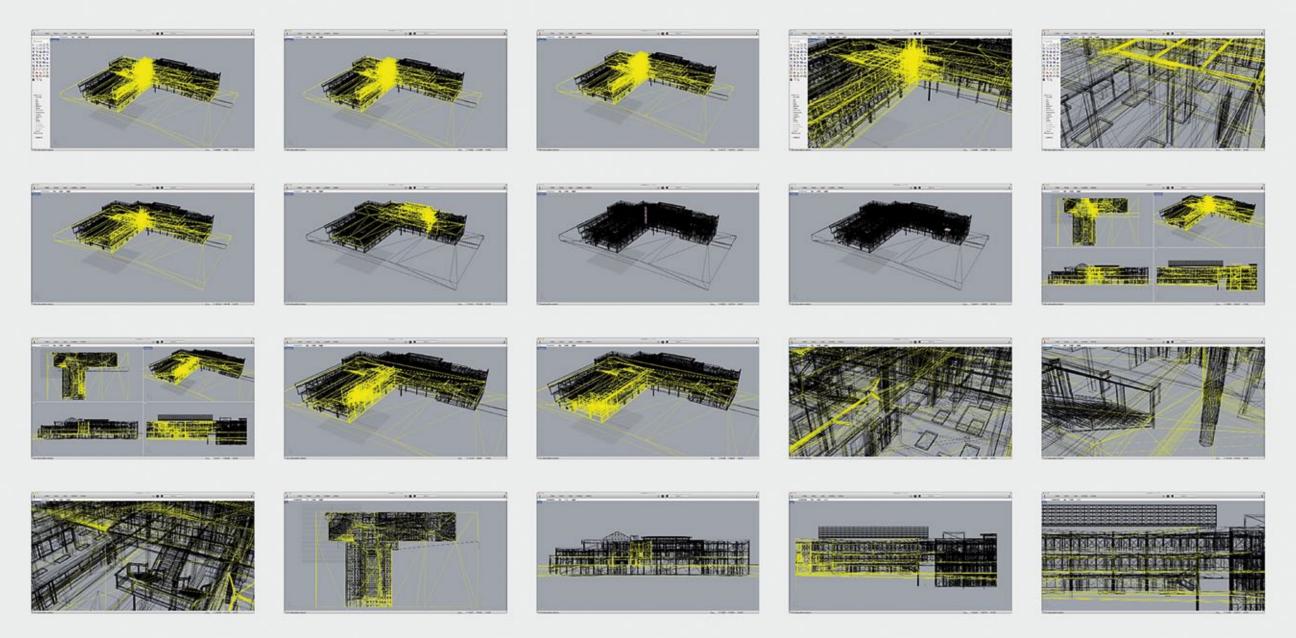
Dietrick and Mundy's installations are not merely formal exercises. When looking at the source code of their works, one learns that it consists of information about pre-existing architectural structures, or the housing and real estate markets relevant to the cities in which the work is being shown, which is reconfigured to create semi-abstract images that appear to be in the process of becoming something, never fully completed: *in potentia*.

The first installation in Kassel conceived for the *Temporary Home* exhibition during Documenta 13 in July 2012 already offered a sense of the process through which the body of work would eventually be moving: from large static paintings to generated animations projected on the gallery walls.

The installation in Kassel, in historical terms, is a contribution to the tradition of the white cube, and as such, the gallery visitor was able to evaluate the abstract architectural forms on principles of beauty. The viewer was encouraged to become aware of the gallery space as an architectural environment that aside from the large wall painting, was empty. At the same time, the design was defined by architectural data specific to German architecture; information-fragments of virtual models of Bauhaus buildings were literally remixed to develop the abstract design. And here we can note an important point that will recur in the work of Dietrick and Mundy, which is the use of pre-existing

architectural data to develop semi-abstract visualizations. Given the tradition of appropriation in art practice as a type of commentary, this action, by default, makes their work prone to be a critical reflection on the material it appropriates, even if it appears as a design primarily produced for aesthetic experience. As it becomes evident in the analysis of other installations developed later, this aspect of Dietrick and Mundy's work becomes crucial in bridging the relation between art experienced in the gallery and the sources taken from the world beyond the white cube to develop such work.

Their next visualization was a permanent public artwork installed at Weimer Hall in the College of Journalism and Communications at the University of Florida, Gainesville. The philosophy in the construction of this building is to have all media—web, print, TV, and radio—together in one space for open collaboration. What this installation shares in common with the first version in Kassel is a clear relation to the architectural space in which it is displayed; in both cases the works of art demand that the visitor reconsiders the aspects of the buildings that may be taken for granted; however, the installation at the university carefully complements the environment, to the point that, arguably, it gets lost within the architecture, becoming inseparable from it; thus providing an aesthetic experience: a visual form as background noise.



independently, while realizing that they are integral to the architectural space. The design unexpectedly gives a sense of disruption, because the image clashes against the building's proportions. It does not have uniform vertical and horizontal lines that follow and complement the architecture, but diagonals that move across the walls delineating brightcolored areas that clearly invite the viewer to question their assumptions about the building itself.

When the design is acknowledged one can reflect on the abstract forms

Grid, Sequence Me, which took place at Flashpoint Gallery in Washington D.C. In this case, the gallery visitor is able to experience the actual movement of the architectural elements in real time, according to the computer programming by the artists. Transparency is a key point for this installation, which is why the source code is also projected on one of the walls, for the viewer to appreciate the actual process behind the animated wall projections.

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⁽previous spread) Screenshot of Weimer Hall fragmentation, 2012 (right) Screenshot from ColladaFragmenter software, 2012

to the complex financial systems of the housing market boom. And it is at this point that the artists' interests in connecting aesthetics with cultural issues become most apparent. In this installation any possible aesthetic experience is met with a reality check, in which the viewer must evaluate how an apparent beautiful image is possible thanks to the dire situation of an economic market

The postmodern preoccupation with the object of art eventually manifests itself in Dietrick and Mundy's installation 1.5 x 3.5 at the Orlando Museum of Art. This piece is directly related to the tradition of minimalist art. As such, the artists cite the work of Tony Smith; specifically his writing about the time he drove over an unfinished turnpike in New Jersey. Smith's incident became known through an interview that was published in the art magazine *Artforum* in December 1966,³ and eventually was mentioned by Michael Fried in his essay "Art and Objecthood" as an example of "literalist art" or "ABC art" as he came to define minimalism and other art production that he deemed not to follow Greenbergian aesthetics, taking place during the seventies.⁴ Fried's contention with work such as Smith's is

that it emphasizes a theatricality in art, something that he argued should be distanced from visual art practice because it devalued the experience that art could provide the viewer. In short, for Fried the work of Smith and his contemporaries diminished the aesthetic experience that art (all the arts including theater) could provide the viewer because it did not offer "presentness" but instead it made reference to the context and the environment which makes the art experience possible.

Cultural Politics

New media art, certainly work similar to Dietrick and Mundy's, has a direct relationship to minimalism. This begins to be apparent in the Kassel installation, it becomes evident in the Washington D.C. exhibition, and is fully manifested in their exhibition at the Orlando Museum, in which the influence of, particularly, the work of Smith is clear. They write when describing the work:

Ubiquitous as an article for the construction of buildings, as well as a formal, minimal, primitive shape, the 2 x 4 here is transformed through its incorporation into a virtual space. The simulation of the generic form becomes an index for any building material, physical or digital,

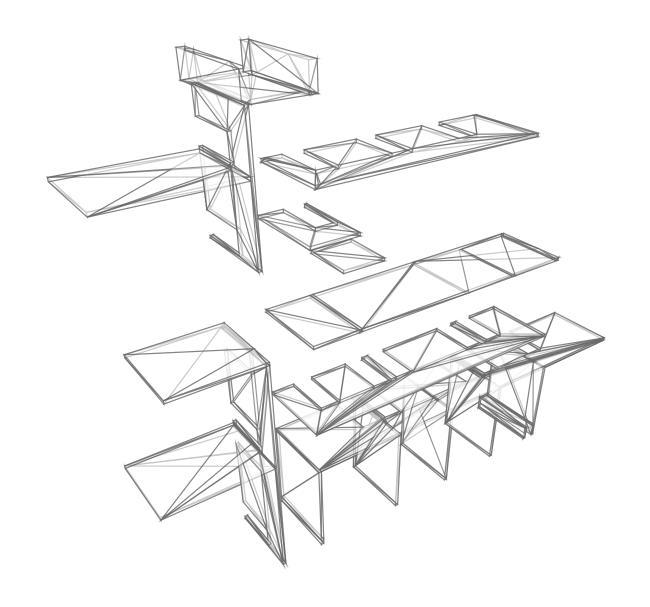
³ Tony Smith, "From an Interview with Samuel Wagstaff Jr.," *Art in Theory*, eds. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (Oxford, U.K. and Cambridge, U.S.: Blackwell Press, 1995), 741. ⁴ See footnote 8 in Fried's text, where Fried claims that theatricality links the minimalists to other artists in different disciplines, such as Kaprow, Cornell, Rauschenberg, Oldenburg, etc: Michael Fried, "Art and Objecthood," *Minimal Art*, ed. Gregory Battcock (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1995), 130.

⁵ Ibid, 147.

and its manipulation, a metaphor for the fragmentation of digital communication.⁶

One of Fried's criticisms of Smith's experience on the New Jersey turnpike is that it points to an inexhaustible possibility which needs no object. The highway in front of Smith is interpreted by Fried as the possibility to experience "endlessness," which for him takes away from the presentness that the work of art is supposed to offer the viewer. In fact, Fried considered the hesitance of Robert Morris (another contemporary of Smith) to place minimal objects into the open air, in nature as proof that what literalist art performed in the gallery was what Smith experienced on the turnpike.⁸

The animation by Dietrick and Mundy reenacts the sensibility which Fried critiqued. In their installation, a single beam not only moves in space, but also multiplies to eventually construct, or allude to the possibility of building some type of living space. Following the hint from Smith's drive down the incomplete highway, the beam was inspired by a housing development just northeast of Orlando, nestled between the Florida Turnpike and Old Country Road 50. In this sense the potential of literalist art to let the world



⁶ Owen Mundy's website, http://owenmundy.com/site/1.5x3.5, accessed Dec 15, 2013.

⁷ Fried, 144.

⁸ Ibid, 135.

experience a moment that is supposed to privilege presentness comes to take effect, and again one is reminded of the fluctuating economy of the real estate market in the United States, because one has to acknowledge the politics of the U. S. economy and culture.

Switching Packets

At the time of this writing it is well accepted that minimalism, and other forms of art practices, such as performance and conceptualism, fully acknowledge their relation to the world beyond the white cube. If anything, many contemporary artists strive to make this connection the very core of their practice. Dietrick and Mundy contribute to this paradigm by taking on the minimalist tradition to comment on the frictions of real estate and architecture in the specific places where their works are exhibited. And by using the concept and technology of packet switching to develop their wall prints and installations, they remind the viewer of the social context that consists of class relations and the economy that informs the very moments in which we may have an aesthetic experience; one which paradoxically is contingent on information access and interpretation. Their work makes evident that trying to create an artwork in which one can escape to have an aesthetic experience without politics is to play into the very politics one is trying to escape, especially in a time when information flows to be remixed everywhere.

Remixing Packets

Presentness is mashed with politics in Packet Switching. Dietrick and Mundy update and reposition the principles that informed minimalism but they do so with no actual object. There is only information, data at play, which is displayed as a projection on gallery walls. What's more, one is aware that such simulation is basically code reconfigured—remixed to appear as a series of objects that one can recognize as an openended, ever-evolving piece of construction. Packet Switching is a body of work that takes on the very principles of the society of the spectacle; it takes theatricality as critiqued and defined by Fried, and makes art that demands critical reflection from the viewer, but at the same time is abstract and open-ended as a visual experience. One can evaluate the works in terms of aesthetics, but one eventually must also face the social infrastructure that makes such experience possible. It is the balance between these two areas of cultural production that is not always easy to touch upon successfully. Like true hackers, then, Dietrick and Mundy crack into the codes of both the economy and aesthetics to expose the relation among information exchange, architecture, and social issues which are part of a network that affects all aspects of society and culture.

Works

Packet Switching (Kassel)

2012 Acrylic on panel 40 x 9 ft. *Temporary Home*, Kassel, Germany

A wall-sized temporary painting based on a 3D digital model of the Bauhaus School at Dessau and 2012 American color forecasts. Having housed the Bauhaus' first department of architecture, this early modernist building connected to the exhibition's venue, a vacant office inspired by Bauhaus design ideals, many times removed, and at one point the location for Kassel's apartment registration (*Anmeldebescheinigung*).





Packet Switching (UF)

2012Phototex on drywall1200 sq ft.College of Journalism and CommunicationsUniversity of Florida, Gainesville, FL

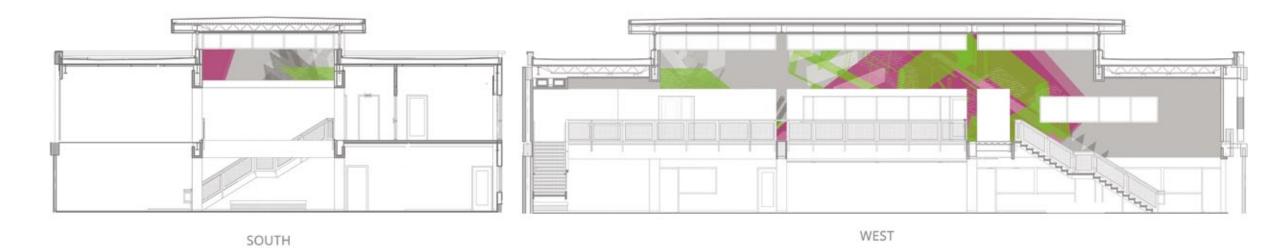
A permanent public commission at the University of Florida's College of Communication and Journalism, Gainesville, FL. Running the length of the atrium fascia between the third floor and clerestory in Weimer Hall, the image is a generative artwork produced using custom software written by the artists that fragments and reconfigures a three-dimensional model of the Weimer Hall Expansion. The structure and individual components of the image are inspired by the rhizomatic structure of the web, the concept of convergence newsrooms, and packet switching, the underlying technical processes that enable all modern forms of networked communication.

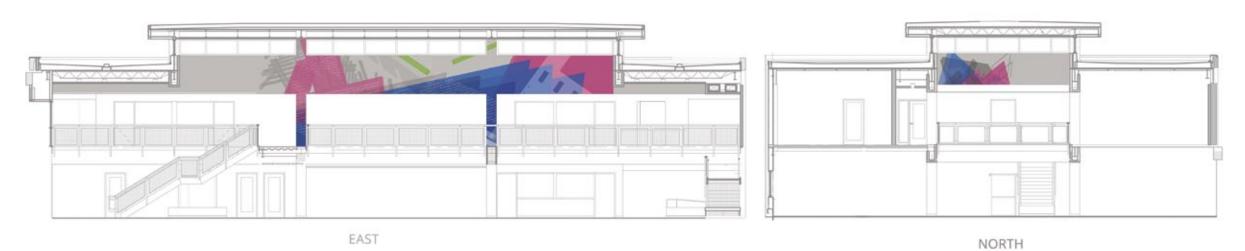


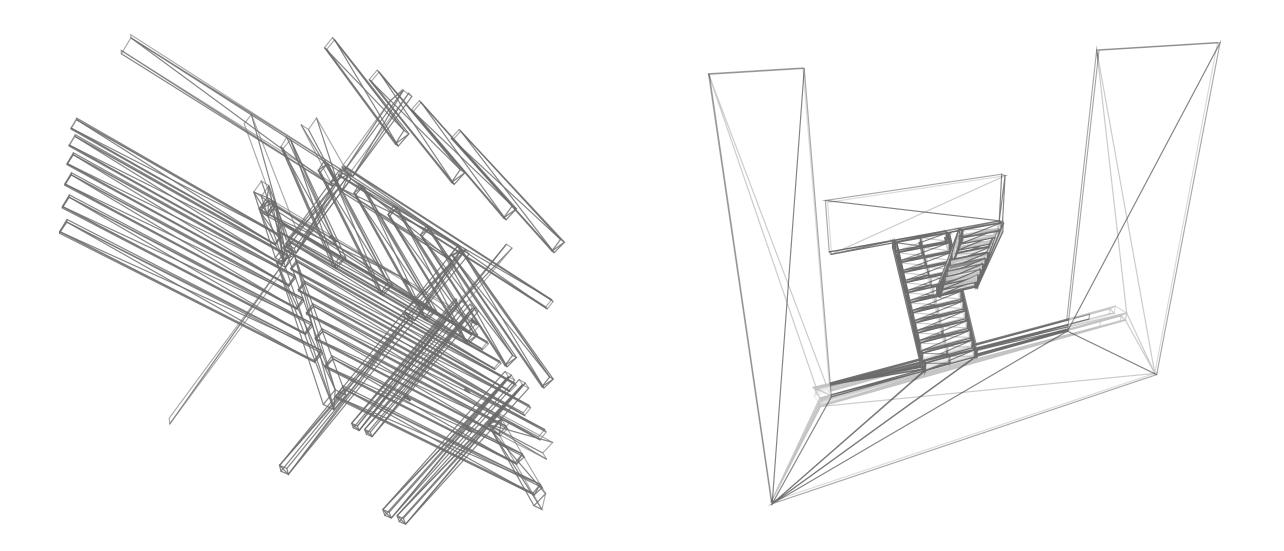












Packet Switching (UCF)

2012
Archival pigment prints
Single-channel animation, 8:40
Center for Emerging Media
University of Central Florida, Orlando, FL

Installation of the *Packet Switching* series including process prints from the University of Florida commission and a new animation called *Particle Convergence*. Sound accompanying the animation includes generated MIDI which corresponded to the movement of the architectual fragments.





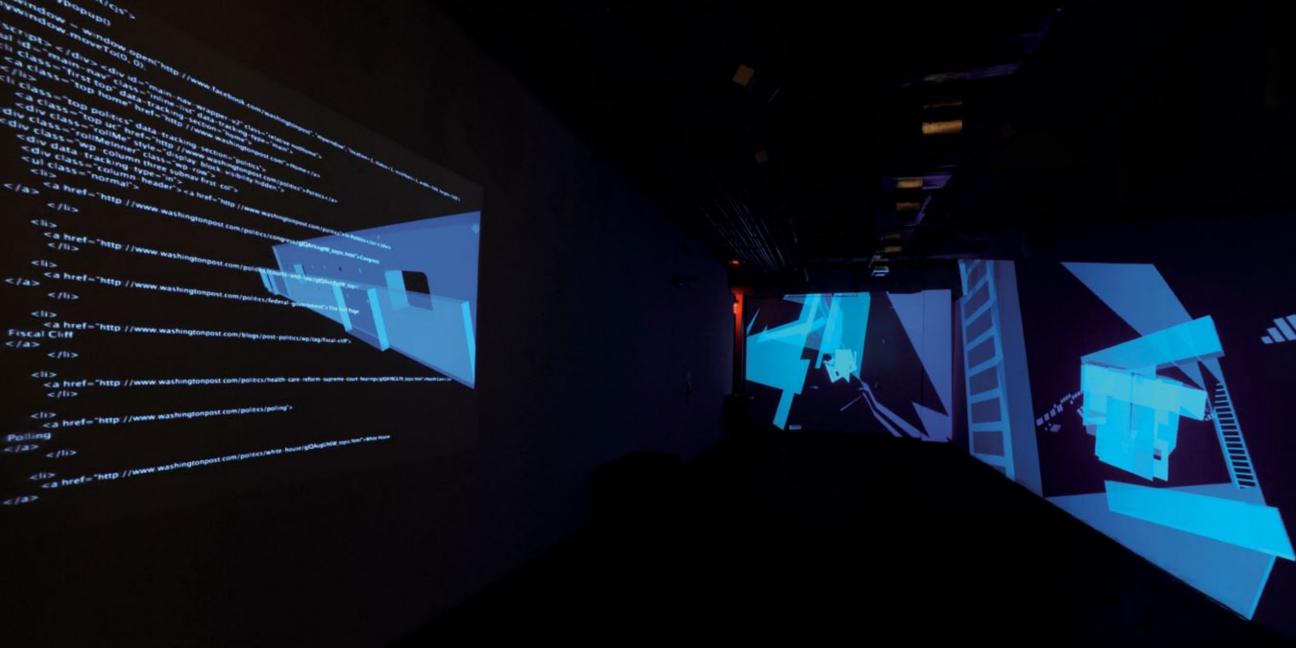
Grid, Sequence Me and The Sea is a Smooth Space

2013

Three-channel projection
Dimensions variable
Flashpoint Gallery, Washington D.C.
Photographs by Brandon Webster

An installation at Flashpoint Gallery in Washington D.C. containing two artworks, Sea is a Smooth Space, a single-channel projection, Grid, Sequence Me, a two-channel projection. Both animations were built with the *Packet Switching* software and incorporated local buildings and data on housing listings.





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1.5 x 3.5

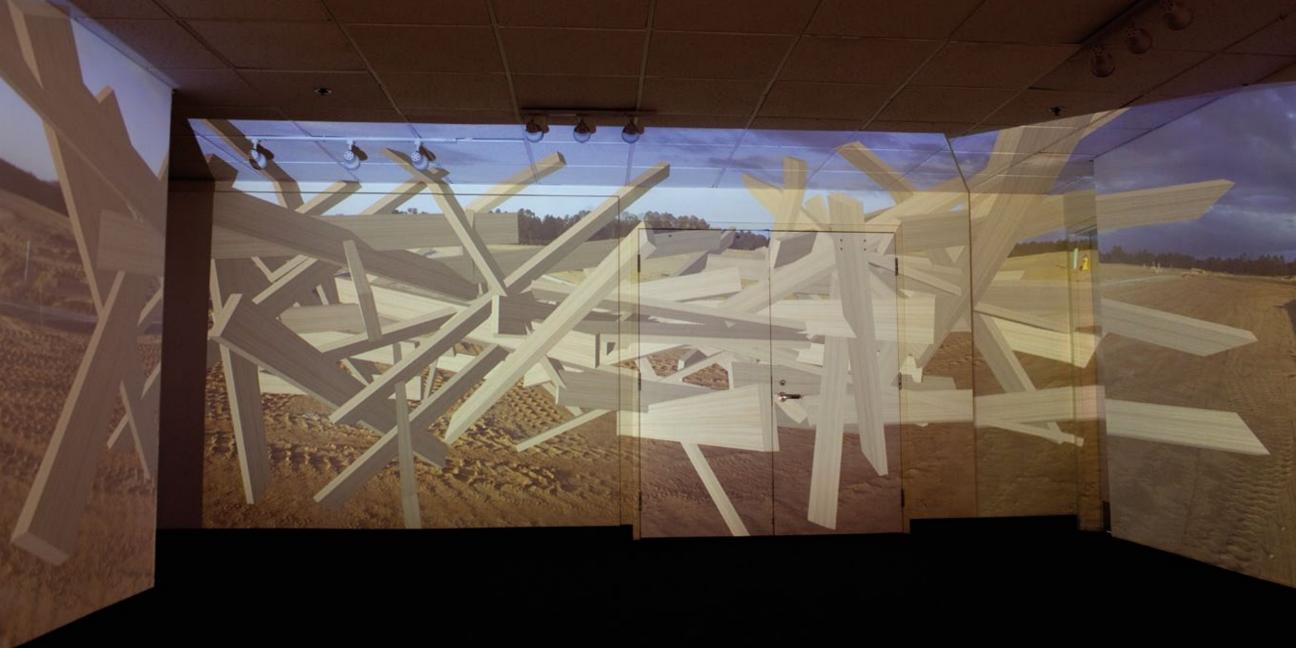
2014
Single-channel generative animation
Making Now: Open for Exchange
Museum of Fine Arts
Florida State University

A three-channel generative animation produced for the Orlando Museum of Art's New Work Gallery. The title 1.5 x 3.5 is the actual measurement for a 2x4 inch board. Ubiquitous as an article for the construction of buildings, as well as a formal, minimal, primitive shape, the 2x4 here is transformed through its incorporation into a virtual space. The simulation of the generic form becomes an index for any building material, physical or digital, and its manipulation, a metaphor for the fragmentation of digital communication.

1.5 x 3.5

2014
Single-channel generative animation over three projectors
New Works Gallery
Orlando Museum of Art





Reviews and Bios

To Interconnect Is Human
By Rob Duarte
Reprinted with permission from
Making Now: Open for Exchange exhibition catalog
Curated by Carolyn Henne, January 2014

With the network model comes the potential for collaboration, sharing and transparency among its nodes and along its links. Efforts to meet the demand for sharing and transparency in everything from government to corporations often have the opposite effect of illuminating the points where these systems fail to relinquish proprietary control and secrecy. As the flow of data in our software-driven networked culture increases in density and complexity, artists whose work is aimed at taking a critical look at culture may find themselves in the role of forensic analysts. The conflation of computer forensics and art appears in the work of artists like Trevor Paglen, Hasan Elahi, Electronic Disturbance Theater, and Making Now artists Owen Mundy and Joelle Dietrick. In Packet Switching, Mundy and Dietrick work to expose the hidden chunks of fragmented data that make up the digestible digital information that we surround ourselves with. The artists' intentions for the work are directly related to their data sources and the ways in which they redesign, re-present and relocate the digital fragments. The content of the work is developed by specifically relating the resulting imagery, with its glitch aesthetic, to the recent real estate collapse and the failures that contributed to it. In parallel, we can view the complex details of the artists' process—from 3D modeling to computer programming to image analysis—as evidence that a critique of the economic, political and social aspects of a culture driven by data might just require that artists consider themselves information analysts and data miners as well.

Duo finds artistry in boom gone bust By Maura Judkis

The Washington Post January 11, 2013

The housing market has turned the corner. And in Joelle Dietrick and Owen Mundy's "Grid, Sequence Me," its corners turn end over end in a perpetual tumble to the bottom, the top and the bottom again.

Dietrick and Mundy live in Florida, where the housing market fell further and faster. Their digital animation aims to capture the tumult of real estate in disarray, constructed to mimic the algorithms that started the problem.

For the artists' new installation, they've taken plans for Washington area houses and public buildings and diced them into architectural fragments—some windows here, a door frame there—that loop across the gallery walls in a collage of competing forms.

A few elements will be recognizable, such as the brutalist outline of the J. Edgar Hoover FBI Building, but many are stripped down to their most generic shapes, making rows of windows look like charts and bar graphs. The projections of some of those shapes echo and interplay with the forms of the Flashpoint gallery interior.

Dietrick and Mundy also scraped The Post's listings of recent home sales, with architectural elements from some of those homes appearing before a dense thicket of live-streamed code. It's a visual reminder of just how complicated the housing industry has become.

This custom coding is also a reference to the way information is transmitted through "packet switching," which breaks data apart as it is sent over the Internet and then reconfigures it upon arrival.

There's a sense in the animation that the structures are tumbling away from you—just as homeownership has slipped out of the grip of many Americans. But the piece will elicit a different reaction here than in Florida, where the effects of the housing market crash have been far more pronounced. In Washington, we've mostly been insulated from it: Foreclosures are few, short sales are sparse. In the jumble of buildings and code, "Grid, Sequence Me," may serve as a warning for those who haven't experienced that sense of loss—but who indirectly, though policy work, may have influenced the systems that led to the crash.

Before long, "Grid, Sequence Me" becomes a meditative experience. Spend a few minutes letting its shapes wash over you in soothing blues and greens and it's no longer about the complexities of housing. It's about finding beauty in transitions, in whatever form they take, from an orderly grid to a spinning assemblage of architectural debris.

Joelle Dietrick ioelledietrick.com

Joelle Dietrick's paintings, drawings, and animations explore contemporary nesting instincts and their manipulation by global economic systems. Her recent artworks and research considers housing trends that complicate relationships to place. Her work has been shown at Transitio_MX in Mexico City, TINA B Festival in Prague and Venice, Museum of Contemporary Art (MCA) Chicago, MCA San Diego, Long March Space Beijing, ARC Gallery Chicago, Soho20 New York, MPG Contemporary Boston, Temporary Home in Kassel during Documenta (13), Flashpoint Gallery in Washington DC and as a permanent public art work at the University of Florida. She has attended residencies at the Künstlerhaus Salzburg, Anderson Ranch, Banff, and the School of the Visual Arts and received fellowships from the University of California, Florida State University and the Deutscher Akademischer Austausch Dienst (DAAD).

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Owen Mundy is an artist, designer, and programmer who investigates public space and its relationship to data. His artwork highlights inconspicuous trends and offers tools to make hackers out of everyday users. In 2009 he created Give Me My Data a Facebook application that helps users reclaim their information in various reusable data formats. His work has been shown at Transitio_MX in Mexico City, the California Center for the Arts in Escondido, CA, Compactspace in Los Angeles, Golden Thread Gallery in Belfast, the Sarai Media Lab in New Dehli, Bauer&Ewald Gallery and G.A.S. Station in Berlin, and APEXART, Flux Factory, and Art Currents Gallery, in New York. He is the recipient of fellowships from the states of Indiana and Florida, a San Diego Fellowship, and a DAAD Fellowship.