

Offsite Online:

Casey Carsel in conversation with Hazel Ellis and Mano Rankin

Hazel Ellis started and led the effort to create [Offsite](#), the online platform for *What do I want? Where do I stand?*. Mano Rankin joined in soon thereafter and has been a key collaborator to the project. Both Hazel and Mano are in their BFA Honours year at Elam School of Fine Arts.

Casey Carsel: First off, could each of you discuss your practice and what led you to the idea of an online exhibition space?

Hazel Ellis: I'm interested in digital and online spaces and how they relate to the networked environments we exist within. Given how integrated these technologies are to our lives, it was necessary for the show to have an online component.

Mano Rankin: This year I've been looking at place in a virtual or simulated sense. Specifically, working with game engines. Acting as a collaborator in the creation of this online space has been an extension of what I've been doing. I think digital spaces can be kept in a particular state - people play with it but (with exceptions) they can't alter it. A game is more like a private property - you can play, but you can't fundamentally change it. All of the background stuff that makes it work is locked away. But I think with the Internet, it's a little bit different. You can participate to a higher degree.

CC: But I wonder if people do. It seems that platforms such as Tumblr nowadays are used more than building websites from scratch. When I discuss web design with people, often the '90s webpage aesthetic comes up, and I wonder if that was a peak of independent webpage creation, whereas now it's set formats and layouts that people slot into.

HE: I think in the earlier stages of the Internet the people using it were also the people who understood it, and who were able to create their own spaces. Now it's so much more ubiquitous, but also you don't necessarily need to know how the Internet works - how to code or anything - because of platforms such as Wordpress or Tumblr. There were earlier conceptions of online participation, where it seemed relatively easy to go and create your own website independently, but the model seems to have shifted away from that.

CC: That was probably back when the Internet was a small town. In the recent Werner Herzog documentary about the Internet, [Lo and Behold, Reveries of the Connected World](#) (2016), one of the original users had a phonebook-sized book from the early days of the Internet that listed every Internet user twice. It's certainly not that way anymore.

MR: That's interesting, because the Internet is known today as quite an anonymous space. Well, in some respects, it's anonymous, but in others it's all about personalities (YouTube, for example).

CC: Often physical spaces are still treated as more legitimate than online spaces. Even this online space will act as a support to the physical space, but what do you think is the relevance of online spaces as autonomous of physical spaces?

MR: [Rafael Rozendaal](#) [a Dutch-Brazilian digital artist who lives and works in New York] made an online gallery space of web pages that featured GIFs and images, and each web page was available for sale. Online spaces can exist as autonomous and different to physical spaces, but it depends on the kind of work featured there.

HE: Digital things can inherently be copied as many times as possible, they can be downloaded, and they can exist in so many different copies, but how would you sell this kind of thing, and keep it singular or within an edition? How would it happen? Maybe you'd have to have it on a computer that wasn't connected to anything. That seems like overkill but...

MR: I think that makes perfect sense. I was going to say you'd have to come up with some kind of image format that would break the image as soon as you copied it.

HE: But even then, it could still be captured in a screenshot.

MR: I guess if it was on a computer that was connected to nothing, that image is going to go nowhere, even if you screenshotted it.

CC: But then, why are we trying to fit these conventional commercial modes?

HE: It does seem weird that you would try to fit it within those established art systems. Because when digital and online art engages with the medium well, it understands the medium's conditions. If it's going to be online, it's generally going to be public, and anyone can see it or download it. I've been thinking a lot recently about online spaces being inherently flat. You can model a space, or create a sense of three dimensions, but it's still flat, coloured pixels made up of red, green, and blue light. If you have an exhibition of paintings that someone has painted physically, in a room, in a space, it changes things to put them in an online show. Even just the decisions of photographing or reproducing the works for a digital space change a lot. For example, whether it's photographed on a wall, or the wall is "clear cut" [a digital manipulation method that erases the background surrounding an object] out.

CC: I think where many online attempts are currently failing is when they expect physical works for a physical space to function the same when put online, not understanding what is lost and gained in the translation. It comes back to the idea of dematerialisation as an idealistic notion that you can have a concept with no form. You can clear cut the wall, but then the wall is digital and made of pixels. The texture doesn't disappear, it just morphs.

MR: By virtue of the screen being flat, you are going to have a flat space as well. I think there are a few museums that are investing in having some of their artefacts turned into three-dimensional models. Is that still flat in your mind?

HE: It is because it's still based on a screen, but it has interactivity to it. [The British Museum](#) has started doing 3D scans of their artefacts, which exist within a web player-type functionality - you can drag them around and zoom, and they have the colour and texture wrapped onto it, but it's rudimentary. Even with the images 3D-wrapped onto these objects, it's still just an image skin. They don't quite sit together.

MR: It depends on what technique they're using. There's a technique of called photogrammetry, where you take heaps of photos of an object and a program spits out a 3D model of that object by stitching the images together. I think that's how they're mostly doing it. It would be different if you were 3D modelling it. It's kind of weird if you 3D model it, because it's just something you made on a computer. But if you 3D scan it

and use photogrammetry, you're actually physically taking readings from that object.

HE: I think flatness is still relatable to these objects, because it's just the image skin. It's more like an articulation of space than an object. The image layer doesn't have a dimension to it, it might articulate the shape of a surface but there's no internal dimension. The great part, though, is that you can download them. I think online things function best when they act as a resource free to the public.

CC: What do you think is the current public perception of online spaces and how do you think this perception will change in the future?

MR: It's hard to foresee, things are moving quite quickly. I think it could go in multiple directions.

HE: It's not like online spaces are new, especially as supplementary spaces, resources and archives, but I still don't think it's something that people are considering enough. Relative to how pervasive these technologies are, there isn't that much going on.

MR: It's definitely something taken for granted.

HE: With all these technologies becoming more popular, or normal, people start thinking that it's going to get rid of the need for real spaces, but virtual things aren't ever going to totally replace the physical experiences.

MR: It wouldn't be possible for particular media, but as a general trend, I think things will migrate more online. Right now these online spaces often operate as secondary spaces but soon they'll become more of the focus. We've seen that in commercial areas, with online stores, it's much cheaper than a physical store. Already in the next generation, some kids will be more used to reading on their iPads than reading a physical book. For them, the book is the foreign object. This won't be the case for everyone, but the trend will keep heading toward the new technology.

HE: That's something to think about with art as well, the physical objects are still going to have to exist, and having exhibitions of art is still relevant, but having both is important, and one shouldn't necessarily be secondary to the other, especially with the benefits that online spaces have. For one, the ability to remove geography from the conversation - if you can't get to the exhibition site, you can still interact with some of it online. My experience on the larger committee also made me realise the difficulty of finding and coordinating a physical site. Especially in Auckland. Our supervisors tell us how they managed to organise a space when they were at art school and they had a whole warehouse to work and exhibit in. I get the sense things like that were easier back then than they are now. Even with the help of the Auckland Council and Auckland Transport (we couldn't find anywhere before contacting them), it's been a battle with building regulations. However, the Internet is also a capitalised space - you do have to pay for domains, or hosting services, but it's also a very small amount compared to the work and money involved with a physical site.

CC: What do you think are other digital gallery space futures and alternatives?

HE: If it's not online, you'd have to travel somewhere to get to the digital space or the file.

MR: If I were to do something like that, a virtual gallery, it would be a distributable file.

CC: File-per-show download.

HE: But again, we're discussing the virtual as a simulation of real space.

CC: It's hard to get away from. I'm so used to reality.

MR: I'm thinking of both - walking through real space, that moves you through virtual space.

HE: There's a rudimentary version with [Google Arts & Culture](#). They have high quality art scans you can zoom into, and Museum Views, which is like Street View, but inside a museum. But that's all in relation to the sensibility of a screen and viewing through a screen.

MR: And without the body connection.

HE: There's a conservation project in the Harvard Art Museum, for Mark Rothko's [Harvard Murals](#) (1962) which had suffered sun damage. They decided to act non-invasively, and digitally project the painting's original colours onto the surface of the painting, and that's how they present it in the museum. At 4.00pm every day, they turn the projectors off, and the viewer can see the original painting.

MR: It's two paintings for one.

HE: But if you can project the colours back onto a painting, how much difference is there then, to projecting entire paintings onto blank canvases on the walls?

MR: But a projection misses the physical qualities.

HE: A little bit. It's half-there.

CC: How are we seeing offline styles (white cube, etc.) translated into online formats?

MR: Rafael Rozendaal is one example of how those formats have seeped into the online space.

HE: Some people thought when we were proposing the online component that it would function as a web simulation of the space, a digital white cube with rooms. There is that technology out there, but I think that's not the most interesting answer. It's one way to tackle traditional art-making, like hung paintings - it's a space for these objects to exist in. There are reasons for this strategy, but it fits within the traditional art display. There are other ways to think about an online-hosted exhibition.

CC: Someone asked me how I would sell my online work, and I responded that I would turn it into a publication. But it wouldn't be quite right in a publication, because it was made with the subtleties of how we look online in mind. How do you think these subtleties affect the work of the artist who plans to put their work online?

MR: An example is video art, which is made to be seen on a screen or projected, not static in a book.

HE: There's video made with YouTube in mind (rather than film), and I think a lot of art now is made to be put online. When this is the case, being put in a physical space like a gallery can be a secondary step out of that online, remotely-accessible environment.

MR: But at the same time, online is not a medium in itself. Video can be on a screen, projected, or go online, and in this way, online is more like a support.

CC: Rather than acrylic on canvas, it's video on web. In many online platforms, there is often potential for a fluidity between creator and viewer. What are your opinions on these structures of the Internet, where users are able to take on the simultaneous roles of uploader and downloader?

HE: I think it's nice to think of online as a democratic space where anyone can do anything, but it's becoming less so. Our generation is seeing an increasingly capitalistic side instead. None of this stuff is new, but I think we're at another changing point, where marketing understands the web.

MR: The web's been tamed. Frequently, people miss the opportunities that Internet-based platforms provide and square them away as something secondary. It may have become that way because from the get-go it's been a secondary space, as we've been discussing, in art institutions, in academic institutions.

HE: But also, there's a trap in the digital-vs-physical debate, when really there should be a paradigm shift taking place. Online is so integrated now. It's not that black and white.

CC: But I feel that often the institutional integration of online is still mostly a lip service to social media, an awkward coexistence rather than an engagement with it.

HE: It's quite forced when it's coming from them, but not when visitors are interacting with those social media platforms naturally.

CC: What are the ways offline and online could work together towards a brighter future?

MR: Turn up the brightness on your screen. Or make a Kickstarter campaign to make a new Internet, a brighter Internet.