DIGITAL COMBINES: A METAMODERN OSCILLATION OF OPPOSITIONAL OBJECTS AND CONCEPTS IN CONTEMPORARY INTERDISCIPLINARY ART PRACTICE

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This article examines the proposed genre of *Digital Combines*, first coined by interdisciplinary artist and educator Claudia Hart in 2021, and how it aligns with ideas that can be found in the currently evolving term known as Metamodernism. While contemporary visual artists have long used unusual juxtapositions in their art making and presentation of work to tell a story or examine a concept. Digital Combines take this further by situating the physical, digital and the virtual in space using a combination of traditional, new media and blockchain smart contracts. In the recent exhibition *We Are Data* held at *Box Gallery* in Melbourne during August 2022, an exploration of this new genre was investigated through the use of a combination of traditional and new media. The outcome was an installation using a metamodern framework that contributed to a greater understanding of the present moment in contemporary culture.

Keywords: Digital Combine, Metamodernism, Interdisciplinary contemporary art, Installation

INTRODUCTION TO THE DIGITAL COMBINE

The genre Digital Combine was coined by Claudia Hart (2021), an artist who primarily uses digital mediums to investigate feminism through the use of patriarchal voices. (Hart 2022) The new term Digital Combine was used by Hart in order to describe an installation or hybrid artwork that is an amalgam of the intangible, digital and physical, and conveys ideas that don't appear to mesh together initially. Hart describes her digital combines as 'a stage set,

juxtaposing poetic, metaphoric objects'. (Hart 2021) The catalyst for the new genre initially came from work the artist made for an exhibition 'The Ruins' held in 2020, which referenced other artists' work to make new work. For this show, the artist made an 'imaginary game world' with forged paintings by Matisse and Picasso using polygon models as a base. These paintings were simulations of the original painting, which were then used to make further copies of the copies. Hart describes these works as 'The real fake. So it's layers of artificiality, that end up as a unique painting by me and a one of a kind, contemporary version of a painting, which is a fake painting of a trompe l'oeil representation of a forgery.' (Hart 2021) Hart then transformed these 'paintings' into Non-Fungible Tokens (NFTs), which consist of a smart contract stored on the blockchain, and established Hart as the owner of these forgeries. In a subsequent group exhibition, new versions of the paintings were created with the addition of Augmented Reality (AR) in the form of layovers placed on top of the painting. (Hart 2021)

Hart has borrowed the word 'combine' from Rauschenberg's combines in which he fused three dimensional objects onto his two dimensional paintings and questioned the establishment by challenging 'the traditional concept of the picture plane as an extension of the viewers space', and provided a 'window into another reality'. (Robert Rauschenberg Foundation 2022) Digital Combines are very similar to Rauschenberg's eclectic choice of mediums, as they too embrace non-traditional materials, like NFTs and the blockchain as a medium. In *The Unfolding Exhibition* held at the Haynes Project Space in 2021, Hart utilised painting, NFTs, AR and wallpaper in her digital combines.

Digital Combines use tropes associated with post-internet which Vierkant (2011) describes as being 'contemporary art and culture after the Internet', and post-digital as they are part of the digital age. Bishop et al (2016) expand on this, saying, 'terms like 'post-internet' and 'post-digital' are associated with an artistic engagement with technology that isn't necessarily preoccupied with the digital as such, but with life after and in the digital, working across old and new, digital and analog'.

The term 'post-internet' was first conceived by artist Marisa Olson and published in an article online in 2008 to 'describe a relationship of art to the Internet', (McHugh 2011) van den

Akker et al (2019) characterise post-internet art by its cursory use of the internet as a tool but not automatically its predominant subject matter. They go on to say that the term is often applied to artists whose work often involves, 'surreal collaged materials and imagery, referencing social media tools or online design styles, as well as certain materials associated with high-tech and/or cheap mass production'. The use of NFTs and the blockchain which is housed on the cloud places Digital Combines under the umbrella of the term post-internet. The term 'post-digital' describes, 'either a contemporary disenchantment with digital information systems and media gadgets, or a period in which our fascination with these systems and gadgets has become historical'. It is a continuation of what has come before through a digital lens. (Cramer 2015)

Both terms first surfaced as a result of the proliferation of digital technology that began in the late postmodern era of the 90s and have become more evident and evolved as the use of technology has become part of our everyday lives. Also, during this period, a critique of postmodernism was beginning to occur more frequently, although Green (2005) claims that 'dissatisfaction with the idea of postmodernism has been present from its inception'. The word is at once hyperbolic and conceptually fuzzy', and that, 'postmodernism seems to be a quality— a deficiency, perhaps— that one attributes to the other: it is that which one denounces, finds at fault, declares oneself against', because postmodernism was an opposite reaction to modernism. Van den Akker and Vermeulen (2019) concur when they quote authors that in 1988 claim the language of the day was inadequate to describe what is happening culturally and politically at that time. Metamodernism attempts to incorporate postmodern stylistic and formal conventions while moving beyond them'. Metamodernism doesn't negate postmodernism but embraces and combines previous ideas from modernism and even earlier and places them in oscillation to form new ideas and meanings. (van den Akker and Vermeulen 2019) Storm and Josephson also add that, 'rather than just a response to postmodernism or an oscillation between modernist and postmodernist modes, Metamodernism is an overcoming of both'. (Storm 2021)

WHAT IS THE BLOCKCHAIN?

According to Franceschet (2021) the origins of blockchain began with the research paper *How to time-stamp a digital document*, published in 1991 by Haber, a cryptographer and

Stornetta, a physicist who were attempting to answer 'epistemological problems of how we trust what we believe to be true in a digital age'. (Franceschet 2021) They were successful in solving the problem and their application for a patent was registered in the United States in 1992. (Haber & Stornetta 1992) In their 1991 journal article Haber and Stornetta were discussing how to certify the date that the digital data of text, audio, picture and video documents was created or last changed. A few years later bitcoin was developed by Satoshi Nakamoto an anonymous person or persons who created an open-source, 'form of money that uses cryptography to control its creation and transactions, rather than a central authority'. (Bitcoin Project 2022) Bitcoin and the time-stamp technology combined with tools borrowed from, 'mathematics, computer science, economics and political science', contributed to the creation of blockchain as we know it. (Franceschet 2021)

Blockchain is a permanent and transparent record, archived using decentralised peer-to-peer Distributed Ledger Technology (DLT). This technology safeguards the security of a decentralised digital database because it eliminates the middleman and reduces the chance of fraud, gives hackers less opportunities to access the information, and increases stability of the system (Srivastava 2020) and further states that, 'It is an emerging and revolutionary technology that is attracting a lot of public attention due to its capability to reduce risks and fraud in a scalable manner'. There are multiple DLTs available with some of the most popular being, 'Ethereum, Hyperledger Fabric, R3 Corda, and Quorum'. (Frankenfield 2021) Ethereum is open-source and best known for its use with the cryptocurrency Ether (ETH). Unfortunately, Ethereum is mostly known for its damage to the environment because it was energy-intense to mine the cryptocurrency, up until recently when they upgraded to proof-of-stake which reduces the energy required by over 99.9%. (ethereum.org 2022)

IS BLOCKCHAIN A MEDIUM?

Described by (Franceschet et al. 2021), 'Crypto art is a recent artistic movement in which the artist produces works of art, typically still or animated images, and distributes them via a crypto art gallery or their own digital channel using blockchain technology'. More widely known as NFTs this type of artwork according to Franceshet et al. (2021) draws its origins from conceptual art—sharing the immaterial and distributive nature of artworks, the tight blending of artworks with currency and the rejection of conventional art markets and

institutions. Colavizza (2022) concurs that these new developments will encourage diversity in artists and collectors by encouraging the expansion of the type of people taking part in the traditionally elitist art market, but then goes on to say that 'The traditional art market is notoriously opaque and hard to access, with steep winner-take-all mechanics making it hard for most artists and collectors to benefit from it. Is the NFT art market any different? The answer is no'. In this case Colavizza is talking about the financial aspects of the blockchain as an artist, whereas Hart uses the blockchain as an artistic medium.

Ethereum is also the predominant cryptocurrency used to mint NFTs on the blockchain. Hart uses NFTs on the blockchain as a 'cloud-based site for media art'. (Hart 2022) Similar to the Instruction Based Artists in the 1960s, who used an instruction in order for the work to be made and given meaning, Blockchain stores contracts using written programming that can be customised by artists to do certain things.

The following is an excerpt from the first Digital Combine contract Hart created: '[T]he born-digital [work] cannot be sold separately from the [physical work], as they are two halves of a singular whole. Sellers and purchasers will be required to share contact information, so that the tangible work can be properly transported to the new collector. Otherwise, this compromises the integrity of the work and, in the event of their separation [the artist] will no longer recognise this iteration as her own and it will not be included in her upcoming catalogue raisonne. In an inversion of platonic idealism, [the artist's] commentary interweaves the problematics of representation through virtual simulation versus the history of representation through physical embodiment'. (Hart 2021)

Artists can use metadata, or information about information, in the smart contract housed on a blockchain to 'suture elements of hybrid works'. Hart goes on to say that 'Digital Combines pair a painting with a related NFT computer graphic, one that also holds the work's metadata, to create a single conceptual object'. (Hart 2022) The metadata in the smart contract of the NFT provides instruction that combines the tangible and intangible. Other artists have used the concepts of transactional processes of finance and money associated with Blockchain in their art making however Hart uses the very foundation of Blockchain like a glue that joins disparate pieces to make one in addition to adding meaning to the work. Like an 'easter egg',

commonly referred to in gaming circles, the information is there for people who know where to look.

A METAMODERN REACTION

Hart talks about how, 'The trading of crypto currencies and the artistic NFT seized the imagination of a public housebound by Covid from early 2020', and that 'Digital Combines have become my response to a culture in crises, inspiring me to adopt the NFT, and the act of digitally "minting" one, as its symbol'. (Hart 2021) This gives rise to consideration that Metamodernism was also born from a combination of developments in contemporary culture including the recognition that we had moved beyond notions posited as postmodern, and the occurrence of what is now known as a meta-crisis of 'climate change, financial meltdown, and the escalation of global conflicts'. (Turner 2015) This has now evolved to include the addition of the recent pandemic, that is currently still playing out, where whole cities were encouraged to lockdown in order to reduce the spread of the virus.

The currently evolving term Metamodernism allows for the simultaneous use of ideas that originate in modernism and postmodernism without contradiction. The use of oppositional aspects or concepts in art making and other cultural production, that form a, 'complicated feeling' (Dember 2020). These ideas in oscillation allow Metamodernism to move beyond these fixed terms, to encompass a wide range of cultural tendencies that reflect the zeitgeist and is known collectively as a structure of feeling. (Van Den Akker, Gibbons & Vermeulen 2019)

In Hart's Digital Combines, the traditional form of painting, that brings along all of its inherent ideologies, problems and aura, is presented on top of a printed wallpaper, when viewed through a special app on an iPhone, activates an AR overlay. These oppositional mediums are then glued together, through its conversion into an NFT that is stored on the blockchain, and subsequently creates the digital combine. This combination of conflicting mediums that at first may seem to be in opposition, create new meaning through oscillation.

Rhea Myers is an artist who makes work that references Blockchain technology utilising the

ideology and aesthetics of cryptography. (Meier, Ap & Damiani 2022) Blockchain is accessed through cryptographic means that enables a person to manage their cryptocurrency and it also uses cryptographic methods to add new information. (Srivastava 2020) In their artist statement Myers describes themselves as 'an artist, hacker and writer', who makes work that, 'places technology and culture in mutual interrogation to produce new ways of seeing the world as it unfolds around us'. (Myers Studio Ltd 2021) The two concepts of technology and culture appear to work in opposition to each other in an oscillation and places Myers work firmly in the realm of Metamodernism.

An early example of Myers work that uses the Blockchain as a medium is 'MYSOUL', a representation of the artist's soul divided into 100 pieces. It was divided in order to make the object for sale more competitive, 'reduce costs and allocate this resource more efficiently'. (Myers n.d.) The work was made in 2014 and placed on the Dogepartychain as a Dogeparty asset that has been defunct since 2017. In this early example of 'crypto art' that is influenced by conceptual art (Meier, Ap & Damiani 2022) the artist is examining the ideology of commodification that is in direct opposition to the metaphysical notion of the soul.

IRONIC SINCERITY

After putting their soul up for sale the artist's wife objected saying that her 'soul belonged to her'. Myers agreed that this was 'an entirely valid point', but was regretful that they now can't 'do market discovery on the value of my soul'. (Myers n.d.) This situation of the artist accepting her loved ones claim on her soul creates a situation of ironic sincerity a hallmark of a structure of feeling. Myers expands on this by saying, 'It's a shame because I can imagine DAOs for different major and new religions all putting offers on people's souls. This combines Pascal's wager with the efficient-market hypothesis and brings about the singularity and heaven on earth at the same time'. (Meier, Ap & Damiani 2022) Hart also draws a connection between the blockchain and metaphysics when they say that, 'I think of NFTs as a kind of magical enactment, an act of prestidigitation—something metaphysical. (Hart 2021) Part data, part physical, part metaphysical, the digital combine exists continuously oscillating between the physical world, the data-driven world of the internet and social media, and the cloud-based virtual world.

The combination of these opposing concepts oscillate to create an ironic sincerity which forms part of the term New Sincerity. Not to be confused with Post-irony, New Sincerity combines irony and sincerity to create new meaning. Kontantinou (2009) claims that post-irony is part of a counterculture that has 'co-opted irony, thus robbing it of its critical power.' Kontantinou (2016, cited in Lambert 2020) says that post-irony is a result of 'the pressure to transcend the supposed heartlessness of postmodernism'. New Sincerity is defined by Siltanen (2020) as a presentation of, 'the self as unmediated: banal, naïve and emotional, exploring these stances as oppositions to ironic hyper-awareness and cynicism, while not fully diverging from them', and goes on to say that New Sincerity responds to postmodernism, being self-referential, and as a differentiation to irony.

WE ARE DATA

Held in an artist run space Box Gallery in Brunswick, Melbourne from August 5th to 27th 2022 the exhibition by Sue Beyer titled *We Are Data* (Beyer 2022) consisted of a range of interdisciplinary media used to begin an investigation into the new genre of Digital Combines through a metamodern lens.

Sue Beyer's artist statement:

Using a multidisciplinary approach I focus on ideas relating to Instruction Based Art, sensory thresholds, transformation and the in-between.

From a young age I have been fascinated with the 'magic' of computers, programming and the internet. When I first became interested in computers they took on a metaphysical aspect for me, hinting that all the answers were available if you knew how and where to look. Trying to figure them out and the way they work is/was a bit of an obsession for me. In my work, the computer or program is an interface or transformative space.

At the present time I am working on a project titled We Are Data. This project uses a mix of paintings, electronic and new media works that reference data I gather from the internet and the physical world. Using various techniques the data is transformed and presented, to tell a story.

My paintings, that vary in size, look pixelated and appear to be a close-up of a digital file. However, when you examine them closely, you can see that the lines aren't perfect and the hand of the artist is evident.

In addition, I use digital, electronic and new media works, that I combine to create installations using the different mediums layered on top of each other like a giant collage that can cover walls and floors. The installations are filled with information, and reference the overwhelming amount of data that can be accessed digitally and physically on any given topic on the internet or in real life.

The project *We Are Data* used a mix of electronic, painting and new media works that referenced data gathered from the internet and the physical world on the artist Sue Beyer. Using various techniques the data was transformed and presented, to tell a story. The main piece included a list of Google data, a printout of a Google search page on Sue Beyer, a pixelated image of the farm where Beyer grew up in the 1970s and 1980s, an abstracted pixelated painting, two QR codes, a background of printed binary data, and two RGB LED Matrix panels run by Raspberry Pi microprocessors. These mediums were layered on top of each other like a giant collage that partially covered one main wall comparable to a stage set.

The title *We Are Data* gives us an indication as to what this piece is attempting to investigate: that it is biographic in nature. The title *We Are Data* refers to a book the artist read earlier that year of the same name, written by Cheney-Lippold that discusses the affect that big data has on establishing our identity online. This particular biography is predominately written by data found through the Google search engine, using the search terms 'Sue Beyer', 'What is Sue Beyer' and 'Who is Sue Beyer' in order to establish who or what big data thinks comprises Sue Beyer. Google search was chosen because it is known as being the leading internet search engine, which according to Statista (2022), generates more than 80 percent of desktop search traffic and would therefore give the most accurate and full account of who or what is Sue Beyer.

Figure 1. 'We Are Data', 2022, mixed media, approximately 4m x 2.5m

The ironic process of a human asking big data who they are, establishes this artist's process of data collection as metamodern, because the artist was seeking a genuine answer from a source that is traditionally known as being oppositional in nature. Big Data provides a basis for 'more accurate and truthful understanding of phenomena'. (Schiuma & Carlucci 2018)

Instead of a clean, crisp and bright digital print, the artist chose to use the traditional medium of painting in this digital combine, that depicts digital characteristics like pixels. This dichotomous use of old technology to illustrate the contemporary can represent a 'disenchantment with the digital' (Cramer 2015), and is a post-digital tool that highlights an aspect of contemporary culture that celebrates the hand of the human artist in the crafting of an artwork. Cramer agrees when they say that post-digital can describe 'a media aesthetics which opposes such digital high-tech and high-fidelity cleanness'.

The backdrop used in the Digital Combine is a binary portrait of the artist consisting of binary data extracted from a JPEG selfie of the artist using the application Hex Fiend. The

process of transformation from the original digital image to a .txt file has revealed the materiality of the digital file in the form of 1s and 0s. This part of the digital combine is sincerely ironic in that it depicts a human person as raw data, unrecognisable to a human but easily interpreted by a computer. This might lead to questions like, does the computer know Sue Beyer better than they know themselves, is this depiction of the person honest and genuine, and is this data more truthful than the image itself? When interpreting the data the computer is not clouded by personal beliefs or idiosyncrasies of how the person views themselves. This is of course an extreme position, as a person is made up from more than just how they look, but is an interesting proposition, particularly when considering the future impact of artificial intelligence and machine learning on humans in general.
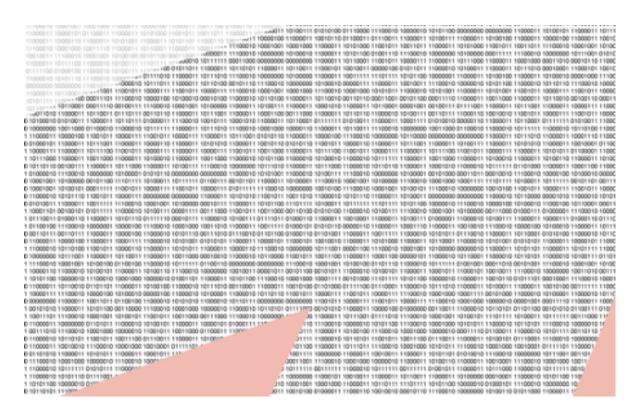

Figure 2. 'We Are Data', (detail) 2022, self-adhesive vinyl

Schiuma and Carlucci (2018) agree when they say that, 'the notion of big data could resonate as dry and opposite with their very deep human-based nature. But in reality, data represents the expression of the organic and dynamic nature of the phenomena characterising and distinguishing human creativity, activities, context, and means of operation. In this

perspective, big data denotes the manifestation of the variety, velocity, and volume of human life'. The seemingly oppositional concepts of human and machine contribute to a metamodern structure of feeling. Dember (2020) describes this as the, 'braiding of playful irony or experimentation with an unabashed delight in the intricacies of being human'.

IN-BETWEEN SPACE

Another interface, used in the *We Are Data* digital combine, are two QR codes, one of which when scanned opened a webpage to the website *Foundation* and gave the viewer the option of purchasing the painting straight from their smart phone. Claudia Hart refers to QR codes as, 'portals to the cloud'. (Hart 2021)

The second QR code when scanned, activated an app called *Hoverlay*, which loaded an AR piece that played a video with sound that overlaid the physical pieces on the wall. The AR work consisted of scrolling words being narrated by a computerised voice with an accompanying video of related images. The first component was created by an AI story generator called *Deep Story* using the search term 'Sue Beyer'. The AI came up with these sentences:

> She is walking along in San Francisco. A record spins. She stops. He approaches. She's not very enthusiastic. Back in the doghouse. Each searchlight beam is making a
>
> blind splash in the river. One of them is hovering over a dead duck. Sue looks up through the beam of the patrol light. Sue Beyer a reporter from the Michigan wire. She waves at a stunned Baird on camera. Sue tries to control her attention as her mother prays. Craig's wearing khaki pants and a sweater. He can't be coming with Bob. A clip-gun blasts directly into the crowd. It catches Tracey's ankle and quickly kicks her forward. She falls as she stands, in a heap. The other camera is pointing directly at the helicopter. The gun fires. Thump, thump! Bought clothes are scattered everywhere. The club consists of a thousand pasted together pieces. Sue Beyer stands, alone in a warehouse of throw pillows. She flicks on her leg light.

These sentences were then converted into sound using text to speech in order to be used with rolling text in a video. Finally, the sentences were entered into a *Melobytes* text to video AI. These three components were joined together and used to create the AR overlaying the Digital Combine. The AR added an extra virtual element to the Digital Combine further enhancing its connection to Metamodernism through an oscillation between the physical, digital and the virtual. The in-between or place of transformation, where this oscillation occurs, where it's not one or the other but both, 'allows three aspects work together and mutually affirm one another, and how their combined effect is one which can best be described as the creation of a space'. (Binney 2015) This is a non-binary transformative space where 'the constant in-betweenness of Metamodernism' (Binney 2015) occurs and is evident in the work of Hart, Myers and Beyer through their use of NFTs and the blockchain, QR codes and AR.

A METAMODERN OSCILLATION

This initial investigation into Digital Combines and how they work has provided an introduction to a new understanding of how oppositional materials and meanings can be combined to create new meaning through a metamodernist lens. The digital combine *We Are Data* is filled with information and references the overwhelming amount of data that can be accessed digitally and physically on any given topic on the internet or in real life. The work uses styles, digital tools and is of the internet, but isn't talking about these topics, which indicates it belongs under post-digital, post-internet and ideas commonly associated with the New Aesthetic, that are in turn associated with Metamodern theory. Further investigation into the metaphysical aspects of this genre in regards to the virtual and cloud based components is required and it will also be interesting to see how this new genre evolves with further enhancements in technology.

Beyer, Hart and Myers work is a metamodern reaction to the metacrises we find ourselves dealing with, combined with rapid advancements in technology. The hybridisation of old and new mediums glued together by the blockchain as a medium for artists needs to be expanded upon rather than just seeing it as a tool for financial transactions and storage.

Digital Combines highlight the in-betweenness in the oscillation of mediums and concepts which is a characteristic of a metamodern structure of feeling. (Van Den Akker et al 2019) Additional examination into the transformative space that the oscillation creates, and how it relates to liminal space through a non-binary process of transformation and creates a more complicated in-between is needed.

This project is a starting point and work in progress, however I believe it clearly shows that the new genre of Digital Combines by their very nature are metamodern constructs, because they use materials, mediums and concepts that are traditionally, culturally and physically in opposition.

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