BEHIND THE SCREENS: DIGITAL APPLICATIONS

What's being created today for the iPhone and iPad is mind-blowing. It's a glorious realization that we are now in a place where digital technology and art together are so inclusive and generative. But who creates apps, what are they, how do they happen? The three minds below are no strangers to this glowing new phenomenon. Follow A.N.D as we converse with all three of them, tracing the expansion of this field, spotlighting the aspects that make it charged and, perhaps, the greatest recent addition to our digital world.

FILIP VISNJIC

Founder of Creative Applications Network, a key source in keeping the public updated about all fields surrounding creative applications.

SCOTT SNIBBE

The most tenured in the field, Scott Snibbe, has revealed a collaborative app with Björk that is nothing shy of breathtaking and revolutionary.

JAMES ALLIBAN

James Alliban, newer to the scene but full of passion, is making immersive applications that alter the streets we walk on.

#1
HOW DID YOU ARRIVE WITHIN THE WORLD OF APPLICATIONS?

Snibbe

I'm one of these people who was born to do what I do. My parents were sculptors, and they were working with technology, mostly with plastics. They made "interactive" art in the form of hanging mobiles. My father invented a geometric kite and worked for a long time on a perpetual motion machine; he's still working on that one! I was raised with art and technology around me and from the earliest time that I can remember I wanted to be some combination of an inventor and an artist. I always wanted things to be interactive. I made 70's style Cornell boxes; when I was really young, cementing Plexiglas boxes together, and putting sand and beads inside them. I'd never seen Cornell boxes but I had an inclination toward interactivity. I mean, human beings are "interactive" so it's not that strange an inclination, though there still aren't many interactive artists today.

In 1980 I had a chance to use an Apple II computer running Apple Logo. Then I knew what I wanted to do with my life; as soon as I saw those colors and learned how to make turtle graphics, I knew. I got my first computer when I was 10. With the Apple II computer there weren't these default saturated reds, blues and greens, they actually chose a really nice palette for their colors, even in the low res grid. And you could make simple audio tones. There's a synesthetic aspect to my mind because seeing abstract color and light moving makes me feel extremely good. I was making graphics and coding from a young age so by the time I went to college I knew something like eight programming languages; and when I went to college I knew that I wanted to do some combination of art and technology so I chose Computer Science and Film for my majors.

I was really into both experimental film, and cinema's classics; my parents introduced me at an early age to the experimental filmmakers of the 60's like Jean Cocteau, who I still consider one of my strongest influences. If you watch his *Orpheus* you can see that it's where *The Matrix* got all of its ideas from, moving through mirrors, time stopping, and so forth. I was also influenced by having access to a ton of art materials at home. We had no TV and tons of materials — from fabric to metal, wood, plastic, and broken appliances. And my parents were Christian scientists so they weren't afraid that we'd hurt ourselves.

I always knew what I wanted to do and the benefit was that I became proficient at an early age and then could work on mastery as I became an adult. I majored in Computer Science, Experimental Animation, and Art. A combination of these thinks is what I wanted to do professionally, but then I never saw a market for it. I was always making interactive audiovisual programs on the side but there were no interactive media university programs in the 80's. I caught a lot of flack in my graphics research lab for some of my experiments. I would do a lot of programming late at night when nobody was around, harnessing all the computers in the lab. These experiments look a lot like what I'm making now. In fact one of the earliest I will be re-releasing for iPad sometime later this year.

Alliban

I started learning openFrameworks early last year and learned that you could use it to create iPhone apps. I thought this would be an interesting platform to explore. I tend to take an abstract approach to digital work. I'm inspired by artists such as Picasso, Braque and Rauschenberg. I have a history of building generative applications that result in Cubist portraits and decided to revisit this area, this time on the iPhone. The result was Fracture.

In terms of my next app Konstruct, I was approached by String, a mobile augmented reality company based in London. They were in the early stages of their development with AR technology when I first met them but I thought what they had achieved was very impressive; it was slick, fast and accurate. They offered my early access to their technology so I decided to check it as I had an interesting idea.

I love generative art and have been working with it for a long time. Short experiments mostly, just dipping in here and there. I wanted to explore generative art, 3D geometry and abstract motion graphics together for my next app. At first I thought I could use touch to build compositions in AR space but I'd seen something like this before and it seemed too personal. Essentially I was thinking of an app that could be exhibited in a gallery or a festival. So I decided to make the piece sound reactive. This makes the experience more inclusive because you're not only interacting with the piece, but also the people around you. You voice is also affecting their work.

Composite is something I dreamt up a year ago or so. It's based on an artwork I did on my M.A called «Broken City." This is basically a flash application that allows you to paint compositions of various pictures taken in a city. Drawing with the mouse unveils areas of randomly selected photos building a layered effect. I thought it would be great to do something that is a continuation of Fracture but using live video instead of still pictures. It seemed like an obvious idea and I was initially worried that someone would get in there and do it before me. I've had a great reception so far. Users are really getting a lot of enjoyment out of being able to quickly build great looking compositions without any artistic skill.

Visnjic

I seem to have picked it up quite early and I think that's why the blog itself draws a lot of attention, it has an angle that nobody's really addressing at the moment. I think a lot of blogs that try to address this issue of interaction and design but without actually getting to the bottom of understanding what context these things fit into. It's an issue that hangs in the air at the moment and I think that's why people are finding these concepts within digital art problematic. The way Creative Applications has developed goes back to when I was a student. My final architectural project was on how you take an idea and shift it through different software. Back then there was code but I wasn't looking at it as a method; I was looking at general applications like Photoshop, Illustrator and as a media how you shift ideas through these different applications. So you take an idea and turn it into animation. New ideas influence the original concept. I would take, for example, an object or form and try to repeat it through different software, like looking at it in 2D or 3D. When I was a student I never thought that there was one piece of software. When you work in an architectural school you look at 2D then build models and take photographs and so forth. Most people would settle on preferred software but I always thought that there isn't one software that does it all, there's a range of things. So I was trying things to see how design develops through these different tools. I've been teaching since I finished studying and I kept coming across new software. Then the iPhone and iPad created a lot of space to understand different tools. In some way it became apparent that these things will evolve more and more. That's where CAN began.

> **+ MOST PEOPLE WOULD SETTLE ON PREFERRED SOFTWARE BUT I ALWAYS THOUGHT THAT THERE ISN'T ONE SOFTWARE THAT DOES IT ALL, THERE'S A RANGE OF THINGS. SO I WAS TRYING THINGS TO SEE HOW DESIGN DEVELOPS THROUGH THESE DIFFERENT TOOLS. +**
>
> Filip Visnjic

#2
WHAT HAVE APPS ALLOWED ARTISTS AND PROGRAMMERS TO DO?

Snibbe

I'd almost given up on screen-based artwork in 2008. Some of these guys, like Golan Levin and the great guys working with OpenFrameworks, are a little bit younger; they've had five or ten years less of struggle [laughs]. I stopped making that kind of web commission work around 2000. Once I started doing commissions I realized that the web is one of the worst forms of media for interactivity, and I really stand behind that statement. I can't stand it as a medium because you can't control the way it's experienced and perceived, there's no aesthetic to it. It's merely the information content, you don't get an aesthetic controlled experience. I kind of gave up. My work was popular, it was in the Whitney and MoMA and places like that but I really wanted to distribute it to everybody. To be honest I never wanted to be a fine artist. I love fine art but I never wanted to be a fine artist because it's very elite, it only reaches a small audience; many people are scared to enter a museum or gallery. I wanted to find some mass distribution medium for screen-based interactivity.

When I worked at Interval Research with Golan he became very excited about interactive abstraction after seeing a program I wrote in the 80s called Motion Phone. I began teaching him how to program, we collaborated on some abstract experiments with great names like Escargogolator, and we came up with this portable device called the Finger Sandwich. It was the size of an iPhone, it had a touch surface on the back and a screen on the front and we tried to get it patented and funded but it was a little early for its time. I always wanted something like that; writers can sell books, musicians can sell songs, filmmakers can sell movie tickets, but there was no way to distribute interactive work until the iPad came out. You can say it was the iPhone but it's really the iPad that made this exciting again. It was really a renaissance. I was doing a lot of installations during the nineties and through the 2000s but those got really expensive to make so I stopped accepting most invitations to show art, and wrote fiction for a few years as my main personal creative work, in addition to the commercial interactive work we do through Snibbe Interactive. Writing was always been my favorite medium because it's the least encumbered by any limits. Programming is probably second because you're still just only limited by your technical ability and imagination. But writing is even more unfettered and I think more difficult than programming.

Just before the iPad was announced I attended an interactive music/art conference at Arizona State University organized by Thanassis Rikakis and Mark Danks gave a talk about the few interactive music iPhone apps and I realized "this is it, I can release my old programs on the iPhone." And so I started programming them for the iPhone and when I was done and about to release them, the iPad was announced and that's why I could release three apps immediately when the iPad came out. Now, finally there was an audience for screen-based interactivity, it made my life.

There's a little bit of an ulterior motive with these apps which is to create certain positive states of mind in people like concentration, and contentment, a state where one is not regretting the past or anticipating the future, but just seeing one's mind's reflection. The inside of everyone's mind is so beautiful, so layered, and these apps are kind of a form of meditation, to see the gentler, contented part of the mind reflected on the screen. I'm not sure a lot of users would say this is their experience but some would explain it that way: it's a non-neurotic activity you can do on your iPhone, instead of jumping from the New York Times to e-mail to Angry Birds you can get absorbed in an alternate form of nature.

Scott Snibbe / Björk Biophilia App

#3
HOW TENUOUS IS THE AREA BETWEEN AESTHETICS AND PRODUCTIVITY IN THIS RESPECT?

Snibbe

That's a really good question because the apps I've made could have a bigger audience if I made them a tiny bit easier to use. They're easy to use but could be easier. I really wanted to make a full screen interface with no menus and icons. That's something I struggle with a little bit because to make something really usable on the iPad you have to make large buttons. I know the logic of user interface design really well, but when you're making a work of art any buttons you put on the screen become part of the composition so it's painful with some of those experiences to add them in. There's a tension, and then you have the negative app reviews from confused people, so you're going to get real consequences of people not buying your app, etc. I could make a super best-selling app and I know how to do it, it would be every color and movement, but there's a certain message I'm interested in that doesn't lend itself to that experience. People will always be drawn toward the Las Vegas experience but it's not necessarily the best thing for your mind.

Visnjic

It's strange to think of this because you wonder about these two things; aesthetics and productivity usually stay apart from one another. Productivity is about end results that you set for yourself through tasks and expediency. On the other side you have the aesthetic, it's not necessarily productive, it's a kind of exploration, you don't know what you're going to end up with, it's an emotional reaction. In my teaching there's always been an emphasis on exploration and research so I think, with CAN, there's not always an aim or expectation. Creative Applications tries to emphasize this, that there are these processes that take place and not necessarily complete products. Sometimes the applications on there have an end in mind. But many people get involved in the technological background, the making, and I always try to get to the bottom of that. People don't always see that as of interest. A lot of blogs don't address the importance of the technological challenges that lie in achieving something. The tools and the code play a huge part in how these products are created. They're not mainly about their appearance. The successful projects lie between the technical and aesthetic achievements.

Alliban

An app is quite different from many other types of digital artwork because you have to brand it, you have to design a logo and website and consider the user experience. I'm lucky that my fiancé Juliet Lall is a digital designer. She's great not only in terms of interface and branding but also in generating ideas and helping to shape the actual art side of the app. So there's a great creative partnership there. The apps we have worked on together look like real products and it's strange to describe art as a product. I remember reading Scott Snibbe's article on iPad art where he explained how art can now be seen as a commodity, like a CD or video, which is a curious state of affairs. I like this though, it's empowering for artists. To get immediate access to a huge bank of people, rather than just the visitors to a gallery, is fantastic. It's great to actually make money making this very personal work.

> AND WE CAME UP WITH THIS PORTABLE DEVICE CALLED THE FINGER SANDWICH. IT WAS THE SIZE OF AN IPHONE, IT HAD A TOUCH SURFACE ON THE BACK AND A SCREEN ON THE FRONT AND WE TRIED TO GET IT PATENTED AND FUNDED BUT IT WAS A LITTLE EARLY FOR ITS TIME.
>
> Scott Snibbe

#4

IS SHELF LIFE A CONCERN WHILE DESIGNING A NEW APP?

Snibbe

It's hard to say. The only things that last are the things that people want to last. People ask this question a lot about digital art and the thing I usually say is that the average length of a civilization is 500 years. Our lives are average 77 years. Everything that begins ends.

Visnjic

There's a lot of times when I post things and I get feedback where people see these things that don't have focus. I don't look at these things from that perspective. I look at what is featured as experiments that don't have a specific purpose or function. What they do is offer insights and opportunities for how these things are created, they allow people to see how these things come together. I'm interested in the building blocks rather than the end result. I don't think lifespan matters, at least not from CAN's view. I don't think the purpose sits in being useful but in opening new avenues for how you might interact or interface with technology. It's an inspirational resource; I try to stay away from using reference to art because that's a whole different playground. I don't think it's my place in a way. There are some projects we feature that might be viewed as art, especially in where they're coming from but I don't tend to look at it that way. I think people enjoy CAN because they can view the difference in how things are done. It's important to help position and to know where your place is on these blogs. I don't pretend to be an art critic or coder.

Alliban

I'm an app addict. I have loads of them on my iPhone and iPad but the vast majority of them I've only played with once or twice. I try to aim to make apps that people will use often. I believe I achieved that with Fracture and Composite. I really think they both, particularly Composite, have a great deal of longevity. I don't believe all apps should always have a long shelf life though. Some apps act purely as experimental in interactivity which serve no purpose other than to inspire and enlighten. This was my approach with Konstruct. People might explore it a few of times but beyond this it might just be used to show off to friends or family. That's absolutely fine.

Konstruct is an early iteration of an ongoing project which will eventually find itself on a pair of AR glasses. This exciting tech should be with us in the next few years. The prospect of having augmented vision will lead to AR playing a large role in how we access information. This is why I believe AR is an important technology to explore as an artist at this stage. I hope to get to the stage where people are building constructs, leaving trails in the cities as they wander through them, the city could be transformed into as a user generated art gallery.

> **AN APP IS QUITE DIFFERENT FROM MANY OTHER TYPES OF DIGITAL ARTWORK BECAUSE YOU HAVE TO BRAND IT, YOU HAVE TO DESIGN A LOGO AND WEBSITE AND CONSIDER THE USER EXPERIENCE.**
>
> James Alliban

#5

I'M VERY INTRIGUED BY THE CONTRAST BETWEEN ABSTRACTION AND REPRESENTATION. IN WHAT WAYS ARE THESE CONTRASTS APPARENT IN DESIGN AND ART, EITHER AS HINDRANCES OR SUCCESSFUL DELINEATIONS?

Snibbe

The benefit of representation is that we each have bodies and when we see the representation of a body we can relate to it. That's why Michelangelo drew God as an old guy with a beard. Unfortunately people today actually think Michelangelo thought God looked like that. People are very confused about representation today. There's a difference between representation pre-20th century and after. People in the 20th century have become extremely literal-minded but anyone looking at that painting before the 20th century would know that the figure doesn't mean an actual person; it represents something: like Truth or God or Liberty or Patience or Death, etc. The purpose of painting a figure into a painting before the 20th century is symbolic, and that form of representation is extraordinarily powerful with the human mind.

Now, what's the power of abstraction? I can only speak to this from a personal level. I was raised with abstract art, and extremely moved by much of the abstract art from the 20th century, especially the works of Kandinsky, and Klee, and didn't see much representational art until later. When I started watching abstract films in college, by artists like Len Lye, the films made me laugh and cry without having representation. To me that was astonishing, it made me want to create that type of artwork. My connection with abstraction is personal and emotional but I know that for many people that's not the case. I think it's abstract movement that is more universal, because abstract paintings often make people say "I don't get this" but abstract movement ties into something more primitive in our brains. What abstract movement might be is the sugar of the visual system, a highly concentrated visual stimulus. There's a long history of using images to evoke metaphysical experiences and some of those have been abstract from the start, with certain patterns and shapes that induce calm states, or transcendent states.

Architecture is also an abstract medium that is highly emotional. You walk into a space and you immediately feel something: cramped, elated, excited, anxious. Abstraction has a lot to do with space. The sky is abstract. It's hard for me to generalize about abstraction; the more you study its history the richer and more complicated it becomes.

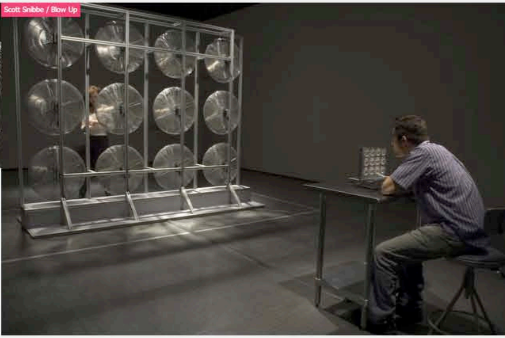
Alliban

I've been a traditional artist most of my life. I didn't get my first computer until I was 20. I was drawing and painting work which was purely representational. I always envied the freedom of these artists who were building abstract works. I could never really bring myself to just take the brush and splash on the canvas with that level of freedom. I think maybe I was a little bit of a skinflint and couldn't really afford to lose all that paint! Being able to use technology to build generative and abstract art is very liberating; the process of just being able to put together a collection of algorithms, then let the machine build the work for you is perfect. You don't have to get messy with a canvas, you don't have to spend hours with something you might hate. You can hit restart and allow yourself to be the judge of the collaboration between yourself and the computer. In terms or augmented reality I often make the comparison between abstract and representational art in terms of how most people are using the technology. Many applications tend to augment reality with more reality, which I don't find very interesting. I'm far more interested in my reality being augmented with something that you won't see in real life. AR is a magical technology and to build an app that simply puts a car on a piece of paper seems a bit of a waste.

James Alliban / Konstruct

James Alliban / Motion trails v01

Scott Snibbe / Blow Up


Scott Snibbe / Blow Up

#6
ARE PEOPLE MORE WILLING TO COLLABORATE, IN TERMS OF USING AND SHARING APPS, OR IN TERMS OF PEOPLE BEING WILLING TO SHARE THEIR IDEAS?

Visnjic

I think open source plays a huge part in this. It's kind of a criticism of what you see going on with the web, what I'm going to say. We found, from last year, with students and in my teaching, a few trends. People are more web-aware. Next year we're going to spend a lot of time talking about credit and the nature of open source. It's becoming increasingly more important because there's a lack of acknowledgment on the web and I think this is because there's a long source of usage and a logic behind agencies using things. If you look at things like Open Frameworks it relies a lot on people sharing work. It's one thing to share a finished project and another thing to share tools that others use. It's difficult to get to the bottom of what libraries or add-ons have been used. Recently, when you go into a submission form on the website there is a little field that says tools used, libraries, and this plays a terribly integral part in these projects to make people acknowledge a contributing tool to the work. Collaboration has become more apparent because of open source and it opens up avenues for collaborative projects. Zach Lieberman is a great example of this because he works with a lot of different people and his their work often comes from his Open Frameworks. There isn't an obsession with ownership with his work; it's about developing ideas together and for other projects. You can see the benefits of collaboration in the stuff that he does. And we see more and more of that, like Björk's latest app for the iPad with Scott Snibbe. You can really see his role in this as well. We'll see more and more of this.

#7
SINCE THE CONCEPTION OF YOUR FIRST APP, HOW HAS YOUR OWN APPROACH TOWARD CREATING NEW APPS PLAYED INTO YOUR VISION?

Alliban

One of the main things I've learned to do while building the apps is the publicizing element. Before I started developing apps I wouldn't usually spend much time on this but with an app I spend days e-mailing and utilizing social media in an effort to spread the word. It's incredibly important to get a decent spread. For future non-mobile projects I plan on spending more time trying to publicize and get the buzz going.

Tyler Do you plan on making some interactive story worlds?

Alliban

No immediate plans but it's definitely something I'm interested in. I studied this area on my MA which was called Hyperfictions. I often speak about AR as a platform for interactive narrative at event although it's not something I've actually worked on myself, at least not in the traditional sense. I'd be fascinated to work in this field but it would require some sort of collaboration, whether that's with an author or a filmmaker. It's a big job to present something like that in a compelling way.

> THERE ARE A NUMBER OF PUBLICATIONS AND ONLINE MEDIA THAT EMPHASIZE THIS CONCEPT OF VISUAL CULTURE, WHICH DRIVES ME UP THE WALL. IT SAYS "IT'S OKAY TO BE DRAWN TO SOMETHING VISUALLY WITHOUT QUESTIONING THEIRPOSITION OF REFERENCE OR HOW THEY'VE COME ABOUT."
>
> Filip Visnjic

#8
WITH THE INCORPORATION OF SO MANY DIFFERENT VENUES AND APPLICATIONS, IN WHAT WAYS DO YOU PLAN ON BRANCHING OUT, WHAT MIGHT BE SOME FUTURE PLANS FOR CAN?

Visnjic

It's hard to say, I've looked at many different options. CAN takes up loads of time. It's happy where it is right now. Sometimes I throw questions to the Facebook audience: do we have too many or too few posts and where we should go. Usually people say everything is fine and where it should be so don't worry. But at the same time I never expected it to grow to the size that it has. I think what I've learned about the blog over two years is that you can't plan these things. You can't plan to shift it in any direction. What I always try to do is look at other blogs in terms of what they do and try to keep CAN unique. I think we're continuing to do that well. There's always a different angle to things and that's a good place to be, to have the freedom to steer in certain directions. I'm influenced by what happens in the school where I teach so when I see students developing interests I try to address that in the blog as well. It's a loop, really. There was a period where I was doing a lot of teaching and I felt that I wasn't really moving forward. You fall into loops when this happens. I look at CAN in order to develop my own ideas as well and how to show ideas to students, to research and develop. When I learn code I don't do it for me to create applications but to be able to talk to my students about this stuff. CAN has become my way of finding out and learning about these things so that I can transfer it onto my students, point them to the right place. I have been toying with the idea of curating more workshops, which are great opportunities for people to meet and creative things very quickly. I want to do more with organizations and festivals but that requires a lot of time.

#9
HOW DO YOU FEEL ABOUT THE DIGITAL WORK FINDING ITSELF BACK IN THE PHYSICAL SPACE, OR A GALLERY?

Alliban

It seems strange to think of a mobile app being exhibited in a public art space. Mostly because the art usually exists purely on the screen. From my experience mobile devices usually exist purely as an interface to an installation. The difference with Konstruct, which makes it work in this sort of environment, is that it appears to act as a looking glass into a world were that space is altered in some way. In addition to this it does actually require the marker to be hung on the wall. Finally the sound reactive element allows people to collaborate and lower their inhibitions. An apps works best in a public space if it can move outside the confines of the screen in some way.

> **I HOPE TO GET TO THE STAGE WHERE PEOPLE ARE BUILDING CONSTRUCTS, LEAVING TRAILS IN THE CITIES AS THEY WANDER THROUGH THEM, THE CITY COULD BE TRANSFORMED INTO A USER GENERATED ART GALLERY.**
>
> James Alliban

#10

WITH THE SURGE OF NEW MEDIA, AN EVER-GROWING FIELD, DO YOU NOTICE A TREND IN WHAT PEOPLE ARE THE MOST DRAWN TOWARD MAKING AND CREATING? DOES THIS LEAD THE PUBLIC AWAY FROM THEORETICAL OR ACADEMIC SIDES OF THE TRADE?

Visnjic

There is a lot of shying away. I totally blame the last ten years in that sense. There's been this trend with the software and packages that allow people to make things in an easy way. They're making this work by just clicking buttons. There's some really impressive stuff out there but it has no theoretical standing, it's purely visual. There are a number of publications and online media that emphasize this concept of visual culture, which drives me up the wall. It says "it's okay to be drawn to something visually without questioning their position of reference or how they've come about." So then we have a huge range of work being created without context. The web influences us daily without us knowing where ideas come from. If you browse Vimeo you'll see the trends, it's not just in applications but anything that is software-driven. With regards to the platforms and trends the idea of making money out of this stuff draws people to it. There was a very interesting time in the app store, just when it kicked off, where people were making very new and interesting things and then it went really quiet. There were financial benefits right away. I always try to encourage people to abandon that idea, to use the abstract as a way of not dealing with money. That attitude can bring you to a better place. If the app store is seen as purely a publishing platform and nothing more it has way more benefit for people operating in the area of creative applications.

#11

MOVEMENT IS CENTRAL TO YOUR WORK, A STRONG BACKGROUND IN FILM AND ANIMATION. CAN YOU SPEAK ABOUT PHYSICALITY OR MAYBE MORE ABOUT THE "PHILOSOPHY OF HOW A BODY 'THINKS' THROUGH UNMEDIATED PERCEPTION?"

Snibbe

What you're talking about is a way of perceiving that doesn't involve analysis or breaking into symbols, but rather directly perceiving something. That quote you mention is about phenomenology which is a recent take on mindfulness. What phenomenology talks about is an older idea, used in Buddhism, which is also an intrinsic idea to human beings; I don't think people knew what it's like not to be mindful before modern times. People had so much time, sitting in caves, watching animals, or walking in the forest. It's not that their lives weren't stressful, but you know what it's like if you're out in the wilderness camping where you have huge amounts of time and no distractions. You become mindful, aware without judging.

The reason mindfulness interests me is because it's a very pleasant state of mind to be in. If you're regretting the past or looking forward to something you have an agitated state of mind. Whether it's something you want to happen or don't want to happen you have an itch of attachment. It's kind of hard for a lot of people to accept that these states of mind are disturbing, because it's fun to feel passionate and excited about something, and I'm driven a lot by excitement myself, but really the deepest form of satisfaction comes from being content, just to be aware.

I'm a Buddhist, and when you go on a Buddhist retreat it's amazing that you realize that you need nothing to be happy, you're happy without the most ecstatic moments in your life, even like sexual bliss, or a nice meal, or winning an Academy award, whatever. You don't really need any of that to be happy. And the gateway to true happiness is just being present, being in the current moment. So I try to make art work that promotes that state of mind, and I've written some theories about specific ways an interactive artist can do that. There's a systematic approach that doesn't replace mediation or prayer but it has some of the same effects.

> **WRITING HAS ALWAYS BEEN MY FAVORITE MEDIUM BECAUSE IT'S THE LEAST ENCUMBERED BY ANY LIMITS. PROGRAMMING IS PROBABLY SECOND BECAUSE YOU'RE STILL JUST ONLY LIMITED BY YOUR TECHNICAL ABILITY AND IMAGINATION. BUT WRITING IS EVEN MORE UNFETTERED AND I THINK MORE DIFFICULT THAN PROGRAMMING.**
>
> Scott Snibbe

#12

GENERALLY SPEAKING, DO YOU FIND THAT PEOPLE ARE TAKING ADVANTAGE OF USING APPS?

Visnjic

If you turn using to experience it changes the whole perception of it. That's coming back to the question of productivity and aesthetic. If you look at apps as driven by experience then that's fine. If you look at them as kind of collector's items it changes their purpose. The problem comes when there's a price tag attached to it. People won't buy it if it doesn't seem useful to them then. In some ways we're used to the free web content, you hardly ever go onto a site that says $1.99 to open it. There's a strange expectation of what's free. But people who publish these things put time and effort into it so they want to get paid. I think it's fine to download an app, pay $1.99 for it and delete it in an hour, I do it all the time. Otherwise I'd have 1,000 apps on my phone. There's no loss in that, you get to see and work with the things, it's like paying an entrance fee to a gallery.

#13

I'M ESPECIALLY CURIOUS ABOUT ANONYMITY IN INSTALLATIONS AND INTERACTIONS AND THE WORK THAT YOU DO WITH SHADOWS. WHERE DOES THIS CONCEPT SIT WITHIN YOUR WORK

Snibbe

Yes, anonymity is a strong element in the work that I do with shadows. One of my friends, who is a great abstract artist, once told me that my work is "generous." I was very flattered by that analysis, and I like that way of describing because it says that I offer something to the viewer. The pieces with shadows are meant to give you creative expression while respecting your privacy, which is kind of an old-fashioned idea today. The idea is that you can have your shadow appear in the pieces and you and your friends can recognize it immediately, but strangers can't. The shadow it's this incredible middle ground between the public and the private. The shadow has the ability to both cloak and reveal and there's nothing else like it.

The fact that you've only seen these works on video, yet you are so excited interests me. So many people have seen my work only in documentation. Sometimes I wonder if it'd be better to just fake new pieces! [laughs] Because they are so expensive and time-consuming. I could fake some of the pieces I'm taking forever to make in a couple weeks. It's interesting how our mind works in this sense. There's this middle ground: you love seeing the video of the installation knowing that it worked; you'd be pissed off if you saw a video of someone faking an installation; but if you saw a movie where you know the technology is fiction, like in *Avatar*, then you're really happy again. It's a middle ground but I guess you'd call that middle ground lying.

#14

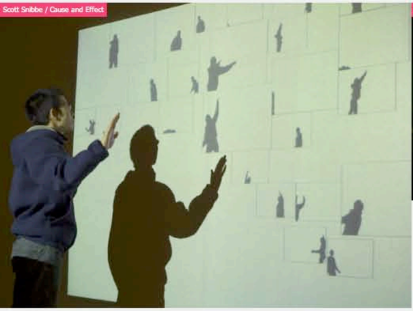
SINCE THE CONCEPTION OF SNIBBE INTERACTIVE, HOW HAS YOUR OWN APPROACH TOWARD CREATING CHANGED? DO YOU TRUST AND REMAIN IN CONTACT WITH THOSE WHO ARE A PART OF IT?

Snibbe

So there are two companies I've created here under one roof. There's Snibbe Interactive, which is responsible for installations, museums, entertainment, corporations, concerts, and other big events. Scott Snibbe Studio, which is responsible for the apps, is only four of five people right now. What I've learned from building a company is how to create things as an organization. One of my heroes growing up was Andy Warhol, not necessarily because of the way his art looked but the idea that he created a culture and a business around his work. I've always wanted to do that. I've had that entrepreneurial urge from an early age, trying to sell radishes in a roadside stand.

Being self-employed has caused a lot of pain, especially during the economic crisis times, but I've really wanted to created a culture around my values. There are great companies out there in the world, but I didn't see any sharing my values. Of all the great things in life one can do, creating a job for someone is one of the best. Creating a person is really cool too! If you can make a job for someone that they really love you've done something enormously positive in the world. For so many people, their job is something they hate or slog through as a means to an end. But doing something you like to go to in the morning is really nice. To get things done in an organization you put together teams, specifically long lasting teams. It's much better to have people on hand as full-time employees: I have guys who can draw, people who can make videos, programmers. For me opportunities and inspiration are unpredictable and if I was limited just to myself I'd go crazy.

You see it yourself I'm sure, you've interviewed a lot of these people in interactive art, and there are big obstacles as a solo operative. One of the biggest problems there is that you have to limit your ambition because you're only making something 15% of the time, the rest of your time is spent organizing, sending invoices, writing proposals, answering e-mails. That's the beauty of an organization, if you can get over that hump and have some capital you can get to a pure productive period. That's sort of where we're at right now, with our organizations; we can take on a lot of new things and have some freedom to do our own projects. We also have a reputation in the world and people start coming to us. It's so hard to get to this point though, it's hell making it work as an entrepreneur but for me it was the perfect thing, I wouldn't want it any other way. I've turned down high-level jobs at some of the world's well known companies because I want to create my own culture.


Scott Snibbe / Cause and Effect

Scott Snibbe / Make Like a Tree

Scott Snibbe / Make Like a Tree

#15

WHAT ARE SOME ALBUMS OR EVEN OTHER ART FORMS THAT YOU'D LOVE TO TRANSLATE INTO OTHER MEDIUMS, EVEN APPLICATIONS OR INSTALLATIONS?

Snibbe
Well I've been working with Björk, as you know, who is truly one of the world's great artists of all media. One of my very favorite movies, animated or otherwise, is *Yellow Submarine*. That movie is like taking drugs; I don't know why people take drugs and watch the film: that movie is a drug. And it's one of the few movies that's about love, in a pure sense. Most movies about love are essentially about forcing someone to like you.

What I wanted to do when I was 18 was make an interactive version of *Yellow Submarine*. And not like a game. Interactivity is much larger than games, much broader, much richer as an expression. Animation became dominated by children's cartoons for a long time but it's much bigger than kids' entertainment, animation is infinite in its visual capability, which The Beatles and the makers of *Yellow Submarine* realized.

Tyler Have you toyed around with making films?

Snibbe
Yes, I began as a filmmaker and produced several short animated and live-action films. I've also written stories and scripts. I'd like to do more work in cinema with the latter part of my life. It's so much pain making a film. It's like an act against God, making a film. Everything goes wrong in making a film but it's gotten less expensive. I've waited for this process to become less expensive, where you don't have to mortgage your house to tell your story. I think I'll have a chance in this decade to make a film. Now you can make a Hollywood-quality film for not too much. The media that have influenced me the most are film and literature and I'd love to be able to express myself in those at a professional level in some way, perhaps by working with some great filmmakers or writers with common narrative interests to mind.

Tyler You've mentioned promoting an understanding of the world as interdependent; do you think that there's an aversion to interdependency?

Snibbe

Absolutely. In our culture it's me me. You see it in our politics today;, and people that are wealthy and successful trying to justify that it was "just me that was responsible for my success; I don't owe any taxes and don't have to help anyone who is poor because I did it all myself." But they didn't, they did it mostly thanks to their socioeconomic status; thanks to their education, how nice their parents and teachers were to them, thanks to everybody who grew and carried each piece of food that they ate to their table. If you start to look at your life you're in debt to every person on the planet for your existence, and a lot of animals too-what you eat, what you're wearing.

It's common sense but culture doesn't teach that lesson: that we're only who we are thanks to the efforts of thousands of people. If we think of the clothing we're wearing and the computers we're using, many people worked many boring jobs to make the software that allows us to talk right now over Skype. Someone just has to introduce you to the idea if interdependence and you have to think about it from time to time and you start to become very grateful for it. There's a Buddhist quote, from Thich Nhat Hanh, where he says "you're only made of non-you elements." Physically, it's very obvious, being made of the things we eat, little bits of our parents, etc. But mentally, it's different. I think I just wrote this e-mail myself but I didn't make up any of the words or content, it all comes from someone else.

#16

IN REGARDS TO YOUR WORK WITH BJORK AND BIOPHILA, DO YOU SEE MUSIC OPENING ITSELF UP MORE TO APPLICATIONS?

Snibbe

Personally, I do. Obviously I've got a stake in it because I really want to work in this area. I've thought about this a lot and given a lot of recent interviews so I've been able to think through it. But I'll tell you a thought that I haven't shared with anyone yet that has been in the back of my mind for a while. I'm thinking about orchestral music: it was the ultimate apex of music but has been almost completely consumed by film and the only time most of us hear it is in the cinema. You can see popular music possibly merging with first music videos in the 80s, and now interactivity. Most musicians aren't just creating a one-dimensional stream of notes; that's not their goal, their goal is to create an emotional, sensory experience which often includes a stage performance, videos, costumes, the way they live their lives, etc. For most musicians it's a natural expression to be able to control an interactive audio and visual experience, a concert in the palm of your hands. I'm also quite convinced that music is meant to be interactive. For music's first 35,000 years it was interactive, people got together and created music together, and they taught music hands-on by doing. Then look at the 19th century, the app of the 19th century was sheet music. People would take the sheet music home and play with it: they could change the words or the notes, make the songs longer or shorter, perform on a piano or a violin. I think all the one-way mass media are a blip in history; basically from the 1950's to 2010. Music isn't meant to be one-way. Even as we imagine theatre and concerts to be mostly one way, we know that actors and musicians wouldn't put on a show without the audience, the two things interrelate.

Tyler It would be great if a musician came up to you and said "hey Scott, I haven't written any songs for this next album that I'm going to do but I have a year and I want you to develop apps with me in the studio while we make songs."

Snibbe

That'd be great. Björk did that a little bit. She's influenced by her collaborators and likes to work that way sometimes. I'm more of a filmmaker person than an artist in that way too: I like collaboration and work with like-minded people. It's helpful that I love Björk's music too as it's hard to work with something you don't like of course. Interactivity is meant to be a collaborative medium, like cinema. We'll see though. It's expensive but music videos don't make much money and people still create them as part of their complete vision. I believe apps will become widespread, and outsell standalone pre-recorded music. I think we're seeing the birth of a new medium like cinema; that's my personal opinion but it has been for a long time.

> I THINK WE'RE SEEING THE BIRTH OF A NEW MEDIUM LIKE CINEMA; THAT'S MY PERSONAL OPINION BUT IT HAS BEEN FOR A LONG TIME.
>
> Scott Snibbe

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