Reports and Commentaries

3.7.1. FROM VOCATION TO FUNCTION:
EXHIBITIONS OF DIGITAL ART IN LONDON IN 2010
by Vlad Strukov

In this relatively short piece, I would like to inform the reader of *Digital Icons* about two exhibitions of digital art that took place in London in 2010 and to debate a few issues concerning the question of curating immateriality and the distribution and functioning of digital cultures in the English capital. In my review, I also provide an analysis of the exhibition in relation to new media studies and the cultural practice of looking.

The first exhibition entitled *Decode: Digital Design Sensations* was organized by the Victoria and Albert Museum in partnership with SAP, the market and technology leader in business management software. *Decode* was a collaboration between the V&A and onedotzero, which is a contemporary arts organization operating internationally with a remit to promote innovation across all forms of moving image and interactive arts. Co-curated by Louise Shannon for the V&A and Shane Walter for onedotzero, the exhibition ran from 8 December 2009 until 11 April 2010 and was housed in the main building of the V&A, with a few works going on display in public places in Chelsea, including South Kensington tunnel.

Decode was presented in three sections, Code, Interactivity and Network, and the display of digital artworks and design in the main showroom was accompanied by a series of interventions in the museum as well as live performances, installations, workshops, presentations and meetings of discussion groups. There was also a varied programme of events to complement the exhibition, including a Digital Design Festival (27-28 February) and a conference entitled *Decoding the Digital* (4-5 February 2010).

Figure 1. Screen grab from the *Decode* website.
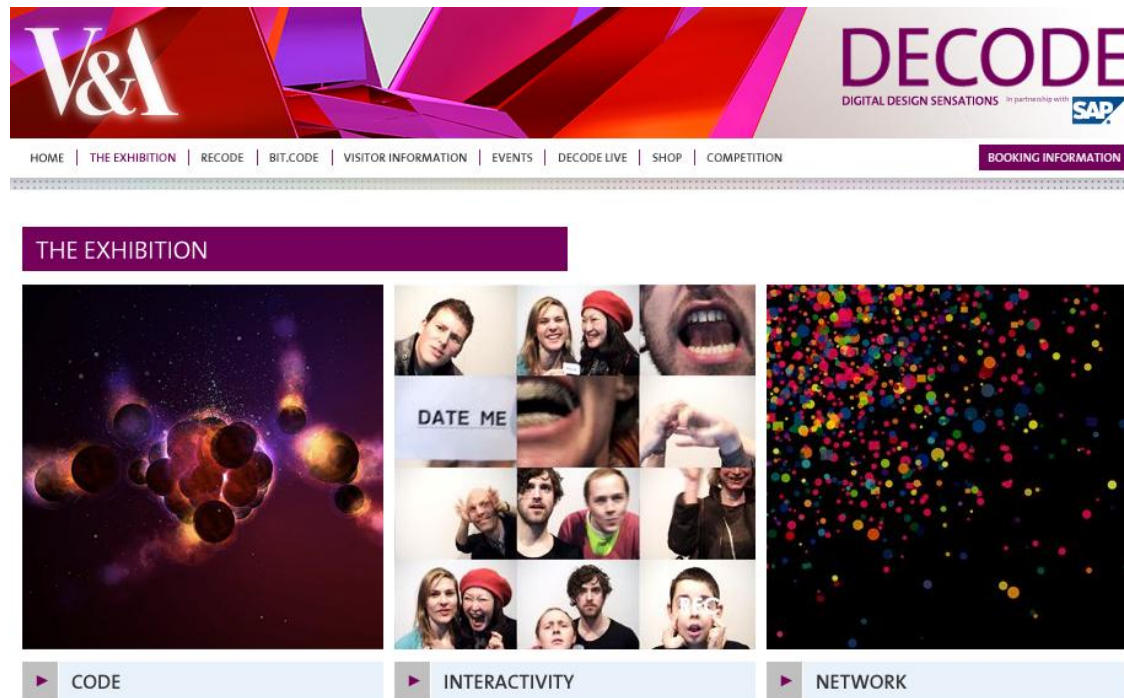
Source: http://www.vam.ac.uk/microsites/decode/exhibition (accessed 20 June 2010).

Figure 2. Digital artwork titled *TI* (2004) by C.E.B. Reas, on display at *Decode*.
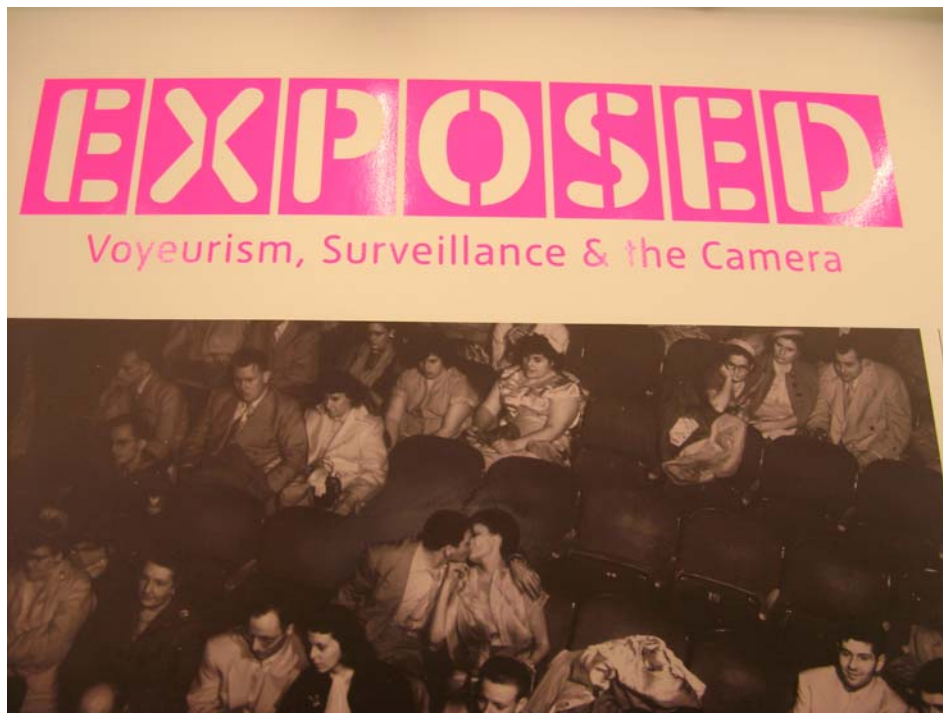

Source: Vlad Strukov.

On the contrary, the second exhibition, entitled *Exposed: Voyeurism, Surveillance and the Camera*, entails few related events, thus, predominantly focusing on the actual display. The exhibition, curated by Sandra S Phillips of San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and Simon Baker and Ann Coxon of the Tate Modern, is presented in the Bankside gallery from 28 May until 3 October 2010. *Exposed* largely offers photographic works, both digital as well as ana-logue; it also presents video art, film, installations, images produced with CCTV, and other transmedia items. The works were sourced from professional and amateur sources and are grouped around five themes, The Unseen Photographer, Celebrity and the Public Gaze, Vo-yeurism and Desire, Witnessing Violence, and Surveillance.

Figure 3. Screen grab from the website of *Exposed*.
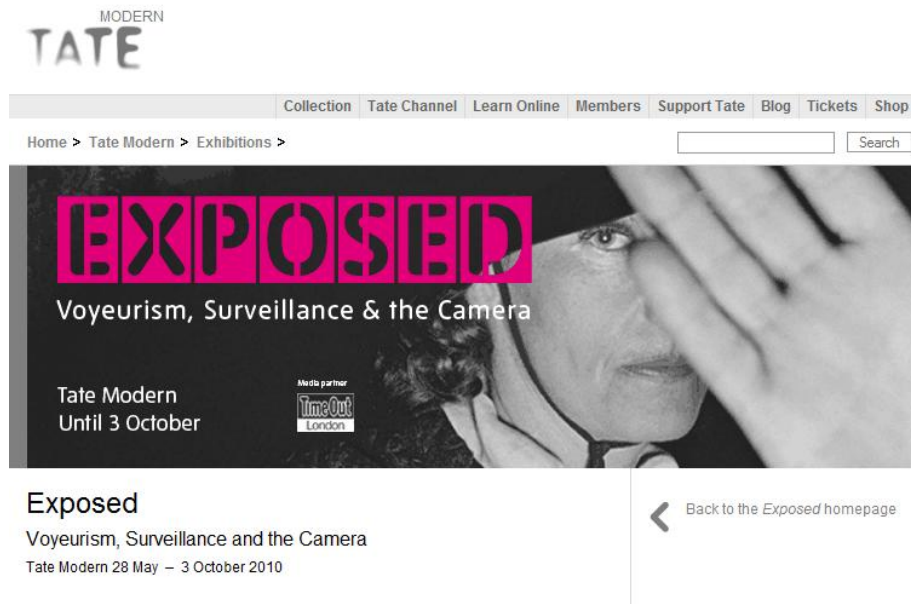
Source: http://www.tate.org.uk/modern/exhibitions/exposure/roomintro.shtm   (accessed   20   June 2010).

Figure 4. The entrance design at *Exposed*.

Source: Vlad Strukov.

One of possible way to read *Exposed* is to see it as a history of photography understood as a tool for watching, recording and spying on unsuspecting—or, on the contrary, cognizant—subjects. The photographer continues to perform a balancing act, being simultaneously a witness and a voyeur of social and private life. Chronologically, the exhibition covers over a hundred years of the photographic gaze, ranging from reportage to CCTV footage, and it documents the transformation of the medium from the analogue to digital form. As visitors move through the rooms of the gallery, they come across mundane, provocative, sexually explicit, morally subdued, politically engaging, and ethically withdrawn imagery, showcasing works by Merry Alpern, Kohei Yoshiyki, Phillip-Lorca diCorcia, Sophie Ristelheuber, Steven Shames and many other artists. As visitors make their journey, they pass through the changing landscape of photography and human desire, and they cannot help noting how the digital technology provides photography with more sophisticated and ornery means of viewing, recording and display. In fact, on display are not only the photographic images of (secret) desire but also tools of capturing such imagery, including a man's shoe with a camera hidden in the heel, an expo watch with a concealed camera (c.1905) and other spying tools. The irony of *Exposed* is in that it tells the viewer more about concealed objects and hidden emotions than about revelation and ostentatious display of affects. The exhibition surveys photographic works produced since the camera became mobile, i.e., it was freed from the spatial constraints of the studio and moved to the streets to photograph real life as it were. It is hardly surprising the exhibition concludes with an artwork that questions the distinction between man and machine: Harun Farocki's *Eye/Machine* series explores image processing techniques used by technicians and machines in industrial production as well as modern warfare. Here digital technology enables a type of movement that guarantees precision and is based on rationalization of vision; the artwork is a peculiar inversion of the early photographic works on display because rather than interfering into the human world, now the lenses construct the very conditions of human existence. The exhibition says farewell to the viewers with a CCTV camera projecting depopulated images on the wall, a somewhat conventional commentary on the disappearance of the man and the crisis of humanistic principles of Enlightenment.

**Figure 5.** The *Exposed* exhibition catalogue.

Source: Vlad Strukov.

If *Exposed* provides a chronological overview of the development of the medium, *Decode* focuses on the current state of digital technologies and design. The latter exhibition presents works made by a single programme / artist and examples of global online creativity; they all rely on bespoke, hacked or shared tools and languages. Works by Karsten Schmidt, Mehmet Akten, Jason Bruges Studio, Mark Hansen and many other artists defy the boundaries of traditional design categories as they include such varied practices as performance, participation, sharing and collaboration. Arranged over a relatively small exhibition space, the works make an extremely intensive impression on visitors who would have to follow the labyrinth of the exposition and, with it, the maze of digital technologies and design innovations. As a matter of fact, presented artworks carry the logic of exhibitions of computer art of the 1990s, i.e., they exemplify and externalize the code as the constructing principle of digital art. In fact, *Decode* does little to advance our understanding of digital art as it recycles ideas of openness, dynamics, processes, movement, networks, chaos and order that characterize discussions of digital art in the 1990s. Rather, *Decode* aims to provide the viewer with a digital spectacle, which seems to be an appropriate aim since digital technologies and networked applications have become ubiquitous. The focus of the exhibition is on the application of digital technologies to the process of art/design production and on the relationship between our perception of

digital artworks in the context of pre-digital art, whereby innovation and the 'wow factor' seem to be the dominant link between the old and the new.

Figure 6. Digital installation titled *Mirror, Mirror* (2009) by Jason Bruges Studio, on display at *Decode*.
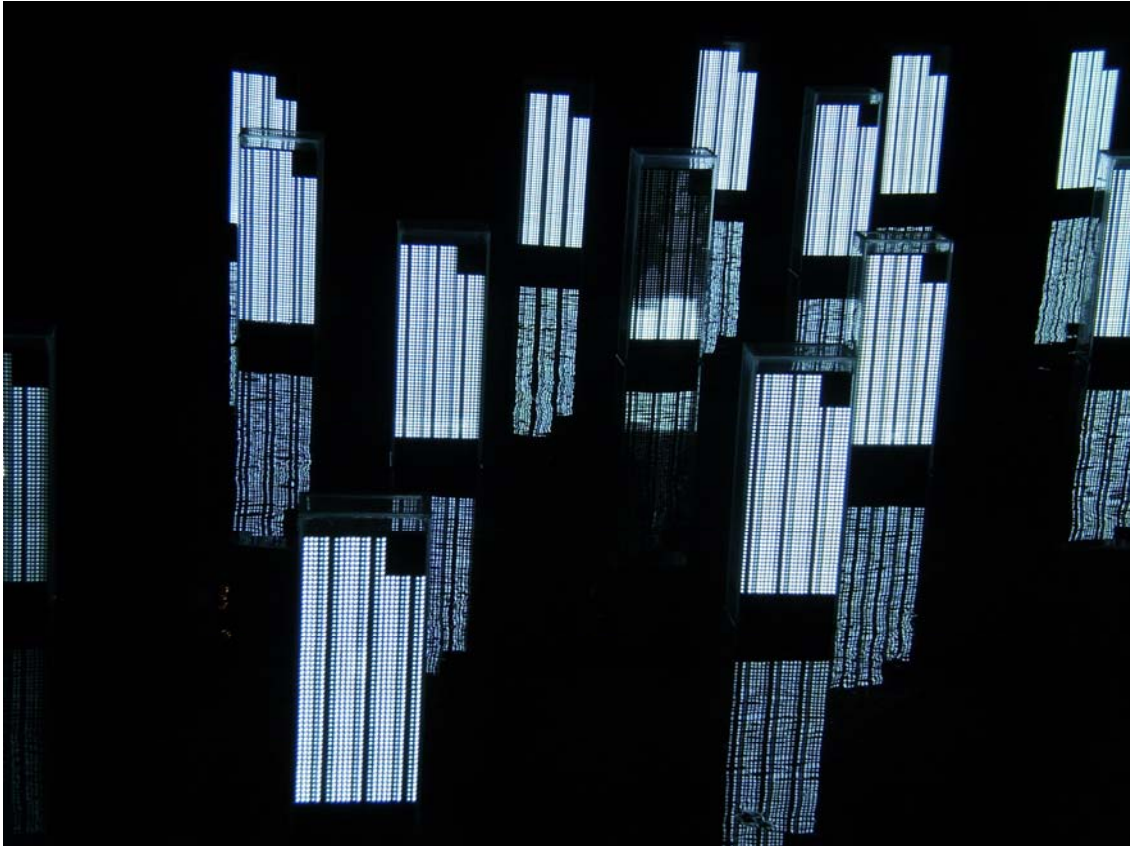
Source: Vlad Strukov.

If *Decode* celebrates the digital, *Exposed* deliberately demonizes it by associating the technology with surveillance, warfare and destruction. The two exhibitions exemplify the two popular attitudes to new technologies and they masterfully exploit our emotional responses and intellectual predispositions by converting ideas into objects and subverting private desires in a public space. Mounted in the V&A and Tate, i.e., the titans of modern art and design, the exhibitions demonstrate that the digital has gone mainstream and that public art institutions seem to have found the way of how to commodify and appropriate the digital, which is quite ironic since the Institute of Contemporary Arts has virtually discontinued shows in its computer labs. At the V&A, *Decode* was installed in the space that overlooks the recently opened Medieval and Renaissance Galleries, confining the digital to the modernist trajectory of art development and accentuating the issue of perspective and optic machinery as the foundational principle of contemporary art. At the Tate, *Exposed* presides over gigantic floors filled with modern art and purports the dialectical approach to the history of art, with the digital serving as a projection of very notion of western modernity.

It is quite striking, neither exhibition features artworks from the post-Soviet, post-communist space. A notable exception is two photographs by Miroslav Tichý (b. 1926) presented at *Exposed*; they show women photographed by a clandestine camera made out of junk. The works were included in the show because they illuminate a specific aspect of photography and voyeurism, i.e., the subjects' disbelief that the thing in the photographer's hands was actually a photographic apparatus. Sadly, the curatorial note uses cold-war rhetoric in the description of the works and unashamedly exploits the fear of the 'communist east' ingrained in the viewer by popular culture. The note fails to acknowledge the ironic and playful nature of the photographs and the artist's project in general. So the conspicuous lack of works from the former Eastern block, and east in general, suggests that both the exhibitions are manifestations of the continuing east-west divide, currently rendered as the analogue-digital divide. As a matter of fact, the east features in *Exposed* only as the object of the (destructive) western gaze: photographs of executions during the Second Opium War, burning oil fields of the first Gulf war and aerial views of Iraq construct and maintain the image of the Orient as the object of the (digital) gaze. While striving to explore, surprise and startle the viewers, the exhibitions continue the work of cultural imperialism, with its preconceptions of cultural identification and borders of the permissible.

Figure 7. Digital artwork titled *Arcs* (2009) by Lia, on display at *Decode*.

Source: Vlad Strukov

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