WHAT’S GOING ON HERE?
DECODING DIGITALITY IN HIGHER ARTS EDUCATION
The 2019 edition of the ELIA Academy was not only the first to take place in Germany, but also a premiere co-operation with ELIA's partner network, AEC. The impressive number of contributions and the large turnout of delegates brought a high level of interest to this truly timely conference on the subject of digitality.

During this three-day event, delegates engaged in conversations around tools, applications, methods, dilemmas and understandings of digitality. Together, we tried to make sense of this broad concept along with its various interpretations and misconceptions.

State Secretary of Art and Science, Research and the Arts, Petra Olschowski, kindly opened the ELIA Academy in Stuttgart and emphasized the importance of digitalisation in the field of arts and culture. This ministry not only supported the ELIA Academy, but they are committed to integrating the outcomes into their future policy when possible.

The opening speeches held a joint message on the potential of digitality to help address societal challenges today. Higher arts education institutions should act and remind politicians of the importance of teaching art in schools, to make our society more diverse, inclusive and environmentally sustainable.

“Art universities can no longer avoid negotiating the spectrum between high level digital, interactive and immersive art forms and the traditional analogue arts such as painting, drawing, or an instrumental performance. However, just as the aesthetic and epistemologies of painting, drawing and piano have intensely informed and shaped and empowered the digital, there is also impact in the opposite direction. It is nearly impossible to imagine the acquisition of skills of colour and pigment without the codes of the compute, just as we have difficulty imagining a musical practice before the time of digital rendering and recording.”

Andrea B. Braidt, ELIA President – Opening speech

ELIA warmly thanks all delegates of the ELIA Academy 2019 for their participation and speeches; and appreciates all presenters, moderators, and hosts of the event: Stuttgart State Academy of Art and Design and State University of Music and the Performing Arts Stuttgart, for making it an extraordinary experience.
DIGITALISATION:
a process by which analogue materials are turned into digital data (for example: scanning a book); an ongoing process, largely routinized.

DIGITAL CONDITION:
a set of affordances creating specific patterns that have become socially dominant 2-3 decades ago which have shaped the possibilities and the presence ever since. It’s not dependent on using digital devices or not.
PATTERNS THAT THE DIGITAL CONDITION IMPOSE ON CULTURE

If a visitor were to go to room 126 at the Metropolitan Museum in NYC, Felix realized that they could safely assume that any object they see has significance and, since it is in an Ancient Egypt exhibition, that it is a historical artefact. However, in the digital condition, these assumptions, which help us to navigate the chaos, rarely hold true.

In the digital world, Felix explained, the order of things is entirely unstable, changing, potentially meaningless and content easily becomes chaotically overabundant, which threatens to erase its meaning. Since it is humanly impossible to process this overabundance, Felix articulated that the user needs to make a selection. From this constant process of selection, a particular view of the world emerges; our future selections connect what we've selected before and what we will select next in a form of production and transformation. Felix calls this basic feature of the digital condition referentiality.

While our community plays a role in helping us to orient ourselves in the chaotic universe of the digital condition, this help is still not enough to make sense of the world, he said. It is in this space where algorithmic pre-processing takes control, a potential which was realised by social media amidst extremely unequal and exploitative frameworks.

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR UNIVERSITIES AND ACADEMIES IN THE ARTS?

Artists are in a unique place to develop new aesthetics as well as new ways to communicate and connect. While art cannot produce its own language separate from other actors, it can develop in interaction with them. There are three main areas in which art schools can help developing a language:

1. Referentiality – the situation of every authorence and action at the necessary multiplicity of any account of reality.

2. Articulate the transformation in subjectivity by thinking and experience is external rather than internal.

3. Learn how machines think in order to not think like machines. Where are the boundaries of their contribution? We can seek to understand our relatedness.
EXAMPLES

While narratives in the arts often take place in the world’s major cities, Monoskop rearranges a cultural landscape, making space for new stories that would otherwise not be available. The platform, a wiki for the arts, media and humanities, began with cultural producers who created their own context and archive. It began with existing, third-party materials and found connections between them through lists and links. Here, digitality help us finding and sharing resources.

When we look more specifically into higher education, ERG Ecole de Recherche Graphique is a good example of how to integrate the digital in teaching. Since 2016, under the leadership of Laurence Rosell, ERG has rethought the meaning of being an art school, with three guiding principles:

1. feminism, defined as a critique of power structures;

2. institution psychotherapy, defined as the relation between the institutional form and the social dynamics that happen within the institution;

3. open source, defined as a general public license offering freedoms to:
   - use the software for any purpose and in any context without restrictions,
   - study and change the program, including the source code,
   - redistribute copies at no cost, and
   - distribute any modified copies to others.

Last but not least, Felix Stalder presented UXTB, an experimental movie database with over 16,000 films available for download. The main goal of the project is to explore film as a digital object – one that can be treated, transformed and algorithmically processed like any other data set – and how relationships to film changes as the sheer number grows. An increase in the number means a larger amount of the material is ignored, and this forces a different relation to the material itself, in the same way as a large number of emails in an inbox or photos on a phone.
Cornelia Sollfrank is an artist, researcher and university lecturer living in Berlin. She built her reputation on two central projects:

1. the net.art generator – a web-based art-producing ›machine‹

2. Female Extension – her famous hack of the first competition for internet art.

Her experiments with the basic principles of aesthetic modernism implied conflicts with its institutional and legal framework and led to her academic research on commons (http://creatingcommons.zhdk.ch).

As an active member of the movement of cyberfeminism – a genre of contemporary feminism which foregrounds the relationship between cyberspace, the internet and technology in the 1990s, Cornelia talked about her shift to technofeminism.

Technofeminism, as described in The Beautiful Warriors, Technofeminist Practice in the 21st Century, looks into current positions in the field of art and activism, and reacts to new forms of discrimination, exploitation, ecology and economy. Her research lives at the intersection of machines, information technology and gender.

During her speech, and in conversation with Evert Hoogendoorn, Cornelia explained the impact of large technology companies on all of us individually, on our society and specifically on higher education.

She argued that students need to learn technical skills not only for employability purposes, but also to understand technology as a dominant aspect of society. On the other side, Cornelia emphasised how vital it is that higher education focuses on teaching which she called the framework of technopolitics, or “trying to understand who develops technologies and for what purposes and whose interests.”
Evert Hoogendoorn has a background in education and theatre and combines his work as a strategist and game designer at IJsfontein Interactive Media with the development of innovative educational solutions at the University of the Arts in Utrecht (HKU). Evert is a program leader of »ludodidactics« at HKU, where he and his colleagues use game design principles to create innovative educational tools and learning experiences. He has been part of the game industry for over 20 years and was co-founder of the first game design program in Europe at HKU. He aims to make games that are not only entertaining but have a positive and proven impact.

Evert illustrated how gaming can be used to lead the learning process in a more active, and therefore, efficient manner through two examples. In the first, medical students used a game to test their own reactions and emotions in surgery and other medical interventions. In another, high school students used games to learn different subjects, by becoming the central character of the game’s story and, in this instance, developed an urgency to learn.

A virtual environment allows the learning process to take place in a different way than in a traditional lecture context, he said. Gaming is used to shape a learner’s behaviour and not so much about “feeding” the student with pre-set content. “As a teacher” Evert explained, “you are no longer the centre of the classroom. The student is the hero of the story”.

Gamified learning focuses on stimulating the interest of who is learning, allowing the teacher to look who needs extra attention and who, on the contrary, is searching for an extra challenge.

To effectively incorporate academic rigor with game development, Evert is not only designing the games themselves, but also co-designing strategies to better align the process of validation with the creative and production strategies of games.
Abhay Adhikari works globally with both private and public sectors to develop digital innovation projects in the cultural and creative industries. He introduced himself as a digital innovator, a consultant entrepreneur—purposely using buzzwords as a start to remind us how we all use categories to define ourselves and how the world perceives us and place others into these categories, as well. He calls this process sense-making.

Sense-making enables us to accept the digital into our lives, but equally, it allows us to reject those aspects of digitality that aren’t a good fit. While we cannot assume that everyone has equitable access to digital tools and resources—admitting that the very existence of a digital resource can also create a divide—we can reflect and discuss how digitality impacts our experiences.

To illustrate this point, Abhay shared examples from his own experience, which very much related to the topics discussed at the ELIA Academy.
Digitality offers great promise for the future of multiplatform storytelling.

Previously, the potential of multiplatform storytelling was considered limitless. Now, storytelling is viewed as fodder for digital platforms, which effectively reduces storytellers to content aggregators who must produce as much content as possible in as short a time as possible. In this setting, the need of the platform is above the need of the creator.

Abhay has been part of a team in charge of running a sense-making project that questions what the outcome would be and whether or not we should instead put the needs of the people before the needs of the platform. Recently, the team worked with the Swedish Institute for Language and Folklore, a cultural organisation with a vast reserve of knowledge. Instead of asking which platform the organisation wanted to use to share this knowledge, the question instead was: what do you want to share?

By flipping the situation and allowing the needs of the organisation to have greater importance than the needs of the platform, The Swedish Institute for Language and Folklore was able to share their content in their own voice. They used the digital to bridge the divide between how they viewed their work and how the rest of the world saw them.

In 2016, Abhay was asked to set up a smart city lab for the second largest local authority in the UK. The Public Health Team was looking for a secure, digital solution to address isolation among seniors and newly arrived migrants – a diverse group with a population of approximately 14,000 people. The goal was for the small public health team to connect with all 14,000 people. The solution developed came not from a desire to create something impressively digital, but from an interest in human experience. The solution was to form secure ‘hotspots’ of social isolation around the city based on real-time data shared by frontline staff from their mobile phones.

The project, called Careview, has been live for three years, and it works. Why? Abhay explains: because it taps into the tacit knowledge the users have. It is an ‘invisible’ digital project, because the outcome is not about the application itself but about people.

Arts and cultural practitioners have some powerful analogue tools at their disposal; ones that can be used to critically engage with contentious themes and value processes instead of pre-defined outcomes. All of these, along with multidisciplinary projects, laboratories, degree programmes, have the potential to give students a lived experience of digital technologies, and a lived experience of rejecting technology. Students, academics and practitioners have the opportunity to learn sense-making as a form of literacy, gain ownership over these tools and their boundaries, and develop a sense of agency to steer further conversations on digitality.
KUNSTMUSEUM STUTTGART

All four floors of the Kunstmuseum in central Stuttgart were reserved for delegates alone on the second evening of the ELIA Academy. In smaller groups, explanations were given of each section of the exhibition Schéeze-Liebe-Sehnsucht by Icelandic artist Ragnar Kjartansso. His video pieces included variation, repetition, loops and extended playing time, humour and pointed intensification along with a memorable “live” performance.
Composer Jennifer Walshe presented >IS IT COOL TO TRY HARD NOW?< a voice and electronics piece, created using a wider range of artificial intelligence networks which had been trained on different databases of material, including diaries, recordings of James Brown and Brittney Spears, images of opera singers, Erik Satie’s performance indications, and more.
Live-coding is a practice where creative artists who work with code do so live for the audience to watch. J. Simon van der Walt outlined current practices and research in the area of live-coded music and visual, referencing educational concepts and questioning the idea of presenting only completed work, while delegates watched on a projected screen and listened as the code created beat-driven music.
REFLECTIONS

The rich programme of the ELIA Academy 2019 showcased a diverse range of projects and presentations, such as workshops, case studies with discussions, performance-based presentations and papers. These contributions explored various aspects of digital practices and digitality in teaching and learning in the arts. Find here some reflections on the countless, high quality interactions that took place during the three-day event.

In the Plenary session HISTORY/FOUNDATIONS/ROOTS, pioneering Internet artist and theorist Olia Lialina, reminded us of the importance of questioning digital tools and the terminology we use to define it. The term technology is so overused and generalized, often causing us to forget the different components which fall under this broad definition, such as hardware, software and coding. Societal and political manipulation often impacts the awareness and involvement of human beings into the debate. Olia reiterated the position of Cornelia Sollfrank on how important it is that the arts and education integrate the political and ethical aspects of digitality into teaching.

When we simply talk about technology, we forget the programming aspect of digital systems, the complexity of the tech-industry and the ethical aspects of coding, which can cause technological tools to be used as a weapon or means of control. Olia refers on this matter to the controversial book What Technology Wants by Kevin Kelly.
Matti Ruippo talked about how he is teaching music using online software. This software allows his students to play together from different locations, and to interact with each other 24/7. He talked about how the use of these digital technologies has caused a shift in his teaching approach and how this will likely change even further in the future.

The internationally renowned media artist Christa Sommerer, took the audience back into a time travel experience. She showed the work she has developed alongside Laurent Mignonneau, and how it pioneered the use of natural interfaces to create a new language of interactivity based on artificial life and evolutionary image processes. Today, Christa teaches a programme called Interface Cultures at the University of Art and Design Linz, Austria. The programme stimulates a critical approach to technology, inviting students to re-think the tools the industry is producing. In the future, data ecology, speculative design and more matters concerning the production, function and use of technology will become more and more important. It is up to artists and practitioners to redesign technology and its use.

Other sessions at the ELIA Academy 2019 focused on EMOTIONAL EXPERIENCE/IMMERSION, CRITICAL ATTENTION/SKEPTICISM, DEVELOPING DIGITAL PEDAGOGIES, DIGITAL FLUENCIES and RESEARCH/METHODOLOGIES. The enthusiasm of presenters and participants allowed the event to unfold several matters around different aspects of digitality. These are some examples:

Dorothee King ran a memorable workshop which included meditation to encourage delegates to overcome set states of mind about their digital abilities and preferences while fully embracing the debate on the pros and cons of digitalisation.

Through an interactive session lead by Christine Goutrié, she argued that coding, algorithmic thinking and binary codes should be taught in elementary school and understood by all as a key foundation for society in the digital world. David White led a mapping activity which helped participants to conceptualise and define their own digital practices.

Digital learning was also touched on in several sessions, most specifically regarding the Exchanged project at Zurich University of the Arts, presented by Charlotte Axelsson, Wanja Kröger and Renato Soldenhoff. Through collaborative webinars and live conferences the initiative, called Exchanged, aims to establish a community of practice for learning and teaching in digitality.
As Abhay Adhikari said, the success of the ELIA Academy was in not trying to solutionise, but in stimulating the debate around a very broad topic.

The process of making sense was key to the engaging series of conversations around terminology, tools, methods, challenges of today and for the future, politics, industry and, of course, education.

Participants heard how we can use technology in different forms as an effective and sustainable tool for teaching and stimulating creative thinking. The use of gaming showed us how the use of digital environments can enhance the value process more than the outcome, taking the students out of the ‘test versus result’ dynamic.

We also talked about how the antagonism of digital and analogue no longer exists. These aspects of our reality already coexist in our lives, and it is now a matter of recognising and accepting their use and existence. More importantly, the focus should lie on the story we want to tell and why that is important, rather than getting distracted by which digital platform we should be using.

Teachers clearly take on an increasingly vital role in helping their students finding their way in this broad spectrum of possibilities and sometimes, dilemmas. Understanding that not engaging with digital tools is a possibility, and on the other side, allowing them to learn to use the technologies that might be of their interest.
And still, very often there has been a common agreement on the importance of teaching, understanding and learning the language of coding. Coding should be a skill owned by everyone; certainly, by students, in order for them to design the (digital) future. Coding competencies are a tool for de-coding society and economy.

The assumption that young generations have a good understanding and grasp of technology was also widely debated. The complexity of the tech-industry has major implications on our society. Many delegates agreed institutions should have more of a role in clarifying this complex picture.

Many think that students, artists and practitioners should be empowered to re-think and redesign the technological tools and their use in society.

There’s a responsibility on the part of the higher arts institutions in stimulating the debate around matters that concern different aspects of digitality.

Some think, for example, that universities and academies should create more awareness on how tech-business is functioning and conditioning our lives. Others think that students are already aware of how these systems work. Higher education institutions do have the responsibility to stimulate critical thinking and to empower students to deal with these systems, being social media and digital presence, and to find their way into this universe.

Delegates at the ELIA Academy were left with many questions still open, but maybe that space of reflection and investigation is exactly what is needed.
The ELIA Academy 2019 was realized with the great support and efforts of the steering group and the selection committee; of our partners, their teams and individuals who provided their time and energy for this purpose. We are very thankful to all of them for supporting us in realising such a successful event.

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