It's Hip to be Square: The Pixel Revolution in Contemporary Art

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A POETICS OF THE FICTIONAL, A POLITICS OF MEMORY
by Natasha Chaykowski
HIP TO BE SQUARE

The Pixel Revolution in Art and Visual Culture

by Matthew Ryan Smith
beginning in the early 2000s, the fetishization of high-resolution digital technology generated something of a critical backlash among artists, software programmers, and game designers wholly committed to retaining pixel art “purism.” This oppositional politics only grew stronger with the introduction of 4K (4096 x 2160 pixels) resolution technology, which far exceeds that of even ultra high-definition television. Arguably, the rapid augmentation of resolution technology is making it more and more difficult to decipher lived reality from the world of digital images—so much so, in fact, that certain digital imagery now appears more “real” than the original.

Artist and writer James Bridle attempts to conceptualize this sociocultural phenomenon under the moniker “The New Aesthetic” through a series of lectures, essays, and blog posts. For Bridle, The New Aesthetic fundamentally “deals with the ways in which the digital, networked world reaches into the physical, offline one.” When thinking about the
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ways that digital machines understand and perceive lived reality, it is the pixel which emerges and subsequently becomes the most recognizable and crucial signifier. Take, for example, Toronto video artist Clint Enns, who reanimates classic Nintendo games in a fury of twitch and glitch; or the work of Vancouver-based artist Ed Spence, who enlarges photographs of swimmers from retro British Columbia tourism magazines then hand-cuts them into thousands of tiny squares, only to paste them back together in sinuous coloured patterns beside their originals. On the one hand, it bridges both analog and digital photography processes through a form of abstract collage. On the other hand, it reproduces precisely how digital images function: by visualizing the perceived world as pixels; in other words, by seeing-as-computer.

Of course, the precursor to pixelation exists in tesseracts, those tiny pieces of glass or stone tile used to produce mosaics. There are other analog approaches, too, most notably the craftwork of beadwork and cross-stitching. Yet the most (in)famous pseudo-pixel in the history of Western art remains Malevich’s epic marvel of abstraction Black Square (1915). According to art historian Irina Lyubchenko, it was with Black Square that Malevich distilled the essence of geometric form to its nucleus as a way to quantify the divine particles of everyday life: “Malevich’s investigations of the visual world led him to discover nothing else but a particle, a basic unit of visible reality [...] not intended as vehicles for gaining knowledge about the world but as particles with which to create it.” The theoretical premise behind Malevich’s square is peculiarly similar to the artist, programmer, and game designer nearly seventy years later, during the early 1980s, when the pixel became a basic visual unit of colouration allowing for the creation of computer-processed images and or interactive point-and-click worlds. But let us not forget that the pixel has remained omnipresent for decades, though it has taken on different forms and iterations. It has been the visual device for camouflaging identity and cloaking explicit sexual imagery, which works to maintain an individual’s safety while, in many ways, obscuring the “truth” of an image.

In the digital sublime, pixelation occurs when a computer divides a display screen into minute imaging units where each unit is programmed a colour value, and the total squares supported by the
hardware qualify as the device’s resolution. Since the early 1980s, Indigenous singer-songwriter, activist and artist Buffy Sainte-Marie has immersed herself in painting with digital pixels through early Apple Paint software as a departure from singing and songwriting. For Sainte-Marie, personal computers find comparisons to beadwork, singing, and linguistic practices in that they resonate with creative potential, namely because PC’s symbolize a bridge from the past to the ultra-current, bringing new ways of thinking and engaging with Indigenous life and culture. So while Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun’s virtual reality work Inherent Rights, Vision Rights (1991–1993) helped to recontextualize Indigenous sovereign spaces, Sainte-Marie was involved in pixelation as a way to renew Indigenous visual history nearly ten years earlier, making her one if not the earliest example of contemporary pixel aesthetics in Canada:

Asleep and awake, I dream about manipulating colours and shapes and sounds and rhythm. I earn my living giving concerts and speeches; when I’m done, my eyes are just hungry for pieces of pure sound and pixels of colour, so I take my imagination into my studio, and play with sound, and I paint with light. To me, a Macintosh is a natural and easy to learn tool, and it belongs in the hands of our bead workers and powwow singers, our linguists, our historians.

In early works such as Elder Brothers (1984–2013), Sainte-Marie appropriates historical photographs of young Indigenous men from the late 19th century resulting in LSD-driven psychedelic dreams. These works essentially reanimate the static nature of the original portrait photographs, what Roland Barthes called its “immobility,” by pixelating the figures into a hypnotizing 16 million colours. In Sainte-Marie’s pixelation process, it happens that the men (photographed in a racializing style made famous by Edward Curtis) have lost most if not all of the stereotyping devices that photographers like Curtis were so fascinated with: spears, headdresses, tomahawks, eagle feathers and so on; thus, Sainte-Marie has redressed the source photograph and removed it of all its coding. She decides instead to focus on the faces of the men, collapsing the ethnographic context of the photograph to highlight their individuality. Here, the pixel is thrust into the center of reimagining Indigenous visual history through photography. It may be a fun picture to look at, but it’s undoubtedly loaded with implications. These early experiments by artists such as Sainte-Marie helped to secure the pixel as one of the most important visual frameworks for exploring questions surrounding race, ethnicity, and otherwise. For instance, “zoom in” on a digital portrait and the occurring pixelation obfuscates skin colour into gradient patterns of tones; “zoom out” and senses of tone are lost, forcing the image to fall easier into readily available racial signifiers such as “black” and “white.”

It is precisely the semiotic limitations of articulating skin tones within rudimentary colour codes that London-based artist Nicole Patrick engages. By digitally photographing herself and her various subjects, then magnifying their portraits via digital software so severely that an abstract pixelated map emerges, Patrick constructs alternative visual spaces to better understand the ways that skin is comprised of tones rather than crude codified colours. In effect, this approach reacts against social tendencies to pigeonhole a particular skin colour within a particular ethnicity or social “type.” Nevertheless, explorations into the subjectivities of colour through digital pixelation do not end at ethnicity. They are also being used to flesh out the dimensional characteristics of the photo camera itself. Imagine if the digital photo camera were to take only snapshots of the world as a single pixel—then the tiring question of the photographer’s subjectivity would crawl into redundancy.

It is this premise that drives Toronto-based artist Dave Kemp’s recent project, “The One Pixel Camera” (2014). In the work, Kemp hacked an old camera with customized software and electronics to capture light information and quantify it into a single flat image: a zero-dimensional pixel. But perhaps what is most fascinating is the almost stupefying referential relationship between the titles of the work and the images themselves: Sunset at Grand Bend, a peach square; Giselle holding the fish she just caught, a brown-grey square; and Niagara Falls, a grey square. One could say that each picture plays with the phenomenological impression of the digital. Moreover, they force the question of whether a photograph is still a photograph when its imagery is rendered void of any indexical trace to the outside world. It’s an important question that beckons at the marrow of taking photographs itself. Ultimately, Kemp has usurped Patrick’s minimalist aesthetic a step further by further annihilating the subjectivity/objectivity dichotomy that preoccupies critical debates surrounding forms of portraiture and documentary photography. Yet perhaps the best-known example of photography that espouses the pixel as an aesthetic device is that of German artist Thomas Ruff. In 2007, Ruff forged one of the most controversial digital photography projects in recent memory by culling from the rampant circulation and proliferation of digital images on the World Wide Web. After scouring the net for pictorial landscapes, war photographs, 9/11 documentation and other related imagery, he downloaded a selection of pictures and enlarged them to limits beyond their existing resolution. The culminating “jpegs” series contains photographs that quite literally blur and befuddle the recording of specific events, environments, moods, times, and places. When these images are printed at approximately 2.5 by 1.8 meters, they:

“fracture and pixelate to reveal, or more accurately to foreground, surfaces consisting of intoxicating mosaics of coloured grids. Stand back and an apocalyptic image emerges: up front, the photograph’s constituent elements and its underlying digital structure predominate.”

For Ruff, the pixels generate a painterly, picturesque quality that tends to mask or censor the “ugly,” more explicit features of the source image and make them beautiful. The theory explains the mechanics behind why photographs of the smouldering ruins of the World Trade
Center or the billowing mushroom clouds of early nuclear tests can appear so beautiful and disarming. For Susan Sontag, who put it so eloquently in her book *Regarding the Pain of Others*, “there is beauty in ruins.” The problem is, rather obviously, that the aestheticization of human tragedy and/or historical trauma virtually extinguishes the image's social context and status as information, thereby manipulating each into mere visual objects for contemplation; into that thing we call “art.”

The pixel has never before been so visible in visual culture, nor so popular, as it is right now. Take for example the failed blockbuster film *Pixels* (2015), the mania surrounding *Minecraft* (2009—), the pixellated introduction of *The Simpsons* (1989—), or the infiltration of pixelation in contemporary fashion and design professions. As the presence of the pixel seeps and trickles through contemporary aesthetics, its meaning is becoming more multifaceted and fragmented. In his book *Society of the Spectacle* (1967), French Situationist Guy Debord maintains that “In societies where modern conditions of production prevail, all of life presents itself as an immense accumulation of spectacles. Everything that was directly lived has moved away into representation.” Similarly, in the present day, the phenomenological distinctions between lived reality and digital images continue to fade with the development of higher-resolution technologies. He argues that images increasingly mediate our social existence, but the daily assault of digital images and digital imaging devices—cellular phones, tablets, laptops, PCs, entertainment systems, televisions—is not necessarily mediated by images, but more accurately, by digital pixels.

So it is pixels that fundamentally structure and govern the ways that we interact through digital technologies. In art and visual culture, more specifically, attempts at seeing-as-computer foreground the pixel at the centre of a new visual language. Alternatively, by isolating the pixel as an aesthetic device and thus removing it from its context, artists, programmers, and designers in each example above, transform the digital into the analog. This process is in fact precisely the opposite of a larger cultural tendency to transcribe the analog into environments of the digital.

In another way, the pixel remains deeply nostalgic. If nostalgia is defined as a longing or sentiment for the past, perhaps much of the contemporary engagement with pixel aesthetics by those who remember *Monkey Island* (1990, 1991) and original Nintendo is an attempt to reconcile past memory and emotion with the present youth with adulthood. Way back when, pixels embodied the very idea of play, of escapism, and of transcendence. Today the game has changed.

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**Endnotes**

6. Early artists and designers were forced to work with a four-colour scheme (Black, white, red and yellow) for their graphics. See Reynolds, *A Pixel Artist Reconstructs Pixel Art*.
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