

BOMBLOG

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Art: Kevin Zucker

By Stephen Truax
(Q&A)

Stephen Truax visits artist Kevin Zucker in his studio to discuss his work's relationship with the Internet and digital media, and how the digital space has impacted the experience of art in our contemporary context.



Red, Yellow, Blue (error type -108), 58" x 72", oil, acrylic, transfers on canvas, 2006. Courtesy of the artist and Greenberg Van Doren Gallery, New York. Photo by Ron Amstutz.

Stephen Truax How have you come to engage the Internet in your practice?

Kevin Zucker Talking about the Internet can get to be like talking about air. It's as much a fact of our existence. I have a friend who teaches in Digital Media at RISD and we've talked about what that label means, how impossible it would be to make anything that wasn't in some way digital. That presence of the computer gets acknowledged in my work in the same way that the channels of distribution that get my work into the world are reflected in it, or the conventions of linear perspective.

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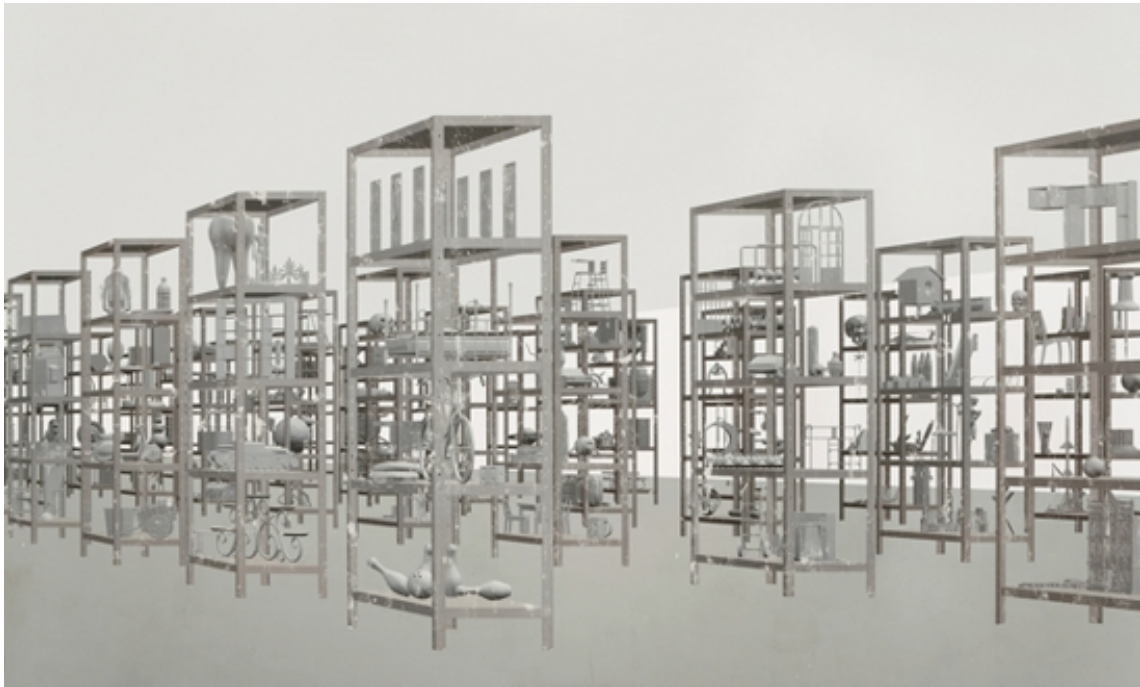
There was a period where I made paintings that made direct use of online collections and source material gathered from digging around online; in that same period I was using models of steel utility shelving units as a kind of template where content could get gathered and shuffled around, collected, curated, displayed, stored. Those templates later became opportunities for other kinds of curatorial activity, like the “group show” paintings where I defined the theme of a painting and provided a framework and process but then had other artists contributing the content.

ST Your work, unlike other painters’, addresses certain things that happen on the Internet. For example, you took your title for *Search Within Results* from Google. And your engagement with the Internet seems to be closer to that of a video or a digital media artist than a painter.

KZ I don’t know if I believe that. I don’t write code. I don’t do anything terribly sophisticated in my use of the computer. With the exception of using 3-D software (which is now also getting very accessible and ubiquitous), I think I do a lot of the same things we all do. We all rely on it constantly, and we all waste time on it, it’s just that I’ve found ways to sort of mentally write that time off by acknowledging its role and incorporating it into my practice.

ST Sure. When did you start using the Internet as source material?

KZ I started using the computer to make artwork in about 1998... I don’t know, it can be tough to say what is and isn’t source material, but a painting I showed at PSI in 2005, the 2007 Greenberg Van Doren show you mentioned, and solo shows I did in 2008 in Beijing and Cologne are the places where I made that connection to online collections most explicit. The paintings in those shows used storage or display apparatus to try to describe the weird curatorial juxtapositions you arrive at online, arrangements that sometimes don’t seem to adhere to any sort of recognizable logic in spite of their having been generated by rational algorithms. There was a big painting in that show called *Encyclopedia* where I tried to collect all the free 3-D models available on the Internet that I could download during summer of 2006.



Encyclopedia, 96" x 160", acrylic, transfers on canvas, 2006. Courtesy of the artist and Greenberg Van Doren Gallery, New York. Photo by Ron Amstutz.

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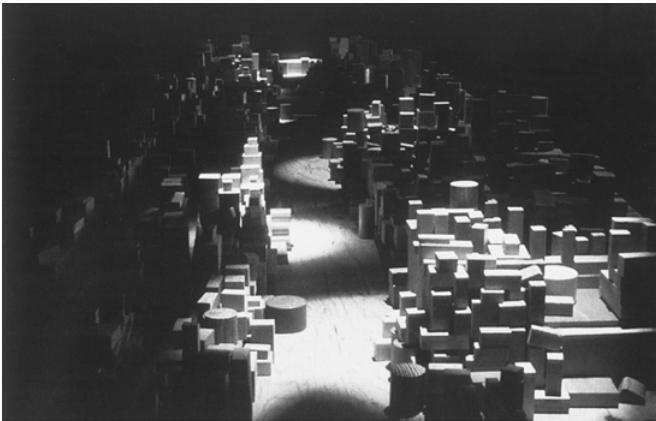
ST All of them?

KZ Well, that was the idea. Of course there are things that were copied in at a scale too small to be visible, or wound up embedded in other objects, or things that wouldn't import into the software platform I was using. But you couldn't even try to do that now. Google's SketchUp software and their online "warehouse" of user-posted models has opened that up to a much broader user base. It's not a little niche thing anymore, and models are probably getting posted as fast as you could download them.

When I was making the paintings that used the metal shelving units, I was asked at a lecture why I would use an image of physical-world storage to describe things that exist online, I guess instead of something more techie. I wanted a sense of anachronism in the work that would highlight how these technologies are continuously changing or becoming obsolete. I hoped that the paintings could be snapshots of a particular moment in the development of that history, a visual equivalent of an archive like the Wayback Machine, where you can go back and see how Wikipedia or something looked a decade ago.

And then I also wanted to evoke the kind of hangover you get spending eight hours lost inside your computer. You haven't moved, but you're a million miles away from anything you started off looking for. Sometimes that can yield really good stuff, other times nothing, but either way you're sort of wasted when you pry yourself away. Or at least I am. The Internet can leave you feeling lost in a dusty basement. There's an image in the catalog from that *Search Within Results* show of the last shot from *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, where the ark is buried in the basement of the Smithsonian, lost because of the amount of stuff surrounding it.

I like the fact that when you delete a file from your desktop you're not actually writing over it, you're just telling the operating system to lose the link to that information and throw it into a space where it can later be overwritten. Not knowing where it is becomes the same as not having it.



Mock-up and matte painting for final shot of *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, Paramount Pictures, 1981.

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ST You have to use *magnets* to find it.

KZ (*laughs*) Exactly.

ST Why did you choose to stick to painting? There is such a rich history there, and there are so many conceptual hang-ups with continuing to paint at this day in age, why is this digital media presented as painting?

KZ The hang-ups and the history are the appeal, though. I like that baggage. I started bringing other [digital] tools into it because of how awkwardly they fit, but also just because we use them in all the other areas of our lives, why deny that in studio? And of course I'm interested in the structures created and reflected by those tools, how they remap our social and imaginative lives.

ST What is the relationship to 3-D modeling software?

KZ It's something that I first was introduced to out of necessity, when I was trying to figure out how to draw a space that had a lot of reflections in it. It lets you build things in virtual 3-D space, move them around, see them from any angle. It's ubiquitous in architecture and engineering, product and furniture design, animation, games. We're constantly interacting with things that existed as digital models first.

ST So it's 3-D objects, presented on a 2-D surface?

KZ Right, you manipulate them on-screen. If you're looking at one of those paintings with the shifted planes (Kevin Zucker, *Red Yellow and Blue*, 2007), you can see that there are multiple reflections of individual objects seen from different angles, different views of the same corner of a shelf, that you wouldn't get by just cutting up an existing two-dimensional image and sticking it back together.

ST Yeah, exactly. So, in your lecture that you gave in 2007 at RISD...

KZ Jesus. (*laughs*)

ST For your job talk.

KZ Uh huh? (*wry*)

ST I wanted to ask you about one subject that you brought up...

KZ I'm being held accountable for things that I said in a lecture I gave in Rhode Island four years ago?

ST Well, you talked about Malevich! You talked about how your paintings, particularly in that 2007 show, attempted to do Suprematist things, where the paint was the paint.

KZ I wouldn't have said that. I was probably talking in a narrow way about having tried to get a specific hand in how paint was applied to the rectangles in one of those paintings, like the hand that one sees in looking at Malevich or Mondrian in person, tactile and purposeful, but also casual compared to the way paint often gets dealt with in geometric abstraction after the early '60s. Though there are a lot more abstract painters interested in that hand now than there were even a couple years ago.

ST The one painting I'm thinking of has blue and yellow squares...

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KZ There were two, one was a CMYK painting, where the colored rectangles were inkjet ink, straight cyan, magenta, yellow, black. The other one was all paint, red yellow and blue. The colors in each of those mediums that you make all the other colors from. One way I thought about those paintings was that they depicted an attempt at completism that would inevitably fail; like they had taken on too much, trying to depict everything, and “crashed,” breaking back into their component colors.

ST I wanted to talk more about how you actually make your images. When did you make your first transfer painting?

KZ I’ve always been attracted to indirect drawing. I’d been messing around with photocopies, carbon paper, that kind of thing, pretty much since I started trying to make paintings.

ST And your work now includes a digital transfer process, right?

KZ Some of it does. Initially I was curious about the computer because it seemed badly suited to painting, a little perverse, and I liked transfer processes because they left a trace of that. There’s information lost in that process. The painting is “indexical,” it retains a kind of record of its own making.

ST Which relates back to painting addressing painting.

KZ Sure. But painting is also a technology for visualizing things that you couldn’t otherwise, whether they’re fact or fiction, abstraction, the properties of materials, poetic idiosyncrasies, utopian plans, dystopian critique of those plans, whatever. The computer can be used the same way, 3-D modeling software gets called “visualization” software. And then of course that attempt at description, the limitations of the tools, reshapes the ideas being described and the ways they make meaning, and so on, right?

That transfer process also emphasizes the tension between something existing as an idea, in a digital state, almost a Platonic world, and then the physical object as it’s produced, with its material properties. I’ve thought about my work in those terms for a long time, like there’s this stuff that exists in a state of pure information, in the computer, and in dragging it into the physical world, there’s inevitably information that gets lost or changed in that process.

ST So do you feel that your subject matter now comes out of your process of learning how to paint, starting with this transfer process, or do you feel like it’s the other way around?

KZ I can’t imagine how those things wouldn’t be tied to one another. They’re sets of concerns that grow up together and continue to inform one another.

ST Because we always have that problem of actually making the object, right?

KZ But even if you were a writer... when I was in grad school I had a conversation with the novelist Rick Moody where we talked about the ways that word processing software inform the production of writing. Copy/paste, delete, find and replace, dragging text blocks around, that changes both the way you write and what gets written.

ST I want to ask you about your “link” essay on ArtFagCity?

KZ That was actually a press release for that 2007 show we’ve been talking about. Which I guess somebody forwarded to Paddy Johnson; she posted about it.

ST It’s a press release that occurs online, that only exists online, it’s just a bibliography.

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KZ It's a link list in the form of an outline for a press release. But I actually gave it a physical form, too. It was printed out and available at the gallery.

ST (*laughs*) Printed in blue, with the underline?

KZ Yeah but it was photocopied and faxed around so it was black and white. I thought about that again recently when I found a newspaper clipping where they'd accidentally run the online text of the article in the print version, so midway through the article it said, in black newspaper ink, "Click here for more information." (*laughs*) I liked presenting those inert links. That show was about the sort of Borges' Library idea that access to an overwhelming amount of information becomes effectively similar to access to no information. So to recreate that frustration in the press release made sense to me.

ST Which is sort of what your paintings are doing. They're presenting images and information that are available online to almost everyone, but you're presenting them in this kind of inert fashion, unsearchable.

KZ There's a kind of reorganizing, re-framing or calling attention to things. Yes, it's all already available, but there's such a glut of information that the art activity can be the digging around in the basement, pulling things out. But we're just talking about some of the work I've made. There are also lots of things that I've done before and since that don't have much to do with that conversation. It became pretty literal in my work for a period of time, which we're focusing on here. That online-ness isn't necessarily the subject of the work in a longer-term way... I don't think of my work as being, like, "about" the Internet. I'm not even sure what that would mean.



Amalgamated Sculpture, 2010. Polurethane foam, urethane resin, paint. Courtesy of the artist and Greenberg Van Doren Gallery/Eleven Rivington, New York. Photo by James Ewing, courtesy of the Public Art Fund.

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ST Can you tell me more about your public sculpture project? Who funded it? What was it for?

KZ It's the first piece of sculpture I've shown. Public Art Fund very generously asked me if I wanted to do something, they paid for it. It's up at Metrotech through September. We wound up producing part of a sculpture that combined all of the models available for free download in the SketchUp database of user-posted models that had the word *sculpture* in their title or description. The idea was to pile all of those things together and create a sort of definitional thing, "What does the word *sculpture* mean there [on the internet]? How is sculpture in that world different from in the physical world?" It's out of the same line of thinking as that *Encyclopedia* painting.

ST So what's your next project?

KZ I'm working on a show, new paintings, a new process right now. Oil paint. Doing that big sculpture on a really close deadline, with two different fabricators in two different states and computer-controlled milling and insane logistics left me very excited about making some new paintings.

Kevin Zucker is a New York-based artist represented by Greenberg Van Doren Gallery, New York, and Linn Luehn, Cologne, and an Assistant Professor at the Rhode Island School of Design.

Stephen Truax is an artist and independent curator based in New York.