

## AHRC ICT Methods Network Expert Seminar on Visual Arts

# FROM PIGMENTS TO PIXELS

*Chelsea College of Art and Design, London, Thursday 27 April 2006.*

*Chaired by Mike Pringle, AHDS Visual Arts.*

In his discussion of art practice as research, Graeme Sullivan observes that the uncertain world of the digital age offers us new ways to communicate:

“Digital technology serves as a site for inquiry where information is clearly no longer a form within which knowledge is found, nor a unit of analysis that lends itself to neat manipulation or interpretation. Yet this uncertain realm of investigative opportunity is just the kind of place where artists, scientists, researchers, cultural theorists, and community activists are speaking to each other in a fresh language of images and ideas.”<sup>1</sup>

For the visual arts research community, dominated as it is by the practice of art, much of the fresh language comes in the form of digital imagery, whilst many of the topics discussed relate in some way to digital imagery and, inevitably, the Internet: the key enabling mode of communication of this new language and the discussions it stimulates. However, as the Internet, in its basic form, is a technological domain, its development can often seem to be dominated by a technological agenda which does not necessarily meet the needs or expectations of the art research community. This is particularly true in the case of those who wish to explore, exploit or expound on such technologies through their practice, rather than via the apparently more tangible means of humanities or science methods.

What this tends to mean, is that much of the integration of visual art resources or methods (on or for the Internet) is through use of the word to describe the visual, and on the development of standards, techniques and technologies for manipulating text rather than images. Consequently, the distribution and accessing of visual information is a complex and often unsatisfactory activity – the fresh language that Sullivan promotes is perhaps not yet fully coherent. The core of the problem lies in the very nature of digital images: through their make up of simple pixels or point data, they tend to lack useful data for machines to interrogate or interact with, making art researchers’ interaction with them dependant on added textual information. This is particularly problematic for the practice-led researcher where the visual object is often the primary means of communication.

As ever greater numbers of images join the information superhighway, the visual arts research community’s reliance on electronic, rather than analogue, images will inevitably increase. This one day seminar will bring together experts, from a number of different disciplines, to discuss: methods currently used for enabling the distribution and accessing of digital images in cyberspace; and, the relevance, mismatch, and unfilled gaps of such methods, particularly in relation to practice-led visual arts research. At a recent AHRC Town Meeting on ‘Understanding and Mapping Practice-led Research’<sup>2</sup>, *one big question* that arose was: ‘What’s in the methods toolbox?’ This seminar will contribute to the answering of that question.

<sup>1</sup> Sullivan, G., 2005, *Art Practice as Research*, California, Sage Publications Inc..

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.ahrcreview.aces.shu.ac.uk/ahrcreview/documents/Bham%20report%20v1.pdf>

## Provisional programme

9.30	<i>Registration (Tea and Coffee will be available)</i>
9:45	<i>Welcome and Introduction</i>
	Morning session: The state of the art – a review of some current ICT methods for distributing and accessing visual information in cyberspace.
10.00	<b>Use and development of traditional text-driven methods (e.g. metadata, thesauri) for cataloguing and aiding retrieval of digital images.</b> <i>Tom Morgan, National Portrait Gallery, London, UK.</i>
10.25	<b>Challenges in improving user success through describing and indexing the content of non-still images (e.g. CAD, VR) in digital space.</b> <i>Stuart Jeffrey, Archaeology Data Service, University of York, UK.</i>
10.50	<i>Tea and Coffee</i>
11.15	<b>Novel methods for increasing access to visual digital information through more intuitive and information-rich interfaces and search mechanisms.</b> <i>Kirk Martinez, University of Southampton, UK.</i>
11.40	<b>The problem with pictures: use of visual metaphors and ‘intelligent’ image browsing to increase options for exploring visual material via non-textual means.</b> <i>Mike Pringle, AHDS Visual Arts, University College for the Creative Arts, Farnham, UK.</i>
12.05	<b>Discussion</b>
12.30	<i>Lunch</i>
	Afternoon session: Human factors – the relevance, mismatch, and unfilled gaps of such methods, particularly in relation to practice-led visual arts research.
13.30	<b>Technological issues for practice-led research in the visual arts.</b> <i>Jonathan Woodham, University of Brighton, UK.</i>
13.55	<b>Artist practitioners and the impact and use of digital imagery and the Internet.</b> <i>Roger Wilson, Chelsea College of Art and Design, London, UK.</i>
14.20	<b>New ways of thinking about imagery in the digital era.</b> <i>Charlie Gere, Lancaster University, UK.</i>
14.45	<i>Tea</i>
15.00	<b>Rapporteur’s Response</b> <i>Chris Bailey, Northumbria University, UK.</i>
15.30	<b>Concluding Debate</b>
16.30	<i>Close of Seminar</i>