Digital media and new technology is reconfiguring our relationship with the world and is also affecting how artists relate with their public. Current technologies can help to position art into the everyday of people’s lives and activities, outside the gallery space. Digitally enabled new spaces have opened up where artists can engage with audiences in a participatory experience. Within the cityscapes of our urban environments, “Big Brother” media and CCTV surveillance allow for few informal, ungoverned social meeting places; therefore, it is the creation of interstices between the formal constructed and observed social spaces, where unorthodox art can happen and engage directly with its audience, that artists are interested in. Digital media provides such relational opportunities but as virtual platforms where accessing them means stepping from one world to the other, a conceptual moving from one state of being to another. Contrary to this human-to-avatar experience, virtual objects are being transformed into solid materiality by crossing this threshold between worlds. The threshold is then a magic alchemical space, an interstice between the real and the virtual, a moment of change, of becoming the other.

ISEA (Inter Society of the Electronic Arts) holds an annual seminal event for digital media art practice and research. For the two past ISEA conferences, I convened panels to discuss new work and ideas that cross the boundary between the analogue and the digital. For ISEA2009, a panel explored practice and curation across virtual and real spaces, while the ISEA2011 panel interrogated the varied forms of theory and practice apparent in approaching the liminal space positioned between the virtual and the real. Artists continue to explore the notion of the “liminal” that has arisen with the evolution of digital technology. The latter panel presented current contemporary understandings of this amorphous state of presence by generating discussion and argument around its nature. Considering the diverse determinations as to what the liminal means in our digitally driven culture this panel asked, “To what extent are artists digitally facilitating convivial spaces where participants can engage with and co-create an art work?” Different approaches were displayed within the panel expertise to interrogate digitally facilitated liminality as either a transformative space of creative transcendence or a convivial and social space where art occurs.

Although conference proceedings are published from these events, the panel talks are not included, and there exists a need for an edited collection of chapters in this area of digitally enabled transitional spaces for creative exploration. Digital Media and Technologies for Virtual Artistic Spaces brings the work of the panel speakers together and aims to provide relevant theoretical frameworks and examples of current practice in this area of variable media and virtual spaces for artists, theorists, and curators, as well as researchers working both in the field and beyond, to those working with new technologies, social media platforms, and digital/material culture. Digitally created and virtual platforms have emerged to become part of our everyday lives. We use them to socialize, play, and work. Artists have been experimenting within virtual spaces over the last decade with ongoing interests in identity, imagination, interactive play,
and more recently, materializing code. The book displays expertise in varied forms of artistic practice in virtual spaces and shows the interest in variable media and online platforms for creative interplay. This specific synthesis of new technology and art practice, although centered on bridging the virtual to the real world offers an expansive take on creative digital practice and liminal spaces.

The first chapter, “The Re-Materialisation of the Art Object,” presents the shift in art-thinking since mid-last century derived from the impact of earlier art, and brings us to the phenomena of the re-materialisation of the art object. By giving examples of recent practice where new technologies have allowed for this re-materialisation, where virtual objects have solidified into physical forms, a re-positioning of the art object is undertaken. This then allows a return to the initial formative conceptual framework and offers a way through to a cutting-edge form of postconceptual art practice.

Ian Gwilt, in “Data-Objects: Sharing the Attributes and Properties of Digital and Material Culture to Creatively Interpret Complex Information,” continues to explore the materialisation of virtual art objects by moving the discussion from virtual reality to that of hybrid digital/physical constructs and the notions of mixed reality.

Martin Rieser outlays his practice of moving between virtual and real worlds in “Mobility, Liminality, and Digital Materiality,” where he critically aligns the use of mobile and pervasive technologies in a number of pioneering projects, with his own practice concerned with the liminal nature of digital media. His work lies at the intersection of the physicality of place and the immateriality of the imaginary in artistic spaces.

Paul Sermon and Charlotte Gould bring together their practice-based research in “Site-Specific Performance, Narrative, and Social Presence in Multi-User Virtual Environments and the Urban Landscape.” They look at the concepts of social presence and performance and attempt to bridge two remote locations either virtually (using online virtual environments such as Second Life) or in the physical space through mixed reality techniques and interfaces that allow the public to direct the narrative and creative outcomes of the artworks.

Denise Doyle, in her chapter, “Living between Worlds: Imagination, Liminality, and Avatar-Mediated Presence,” interrogates the notion of the liminal in relation to the virtual and the imaginary through a consideration of the field of art and technology, and current creative practices in virtual worlds and avatar-mediated space.

Elif Ayiter continues with the theme of virtual worlds and avatars in “LPDT2: La Plissure du Texte 2,” where she discusses the artistic processes involved in the creation of the 3D virtual art installation La Plissure du Texte 2, a sequel to Roy Ascott’s ground breaking telematically networked artwork La Plissure du Texte, 1983.

The next chapter, “Can Duchampian and Darwinian Virtual Objects Ever Behave Themselves?” follows with another exposition of a virtual world as creative space, this time not with avatars but with digital objects which are given human and animal-like behaviours. This chapter offers the trajectory of a collaborative art practice towards intuitive interaction for visitors in the real world accessing virtual spaces to achieve a shared holistic understanding of a complex system.

Alistair Payne explores the philosophical positioning of The Virtual in response to the writings of Giles Deleuze. In “The Virtual and Interdisciplinarity,” he unfolds this thinking through its interdisciplinary and transformative affects upon contemporary fine art, specifically painting, but as an expanded practice engaging with other media.
Ross Winning, in “Behind the Sonic Veil: Considering Sound as the Mediator of Illusory Life in Variable and Screen-Based Media,” draws on animation to examine how applications of sound may demand new conceptual frameworks for the traditional screen and enable new virtual moving image spaces to develop.

Ian Stone also explores traditional and digital screen space in his chapter “Para-Formalistic Discourse and Virtual Space in Film.” He focuses on the use of digital technologies by two Auteurs’ who use the “active” variant of the third text in their films to make the audience aware of a film’s artifice, and project them into an ontological virtual space where they are compelled to confront the conditions around them.

Judith Aston considers screen space within her chapter calling for a “sensory turn” in anthropology in its meeting with new media. “Database Narrative, Spatial Montage, and the Cultural Transmission of Memory: A Case Study from the Sudan/Ethiopian Borderlands” looks at the potential of the Internet as a means through which real-world project materials can be made available to the wider diaspora as a basis to which others can add their own stories.

Rina Arya unpacks the term “liminal” or “liminality” and examines its applicability in a wider context beyond anthropology in her chapter “Exploring Liminality from an Anthropological Perspective”.

Eugene Ch’ng considers Heritage as another area undergoing digital transformation in his chapter “The Mirror between Two Worlds: 3D Surface Computing for Objects and Environments.” He sees heritage as increasingly being transmuted through digitisation devices such as laser and structure light scans into multiple representations of information. Once digitized, it becomes free from its physical predecessor and enters a world that defies the physical laws of nature where the imagination of the maker is the limit. The multi-touch table then becomes the mirror linking the real to the virtual world.

Suzette Worden, in “The Earth Sciences and Creative Practice: Exploring Boundaries between Digital and Material Culture,” continues with the theme of heritage but only as it pertains to mining heritage. Her chapter concerns those artists who engage with the earth sciences and have been able to explore all kinds of information about the natural environment, including the atmosphere and extremes of physical formations across immense dimensions of time and space, and increasingly “invisible” realms of materials at the nanoscale.

Gianluca Mura, in “Metaplastic Cyber Opencode Art,” explores the continuum between old and new media and presents the research area of Metaplastic Art and Design. Within this, he relates his own methodology for creating interactive virtual spaces for Cyber Art between reality and virtual realities.

Anita McKeown considers the process of “becoming” in her chapter, “Virtual Communitas, Digital ‘Place-Making,’ and the Process of ‘Becoming,’” and how selected context-responsive projects that use the Internet can develop and harness communitas and function as liminoid space facilitating new understandings of place.

The chapters collected from the ISEA panel sessions together reflect the research and critical practice currently taking place in creatively exploring the space between the real and virtual worlds, and the conceptual approaches toward this. They include varied forms of practice, from avatars to film and animation, from heritage and anthropology to nanotechnology and from earth sciences to artificial intelligence. They move through painting, sculpture, and craft to conceptual art practice and social artwork in their scope, and offer insightful understandings of how the digital is offering new opportunities for the creation of virtual artistic spaces.

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