

## Fresh Flowers and Digital Decay

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'Stem Cell Technology' [Hockney's iPad pictures], *Times Higher Education*, no. 1976, 2-8 December 2010, pp. 45-6.



Untitled, 10 June 2010 iPad drawing

Many of those who are given cut flowers value the gift because of the short, poignant span of the blooms' beauty. As with a firework, merely slower, money is sacrificed to transient display. The presence of flowers in a vase is also bought at the price of their death. A digital image of a flower is quite different: if it can be read, it will remain unchanged (so long as the varying colour registers of different monitors are discounted), and most errors that are introduced into its copying will prevent its being seen at all. One artist, David Claerbout, played on these contrasts by designing flowers that could be downloaded to the desktop where, over a period of weeks, they would wilt and decay. His work was named *Present*.

David Hockney has lately been 'painting' flowers on an iPad, using an app called 'Brushes', which allows the user to make the touch-screen display colours by stroking it with a stylus or fingers. Any colour can be laid over any other without the lower layer showing through, which is not the case with paint. Hockney traces out the designs of cut flowers, often seen against a window in the early morning, and sends them to a small group of friends. He can get rapid comments on his work, and his friends are apparently free to circulate these gifts as they like.

Hockney is showing two hundred of these works in Paris at the Fondation Pierre Bergé (which is devoted to perpetuating the reputation of Yves Saint Laurent), displayed on iPads. Since the software also allows the user to replay each stage by which a composition was built, viewers can see how Hockney went about making a digital picture of the nearby Eiffel Tower. This is a nicely demystifying display which should encourage others to turn their iPads into sketchpads.

Hockney's interest in computer technology is long-standing, and he was experimenting with Quantel's Paintbox, a dedicated machine made for the design of TV graphics as early as 1985. In a remarkable TV programme made at the time, he showed how the machine and software could be turned to make pictures, 'painting with light', as the artist put it. He revelled in its precise emulation of material media, and in the speed with which ideas could be tried out, and the ease with which failed attempts could be erased. While, at the dawn of computer art, many artists used their work to reflect on the nature of the universal simulator, Hockney (then and now) uses computers to do more conveniently and rapidly much what he would have done in paint.

Hockney says that, unlike fresh flowers, 'my flowers last'. Digital media tightly entangle an ideal immortality with an actual disposability and ephemerality. If a file can be read, it will not age, but that 'if' is not a trivial one. The physical media on which files are held do, of course, deteriorate; as software is developed, incompatibilities with older versions can emerge, while other programmes are abandoned altogether; media become obsolete (punched cards, magnetic tape, floppy disks and Zip drives, to mention but a few). Ensuring the continuing freshness and life of digital files requires work, and that will continue only if the material continues to be of enough interest to warrant it. The vast majority of the five billion photographs on the photo-sharing site Flickr will surely be left to digital oblivion.

Giving gifts is one way to gain attention, and digital gifts are easy to give to many people. Adding a name to an email list takes little effort. The digital gift economy offers genuine goods (think of the music, video, photographs and texts shared online), in the hope that attention may itself turn out to be valuable, and may lead to the opportunity to sell other goods (material paintings of flowers, for example) at a premium.

So one way to view Hockney's exhibition is that it is a successful joint advertisement for the artist and Apple. In a much-quoted statement, Hockney makes this clear comparing the iPad favourably to a drawing pad, and saying that 'they will sell by the million'. The conjunction is also illustrated nicely by the technology's site cnet, which carries a brief account of the exhibition; directly below a reproduction of one of Hockney's pictures there is a link entitled 'Read Full Review', which takes you, logically enough, to a review of the iPad.

Apple has marketed devices of remarkable visual polish coupled with alluring and accessible interfaces, but its software is proprietary and closed source. Software designers are not free to alter and improve it, as they can with the Open Source or free software that runs much of the Internet. The success of Apple's various communication tools, and of other closed parts of the Web such as Facebook, can be seen as digital enclosures. As Richard Stallman, one of the founders of the free software movement famously put it: "Free software" is a matter of liberty, not price. To understand the concept, you should think of "free" as in "free speech," not as in "free beer". With free software, people are able to update and improve programmes if they think it worth doing, and one of the things that they may do is to ensure that old file formats can be read on modern machines, just as fans of old games write software to give them continued life.

Closely linked to the issue of software is the distribution of these images which could, in principle, be copied freely, distributed widely and dwell on the hard disks of millions of computers at once. In fact, neither Hockney nor his friends seem to have given them public life. Google searches for the iPad flowers only throw up a few low-resolution images published online (that is even lower resolution than the already low-resolution iPad screen). If the iPad is used to closely emulate the old art of painting, its old economic model is also followed, as if digital files have to be guarded as closely as unique objects.

Using a closed source device to make the flowers is to stake their future on the survival of a single company and its continued interest in protecting its past file formats. The life of Hockney's flowers may be shorter than he imagines.

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