

In the place of the digital

She passes a gas station in the American state of Nevada. Until the artist arrives at an isolated house, some ninety minutes further down a track, this will be the last evidence of human presence she encounters on her journey. The reception on her phone begins to ebb. Three bars, two, one then none. The narcissistic callback of social media fades away as a sandy landscape of sun scorched grasses stretches out to the horizon. Arriving at a simple one-room wood house, the artist is on her own.

Taking her digital camera, venturing out on foot across the scrubby expanse, the artist spends her days making small videos. The raw footage depicts largely nothing but blue sky, flat planes; sparse foliage, silhouetted as night falls. The sound of the wind rattles through. The films record the place and offer mediation of the artist's presence (withdrawn, as she is, from the constant assurance socialisation provides). The days stretch out, time distorts like the landscape in the midwest heat. The artist encounters an intruder: a plane overhead breaks the quiet loneliness. Then another. It became apparent that while there are no people, no buildings nor phone network; high in the sky, the constant hum of human technology and infrastructure sneaks unabated over this supposed wilderness.

Let's go up 39,000 feet. Or rather let's look at a data visualisation of the planes travelling high above this isolation. We still have the technology that the artist is marooned from. Thousands of radio signals ping to air traffic control, each locating a plane; these are gathered together as a dataset which is represented on a flight tracking website accessed via my the laptop, through a modem, a local service provider, an exchange point and data centres in other deserts, telephone lines, undersea cables. The Great Basin is a crowded mess of slow moving data packets it seems; 0s and 1s crammed together as aeroplane emojis.

Lilah Fowler's work considers the coexistence of the digital and material, and how these parallel worlds have started to bleed into each other (indeed it is perhaps naive to think one could exist without the other any more: it is algorithms that are keeping the planes in the air after all). Through her sculpture, weaving, architectural interventions, sound and video work the artist allows us to feel and see data, hold it in our hands, walk through it. Hers is a practice of artistic synesthesia. For the past two years Fowler has been using a custom-built computer programme which uses changing, arbitrary data points to generate unlimited visual patterns. These pictorial representations of code appear as pixelated topographies; boxy and gridlike, they nonetheless exhibit a riotous palette, coursing across a screen to form colourful fissures and clouds, lines and columns, borders and puddles. Fowler can change the data points to encourage different outcomes, but the results are largely as uncontrolled as they are infinite: the programme can keep on producing different patterns for as long as the technology that allows it survives. This is art in unlimited edition. Yet to view the outcome on a computer is still to be seduced by the aesthetic mirage of code that our computer screen magics. Unsatisfied at this, the artist has taken these patterns and used them as the backbone for a wide variety of physical projects. In a 2017 commission, for example, the artist applied one of the data patterns to the facade of a building in the Broadmead area of Bristol. The main outlet for the materialisation of these infinite compositions however has been the artist's weaving work. These are produced by hand, the cold calculations of code approximated by the crude variations of manual labour. The colours of the cotton near-as-possible, but never exactly tallying to the on-screen palette; the artist's stitches, as she learns the craft, no match for the precision of pixels. The artist presents her tapestries on floor-standing polished aluminium structures: a screen of woven pixels draped across a silver frame, these sculptural arrangements nod to both finish fetish minimalism and that other great west coast American invention, the pleasingly-designed computer screen.

Conversely, from the footage Fowler took in the Nevada desert, the artist was drawn to the moments where the technology failed in its representation of the material world; the moments when her digital camera struggled to focus, could not cope with the light conditions, or wouldn't keep up with the movement of the filmmaker. Fowler stitched together these moments of glitch, in which the technology underlying the

camera's digital simulacrum of reality is revealed, creating a video, titled *5179*, that is both frantic and uneasy. With its abstract electronic soundtrack (created by assigning a tone to each colour variation in one of her data compositions) and eschewing of conventional representation, there is something distinctly alienating to the work. Over three minutes it refuses to allow the viewer to relax into a narrative. The technology is striving to represent a place, but Fowler allows us only to see its failure. The sand and foliage, those echoing blue skies, implode into misshapen raster pixel.

At the heart of this new body of work is a meditation on wilderness and *placelessness* – physical, digital and psychological. Fowler's sculptural installations corrals infinite data variations, giving them a space to settle. The American desert Fowler found herself in was, with its lack of landmarks and human habitation, a non-space in many ways (though a highly constructed one, existing only by the grace of human politics). As she stared out of her remote home, the empty horizon could be imagined as infinite. Fowler does not offer any hierarchies between the digital and material space (a landscape which she refers to as 'nth nature'), but instead draws a connection between that desert wilderness and the non-place of code. Hers are complex abstract questions posed through solid, elegant, constructions in which the physical labour is apparent: but we're never quite sure whose labour, that of the artist, or that of the digital ether that surrounds us all.

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