It's art, but not as we know it at V&A

Body Paint exhibition: visitors at the Victorial &Albert Museum get interactive by splashing digital paint onto a large screen, using motion sensors

The V&A is turning perceptions of being 'traditional and stuffy' on their head with its Decode exhibition. *Paul Milligan* finds out how artists are using av to bring their creations to life for a new generation of art lovers

The old and the new collide spectacularly upon entering the Victoria &Albert Museum in London. Turn right and visitors can discover the medieval renaissance, while opting to go left will see them enter a 21st-century zone where Decode, a series of electronic artworks based on code and data, are on show.

This is the exhibition that is helping the V&A to attract large (and often new) audiences by using different types of technology – not something traditionally associated with the V&A's Victorian character.

Decode: Digital Design Sensations runs until April, featuring works from artists and designers such as Daniel Brown, Golan Levin, Daniel Rozin, Troika and Karsten Schmidt, and uses an array of av technology to bring the pieces to life. Decode is a collaboration between the V&A and digital arts company onedotzero. The av is managed by production company Aztec, which won the contract after a three-way tender.

The idea stemmed from the success of a V&A Friday Late event held in 2006 called Transvision. It saw a crowd of more than 6,000 people (still a record for this type of event) view works from 20 creatives. This time around, 35 works are on show, from more than 20 artists.

The exhibition explores three themes: Code presents pieces that use computer code to create new works and looks at how code can be programmed to create constantly fluid and ever-changing works. Interactivity looks at works that are directly influenced by the viewer – visitors are invited to interact with, and contribute to, the development of the exhibits. Finally, Network focuses on works that comment on and use the digital traces left behind by everyday communications and looks at how technologies and the internet have enabled new types of social interaction and modes of self-expression. »

AV at work at the V&A: an infra-red powered hairdryer blows the seeds off a projected dandelion (left); on-screen kisses become more passionate as the visitor comes closer (above)

The majority of the funding for the exhibition has come from software company SAP, but as with most art projects, money was tight. 'There was a limited budget so you have to think about the best way to show it. That also explains why there is a mix of projection and other technologies,' says Shane Watson, founder and creative director of onedotzero.

Some of the artwork already existed so costs for those could be minimised: 'It was just a case of installing it in place as the technology was implicit in the work,' says Watson. 'Some of it could be presented in lots of different ways, so we had to think about how to use that space in an effective manner and come up with a solution to show the work to the satisfaction of the artists and the V&A, as well as the audience.'

Cost was also an issue for Aztec. 'During the build, we were given a huge excel spreadsheet with the requirements from 35 designers,' says Dan Munslow, account director at Aztec. 'The V&A asked us to cost it as we saw fit and not based on the requests of the artists. One artist requested 10,000 lumen projectors, without knowing about the light in the exhibition space. We had to recommend equipment that would be cost effective and exceed the requirements of designers,' he adds. 'Once the V&A understood the costs, it asked us to look into a purchase deal rather than a hire deal, as the plan is for the museum to take the exhibition on tour [to China and South America].'

Interactive exhibits

Watson has previously worked with many of Decode's artists, and says most work commercially as designers, which means they keep a keen eye open for new technology (with future art projects in mind). 'If they are using a projector they will know the lumens required or the resolution of a monitor, and how different models will change the artwork.'

The exhibits use a myriad of av technologies – from a Panasonic 103in plasma in portrait, mini camcorders, projectors and PC monitors to a mini zoetrobe. Interactivity is prevalent throughout, and a hands-on approach is encouraged. 'Many of these pieces do not have a fixed point and are continually developing so that every time you revisit the exhibition it will be a new experience,' says Watson.

The Lightweeds and Tree exhibit by Dutch artist Simon Heidjens features an indoor tree projection which shows the tree's branches blowing in response to wind outside the museum (detected using sensors) and which sheds leaves that then move along the ground as visitors walk amidst them. Like many of the artists, Heidjens sourced some of his own kit for this job (namely wind, rain and light sensors). Aztec then attached the sensors to the side of the V&A and networked them, including opening a pipe between the museum and the Natural History Museum (NHM). Images were then projected from the NHM on to the side of the V&A. Aztec used a 15,000 lumens Christie projector for the outside work and two Sanyo 400 lumens projectors for the inside tree projection.

At the more interactive end of the spectrum are works Dandelion and Body Paint. In Dandelion, an infra-red powered hairdryer blows the seeds off a giant projected dandelion, while Body Paint allows visitors to splash (digital) paint on a large screen using motion sensors. Golan Levin's Opto-Isolator, meanwhile, is a human-sized mechanical eye that follows the gaze of the viewer, blinking one second after its visitor blinks – a disconcerting effect – almost as if the machine is alive.

Study for a Mirror, by UK design collective rAndom International, creates a temporary portrait (lasting a few minutes) activated by standing still in front of a plate glass window which scans the viewer's reflection using ultraviolet light.

KIT LIST

- 1 x Christie LX1500 projector
- 7 x Sanyo XU305 projectors
- 6 x Sanyo XU106 projectors
- 2 x Sanyo XU300 projectors
- 4 x mini mac
- 16 x HP PCs
- 1 x mac book
- 1 x uTouch overlay
- 1 x Sony Handicam
- 1 x 15in touchscreen

Overcoming challenges

Co-ordinating 35 works of art from around the world creates many logistical problems. Aztec worked around geographical difficulties by setting up an FTP site for the designers to send their work to be tested in Aztec's warehouse. The main technical challenge was that there was not enough space to project all the images without the use of keystone correction. 'We had to test various projectors to make sure they would work with the limited projection distance and fill screens perfectly,' says Munslow.

The main challenge for onedotzero was that this job differed from previous art projects. The usual scenario would be a collaboration with one artist for one or a short series of nights, but this project lasts four months and has to withstand the rigours of the public using its pieces. The project took five weeks from completed artworks to premiere.

So is this project part of a growing demand for museums to use technology to shed previously stuffy reputations and attract a technology-savvy public? 'This is a brilliant destination for this kind of work because it challenges people's perceptions of the V&A,' says Watson. 'The museum actually does a lot of contemporary work, and people don't realise it, so this project highlights that it is open to a modern approach. Most museums need to position themselves to be relevant today. This show, even though it wasn't designed to meet that need, is part of the solution.' ■

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