

# The Aesthetics of Activism

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## ABSTRACT

For this demonstration the authors intend to present the *Aesthetics of Activism* as a work-in-progress. The artwork is designed to aggregate visual material from social networks to form themed compositions that can be explored jointly within a shared interactive space. Visual elements are programmatically arranged according to formal aesthetic criteria, while motion within the exhibition space is detected via optical sensors. Artistry built into the algorithms used for creating the visual compositions and those used to present, filter and rank content within the social web are exposed for people interested in the relationships between the cultural and computer layers inherent to the system design.

## Author Keywords

Interactive Art; Aesthetics; Activism; Code Literacy.

## ACM Classification Keywords

H.5.m. Information interfaces and presentation (e.g., HCI); Miscellaneous.

## INTRODUCTION

Interrupting our daily lives, digital platforms present us with a dizzying array of visual stimuli. Social networks and news aggregators create a torrent of content competing for our attention. The issues touched upon within these presentations range from the tremendously mundane like the advertisement for a toothbrush; to the alarmingly urgent like the impacts of climate change.

The coded infrastructures and algorithms that determine the mode and frequency of presentation remain hidden from the viewers. They thusly are not subject to reflection, public debate or negotiation on the media they are presented. Likewise, aesthetic qualities play a significant role in determining what we regard as relevant, coherent or interesting [3, 4]. Charles E. Osgood used semantic differentials to research people's response to aesthetics and claimed, 'human semantic processes are very complex, and that problems of meaning are inextricably confounded with more general problems of

human thinking or cognition" [2]. From an audience's perspective, the rules determining the aesthetic appraisals are for the most part applied subconsciously and believed to be the result of evolutionary processes. In effect, both phenomena though apparently unrelated, exhibit similar qualities. They determine how we distribute our attention without the mechanisms of their operation being transparent to us. By allowing people to jointly experience the phenomena of aesthetics and decisiveness of digital architecture, they are invited to reflect on the tacit rule-sets underlying our everyday digital interactions. In this way, we intend to demonstrate the *Aesthetics of Activism* to provoke questions such as: Is code a purely instrumental enterprise? How do we measure its misappropriation or use? And, how do digital practices affect social conditions? In the sections to follow we discuss the spatial layout and thematic structure of the demonstration model, along with details of our future work.

## Spatial Layout

The proposed demo can be projected on a frosted glass or white surface at any size. As seen in figure 3 the work possesses an interactive zone situated in front of the projection, spanning an area of roughly five feet.

If two people are present, the shown projections reflect the relative positions of both bodies within the tracked radius. The system computes collages that are aesthetically juxtaposed, as well as, embodying the configuration of bodies within the interactive space. Collages are updated quicker as long as the interactive space is populated. The engendered effect of coordination invites spontaneous communication between people viewing the artwork. In the case of a single person, the distance between body and the projection alone determines the output.

Social web resources are continuously scavenged for visual content pertaining to the themes chosen by the system makers. In the absence of people or in the case of non-interactive installation, the system operates as a purely ambient display, showing aggregated content according to general formal aesthetic principles including colour harmony, typographic style and modular scale [1]. To this end continuous statistical analyses are performed on gathered material in order to prepare the collage making process.

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**Thematic Structure**

The thematic structure of the artwork is designed so that it can spontaneously report on emerging issues. For this demonstration the artwork will project images, video and text related to Canada’s Kinder Morgan<sup>1</sup> protest to stop a pipeline from being built at Burnaby Mountain in British Columbia, Canada as seen in figure 1.

As activists upload video and images from real-time protests, multiple views of the generative composition aggregated from social web resources are displayed. Figure 2 illustrates the compositional framework. Reflecting on the algorithmic and aesthetic aspects of the attention economy might prove especially important regarding issues such as sustainability and social change that demand a certain level of urgency. The installation thus does not want to 'admonish' its viewers. Instead, it invites playful modes of interaction that interrupt the communal experiences of everyday life.

**FUTURE WORK**

In this demonstration submission, we have briefly described our motivations for producing the *Aesthetics of Activism*. Our proposed demo intends to invite conference attendees to engage with an alternative image system for reporting on social change. This work is part of a larger research study that investigates the broader context of social, digital and cultural production. Our future work will continue to explore the creation of code and the detection of social media patterns as a mode of cultural production firmly rooted within the realm of aesthetic practice such as: painting, nature, or mathematics.

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<sup>1</sup> Support Burnaby’s Kinder Morgan Opposition <http://350.org/how-to-help-stop-kinder-morgan>



Figure 1. The Aesthetics of Activism work-in-progress at the Surrey Central Library, BC, Canada <http://interactionart.org/the-aesthetics-of-activism>

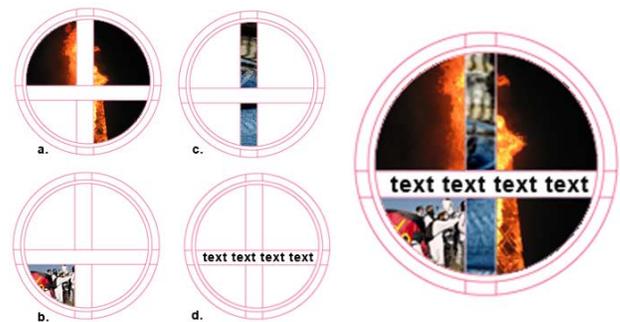


Figure 2. This illustration maps the compositional framework and placement of each layer: a) context, b) contrast, c) people protesting and d) text related to theme.

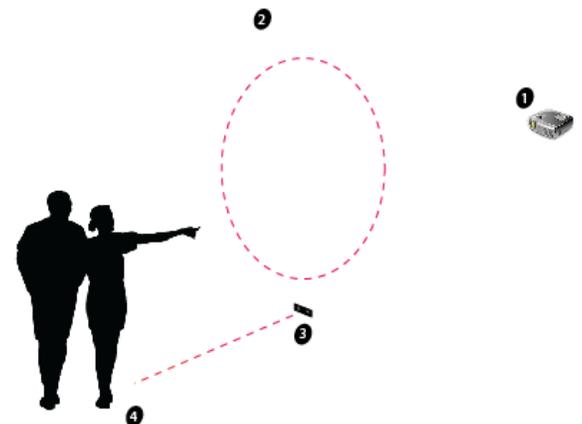


Figure 3. The demo installation can be scaled down to fit different space constraints. This illustration shows the general set-up: 1) Projector and Laptop computer, 2) Screen, 3) Kinect sensor and 4) Space for people to move in front of the sensor.