

Henry Codax
December 9th, 2023 - January 27th, 2024

Everybody
437 E Grant Rd., Tucson, AZ 85705

Shutting the door behind you, escaping the busy Grant Road traffic only yards away, one is transported into a closet size foyer where immediately to the left and the right two very white "clean" room spaces bathed in fluorescent light glow. Almost immediately one is visually confronted with questions that surround the awareness of one's own instincts. Not the instincts that might kick in to be able to survive, or the solace of belonging or connecting with others, or anything even remotely resembling desire and sexual energy.... no... one is confronted by glimpses of larger than normal QR codes, floating, spaced apart, industrially screened on flat and innocuous panels that melt consequently into the bleached walls. Mimicking the insta-frame QR-reading mechanism on any cell phone, you find yourself visually 'zeroing in' too, walking towards the forms, and reaching for that very same cell phone in one encapsulated lock and load movement. Are we now activating a newly evolved basic instinct, one that spares no pros or cons? Is it the instinct of engaging in material acquisition or, dare I say, shopping?

Immediately one needs to pick a room to enter (I picked left) where you find yourself surrounded and twirling around as each of the unreadable busy QR codes demands your attention ...uniformly.... as you simultaneously draw your phone for a quick snap. Here your post-skeletal optic nerve demands you capture and consume everything you see while strangely your internal biological skeletal optic nerve is trying to make sense of the visual chaos before you. Have the author(s) decided to sneak in an actual analogue pun or hidden image into this QR visual equation? These impulses all happen in milliseconds: instinctively, compulsively, in an uprising of adrenaline. The experience echoes and distills all our hunter-gatherer reflexes so long exploited by modern-day marketers, preparing us for this moment way before we walked in.

Social digressions aside and making nothing but impulsive decisions at this point, choosing one to focus on is harder than it looks. Possession and control are human traits for sure... especially when one knows all will be revealed in seconds by the pocket space decoder in hand. As the code is read by the phone a blank screen of color appears..."really"? One single color "really"?completely filling the 2.5 x 4 inch parameters of the crystallized screen. Surprising yes but not. No drama here, just backlit soothing color,... in a very non undulating way. More than a mere color swatch in a Pantone book or in a big box paint store. Color. Tonally not too bright or saturated...not too brooding either...steady.

So is this it??? If it is, that's cool. But as I stare at my phone at this one single color the physical space quickly recedes. Muffled evidence of people who have now entered the gallery blends into the background now. It is no different from when I'm on my cell in any other environment I find myself in... work, school, home. But who cares about the outside world, right? I'm staring at my phone and this oddly non-descriptive color, logging it into my memory, deciding whether to plow it into my picture storage with the thousands of other can't-be-forgotten "memories" I

crave to keep at hand. Hell, there is a joy here knowing that I have in my direct possession my own mini-James Turrell. The soothing, spatially present color in all its flatness leads me to wonder, shall I duct tape my phone to the ceiling and find out?

But this quiet, even intense moment lasts mere seconds. The abrupt insistence of a half dozen more QR codes in my peripheral vision now triggers the need to acquire ALL of them....quickly, decidedly, in some strange compulsive way... each revealing, one by one, another spectral wavelength I can catch and carry without deviating too far from the scope of the first. No shocking transitions, no surprises, just a stream of steady color samples. Color that never heightens my awareness nor disappoints me either. One room down..time to head to the other room where more QR codes and color memories await possession.

But another strange instinct takes hold in that I'm now suddenly finding no need this time to take a QR reading of "All" the remaining works like I did in the first room. Here quickly an incompletely complete sequence has been established. Strangely my need to record my findings and expect any more surprises is surprisingly diminished. Why? Could not even one of these visually very aggressive busy codes reveal something new or unexpected? Am I now just lazy and fatigued by the whole enterprise halfway through? Have I "acquired" my fill so to speak, not needing to pick all the apples off the tree? Have my consumptive instincts been satisfied, fulfilled, or maybe just box-checked with enough likes registered? "That was fast." Perhaps my simple and benign expectations have now been met... allowing me now to focus on the familiar faces in this room more than the codes that embellish the walls here on opening night of the Henry Codax exhibition at Everybody here in Tucson, Arizona.

As the gallery fills with more voices yet another surprising reality soon sets in. As I'm focusing on people's faces as we talk about the exhibition and such, my vision again becomes more heightened. Past the eyes and lips and over the shoulder of the person right in front of me, scream the not too distant QR codes. I wish they would stop. The pristine walls and lack of any human touch beyond the panel they are printed on makes it impossible not to focus on them alone. No oasis of distraction to quiet their assertions here. Is this happening to everyone elsewhere tonight? Later I will learn that cognitive scientists have identified this impulse as spatial processing, scene gist, and how one's personal space, action space, and vista space, are all entwined. They require your attention in both real time and memory collection.¹ It's nerve racking though, even to the point that many of us are now diving into our own art world comfort zones with made up questions of how these aggressive fiendishly chaotic codes reflect back to moments in art history. Why there? They were made for machines to read, not us?² Increasingly I'm starting to feel even more agitated at this event. Not by the company by any means but how my eyes constantly, distractedly concentrating on the QR codes, aware my focus is so split I lose track of what's being said right in front of me. Like the QR reading function of my camera, I too am mechanically trained to visually "jump" to these unrecognizable object objects. Gone now are the consumptive instincts that met me at the door when I walked in. The QR codes offer no gestalt-like satisfaction, no comfort of composition, no Euclidean balance. Ironically (little black squares don't lie..now do they?), there is no place for found harmony in the visual ways things normally resolve when we "look" at the busy world before us. And I don't think I was alone in my agitated state at the opening. By the end of the evening everyone had migrated to the smallish

comforting back room, warmly painted and lit, a welcoming waiting room of sort: artless with small low hanging, benignly cute ceiling fixtures. It was a world away from the spare white glare of the blazing gallery only feet away. In some ways, standing there, it felt like we were all part of a social or psychological experiment. I wondered too if a group of children would have acted the same way, unconsciously needing to escape the same visual bombardment of the QR coded walls. If they did, it would only be of course after they raised their cell phones to translate the codes first, far faster and more expertly than I.

Walking out of Everybody into the night one is immediately met with the glaring busy streaking lights of oncoming traffic, another antagonism to the sanity of one's retina. Driving to the airport now for a late night pick-up, it dawned on me that I had just gone through a visual gauntlet of perceptual, cognitive, behavioral, and even physical transitions, surprisingly generated by nothing but a series of uniformly presented QR codes. Bigger than I typically see them, yes, but by no means large and overbearing. So why the agitation, the fatigue, the feeling that the QR codes took up a disproportionate amount of mental space than the soothing color they triggered on my cell phone? What was this cascading mix of conditioned responses and modified expectations? Was everyone waiting here with me now in the airport cellphone lot staring at QR codes, marking time waiting until the next incoming flight landed? Would they sit there in the privacy of their SUVs and take the moment to absorb a soothing field of color or immediately gobble the next QR code that awaited them? A weird mix of unanswered questions continued to meet me as my wife Trudy climbed into the front seat for the ride home.

(Next Day)

QR codes are often benign, even ignored little entities that inhabit our ubiquitous world of commerce, often in eye shot of an Amazon or UPS box. Curious, even interesting to look at, but obviously for digital consumption linking us to information that is cemented in dollars and delivery directions. So why when Codax seductively connects it to the sublime, aesthetic nature of color or more accurately color field... and maybe the rich tradition of minimalism with its deep roots in color and perception, why does the high-contrast, noisy and impenetrable QR code monopolize our experience and overwhelm what is a beautiful and rewarding way to experience color anew?

"But the biggest thing QR codes did wrong was building for machine interfaces at the expense of human interaction. People can't read QR codes, but using them requires people to be involved. This effectively forces confusion onto people. The design of QR codes was so focused on the technology that it created a totally broken user experience." - Aten Design Group²

So has Codax reversed or sadly revealed what it really means to have access to someone, to something, through a code or even a code breaker that is circuited directly within our beloved cell phones. One that even without an inch of effort breaks and transcribes in milliseconds the pleasure and information we desire as if it were an important part of our own body. And once the subject/product directions tied to the code is acquired and consumed, and the contents is stored or discarded, maybe it's the victorious "breaking" of the unreadable code that counts more than the details or knowledge it reveals?

Color by its very nature is an immeasurable wealth of meaning and possibility as demonstrated throughout history the world over. Codax delivers it here cleanly and more pristine than any paint on canvas could fully achieve, free of annoying glare, warped stretchers, inconsistent paint surfaces. Here an untouched, private, chapel-like delivery of color abides in your hand—readable day or night and easily shared at a touch of a button. What's not to celebrate? But no, we ignore this offering and march on to yet another QR code, one that makes our eyes bleed with impossibility. Here the painful optical mixing of the not so random little black squares hold an irresistible key, a tool to what we might want or think we need. Codax surrounds us with these decoys that obscure the real, more “human” content we expect and are programmed to receive in seconds. Blurred here are the boundaries between tool, physical being, experience, memory, and action. Maybe color itself is now retrievable in reverse order or so we like to think as we ask ourselves "did I dream in B/W or color last night?" All the same, it's nice to believe the push of a button remedies these questions on demand. Ahhhh ...we are comforted by yet another memory-like "Warholian" box. One that has archived "remnants" of yet another day's purchases and accumulations and put safely into storage.

So maybe here at Everybody, Codax has set up a thread of clashing instincts to wrestle with rather than just an exhibition for the eyes... some with deep demarcations but also more times than not some not so easily distinguished from one another. Clashes that might include the instinct to “look” to learn and acquire “knowledge” smashing up against another very different instinct, that to “look” to mindlessly collect, ...to “shop”. And maybe too, injecting the instinct to surround oneself with aesthetic beauty with the confrontational compulsion to hoard and store. Or maybe Codax is toying with the idea of presenting the instinct to map and build awareness and then bypassing this visual awareness all together by replacing it with the addictive thrill/hunt of game theory and breaking codes for the sake of breaking codes...even if it does makes your eyes bleed. Additionally, a very relevant question being floated in this exhibition is can we pair our instinct toward the social and physical need to share what we see to that of falling helplessly into a very narrow solitude, embracing the lonely endeavor of completing insular tasks on screens, racking up “points” and “likes” without purpose, and feeding the adrenalin starved sponges in our brains. Maybe in the end Codax is asking just one question,... have we all just changed somehow and that all instincts themselves are never ending constructs to be navigated and questioned.

Some of the clashes Codax invokes are loud, some soft, but all reflect a far more pervasive dynamic that anyone will recognize as they “break” with and against the codes of this very intriguing and demanding show. Henry Codax at Everybody will stick with you well beyond the time you spend at the gallery... even if you decide later to press that camera icon on your phone to confirm what you think you remember.

Mike Stack

¹. <https://www.annualreviews.org/doi/pdf/10.1146/annurev-vision-121219-081745>

². <https://atendesigngroup.com/articles/why-i-love-hating-qr-codes>