

Mentor's Introduction to Luke Meeken

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Digital places are in many ways like places in real life. They are made and unmade. They take shape from ideological and material realities, combining both a sense of time and space with the cultural and social characteristics that imbue meaning to matter. And if this is true, digital places suffer from the same legacies of colonialism that have come to shape our world. You don't have to dig for very long to uncover these legacies. Discourses of discovery and frontiers have long been a part of the metaphors that shape the stories we tell about our networked lives and digital spaces.

Presently, we sit at the convergence of the rapid development of artificial intelligence and the invention of a massive, augmented reality that has come to be referred to as the metaverse. At this nexus, Luke Meeken asks a fundamental question of the practices and habits of place-makers in digital networks: how might we cultivate critical sensitivities in our digital place-craft by recognizing their material qualities and the colonial ideologies digital places often materially enact and habituate? Meeken perceives a world where our inhabitation of these places, either by game play or constructing places in virtual reality, bares the legacies of settler mentalities that pervade our interactions and code our experiences as extractive actors. We take. We conquer. We inhabit without

Marilyn Zurmühlen Working Papers in Art Education 2022

<https://pubs.lib.uiowa.edu/mzwp>

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memory. We intervene and hold place as a usurper and not as a relational entity invested in the ecology of life and the immanence of history. Meeken's insight here is that our burgeoning metaverse mentality, the material and behavioral constitution of shaping space, constructs a frightening world of conquest when compassion and justice are needed most.

And here enters the challenge for art education. Upon this precipice of the wild west of the metaverse, what role does art education, both as a place of cultivating critical sensitivities through learning interventions and a site of virtual curricular construction itself, have to play? Meeken looks to our recent past to mine the foundation of visual culture art education as a critical schema of curricular theory that might offer a direction for critical education. Its limits, of course, probe the intersections of materiality and representation. From this new materialist perspective, art education curricula expand to take in effect the material agencies of creative practice along with the decoding of media representations so central to this perspective. Meeken additionally, expands this criticality to question the settler subject position in an effort to reckon with the drive toward decolonization that confronts all cultural institutions including schools and museums.

Meeken's action research methodology takes these concerns to the lives of crafters: space-makers enacting and playing in the networks of virtual construction and inhabitation. The kids that live on online and live in our online curricula. They, Meeken and his students, navigate together these tough questions. Asking of themselves as well as the possibilities of what a digital space can be, who it might be for, and what we may be learning as a result of these creative acts in virtual spaces. As art educators, we recognize the power of creation and Meeken asks us to also recognize the habituation within that practice to nullify what came before, to assume *terra nullius*, and ignore the marked ground upon which we walk. Meeken offers insights into what the new world may be when cultivating critical sensitivities in the practice of crafting digital spaces allowing us to enter into relational spaces of care and justice that are needed most.