

# Decode: Digital Design Sensations

## The Victoria and Albert Museum's partnership with SAP

### Introduction

The [Victoria and Albert Museum](#) (V&A) is the world's greatest museum of art and design, considered to be unrivalled in diversity as well as scope. [SAP](#) is one of the world's leading providers of business software, offering services that assist companies in 25 industries across 120 countries. Together they have formed a partnership around an exhibition entitled '[Decode: Digital Design Sensations](#)' at the V&A between 8 December 09 and 11 April 2010. The exhibition has been curated by the V&A in collaboration with [onedotzero](#), a London-based digital arts organisation which promotes innovation across all forms of moving image and motion-based arts. The exhibition also marks the beginning of an interactive learning programme at the V&A. This case study, therefore, considers how digital technology is not only changing art practices but also the convergence in approaches across sectors as a result of the new capabilities of digital technology.



Image © V&A. Projection - Daniel Brown, On Growth and From, 2009

## The Partnership

Decode will be the V&A's first exhibition dedicated to digital and interactive arts. It is therefore an example of innovation in the cultural sector as digital technology is fully embraced by one of the UK's national cultural institutions. For SAP, however, there are also several symbolic layers to their involvement. SAP was looking for a new and creative platform from which to tell its new "clear" brand strategy (see [www.sapclear.com](http://www.sapclear.com)). The exhibition and the hospitality opportunities at the V&A provide a unique way to communicate this story to SAP customers, as a result of the partnership.

Part of SAP's goal as a software company is to help organisations achieve greater operational efficiency so they can better understand every aspect of their own business. The ability to analyse data and interpret it to engage the user is a process mirrored in the art world and consequently the ethos of the designs featured in the Decode exhibition.



This is perhaps best exemplified through the work 'bit.code' by Julius Popp, who was commissioned for the exhibition by the V&A in partnership with SAP. This piece comprises of a large screen with moving black and white tracks representing the 1s and 0s of binary code. During the day at specific times, they align and display the most popular words taken from recent web feeds. SAP made their consultants and software available to Popp for the production of his artwork. SAP's 'Business Objects' software mines online data, which is then 'fed' into the artwork and displayed in the physical installation. Therefore, just as SAP's solutions provide clarity of information in the business world, many of the works on display in Decode bring clarity to digital information in a visual way. The exhibition reflects the company's business objectives as well as providing a symbolic analysis of the digital world that cultural organisations have to respond to.

Image © V&A. bit.code, Julius Popp, 2009. Courtesy Julius Popp, Leipzig. Commissioned by the V&A in partnership with SAP.

This is an interesting partnership as not only has it resulted in a fascinating exhibition, but because it has embodied the ethos of the business partner by enabling their ideas to be experienced by everyone through the art, allowing for brand and content alignment for both partners.

## The exhibition

The exhibition itself is split into three categories, each of which finds a unique way to engage the user. **Code** proposes that computer code can be utilised in a similar way to how a craftsman might use wood or clay. As well as carrying the core data required to run simple tasks on a computer, code is becoming an increasingly prevalent design tool. Therefore, it is both a material and an inspiration for artists, with practitioners exploring the beauty of algorithms and the artistic potential of computer systems.

This part of the exhibition also analyses the potential of open source code. If designers publish their codes on the internet it creates libraries of creativity for others to borrow, develop or pass on. An example of an existing open source community project might be the web browser Firefox. The 'no secrets' approach actually improves the authenticity and collaboration of the development and is as close to 'organic' software as we're likely to get at the moment.

This ethos is important to SAP, as it should be to all business brands. The marketing campaign for Decode features an open source piece of artwork by Karsten Schmidt which invites users to 'Recode' the artwork themselves and manipulate it. A media partnership with CBS outdoor advertising allows this to be spread across communication platforms such as digital projections on the London Underground.

**Interactivity** is focused on designs where the user directly influences the work produced. This grasps the possibility of the relationships that can be created through digital technology. Many of these works respond to gesture, tracing the presence of the viewer and translating it back into the work. For example, Weave Mirror by Daniel Rozin is a responsive sculpture that recreates the image of the viewer on motorized planes which rotate to create a mirror image as the viewer comes into focus. One of the changes we are experiencing with the advent of digital technology is the importance of user-generated content. These pieces intentionally blur the lines between design, interaction, play and performance.

**Network** focuses on a crucial element of digital information, the fact that we are now all linked through systems and networks. The internet and social media is arguably the most important technological development since the industrial revolution and, with mobile technologies becoming more widespread, we can share information and be connected to each other constantly. The artworks here examine the electronic traces we leave behind from our communications. The art then visualises these digital tracks therefore evoking issues around control and security in the digital world as well as digital memory. For example, majestic visualisations of real-time flight patterns, designed by Aaron Koblin. Or perhaps 'We Feel Fine' by Jonathan Harris and Sep Kamvar, which extracts comments by bloggers from all over the world on how they are feeling and represents the information as colourful, floating spheres. Users can filter the information by selecting an emotion as well as bloggers' gender, age, location and weather conditions to reveal anonymous but personal statements about modern life.

## Outcome

Decode has only been open for a short time, but it is already apparent that both the exhibition and the partnership has been a success as a landmark exhibition for the V&A and the partnership that made it

possible is an excellent example of a brand taking full advantage of digital trends by communicating the ethos of its products and its business strategy in a way that people from all walks of life can engage with. There has already been a very positive response from visitors and the media.