

Interview with Brian Kane, artist and creator VuJak

Note: This interview was conducted after Brian Kane's visit to CU Boulder's [Media Archaeology Lab](#), where he demoed VuJak, the world's first video sampler, for faculty and students. Attendees included members of Lori Emerson's graduate English class, "[Theory & Practice of Doing // From Digital Humanities to Posthumanities](#)". References to both the demo and the Digital Humanities class are included in the interview.

Information about Brian Kane's current and past projects can be found at <http://briankane.net>.

Erin Cousins: Our course this semester began with discussions of digital humanities, and while we've focused a lot on the role of the digital in academia, we haven't talked about the role that it plays in art. I think that's one place where the interaction between the digital and the human is most visible. Looking through your work it seems that there is a through-line of the interaction between the human and the digital, and how they create subjectivity...

Brian Kane: Well it's all people to me, but you know, that's just because as an artist, what you're doing is talking to people. I mean, do you feel like you have a definition of what digital humanities is?

Cousins: Oh, the whole first quarter of the semester was trying to figure that out! We never got to a single answer...

Kane: Maybe you're best without an answer.

Cousins: One of the questions we got to was, "Is it really worth asking this question still or should we just be making stuff?" Should we just be doing the work, and we can worry about labeling it later?

Kane: So it's kind of project oriented?

Cousins: It's turned out for a lot of us to be about making something or doing something for the final project. Jillian Gilmer and I are creating a virtual reality tour of the Media Archaeology Lab, some people are writing essays, some people are creating digital visualizations of lab spaces, and others are making creative projects like digital poetry websites, so we're sort of covering a whole range of "What is the Digital Humanities"? But so far I don't think anybody has gone into visual art, and I think only one project is tactile.

Kane: With a lot of the students I work with it is kind of the opposite, they get lost in the digital, and you pull them out and get them working with their hands again to straighten them out.

Cousins: So it acts as a balance?

Kane: Different people are different, and you start to get a read on people after a while and learn where they are coming from. This one amazing student, she is just this incredible fashion designer, but she was really struggling with everything electronic and digital and in the end I sort of pulled her out and I said, look, you focus on your strength and this is what you're good at...and she made this fairly simple piece, just stunning. It defaulted back to her eye and her sense of design.

Cousins: With your students or with your own work, do you ever find that the only way to do the work is to collaborate? For example, if you have this person with skills in fashion and this other person with skills in tech, can putting them together be a solution?

Kane: That's completely up to them; we've had some great collaborative projects. I definitely think that collaboration is a huge part of doing this kind of stuff, because nobody knows everything, and I think it is

in many ways an artist's pitfall that they think they have to make everything themselves, that that's what gives it meaning, that "I" made the whole thing.

Cousins: The Artist with a capital A.

Kane: Yeah, but you can't do it, you need to sometimes work with other people. Figuring out how to do a really good collaboration, especially artists working with engineers, is a challenge.

Cousins: How so? Are you speaking from your experience, or that of your students, or both?

Kane: It's from my experience and from a lot of other people that I know that have done it. There are these two cultures and they don't communicate very well. The place I've seen it fall apart is where artists expect that the engineer is just going to make the artist's vision. So there needs to be *creative* input from everyone if you're going to have a real collaboration. And that's a challenge, because it means that the artist needs to give up a little bit of creative control, and they don't always want to do that. But if you're willing to do that, and you can figure it out, you can do some really great stuff, because a lot of the engineers are dying to do a creative project. They just don't want to feel that they are being pushed around, that they are just working for free for somebody else. So you've got to make sure that everybody gets credit, and present problems to the engineers and not solutions.

Cousins: Do most of the pitfalls come from communication?

Kane: Or ego. For me, I find that if you talk about this stuff up front, it makes it better. I have a project that's opening in D.C. this week, a dance project, which is new for me. But there were four of us that were the collaborators, so before everything began there were phone calls, we were talking on Skype, before anyone did anything we said okay here's what we just talked about and here's how it is going to get credited. 1, 2, 3, 4 names in a row, and this is what you're doing. That way it has been talked about and everybody is comfortable getting in, then everybody is on board and we can move forward. A lot of fine artists just think that they are going to go and lock themselves in the studio and come out with this thing like, "Tada!" But there are other art forms that collaborate a lot. Music, theater, certainly film and video are these collaborative arts. So I think that a lot of this technology stuff wants to look at these other fields to figure it out—how do you get a group of people to do something like this?

Cousins: We've been talking about collaboration also in terms of space, having a space like the M.A.L. or a lab where people come together to work on collaborative projects. Your project sounds like it was more virtual, though, through Skype and phone...is that normal for your collaborations, to do things virtually?

Kane: It can be; that one just happened to go that way. The dance company was in D.C., and myself and the photographer were in Boston, and the costume designer was in Beijing. So with all that coordinating it helps to know what your role is. And one of the big things that is really important is that people like credit. Or the other way to go about it, which is really valid...there's a lot of times when it is much easier to just pay somebody. Do it the commerce way. Then it is cut and dry. Everybody knows what is going on. It's kind of a like if I need a sport coat and I'm going to pay you to tailor it—it's very simple. It's a straight up exchange; if you're not willing to pay then you have to let the tailor do the design because they want to show themselves off. People want credit. And that's just people, I mean social media has really proven that. How many followers, how many likes?

Cousins: External validation incorporated.

Kane: But if you approach it right, there's a lot of people that are in engineering, in computer science that

would love to do some artistic or creative thing. It's an exciting part of their life, something that is really different. So if you create these opportunities properly, it's really cool. Just ask, and make it the highlight of their life. Same thing with commercial companies, like Clear Channel. I do collabs with Clear Channel...you know they just love it. I mean, its like, oh my god, this is a non-boring project I get to work on with an artist? They just love it; it's like the fun part of their day. If you approach it that way...

Cousins: Do you find the reverse to be true as well? Since you are an artist and you do have a vision, if you're working with a corporation, do you find that it limits your vision at all? Especially if you are working with the digital and with tech, and there is something of a marriage between tech and the corporate world...do you find yourself having to concern yourself with that at all, or having to negotiate with company goals or orientations?

Kane: I haven't run into it, but I'm not afraid of no, I'm not afraid of rejection. But this is something I was saying to the students as well—you have to ask. You're never going to get anything if you don't ask. And if you ask for ten crazy things and you get one...you've got one! So you just have to be prepared for a lot of rejection. I mean, if you think that Google should change their homepage for you one day, you have to ask! They're not going to come to you. If they say no, okay, go pound the pavement. You never get anything you don't ask for.

Cousins: I guess I'm thinking specifically about your piece "Healing Tool", and the idea of 'unvertising' that you brought up yesterday...To me, it almost seems subversive in a way just because technology does allow for this sort of constant presence of advertising and corporations in our lives. The idea of being able to drive down the highway and suddenly encounter an absence of advertising, that "unvertising", would almost be more surprising than to see a billboard. The absence of advertising might actually be more of a shock.

Kane: True, except that in today's crazy media landscape, they got more attention for their digital billboards by doing that than they did with any of their others. They got written up for all this kind of stuff, and they're like "Hey, we got attention." What else are they going to put up on there that gets that much attention? Not a whole lot. So they wound up looking good, and that's a win-win.

Cousins: Do you mind your work being in service of that? Or do you consider it more of a symbiotic relationship?

Kane: I think it is super cool, I think it's great. I mean, what's cooler than using international commerce to make art? I think it's the coolest thing ever. Everything about our times is advertising and media and international business...

Cousins: So then the idea is to use that as a tool?

Kane: It's material, it's material. Some people can do that with film, some people manage to squeeze really interesting stuff out through the TV set these days.

Cousins: It reminds me of what DJ Spooky said yesterday about your earlier work with the Emergency Broadcast Network and with video sampling as "using media against media". But it seems like for you, one doesn't have to always be against, it's really more about the "using", using media as material, the digital as material...

Kane: At that point it was very much just about using media, period. Because you couldn't...all you could do was consume. It was a one-way street. So that was just sort of a new proposition, that we might be able to *do* something with it, that it was plastic. And like I said, hip-hop and scratching and sampling was

already doing that, but not in the world of TV and video, which is a different thing. So we looked at that. But now that the media is fully two-way, it's different. It's not nearly as interesting, I don't think. I don't think it's as interesting to download a YouTube video and edit it. Maybe it is, but that to me is expected. I mean, we're walking around and constantly manipulating and inputting and creating and changing, we're doing that on a daily basis now. So the landscape has really changed.

Cousins: Has your work then had to respond to that change in the way we use technology?

Kane: Oh, it's totally different now. I've been doing mostly sculpture, and I'm interested in having physical objects that people have to interact with or deal with. And in a world where everything is beeping and flashing and asking you to push buttons and respond to it, I'm starting to think that something like a painting or a sculpture that just sits there and doesn't have that is maybe even really intimidating.

Cousins: That was actually one of my questions for you, because some of these sculptures are even larger than life manifestations, or even if they are not there is something imposing about being confronted with the tangible object that you are so used to seeing in the abstract.

Kane: It's tangible, and it's also final. It's final. And I'm talking about looking at some roman sculpture made out of marble, that kind of final. Nothing is ever final in the digital world, everything is changing up to the moment, your dinner plans are changing up to five minutes before dinner, can I meet you here, can I meet you here. There's always an undo button, when you're writing a paper you can always edit it and save it, edit and save it.

Cousins: Revert to original.

Kane: Yeah, how do you revert when you put a chisel to stone, you can't undo that. The notion that there is just this imposing *thing*, maybe that's more interesting.

Cousins: Do you think that being confronted with the physical is shocking for people? What kind of experience do you think people are getting out of it, or have you heard any feedback about it?

Kane: Yeah, I've heard a lot of feedback. So I think when experiencing a digital phenomenon physically, it's more like cognitive dissonance. Like, you don't belong here. Sort of like when you have two groups of friends that don't know each other...And that's sort of a ticklish cognitive dissonance that is really cool.

It reminds me of perhaps the reverse of the sensation you get when you close a computer after staring at a screen for a few hours. We have these sort of separate spheres of screen world, real world, and anytime we put those in direct conversation with each other it does create some dissonance or discomfort.

Well there's a lot of energy spent on taking the physical and making it digital, so going the other way is sort of a reanalysis of that. But I personally now like to do what I call AWOD, away without device. I just find it personally to be a way to clear your head, get away; you can actually be in the moment.

I mean, here's one thing that might be interesting from a Digital Humanities perspective—it has to do with memory. So there was arguably this big shift when we moved from oral to written language, and that represented when we could forget these stories. We lost this memory in exchange for being able to store that. And I think that's happening again with all of this stuff, you don't need to know the directions, you don't need to know the information because it is always available. It may be an evolutionary thing where our memories are going to change, and I don't want to say if that is for better or for worse, but...Something is happening, and it may be as significant as the shift from oral to written language.

Cousins: Does art have a place in articulating or analyzing that shift, or counterbalancing it? Is it something that art has a responsibility to deal with in any way?

Kane: No, art has no responsibility. That's a trend I really dislike...in my opinion art is about people making things, sharing experiences. It should not have any filters or constraints. But like anything that is going on, it is always worth talking about. I think it's really important not to send a message. There's a famous quote about that, one of the early filmmakers said, "If you want to send a message, use Western Union." I want to leave work open to interpretation, when things are open to interpretation then people can project themselves into it, they can bring themselves to it. If not, then you're just talking *at* people instead of having a conversation that they are part of. Everybody has different life experience, so they bring different things. You show one picture to ten people and they are going to interpret it differently, and that's I think a fun, active ingredient. It's been my experience that the pieces that are the most open to interpretation are the ones that people can respond to the most.

Cousins: That makes a lot of sense, and is especially easy to see in your current work. Even with VuJak, though, even with creating this video sampling tool, from that that point it expanded in all directions. People *can* use it as a political tool, people *can* use it as an entertainment tool, but leaving it open, not guiding the use or the experience seems like a through-line for you there as well.

Kane: It can be a relaxation tool, even; you can do whatever you want with it. It's just sort of like watching these new forms of culture happen and grow, it's really interesting. I love all the stuff on YouTube. The stuff that's called amateur I think is great, some of it I think is better than what's called professional. It is for me at least, because it's so personal. Some of it is really creative because it's unhinged, which I think is cool.

Cousins: And now there is a platform for that sort of amateur work—we talked a little yesterday about the idea that anyone *can* use that platform. It's open, open-source.

Kane: I don't even think we've seen it all, it's just starting. We don't even really know. And I think there are all sorts of narrative art forms that haven't emerged yet, too. Why not make a narrative where you have to go find pieces of it on YouTube, and you have to find pieces of it on Netflix, and you have to find pieces of it on Instagram. Why not, right? These things are so new that it's just a matter of time before people start doing these crazy things. Wouldn't that be cool, to actually treat social media as a narrative platform?

Cousins: Absolutely! I know people have done it to a lesser degree, with things like twitter stories, I think it was Jennifer Egan that published a short story through twitter, but as far as I know no one has done the...

Kane: Cross-platform.

Cousins: Yes, the cross-platform move. That would be fascinating.

Kane: Yeah, and there could be parts that are open for user input, maybe. And that's just one example.

Cousins: You also mentioned yesterday that "emotional robotics" could be the next big thing.

Kane: Definitely. Instead of machines that are supposed to solve problems, people will be able to interact with these devices that have an emotional function. A lot of this started with my friend Dan at MIT, this is sort of like his focus, and he's been looking at things like a comfort machine for end of life. Hugging machines, things like that. Touching machines. Ways to connect people as opposed to disconnecting them.

It's an interesting move for me, but I think that's going to be big. Because this digital loneliness...it's huge now. People are feeling more atomized and separated. Assuming that that continues, for whatever reason we define ourselves through technology, so if that continues then we are going to look to machines to intimacy. And I don't mean sex; I mean intimacy, that's a big difference. I mean the feeling of connectedness, communication, care and touch and response.

Cousins: Do you see any danger, then, in looking to machines to fill a void that is also created by machines or by the digital?

Kane: I can't comment on whether its dangerous or not, I'm just looking down the freeway and seeing what's coming at me. Sure seems like it's going to happen; I'm not seeing any significant counter trends to this.

Cousins: I guess the inverse of seeking intimacy through tech would be seeking it off the grid, or seeking to go off the grid entirely. I'm thinking of things like tiny house movements, or people who are looking for a way out of digital isolation by looking toward sustainability or seeking to be more grounded through a return to the local. Going analog, in a way.

Kane: That's the counter trend, but I'm not sure that it is as significant. All that stuff, I mean tiny houses, artisanal beer. I'd call it more high-touch. High-touch culture. It's a high-touch trend. It's significant, but even the people that are into that still have their iPhones. So that's why I don't see it as being as significant. It's not groups of people saying, "We're going to take down all the electric wires in our town!" I'm not hearing that. Instead I'm hearing, we want faster Wi-Fi and we want it for free!

Cousins: So if take it as a given that we are fully swept up in the momentum of the digital age, is there a point when all art will have this digital component as well? I do wonder if we'll at least see more and more digital distribution of art, or digital tools being used to make it.

Kane: I definitely think so, and I don't think that the visual arts have figured out how to use the web yet to make money, like a lot of others have. There's been resistance to it. People are afraid that they are going to have their work ripped off.

Cousins: So it comes back to credit.

Kane: Yeah, and painters put these little postage stamp sized images of their work up, because they want you to call the dealer and come and see it. The same way that musicians are afraid of mp3...a lot of visual arts are just late to the game in terms of selling stuff on line.

Cousins: Do you think that they need to catch up to the new ways that digital technology changes how we distribute, how we experience works of art? Are they going to miss out on something if they don't?

Kane: I don't think they need to do anything, I just think someone's going to figure it out. On the commerce side, it's inevitable. People buy everything online, why not buy art online?

Cousins: I wonder what that would do to the art-going experience. I think of seeing art as very placed based, we go to a museum, to a gallery, and that is part of the experience. This is hypothetical, but it makes me wonder...are there going to be digital art galleries, digital museums?

Kane: That's got to get figured out. There's a lot of that happening now, and its unclear. It'll probably be both, it's not either / or with a lot of this stuff. There's a lot of great sites, but I'm not sure if anyone has

captured the concept of the gallery yet, or the museum. Most of those sites end up feeling like catalogs. I don't know if I have the time right now to figure it out, but I'm interested in that. Why not? Why not make money off of the web? Everyone else is doing it. You just have to figure out how to do it.

Cousins: We've had conversations in our course about the digital in academia or in the humanities, and concerns have been expressed that a heavy focus on the digital might entail a loss of the "human".

Kane: But is that the technology, or is that the people? People don't answer their phones anymore, but that's not the phone, that's the people. I don't do email. In the world of digital, to leave something physical behind stands out, as opposed to saying, "Here's my twitter, and here's my LinkedIn". That just goes into the noise-o-sphere, there's nothing that stands out at all. It's just a wash of noise, and in my opinion a wash of cowards that don't have the guts to talk in real life. That's just this big cultural shift that's happened. The thing about email is that nobody reads it. They literally do not read it. You may as well be handwriting it on a postcard and putting it into a furnace. We've done a lot of research on this and people do not read emails.

Cousins: Do you think we're losing some sort of face-to-face accountability as time goes on?

Kane: It's just changing; I can't put value judgments on it, but its definitely changing. It changed when the car was introduced, it changed when the telephone was introduced, and it changed when writing was introduced. You know, when the car was introduced, all of a sudden we could spread ourselves out a lot more, but civilization continued. Telephone was the same thing, when the telephone was introduced, we could communicate over long distances, and civilization adapted. We may just be in a period where we're so turned on by all of this stuff that we're addicted to it, and that may temper off.

Cousins: It makes me think about something you said yesterday about obsolescence, because phones are made to become obsolete, but we get a new one. That's why they keep supplying us with the new ones, right, so the novelty never wears off since there is new bonus features every couple of years. How many new iPhones can they make before we stop caring about the new iPhone?

Kane: I mean new cars have all sorts of new features; cars should arguably last longer than they do...that's more of a sustainability conversation. But there's no reason why our phone should go obsolete, but Apple solder in the battery, they make it really, really, really hard to fix it. I mean they sort of invented that. Now other people are doing it. But when I bought my phone, I chose the one that had the replaceable battery, the only one left where you can still do that. Otherwise you buy it and throw it away. It's pretty trash.

Cousins: A lot of us don't go in and mess with the tech anymore—at the same time that tech is so present in our lives, we don't really go in and see how it is made or what it is made of.

Kane: Although it is kind of shocking when you see how silly it is inside. The shell is so shiny, you think what is in there is really cool, but it's just a bit of chips and parts and pieces.

Cousins: Do we lose something in not digging in and messing around with the hardware? As someone mentioned yesterday, when you created Vujak you were making something for the first time, whereas now it's been prepackaged, people can go in and create pieces without having to do the hardware work. It also reminds me of what you were saying about your students, about this making process, this messing around process as having a special kind of value.

Kane: I think making always has value, but that's always been the case. If you're doing something that has been done before, I don't know how interesting that is. If you're making something new, you've got to figure it out. Like with projection mapping - it's kind of this trendy thing where you video project onto a building or something and get it to perfectly match up with the surface. 15 years ago that was really cool

and people were doing it for the first time and were figuring that all out and it took a lot of work; now you can just buy the software and plug it in and do your thing. So there's a difference between the people that figured that out and the people who just buy the software. It doesn't mean that the people who are doing the new stuff aren't as interesting...

I take that back. It's not as interesting. If you're going to try to do something new, you've got to figure out how to do it. And it's also not for everyone, because it's risky. It's risky and lonely and you try to do things and if it's really new you might not be able to get anyone to do it with you because they don't understand it and they don't want to fund it and it may not work, so you have neurotic attacks, sleepless nights. It's definitely a high-risk, high-reward kind of thing. For some people it's easier to pick an art form that's been done before and do it in a new way, or do it their way. It's a hard thing, it's like climbing a mountain, and it's not easy. It's beautiful to look at the mountain from below and enjoy it, but to decide to go to the top is not easy. There's no guarantee you're going to make it, so it's not for everyone. I'm just being honest.

Everybody's different, and in the end the only thing that's really different is history. Time has a way of picking winners and losers. Someone like Van Gogh, who we think is so great now, was in his own time disregarded. And then you have people like Madonna, who...no one even cares anymore. She won't be remembered.

Cousins: Do you think that process of forgetting will change since we do archive everything online, or do you think that's just another way that things will become obsolete...being lost in the giant archive that is the Internet?

Kane: I think it just becomes lost in our cultural memory; it's just not relevant. As time goes by there's only so much room in our cultural memory. Time has a way of telling.