



Off Site Project

Jun 26 · 19 min read · Listen

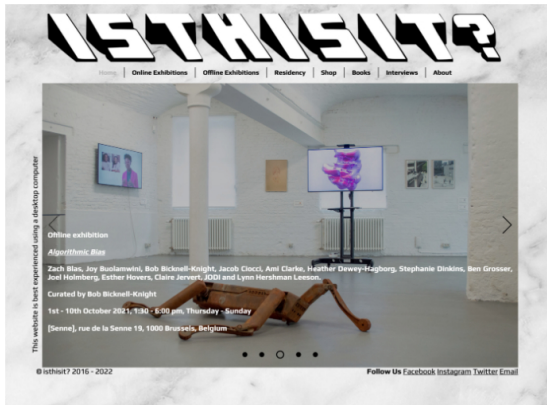


## F.U.V. with Bob Bicknell-Knight of isthisit?

Adapting Roman architect Vitruvius's three characteristics of good architecture, outlined in his treatise 'De Architectura' more than 2,000 years ago, the F.U.V. interview series builds discourse around online curatorial platforms and projects, addressing the experience of UX design as well as the human structures that underpin the production and maintenance of these spaces.

**Firmatis** (aka Durability) — It should stand up robustly and remain in good condition; **Utilitas** (aka Utility) — It should be useful and function well for the people using it; **Venustatis** (aka Beauty) — It should delight people and raise their spirits.

Each question is marked with a F, a U, or a V to denote which of Vitruvius's three principals it was written in relation to. Text in bold is by the interviewee. Collectively the F.U.V. series intends to explore multiple interpretations of these terms by focusing on various facets of curatorial practice online.



Homepage of isthisit?, showing details of offline exhibition 'Algorithmic Bias'.

In the opening interview of the F.U.V. series, we spoke with the artist [Bob Bicknell-Knight](#) about his work as co-founder of [isthisit?](#), an online gallery he founded in 2016 that has grown and expanded into multiple online and offline programmes and means of production. Amongst the first wave of what we may term a 'platform builder gallery' — meaning an online art space developed using a service such as Wix, Wordpress, Squarespace, Cargo Collective etc — [isthisit?](#) has become a notable hub in which emerging and established artists co-exist in group exhibitions addressing various facets of capitalism and technology. Originally producing an online exhibition every month, Bicknell-Knight's gallery has recently slowed production to focus on commissioning sets of thematically linked shows and publications, moving from a frenetic model to one that is more sustainable for both the artist and the curator. Our interview with Bicknell-Knight addresses a range of subjects, including the design functionality and content manager system the gallery uses, to how the gallery functions as a networking tool and has become recognised as a brand in its own right.



(U) Exhibitions on isthisit? opt to employ one of three orientations that affect the user engagement. Y axis and X axis shows such as [Please don't stand in the middle of the road waiting for me to get you on camera](#) (2019) and [Piper in the Woods](#) (2020) restrict movement to vertical or horizontal scrolling respectively; whilst exhibitions such as [Office Space](#) (2020) combine XY cartesian movement to create a more exploratory, hovering, sensations. When planning a show, what informs your choice between these formats? And what qualities do each embody for you?

So I think I'll start off this conversation by saying that the isthisit? site resides on the website builder Wix, which comes with many limitations. I originally used Squarespace back in 2013 for my personal artist website, but moved away due to it stopping you from having any flexibility whatsoever, simply providing you with a choice of several templates and not much else. So Wix, for me, is the best of a bad bunch. The site has such a large archive embedded within it at this point that it would take quite some time to archive and import everything onto a custom-built site.

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Online gallery founded by Pita Arreola-Burns & Elliott Burns. Research blog exploring the ideologies, systems, architecture and design of digital art spaces.

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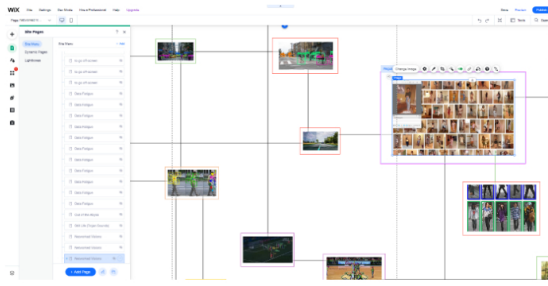
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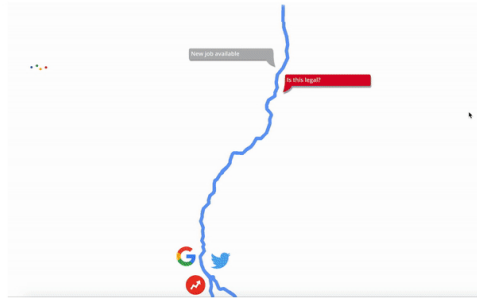
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A screen capture isthisit's Wix content-management-system, showing the installation of 'Networked Visions' (2020-2021).

Anyway, to begin to answer your question, the different exhibition formats that you describe have been slowly developed by learning the limitations and ways to exploit the builder, working with and against its website tools. As I've continued to curate online the way in which I want people to interact with the exhibitions I organise has changed, especially since the pandemic and the radical shift in the way in which we view art presented in an online setting. As someone who grew up in a world where attention spans are rapidly shrinking due to social media and the internet, with everything and anything just a click away, I used to put together shows where the work was easy to see. A visitor would enter the website, click on the show and see the work, much like the experience of browsing an artist's personal website, with an additional sprinkle of curatorial text.

Since those early beginnings I realised that, even if you put the work front and centre, it really doesn't mean that online visitors will stay and engage with the work for a meaningful amount of time. So, I guess in response to that, my curatorial style changed, creating these shows that purposefully hid the work, requiring visitors to actively engage and pursue the art on show, rather than just having it served up on a platter. This is where the orientations that you mentioned come into play, asking the audience to scroll, click and explore through an exhibition. Like with the artwork I produce, working in a multidisciplinary way, I always try to put concepts first, so the format of (or how you interact with) the show should function in tandem with the conceptual nature of the exhibition.



'Please don't stand in the middle of the road waiting for me to get you on camera' (2019) ft: Aram Bartholl, Petra Cortright, Benjamin Grosse, Joe Hamilton and Pilvi Takala.

[Please don't stand in the middle of the road waiting for me to get you on camera](#) (2019) was a show about how human beings are increasingly reliant on digital technologies, using the framework of a Google Maps plotted journey to present several works about digital identities and hypercapitalism. This show was very open, requiring the audience to scroll up and down, hovering on various icons to reveal the different artworks. Looking back, it's a very simple layout and exhibition, before I discovered how to use the X axis on Wix, let alone the XY axis in tandem.

I think [Office Space](#) (2020) was one of the first shows I produced that utilised the XY axis, after working out that, by zooming out in the Wix software, you could do a lot more off the page. This, however, came with a few limitations. The first being you could only add content to the right and down of the page, and were unable to choose where a visitor to the site begins their journey. It also forces everything to the right of the page to have a white background. [Office Space](#) (2020) was all about the aesthetics of the corporate office, placing the audience into a confusing endless corridor like space, so having the background white throughout worked well.



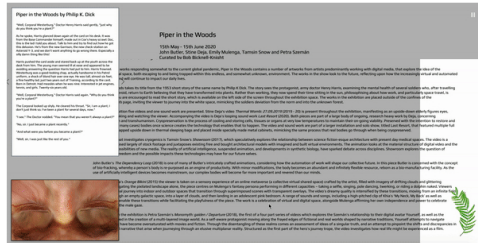


'Office Space' (2020) ft: Lydia Blakeley, Naomi Fitzsimmons, Johnny Izatt-Lowry, Perce Jerrom and Lilli Method.

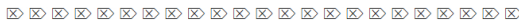
A lot of the time with these online shows I usually pin down what I want the layout to be purely through experimenting on the platform, considering the concept of the show and working out a way of integrating that into the way in which the audience interacts with the site. So when I discovered you could use the X axis, but only with a white background, this fitted into the conceit of the show and complimented the concept of being lost in this white space too. I then used the XY axis exploration again in *Networked Visions* (2020), a show that featured several artworks hidden amongst a connected network of images and videos.

*Piper in the Woods* (2020) only used the X axis, and was inspired by the Philip K Dick short story of the same name. In this show I purposefully added a background colour to the web page so that, when you scrolled to the right, you would enter a white space and encounter the different works in the show, kind of like turning the pages of a book. This was an attempt at mimicking the narrative of the short story, about a soldier who deviates from the norm and ventures into an unknown forest, with the audience journeying outside of the web page and into the white space.

So with the shows I curate I usually try to bond the concept of the show to how the audience is going to interact with it. Some of these exhibitions are more successful than others, but more often than not it is very much concept driven. I like curating shows online because of how flexible and experimental you can be. A lot of the time when curating in physical spaces, money and the limitations of the space can really constrict your ideas and what you want to do with the space.



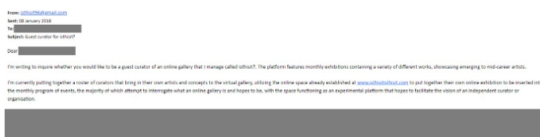
'Piper in the Woods' (2020) ft: John Butler, Stine Deja, Emily Mulenga, Tamsin Snow and Petra Szemán.



(F) Beyond organising your own online exhibitions you frequently invite external artists, curators and collectives to produce shows within isthisit?, ourselves included back in 2017. Generally, how do you structure these relations and how do you familiarise guests with a content management system they might not have previously used?

I started inviting external people to be a part of the project back in 2016. One of the primary reasons why I started isthisit? was to broaden my creative network, so inviting others to work on the site in some way was a key part of that. The first person involved was Helena Kate Whittingham, at the time an artist and curator, who originally got in touch with me to put together a show on the site. If I remember correctly that's what inspired me to start inviting people. I then sent out a bunch of emails, rather naively, to various collectives and young artists/curators I found online, inviting them to guest curate shows.

Back then I was curating a new show every week, but as time moved forwards that became increasingly difficult to keep up with. These days I take bigger gaps between shows, preferring to work with artists on the website only when funding is available, so having guests curate shows on the site has taken a back seat. I still have an ongoing open call on the site, so if you have an idea for a show and are interested in putting it together yourself you can apply, but that's very rare as I firmly believe in paying artists for their time and energy.









It's for this reason why I kind of stay away from curating those kinds of shows these days, thinking less about the number of artists in favour of focusing more on the overall concept and working with a selected few. Obviously these large exhibitions happen in offline contexts too, mostly in institutional spaces but also in small artist run and commercial galleries as well, but the physical nature of those shows changes that relationship slightly. It has similar issues, but, bearing in mind what I've already talked about in relation to online shows and the lack of time that people spend engaging in digital spaces, those problems are amplified in the online realm.

Reflecting on what I've been developing with *isthisit?* over the past six years, beginning with working with lots of artists (the [first physical show](#) I curated in 2016 was a group show consisting of 22 artists packed into my small bedroom), to now curating three or four person exhibitions, I think I'm transitioning to the traditional brick-and-mortar working method. Building relationships with artists, alongside growing and evolving with them, is so much more beneficial and exciting than working with hundreds of artists who you may or may not remember in the years to come.

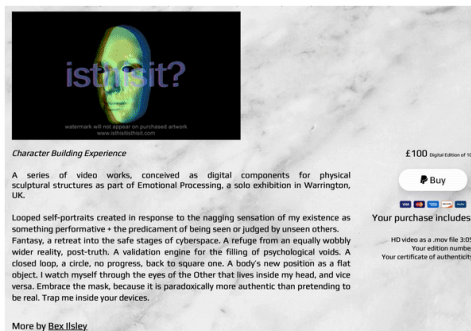


'isthisit? issue 1' (2017) launched in conjunction with a group show exhibition at Serf Gallery.

(V) In regard to brand identity, *isthisit?* has grown multiple streams of production over the years, online and offline shows, a residency, an interview series, and books. Can you speak to how this breadth of activity has worked together to increase brand recognition?

Quite honestly the idea of building an identity or brand recognition is otherworldly to me, and really wasn't something I was thinking about when starting *isthisit?*, or over the years that followed. I didn't start *isthisit?* to make money or to build a brand. If that was the goal I have failed drastically! Actually, thinking back, [an early show I curated at Serf](#) in Leeds was actively responding to the first issue of the magazine (now book) series and its exploration into money-orientated experiences. It featured prints of the magazine, alongside the logo on hats, t-shirts, mugs and pens. It was a critique of those capitalist ideas though, rather than actively attempting to turn the platform into a recognisable brand.

I've spoken a lot in the past about why I started *isthisit?*, to broaden my network and explore all the aspects of curating. So expanding the platform into an online residency and a book series was just that, experimenting with what a curator is and could be. I haven't had any formal training in curating, so this was my way of educating myself, learning by doing.



'Character Building Experience' (2017) by Bex Isley, available as a digital edition via *isthisit?*

