Zach Lieberman's magical world

By Sue Disler

Academic, rockstar or DJ? This was one of the questions I had for artist and educator - creative coder, Zachery Lieberman in our interview on Day 1 of Design Indaba 2018.

Zach Lieberman, artist and educator - creative coder.

Listed as one of Fast Company's Most Creative People, Lieberman writes software that focusses on experimental drawing and animation tools so he and other participants can create art – be it in motion, with sound or even into the depths of AR (augmented reality).
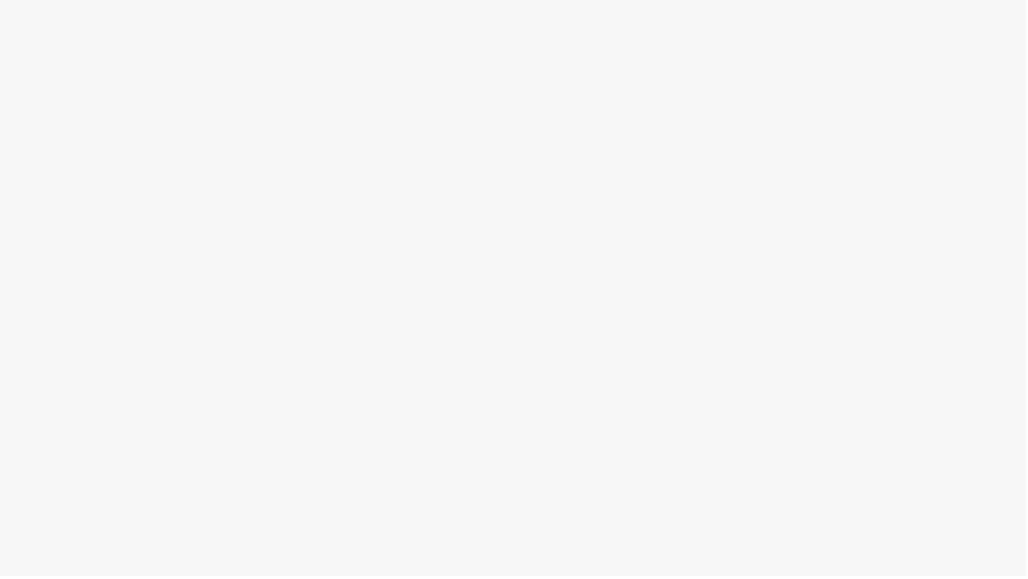
His technical and art background, coupled with an unadulterated curiosity into the world and how computation can be used as a medium for poetry. He likes the idea of a coder and poet. It's a beautiful expression that he wants to celebrate and bring the energy to the art they create. This gives way to some visually mind-blowing installations and artworks that you will either just like to view or simply want to take part, examples of which are:

1. Más Que la Cara – a public art installation in Downtown Houston.

[Más Que la Cara installation](#) from [zach lieberman](#) on [Vimeo](#).

2. Margaret Atwood's book *Hag-Seed* - where he took the words in the book to create an installation where participants become characters from the book - whilst exploring the language of Hag Seed at the same time.

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>
> *[Margaret Atwood interacting with the project I made based on her book](#)*
>
> *A post shared by [zach lieberman](#) (@zach.lieberman) on Oct 6, 2016 at 9:42am PDT*

r components and free software to allow someone to communicate via eye movement to enabled people like Tony Quan, a graffiti artist with ALS (Lou Gehrig's disease), to create art using only his eyes from his hospital bed, as that's only part of the body that's not paralysed by the disorder.

The Eyewriter from Evan Roth on Vimeo.

4. Landlines – a Chrome experiment where a user starts drawing or dragging a line, and the google images of the planet complete the picture winning him and his team a Gold Pencil from The One Club for Art and Copy in Mobile Innovation.

Teaching and collaboration is key to his craft as "it's more fun to work with other people." This is why he co-founded openFrameworks, an open source C++ toolkit for creative coding, and School for Poetic Computation, a low-cost school that through a mixture of an artist residency and an intensive seminar where they explore "how electricity, code and theory can be used to make poetry."

Lieberman is also involved in an interaction design studio called YesYesNo, where his expertise is used to turn running data into paintings for Nike, make shoes that talk for Google, encourages people to drink more water at a talking water fountain in Brooklyn, New York and more.
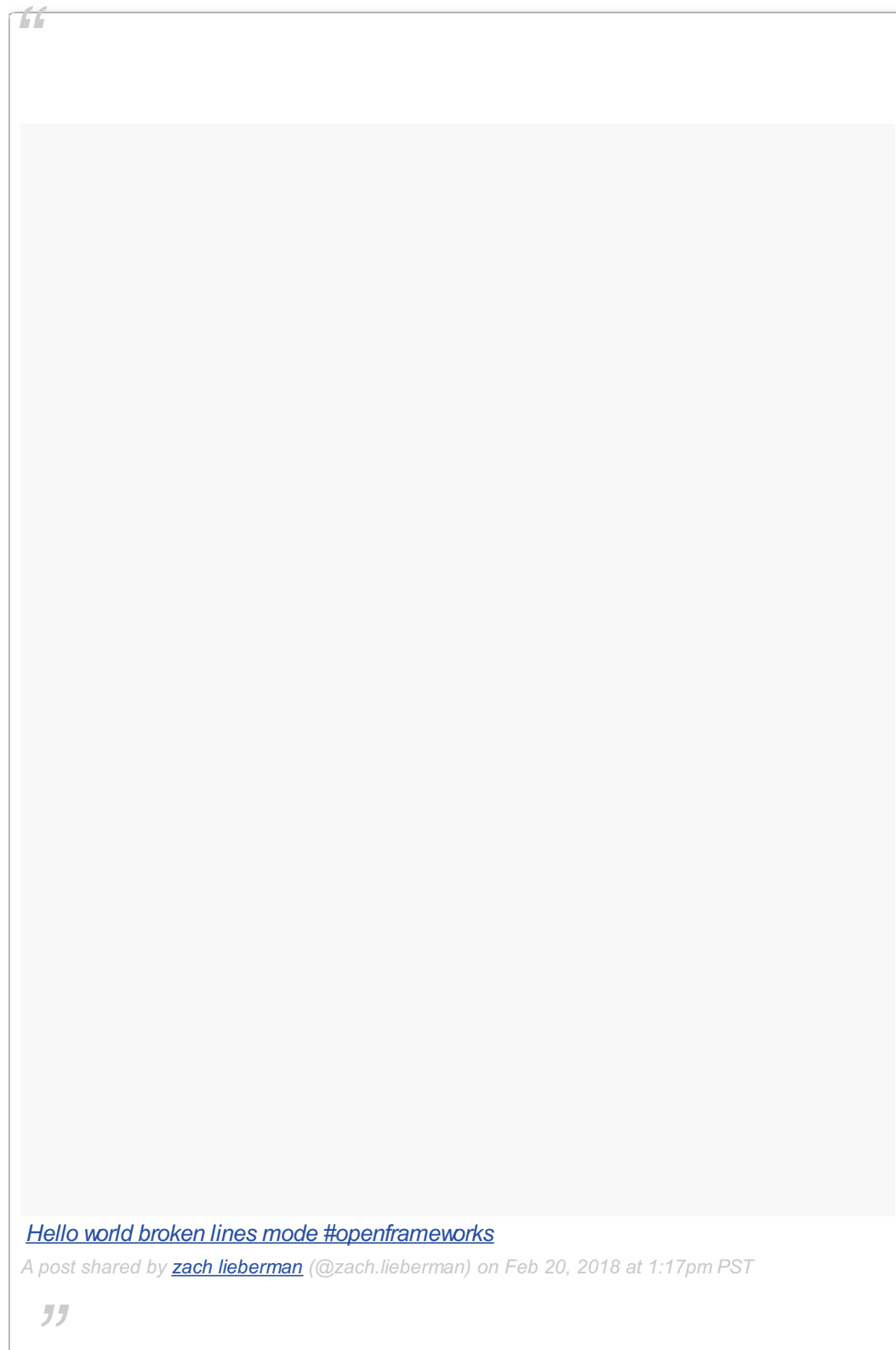
ABI (Always be iterating)

Lieberman likes to change and manipulate all the time. For him, it's about the shortcuts that can become your style and ultimately define who you are as an artist.

"If you say to yourself, 'I need to make something new every day,' it could be quite challenging as you could look at a blank piece of paper and ask, 'what am I gonna write today, what kind of music am I going to compose today?', but the act of creativity is about modification and combination – versus going to stare at this blank piece of paper and thinking the answer is going to come to me. It's about reworking and trying to play with what you have."

Which is what he is doing through his work at the school – looking at old work and trying to recreate it. He uses this method when teaching a class about recreating the past. For the students it's creative – but they are not starting from an algorithm and make something cool with it. Actually, they say, "Let's look at this work," and the work can lead to a conversation about

an algorithm. And the output is that you are trying to create something. It's important for everyone to know that the past is there… an incredibly valuable resource for creativity that you can say, "I can take this artwork from the 1970s and what will happen if I recoded it?" It's a great benefit and an obligation – as an artist you have to take the past and say it with the voice of the present.

His daily [Instagram](#) sketches embody this iterative process.

> [Hello world broken lines mode #openframeworks](#)
>
> *A post shared by [zach lieberman](#) (@zach.lieberman) on Feb 20, 2018 at 1:17pm PST*

as their tool. So, I asked him…

⊞ *Do you feel that designers are being sidelined from interaction design since the demise of Flash?*
"No, I don't think so. The thing about Flash was an amazing community grew up around it. The tool itself was interesting, but the community was so incredible. I got into code at that moment as I saw that it was social and you could share.

The socialness of this movement moved him from drawing art as he was always interested in animation and discovered that you could write a line of code to see something move changed his life – Flash was that.

"The problem with Flash was it was a tool and a programming language that was controlled by a company and not by a group of people and I think a lot of the decisions and the way it went was because of the company – you see that a lot about languages that are corporate driven. It's sad, but now you see all these beautiful things that people do in Javascript – open source is the way to go…"

⦙⦙ How do people make a career out of creative coding?
"Artists are amazing when they think about where technology can go; they are good for transition and prodding to see what's possible. So, there's always opportunity and work in creative coding in particular interactive work working with agencies. I find that new technologies lead to jobs. When VR came out, a lot of my friends moved to that space because there was a lot of work as a lot of companies were trying to figure out what VR meant to them."

Despite global economic climate people come to Lieberman (and his filmmaker wife – yes, they work together) – normally triggered by a new technology, but as he says, "the challenge is to not get sucked into that – it could also be a trap."

Lieberman's work comes from the school, commercial work and bigger corporations (technology companies) that want to experiment with uses of tech – an interesting space to be in.

It's all about a social experience/experiment
Lieberman is excited about creating experiences and putting them in other people's hands to see what people do with them.

Like when he built a small 3D drawing tool that when his daughter drew a television she could see his wife through the TV. She could walk through it and realised she was in the TV, and out of the TV, and in and out. Watching this from the sidelines they realised that this was something really social and technology has created this magical world.

"Recording and sharing works so well, but despite this, it's not really a rich or deep medium – it's quite well suited to our visual culture right now which is tiny snippets."

The result of this is the Weird Type app, which will launch before the conference is over. "Ravi said, 'Do you want to make something?'" So, drawing on his daily sketches you can now put type in space. Hint, you might need to move to discover it sometimes.

I never got to ask the question – academic, rockstar or DJ? But I say he traverses all three!

Catch Lieberman's daily sketches on Instagram and on Medium from time to time.

ABOUT SUE DISLER

Sue Disler has more than 25 years of experience in the advertising and marketing as a designer (and sometimes coder), art director and strategist, the last 20 largely dedicated to digital. Email her at suediz@gmail.com, follow @suediz on Twitter or find out more on Linkedin.
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