DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY

Checking in on the Digital World

Scholars and practitioners gather to consider media, culture, and a digital future.

Interview by Kathleen McGarvey

WHAT DOES DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY MAKE possible—and what responsibilities come along with those new freedoms? A conference, open to the public, called "Decoding the Digital: Technology, New Media, and a Culture Consumed?" will take up those questions September 12 to 14, with speakers from organizations such as Warner Brothers Digital Distribution, the Modern Language Association, the George Eastman House International Museum of Photography and Film, and universities in the U.S. and abroad. They'll address issues such

where you can teach the machine to recognize visual patterns. You can do scientific simulations that involve distances that are too great for us to traverse or that involve things that are too small or too big for us to work with directly.

Is the digital realm a freer place than the nondigital world?

The digital provides a paradoxical release from control and then exerts its own kind of control as well, as recent stories about NSA surveillance have shown. The more each of us knows about technology, the freer we are to take advantage of its benefits, but none of

> The more each of us knows about technology, the freer we are to take advantage of its benefits, but none of us has the kind of control that a corporation or a government has over digital material, which means that we are both controllers and subject to greater control.

as what constitutes intellectual property, preservation and archival problems, and the invention of new forms, such as "born-digital" books.

As Rochester prepares to formally open the new Ronald Rettner Hall for Media Arts and Innovation this fall, the time is right "to understand what the digital is doing," says Thomas DiPiero, dean for humanities and interdisciplinary studies.

### What does the new digital realm let us do that we couldn't do before?

Obviously you can do things much more efficiently and rapidly with digital technology, things you never could do before. A literature search for any field, which used to take days, weeks, or even months, can now be done in a matter of minutes or even seconds. With digital technology you can search images not just faster but in entirely new ways, with innovations like machine vision and image-based searching,

us has the kind of control that a corporation or a government has over digital material, which means that we are both controllers and subject to greater control.

At a more prosaic level, digital communities develop to have their own sense of politics and etiquette as well, and there are ways of speaking in those groups, the way there are in any other kind of community. And you have to abide them or else you'll become either censured or banned.

What kinds of new responsibilities does digital technology create?

In the area of personal identity, it's a really complicated question: who are you online, and is it the same as the person—well, right away, we have a problem. You're not a person online; you're a representation. Arguably you're a representation in real life as well, but think of the concept we call "identity theft." It's a strange, crazy term, because if someone steals my Social Security
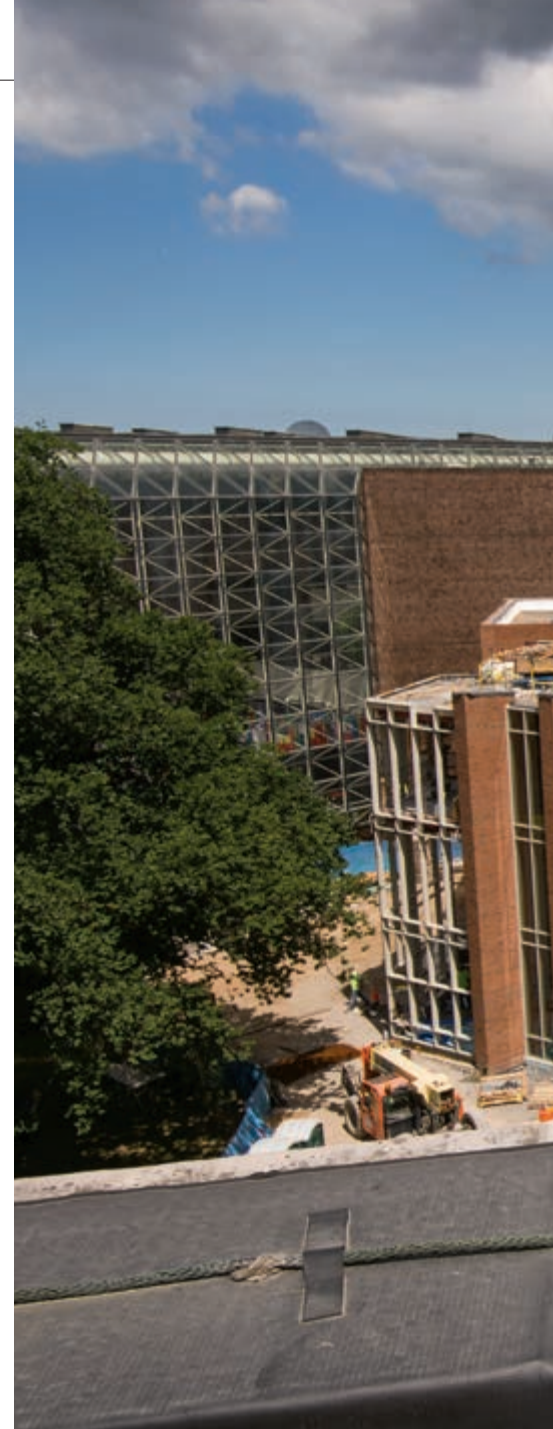
number and my credit card information, that's a far cry from my identity. I hope it is—I think I'm a little more complex than that.

On Facebook, just to take a simple example, you put a "face" in your book that you want your friends and associates to know you as. The ways others perceive me in real life means that they're going to assume

▲ BRICKS AND CLICKS: As construction nears completion for Rettner Hall for Media Arts and Innovation, the time is right "to understand what the digital is doing," says Thomas DiPiero, dean for humanities and interdisciplinary studies.

certain things about my identity that I can't control. I can control that more when I'm creating an online identity. But certain things aren't always visible the way they are in real life. We've all heard situations where people represent themselves as something completely other than what they are in real life. That can be both a good and a very bad, dangerous thing.

You say online identity can actually be more restrictive. How?

In social media, to take just the easiest example, there are things that someone comes across as in real life that are much more difficult to represent when you do that through textual or image-based representation. Many people represent their gender online, but—either because they don't think of it or choose not to—don't represent their race. Then there are things that are much more subtle, and by that I mean not easily perceptible through a quick visual presentation, like sexuality, ethnic identity, class identity—the kinds of things that you learn how to read through interactions with people in real life that they won't necessarily represent in their online identities.

You've also described digital technology as a tool of the imagination.

There are things the digital can help us imagine that we really can't imagine through any other media—to me, that's one of the most interesting things about it. The aesthetic can suggest things through inference, through connotation, through circumlocution, and through metaphors that discursive speech can't do. New digital media can bring the conjunction of sound and image in ways we haven't had before—add to that interactivity, and the way we can imagine worlds is dramatically more involved than anything we've had previously. Suddenly a whole new aesthetic is available to us. The introduction of new forms of technology exponentially increases what we can do aesthetically. Ⓡ