The start of a networked curatorial dictionary…

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Abstract

This paper outlines and defines selected key concepts and terms that form part of a dictionary that supports the definition of a networked curatorial practice. The paper unpacks and discusses the following key concepts and terms: digital art, networked, networked curatorial practice, the curator, the para and post-curatorial, the post-occupation condition, and spaces - all within the digital art landscape. The paper argues for a dynamic interpretation of key concepts and terms encompassing this practice emerging in a contemporary digital context, urging readers to traverse and form their own connections. The discussion is framed through the description and definition of four key curatorial projects— *Floating Reverie*, *Covalence, TMRW,* and *Blue Ocean*. These projects, ranging from digital residency programs to online art spaces, demonstrate the diverse ways in which curated spaces can support digital artists. The paper seeks to enhance accessibility and contribute to ongoing discourse within the digital arts community, focusing on establishing a sustainable ecosystem through different spaces for artists and curators through a networked curatorial practice.

Keywords

digital art, the digital, networked, networked curatorial practice, the curator, the paracuratorial, post-curatorial, post-occupation, spaces, digital curation, practice-based research

Introduction

The Networked Curatorial Dictionary has a selection of key concepts and terms that support the definition and expansion of a networked curatorial practice. The dictionary is not intended to be static but instead dynamic and flexible to both the digital medium, orientated around a networked curatorial practice, as it shifts and adapts.

The dictionary was initially developed as part of my PhD research titled *Networked Curatorial Practice: Reorientating and Creating Spaces for Digital Artists in South Africa* (2024). The research considers how a networked curatorial practice can actively create and provide opportunities and space for artists and curatorial discourse within the digital arts in South Africa, as part and within the context of the Global South or Majority World. The research is based on four curatorial projects which embody these key concepts and terms. These projects are– *Floating Reverie*, *Covalence, TMRW,* and *Blue Ocean*. I refer to this research in the present tense, as much of the practice continues to reflect and align with this initial scope and field. The list in the thesis is more extensive, and only a select few are being discussed in this paper and expanded here. For a comprehensive list of the key concepts and terms, view the online catalogue, which forms part of the PhD submission.[i]

I have collaboratively developed these four projects, evolved through my need – as a curator and an artist based in South Africa– to create and contribute to spaces that are inclusive and accessible to both the digital medium and its practitioners. This paper, which begins a 'networked curatorial dictionary', hopes to add some context and new understanding of the concepts and terms that form an integral part of my research.

Approach to understanding and outlining the key concepts and terminology

My approach to these 'key concepts' was informed by tranzit.hu, who developed the *Curatorial Dictionary* (2012) in an attempt to establish a layered and comprehensive understanding of different terms in curatorial practice to overcome the vagueness of specific terms that they had identified, such as 'performative', 'curating' or 'collaboration'.[ii] As a network of predominantly native Hungarian speakers, tranzit.hu, when conducting their research on the curatorial field and into different terminology, identified a "cultural and a linguistic-epistemological gap … making this discourse more insular and inaccessible for general non-English speakers". The linguistic difference/distance and exclusion from these terms are slightly more obvious than cultural and geopolitical exclusion, yet they still create additional distance and the terms are unrelatable. As a result, tranzit.hu sought to "map the local(ized) manifestations and relevance of the concepts in various geographical and geopolitical regions". The research moved from a general definition of the terms towards "understanding their contexts and relations". As such, their *Curatorial Dictionary* "attempts to delineate the historical, socio-cultural contexts, and artistic processes in which the examined terms appeared, are used, and are given signification by writers", with the final manifestation existing as an "online, open-access website

where the visualization contains information also about the relationship between the concepts".[iii]

Understanding the terms contextually rather than just historically or academically, became more pressing as my research progressed– thus imitating tranzit.hu's methodology. It was crucial that the key concepts and terms that I was using to describe and form not just my practice but others' practice too, I could contextually place them within my context. They needed to be often reorientated to my context in South Africa, the Global South/Majority World and the digital medium.

The terms below are organised based on my perceived relationship with each other, as depicted in the diagram below.[1] They are not intended to be fixed definitions of these terms; rather, dynamic interpretations based on various readings and understandings of what they could mean, interpreted through the lens of my context and location from a perspective of the Global South/Majority World. These descriptions and concepts need not be read linearly; this paper invites the reader to jump between them and form their own network between them.
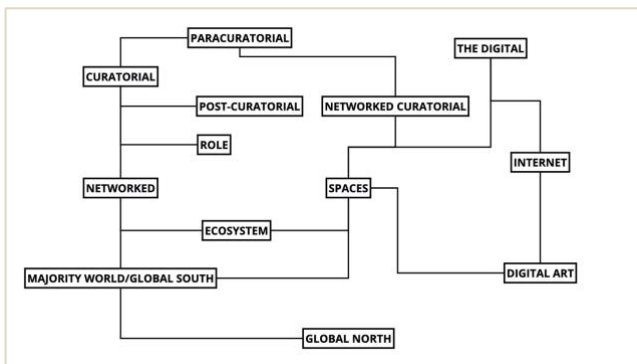

Figure 1: A visual map of the key concepts, and terminology

Description of projects

Before I unpack the selected key concepts and terms, a brief over of the curatorial projects will help support how and why they were selected.

This description of the projects initially formed part of the description of 'spaces' in the thesis and came at the end of the 'Key Concepts, and Terminology' chapter. I have chosen to include it here as a way of better understanding the curatorial research for the context of this paper. The projects are – *Floating Reverie*, *Blue Ocean*, *Covalence*, and *TMRW* (described below). It is through various types of spaces that a spaces' potential to offer opportunity and support to artists and curators can occur and therefor the

developing of a sustainable digital artistic practice exists consequently. For the research, this is achieved through the use of physical/online/imagined spaces, such as a residency programme, studio space or production support, or an exhibition space; and discursive spaces, including documentation or archive creation, and thought spaces, to encourage and develop discourse (publishing and discussion-based). A focus is placed in on identifying how the role of the curator may – and arguably is required to – change and shift within these different spaces as a result of the medium and a post-occupation condition.

Floating Reverie

Floating Reverie is a digital residency programme which consists of two components. The first component, the *//2weeks* residency, happens for two weeks, almost every month, when artists are invited to iterate a process, concept or research on a daily basis for the duration of those two weeks. The second component is the *Post-Digital* instance, which occurs at the end of the residency year, when artists are invited back to respond to their residency and process, in the form of a physical exhibition display – effectively reimagining their online residency in a physical space. *Floating Reverie* is a residency space that offers artists the opportunity to iterate and refine their digital art practice.

Covalence

Covalence is a digital studio and an online community-based platform that supports interdisciplinary, experimental artworks and projects by facilitating resources and ideas exchange and collaboration among creative practitioners in Johannesburg. It was conceptualised between 2020 and 2022 by Bhavisha Panchia together with Carly Whitaker and Chad Cordeiro.

TMRW

The Mixed Reality Workshop (*TMRW*) is a unique space, which combines artistic exploration and technologies in a physical workshop space, gallery, and R&D environment. Initially located in Johannesburg, South Africa, this space focused heavily on working with artists to cultivate a sense of the possible, exploring different digital mediums, including mixed realities like VR (virtual reality) and AR (augmented reality). *TMRW* is a production and exhibition space, which allows artists and curators the opportunity to work with technology when producing and displaying their practice.

Blue Ocean

Blue Ocean is an online digital art space created specifically to display and allow artists to present internet art or digital-born, online creative practices. It was conceptualised in

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[1] In the PhD thesis, the full list of terms is organised alphabetically for ease of use, but with a clear understanding that they are neither necessarily connected nor related.

2020, during the early part of the Covid-19 pandemic, and officially launched in 2022.

Digital art

The digital medium is a given, not in need of defence. Beryl Graham and Sarah Cook refer to "new media art" (digital art), and describing its "particular characteristics that distinguish it from contemporary art and by extension from the systems involved in the production, exhibition, interpretation, and dissemination of contemporary art – the realm of curators".[iv] According to Christiane Paul, the term 'digital art' describes a broad range of "artistic works and practices [and] does not describe one unified set of aesthetics", but rather reflects a "language of aesthetics".[v] Paul additionally distinguishes between art that uses digital technologies as a "tool for the creation of traditional art objects", versus art that is reliant on technology for its production and operation as a medium "being produced, stored, and presented exclusively in the digital format and making use of its interactive and participatory features".[vi] Graham and Cook provide a comprehensive list of the different terms that have been used to describe digital art, which include: "art and technology, art/sci, computer art, electronic art, digital art, digital media, intermedia, multimedia tactile media, emerging media, upstart media, variable media, locative media, immersive art, interactive art, and Things That You Plug In"[vii]; while Paul identifies seven broad categories: installation, film, video and animation, internet and networked art, software art, virtual reality, and sound and music.[viii]

These lists reflect the many different fields, perspectives and applications involved in attempting to define the medium and its particular nuances. The medium's complexity allows for it, as a creative medium, to be a suitable site for critiquing and reflecting the contemporary moment. It also becomes prime for networks to emerge and be formed because of its creative potential and through it. It is this very site which sees a networked curatorial practice and methodology emerging in and through.

Networked

The term 'network' is used not just to refer to forming a connection but also as part of an outcome of the methodology. The word 'network' has migrated from computer engineering and related fields to the social sciences and popular culture. A network exists as a constellation of connected or related entities or nodes. There can be different types of networks, and therefore different types of relationships, formed between those nodes. Deleuze and Guattari, synonymous with rhizomatic theory and ways of thinking, describe that "unlike trees or their roots, the rhizome connects any point to any other point, and its traits are not necessarily linked to traits of the same nature; it brings into play very different regimes of signs, and even

nonsign states".[ix] This non-linear and non-hierarchical state of being reflects a decentralised and distributed way of thinking about connections that form through a network, which moves and shifts depending on its growth and meaning. This way of thinking is inextricably linked to contemporary ways of living and behaving, as so much of our daily habits exist online in a networked form, as well as being situated within a digital art context, where understanding a networked way of thinking is necessary to understand the medium and its different contexts.

This way of understanding also relates to Nicolas Bourriaud's relational aesthetics and art, which are formed through "inter-human relations which they represent, produce or prompt" that are situated in a "social context, rather than an independent and private space".[x] Inherently, these aesthetics and relations set up a network of meaning and value within them that can transpose to further networks of meaning and value. This act of iterating and developing has emerged in the curatorial practice, unpacked in more detail below.

Networked curatorial practice and methodology

The term 'networked curatorial practice' refers to a methodology and practice that has emerged over at least the past decade within curatorial research and practice in response to a deep sense of urgency and desire by a growing number of curators to create and provide opportunities and space for digital artists to present, display, discuss and develop their work.

For me, the term 'networked curatorial' describes a curatorial practice, more often than not within a digital or new media art context, that can be applied to both a curatorial and artistic practice. It emerges within a network of relational entities, actors and agents, or nodes; or from a network, where the network itself may be understood as the medium. This can occur online, where the internet – as a network – forms part of the curatorial framework and form; in an iterative practice, where the practice becomes connected through its own formation or an application or recommendation referral system for artists or curators.

The use of a collaborative method within a digital context influences curatorial methodology. It impacts the dynamics of how one can work curatorially and increases the potential scope of collaboration, promoting the development of a networked understanding of what a collaborative, connected methodology is, or could be, for artistic practice within the arts, potentially not only within the digital arts space. By its nature, the digital medium is dynamic, both allowing for and requiring inputs and outputs, creating connections and nodes based on different criteria and interactions. It has the potential to be decentralised, transparent, and to create visibility. It does not exist in isolation in its own context; it is often the antithesis of the hierarchical, centralised,

Western institutional curatorial model or framework described above. Unpacking how the digital medium can facilitate a collaborative and networked curatorial methodology is central to my research.

This methodology and practice are present and manifest differently in the different projects. It manifests through form through iteration due to a pressing need to build and create through the digital medium.

Curator

The role of the curator shifts within the curatorial and further within the digital context to demand more of the role. The role of the curator is contextually defined, dynamic, and often multiple. Celina Jeffery reflects on the "hybrid role of the artist-curator in multiple manifestations", and the possible connection between the two as resulting in "a creative process, a research methodology and a critical strategy".[xi] There is a clear link that is starting to emerge in contemporary curatorial practice between the scope of the curatorial, and the dynamic, diverse role of the curator, with the role of the digital medium affecting that scope. Karen Gaskill lists a range of descriptions for contemporary curators: "as caretaker, facilitator, mediator, catalyst, context provider, collaborator and negotiator". [xii] Nina Czegledy describes the role of the curator as encompassing a range of skills and qualities: "as producer, collaborator, as champion of objects and/or interactivity, as hacker, as broadcaster, as context provider, as communicator, as outsourcer, or even as a politician".[xiii] When curating the digital or immaterial, the curatorial role has the ability to shift from one person to the next, as the users also have the ability to interact with artworks online. In this instance, it is as though "curatorial authority [can be] shared with the platform ... and its users". [xiv] Within our contemporary moment, with the multi-hyphenated roles[xv] that curators embrace and the post-occupation condition (see definition below), practitioners have a variety of skills. They can traverse various positions and contexts easily – freelancing and developing a diverse practice, and "dispens[ing] with the term 'artist' (or critic, curator or art historian) in favour of something like art worker-at-large".[xvi]

A curator's role is collaborative; it is networked through connections, which can be amplified by the curator's context and the digital medium. It demands and allows for more and more of the curator.

Paracuratorial and post-curatorial

The paracuratorial offers a framework for reorienting the curatorial to become post-curatorial. According to Paul O'Neill, this is "conceived of as operating away from, alongside, or supplementary to the main curatorial work of exhibition making". [xvii] O'Neill argues that the paracuratorial might be considered outside of the curatorial – adjacent yet connected – where paracuratorial practices "are part of this constellation … [responding] to certain irreconcilable conditions of production".[xviii]

Simon Sheikh, defined the curatorial, before the paracuratorial, as the "process of producing knowledge and making curatorial constellations that can be drawn from the historical forms and practices of curating".[xix] If one takes O'Neill's definition of the paracuratorial as being part of a constellation, with "auxiliary procedures around and outside of the form of the exhibition as such",[xx] then it is these very constellations, connections and relationships, which start not only to form a network of ideas as thoughts as extensions of overlapping themes in curating or arranging objects, but that establish discourse and produce research through those networks. It is at this point – where the paracuratorial can be seen as assisting in reorientating the curatorial – that it also becomes post-curatorial, through "[distancing] itself from large scale curating, and [focusing] on sustainability and durability instead … [distancing] itself from the dominant rhetoric of curating, both in terms of the language *of* the exhibition … [and] *about* the exhibition".[xxi]

Sheikh adds that the paracuratorial is a "critical response to the marketisation of contemporary art, and rejection of spectacle, bigness … both anti-biennale and the anti- art fair … in the form of research-led programming and curating", and that it acts as a mode of critique or a methodology, which allows for a critique of the curatorial, and provides an opportunity to rethink it. [xxii] Within this definition, the paracuratorial may hold more potential for all agents and participants than the curatorial. This can be seen in the diversity of projects that make up the curatorial research, the form they take, or the type of space.

Post-occupational condition

In her article 'The Post-Occupational Condition' (2016), Tara McDowell describes the post-occupational condition as one where practitioners have a variety of skills and can traverse various positions and contexts easily – freelancing and developing a diverse practice, and "dispens[ing] with the term 'artist' (or critic, curator or art historian) in favour of something like art worker-at-large".[xxiii] This describes where the division of labour and roles blur, and where those categorisations become obscured. Artists and curators access new forms of practice interchangeably as an outcome of the curatorial becoming a form of research that informs dynamic curatorial contexts.

These roles change even further when positioned outside of a Western context, where different needs and requirements exist for both artists and curators, as well as the curatorial. This blurring of roles, McDowell suggests, is a result of social and economic contexts, and she questions how this condition exposes an "uneven globalised art world?"[xxiv]

Spaces

Each project– *Floating Reverie*, *Blue Ocean*, *Covalence*, and *TMRW* – exists, both conceptually and as a space, through its potential to offer opportunity and support to artists and curators developing a sustainable digital artistic practice. It is through various types of spaces that this can happen. This is achieved through the use of physical/online/imagined spaces, such as a residency programme, studio space or production support, or an exhibition space; and discursive spaces, including documentation or archive creation, and thought spaces, to encourage and develop discourse (publishing and discussion-based). A focus is placed on identifying how the role of the curator may – and arguably is required to – change and shift within these different spaces.

These spaces allow for unique interactions between artists and curators and between the online medium and the physical and digital. These unique interactions allow for the expansion of creative artistic practice and exchange to develop among them.

A space is understood here not to be limited to a physical environment, such as a gallery; rather, a space could be a podcast or a publication; it could exist online or in a physical space, discursively, imaginatively, and practically. Traditionally, institutional support for art and artists has existed in the form of galleries, museums, and formal educational institutions, while non-traditional/informal support can happen through festivals, residency programmes and artist-run spaces. The boundaries between the traditional/formal and non-traditional/informal platforms have begun to overlap and merge in recent years, depending on the needs of the context and the agents or actors in them.

These various types of spaces and the ebbs and flows of sustainability around them start to form an ecosystem for artists and curators to tap into and out of. This speaks to the ecosystem of needs required to ensure a practice is sustainable. The different components – audience, space, education, discourse, production, and curation – need to align for this to happen. Such spaces are crucial for these artists and the ecosystem they support to cultivate and sustain these practices.

Conclusion

While these key concepts and terms are not necessarily new, they help articulate and unpack a networked curatorial methodology. This unpacking is continuous and should constantly be reviewed, reflecting and self-critiquing my practice.

The different curatorial projects are where these concepts and terms occur. The various types of spaces and the ebbs and flows of sustainability around them start to form an ecosystem for artists and curators to tap into and out of. This speaks to the ecosystem of needs required to ensure a practice is sustainable. The different components – audience, space, education, discourse, production, and curation – must align for this to happen. Such spaces are crucial for these artists and the ecosystem they support to cultivate and sustain these practices.

The digital medium and digital art offer a prime location for networks to emerge, for a curator to use this medium to support their practice and develop and create their own network through and because of the medium. A networked curatorial practice allows the curator's role to be dynamic, changing, flexible, and expansive. It is here that multiple sites and curating are able to expand into the paracuratorial. The digital medium allows and demands that the curator become more than the carer and organiser, that through different spaces and types of production, through a networked curatorial practice, an ecosystem emerges, allowing the curator to create a sustainable space for digital artistic production.

For a full presentation of the curatorial research, the online catalogue is accessible *here*.

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