Curating Online: Art in Space and Time

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Abstract

This paper aims to gain more insight into the exploration of aesthetics, space, time and narrative in online exhibitions. In potential online space can be continuously refigured, and networked machine time is a complex assemblage in which computer-based times and the traces of human intervention become entangled, generate the potentially unlimited experiences of temporality without a clear trajectory, either in the past or towards the future. Hence, the unstable qualities of space and time problematize narrative as an expanding space in which ideas unfold through time. Drawing on a series of interviews with curators and artists who organized online exhibitions, this paper makes a first attempt to question how the relations between online space and time affect and create alternative narrative potentials? And, moreover, how this entangled space time relationship that is set up between humans and non-humans affects issues of value, trust, ownership and authorship in relation to the art it presents?

Keywords

Online exhibitions, digital art, curating, time, space.

Introduction

In 2021, in the midst of a global pandemic that forced many people to work online, Valiz Foundation in Amsterdam published a series of interviews that I had conducted with curators, artists and designers on curating digital art: *Curating Digital Art. From Presenting and Collecting Digital Art to Networked Co-curating*. [1] It could be seen as a good marketing strategy to publish a book about a phenomenon that was unfolding at the time. However, the earliest interviews took place ten years before 'the great migration' to the World Wide Web. The interviews emerged from the concern that too little knowledge was available about the potential of exhibiting digital art, either in museum spaces and galleries, or online. Around that time there was a shared acknowledgement that the divide between different art types was pronounced and hard to overcome. Fast-forward ten years and digital art has become more visible and is included in group exhibitions or dedicated digital art presentations, and its presence in the commercial artworld is burgeoning, perhaps mostly due to the NFT-art hype since 2021. Similarly, and again mostly due to external factors instead of inherent interests – this time the outbreak of Covid-19 – online curating has become a ubiquitous practice. Not only is everyone a curator, but now every museum and gallery also present online exhibitions.

Despite a significant history and numerous examples of what it means to curate in a virtual space, many of the attempts that appeared during the 2020–21 pandemic mimicked conventional gallery exhibitions. The skeuomorphic representations were discussed in online debates about the new normal in a digital world. Most of the exchanges focused on questions of how the exhibition operates as a site, agent and entanglement of enquiry, as a spatial choreography or as material assemblages. While relevant and interesting propositions were made, conspicuously absent from these debates were the curators, artists and designers who had years-long experience in curating online. Perhaps this was largely due to the invisibility of the work that online curators had already done. Going back in web time means digging through fragments of websites that once were, stumbling upon 404 messages from an inaccessible past or static documentation of exhibitions that should be interactive. Indeed, it's hard to build on the past when it's no longer retrievable.

In the ongoing exploration of aesthetics and narrative form, space and time are among the most frequently discussed topics in exhibition design and curating; however, in the web, space and time seem to slightly shift in meaning. Simply put, a website can be located, accessed and experienced from anywhere at any time. Less bound by physical bricks and mortar, it's nevertheless still tied to a location: a website's physical IP address translates into a Unique Resource Locator (which is again a specific type of URI, a Universal Resource Identifier), that can only be accessed through a specific protocol (such as http:// or https://). Hence it is dependent on a server's accessibility as well as its owner's ability to look after it (updating software, paying bills, etc.). So, while a website may seem a space- or site-less entity, similar to a physical gallery, it is nonetheless bound by all kinds of technical and human constraints. In a Cartesian sense a website is just as physical as an offline gallery, with similar characteristics that can be politically, socially, economically infused. In order to be able to address how online exhibitions function or what they do – how they negotiate distance and time between things, how a scenography or choreography is produced, how the space can be subverted, or how relations are created between artworks, their audiences and between audience members – one needs to understand space on the web.

Space

When asking the curators and artists about how they approached the qualities of digital space, their responses show how space dissolved into a set of processes occurring simultaneously and at different points in virtual and / or physical space. [1] While in some cases the space could still be configured and calculated as a relatively stable topography, in others it became as compound as the practices that animated it.

The interviewees agreed that the web is not an easy and straightforward space. Although it can be modelled into a template or a standard form, as happens a lot within institutional examples, the interviewees were unanimous in their interest in playing with the constraints and limitations. Rather than seeing these as impediments, they said that the 'open space' and being enmeshed with the complexities of the web was what attracted them to this type of curating, as well as the excitement of exploring a new and often unpredictable space, because it provided opportunities that would be impossible in a physical space. However, this could mean different things: for example, expanding the 'physical' boundaries of the gallery into a virtual space, as in the exhibition *Surprisingly this rather works*, curated by Anika Meier and Johann König (2020). The curatorial duo invited artist Manuel Rossner (who initiated the online Float Gallery in 2012) to exhibit some of his new work. Rossner transformed the former St. Agnes church into a gaming environment with his amorphous sculptures and paintings based on digital drawings (Fig. 1). At the same time, he developed a digital translation of the space in which users could direct their avatar to explore the monumental space even further: areas that couldn't be accessed in the physical space could now be explored up close and from all angles. Visitors could use a treadmill that passed through the floor and the back wall of the nave of the church, or climb a large yellow plant-like sculpture leading to the church tower (reminiscent of *Jack and the Beanstalk*), or even throw the sculptures around. As Meier comments, "rules that normally apply in exhibition spaces are suspended in this digital environment". [2]

Translating physical space and objects into virtual space to explore what would otherwise be completely inhospitable spaces is also at the core of the work of German artist duo New Scenario (Paul Barsch and Tilman Hornig). Rather than replicating the white cube gallery they investigate alternative ways to exhibit artworks. Examples include an exhibition in a Hummer limousine titled *Crash* (2015); a small Dinosauria park that presented *Jurassic Paint* (2015): paintings exhibited among synthetic dinosaurs that counterbalanced the science-religion debate with the value of painting in art's historical discourse; or deep inside the Chernobyl exclusion zone, where *Chernobyl Papers* (2021) presented –organised with the help of stalkers– 39 drawings form a poetic encounter and testimony of people's experiences of the disaster. While the drawings will remain onsite and slowly decay, the exhibition remains accessible through the documentation that is presented on their website, where you

can also slowly zoom into the spaces. Similarly exploring inhabitable or inaccessible spaces, their exhibition *BODY HOLES* (2016) consisted of tiny artworks exhibited in the different openings of the human body: from the ears, nose and mouth to the genitalia which normally would be inaccessible to spectators (Fig. 2). This absurdist way of present-
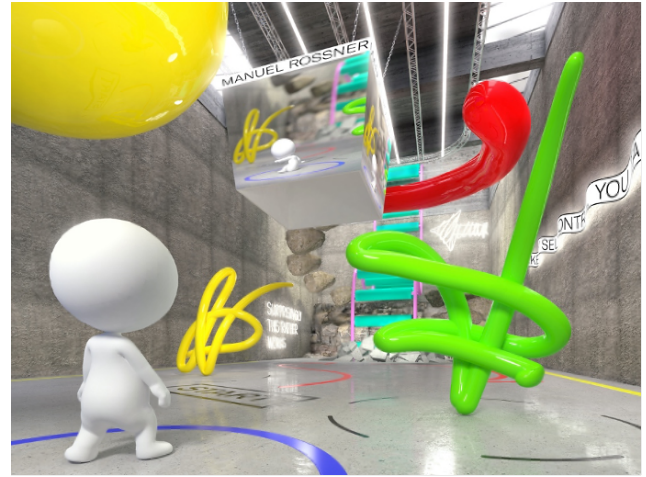

Fig. 1 Anika Meier and Johann König Gallery: Manuel Rossner, *Surprisingly this rather works*, 2020.

ing art, which evokes at the same time a sense of disgust, horror, beauty and surprise, could be seen as merely attention-seeking and the extreme sports of curating. Yet, by interweaving narrative texts on socio-political issues of gender, privacy or surveillance, their focus is clearly on the broader context of how images, art and politics are discussed in the artworld. New Scenario challenges conventions and traditions by creating their own rules, since: "At this point, it is no longer possible to curatorially bring the artworks into an intellectual and spatial context using known formulas". [3]

Fig. 2 New Scenario, *BODY HOLES*: Hana Earles, *The Tightest Youngest Legal Pussy*, 2015. Fabric, pen, cotton thread, ribbon.

Their 'mise-en-scene' takes place in physical spaces and is immediately documented and shown online, either in the form of a video, a sound recording, a VR experience or an

unconventional slideshow. For them the documentation is just as real as a physical experience: "If the documented scene and the location in which the exhibition takes place are strong enough and if the artworks and their surroundings can interact and communicate with each other, they are able to transcend the documentation and turn it into an experience that is able to replace a spatial experience". [4] It is hard to see the exhibitions merely as attempts to present existing or new artworks, since their documentation creates a new spatialisation, narrative and experience, thereby questioning whether their scenarios are also new art projects, or performances as they describe them. New Scenario emphasises the importance of context while critiquing the virtual white cube that has become a recent standard in which the physical space is merely copied and where the artwork and its documentation are devalued to a low-quality image. Instead, by removing the sensual experience of physical space, the conceptual and narrative qualities of the documentation provide a new imaginative space, where anything can happen. Yet, while New Scenario aims to expand the forms of documentation, in a world where institutions and artworks serve as a backdrop for redundant selfies and documentation becomes social capital [5], the subversive quality of documentation may become ineffective or even obsolete.

The idea of subverting the existing physical art world inspired many interviewees to become active on the web. Curator Miyö van Stenis describes how the web was a possibility "to create our own space and forcing the art circuit to adapt". [6] Similarly, online persona LaTurbo Avedon, says that, "as a curator I want to raise the ceiling, or break it altogether. I want to see what artists envision when they have greater freedom". [7] Yet at the same time there is an interest in bringing the different worlds closer together. For Italian curator Domenico Quaranta it's important to be "carefully mixing adaptation and conflict, making things that look familiar and provocative at the same time". [8] A third position taken by curators is to exploit online space itself. Moving away from the binary between physical or online curating, Italian curator and researcher Gaia Tedone's interest is in exploiting "the curatorial tools already existing within online platforms and modifying their original purpose". [9] Rather than breaking or subverting existing offline standards, Tedone believes that online curating "inevitably needs to confront itself with the extreme volatility of digital content and of images in particular, as links are erased, content removed and websites down-ranked. This should not be seen as a limit in itself, but as an integral part of the research process and can, in my understanding, be creatively incorporated into the curatorial narrative". [10] Rather than being controversial or trying to break with traditional curation, online curating requires a new approach, which factors in that the outcome cannot be controlled. As Italian curator Marialaura Ghidini remarked, "Experimenting with online curating is one of the ways I've used to explore how the communication and service technologies we use right now – but also the contexts of their making and usages (the web, apps, sharing economies, IT companies, to name a few) – shape us and our surroundings. At the same time, it also allows me to explore how we the users can in turn shape them if we use them differently – beyond the purposes they were designed for". [11] While online curating is about learning to understand the socio-technical characteristics of the media, it is also about acknowledging that it is infused with other aspects that are often unpredictable and can affect the environment, the artworks and the interactions with them.

While in the examples of Meier and New Scenario, the curators are firmly in control of the space they are creating, in the practices of Tedone and Ghidini the underlying systems of the web and its different platforms play a significant role. Here the site-specificity of the web becomes important and the role of the curator as well as their project can develop in different and sometimes unexpected ways. Due to this socio-technical site-specificity, the focus of curating moves from artists and artworks to processes and systems. As such, "it shifts the attention from what is produced (the end product) to how something is performed". [12] Moreover, in addition to performing, i.e., setting something in motion, online curating is processual, since every interaction triggers an execution. Such processuality can consist of multiple threads that execute instructions concurrently, or it can involve interactions between multiple paths that can potentially branch out in different and at times unknown or ambiguous directions. In these situations, online curating is intricately intertwined within the complex network of other humans, technical elements, and digital objects that impact the conventional role of the curator. One of the consequences is that the previous roles of curator, art(ist) and audience, and potentially the division of labour, are blurred, or (un)intentionally obfuscated or abandoned. Instead of seeing this as a problem, emphasising this tension provides an opportunity to explore more thoroughly the socio-technical impact on digital cultural processes, and curating in particular. Online curating then becomes a tactic to rethink the dynamics of power, authority and cultural gatekeeping which are at the heart of curating. Indeed, online curating forges new relationships between aesthetics, technics and politics, and curators, artists and audience members. This interplay can result in more layered structures of power and governance.
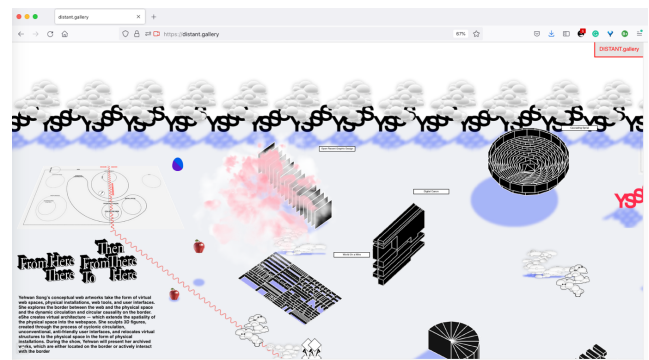

Fig. 3 Constant Dullaart, *distant.gallery*: Yehwan Song, *From Here to There*, 2022.

Regarding a website as a medium in which one can break the fifth wall between art, space and audience enables artists, curators and audience members to think differently about the art that is displayed. Based on earlier ideas of presenting different websites and contextual information about these on one webpage, Dutch artist Constant Dullaart opened *distant.gallery* in 2021 (Fig. 3): "The new model of showing online works alongside references to offline works in a single website is my all-time favourite. You can hear one work while looking at the next, just as you would in a physical exhibition. You can make relationships between works within the same show, and enjoy a multitude of different media, be it a PDF, a video, a sequence of gifs, a 3D object, 360 image, webgame, etc.". [13] Besides emphasising the relationships between artworks and/or additional documentation, the relation between users of the site is an important element that is negotiated in various ways: by using virtual rooms and avatars, or by including chat rooms, live audio or video streams. In the case of Dullaart this meant that "Adding the social element of seeing the other visitors represented with a simple dot, and being able to hear the dot when in close proximity (for example when you're looking at the same work), copies social behaviour within an art institution in such a simple and direct way. And I love the friction that this creates". [14] When entering distant.gallery your cursor turns into an egg shape and once you're in the vicinity of another user you can choose to remain anonymous or show your camera and start a conversation. Copying social behaviour in such a simple and direct way inside the online gallery creates a strange discord: being in your own private space you are suddenly confronted with the 'physicality' of other visitors. It is precisely these sudden surprises that Dullaart is interested in: "I enjoy the friction of translation and I tend to enjoy the awkwardness of a physical representation based on an online experience within the realms of a cultural institution, simple and blunt translations emphasising the difference between the two cultural planes: online and offline". [15] In the exhibition *The Recombinants* (2017–19), an experiment by artist Martine Neddam, curator Emmanuel Guez and programmer Zombectro, visitors could directly influence the artworks and their presentation (Fig.4). The trio created the character Madja Edelstein-Gomez: a contemporary independent global curator from Argentina who initiated *The Recombinants* in the form of a conventional exhibition, including an open call for artworks, a database and an exhibition. Yet, every time someone entered data into the system it triggered a chain of events where every user, or better each piece of data, became a recombinant. *The Recombinants* used a form of data-splicing to generate a page, and with each interaction the data was regenerated or recombined, thereby challenging the notion of 'the art-as-object'. By changing the format and chain of events in the website in which each work and each interaction happened in relation to something else, albeit that the relation-making was not clear, *The Recombinants* was about modifying and reconfiguring access, as well as about self-replicating space and time rather than continuous space and time.

Clearly, physical space has its own attractions, ranging from place and scale and its tactility to enabling physical human contact. However, in their attempts to subvert existing standards, while still creating a skeuomorphic design of a gallery, these examples demonstrate how online space provides opportunities to experience artworks and space in different ways. Yet, the relationship to time provides another important distinction between online curating and physical exhibitions.
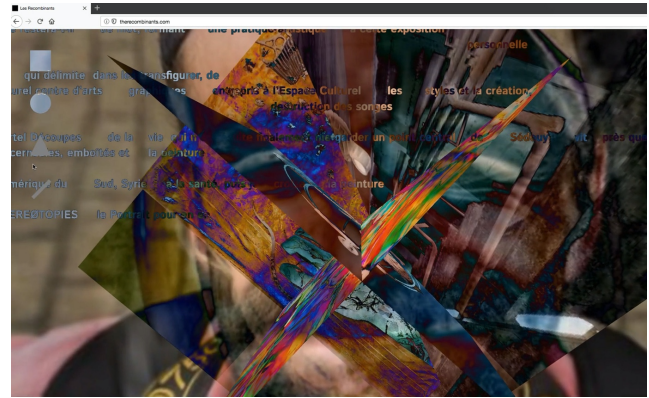

Fig. 4 Madja Edelstein Gomez, *The Recombinants*, 2017-19.

Time

In 1998 the Swiss watch company Swatch introduced '.beats' a decimal time system that ran from @000 until @999. It was a way to easily connect to others across the globe without getting distracted by different time zones. I still have the watch but was never able to connect with friends across the globe. Despite its dubious launch of a universal Internet Time, I liked the idea that it mirrored a new world, and how it subverted normalised time, the time of modernity and capitalist industrialism that is measured 24/7 by timepieces of various sorts. More than two decades later, with my .beats still going, the Swatch phenomenon still hasn't gained much traction. Internet time ceded to the trope of 24/7: a non-stop world in which content can be consumed at any time of the day or night, where every nanosecond data is being crunched through wires to reach potential readers. Indeed, unlike their offline counterparts, online exhibitions are available and can be experienced all the time. Most online artworks and exhibitions are "ideally meant to be seen by someone in their bedroom at 2 a.m. with a million other browser tabs open". [16] Many have proposed the detemporality of Internet time, where the acceleration of information developed a temporal compression in which time as a process disappeared. [17] Such observations tend to see the web as fluid and continuous, or as a nice uninterrupted flow of data and exchanges. However, in most experiences the web is more volatile, less like a steady stream and more like a wild river that moves at different speeds, including downtimes, blockages, missing parts, relays and dead ends.

In that sense, rather than detemporality, it is a temporal discontinuity, or a broken time.

Despite the possibility of extending exhibitions across geographical and temporal expanses, and the always accessible format of the web, some interviewees chose to focus on set opening times: they only had a show visible for a month or even just a few days to stress the 'event factor', or to amplify the time-based context of the web where things change constantly. Opting to pause activities became a statement during the pandemic when all kinds of museums and institutions suddenly 'discovered' online space to curate activities. In response to the lockdowns and the resulting closure of physical cultural spaces, in mid-April 2020 New Scenario was among the few whose website showed a 'closed until further notice' message. Although unaffected by the lockdown, their response was aimed at the sudden shift online, one which merely resulted in "uninspired, conservative, clumsy and market-driven" [18] exhibition efforts by institutions to keep their audiences and funders connected and pleased. Moreover, and similar to others such as Green Cube Gallery (Fig. 5) [19], they wanted to emphasise how the lockdown affected life on all levels. Rather than replicating the physical space and time, their attempt emphasised how various spaces are connected.
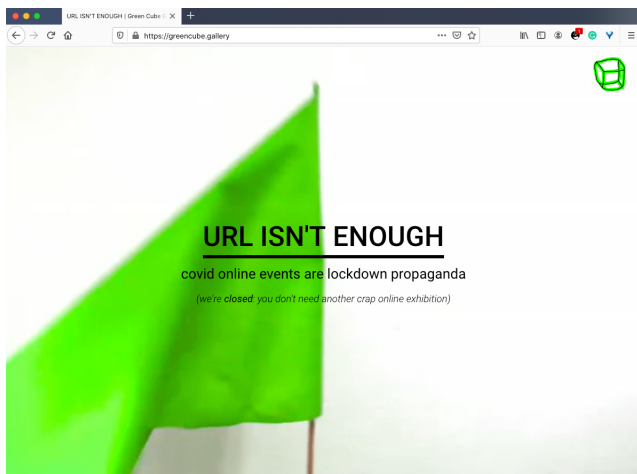

Fig. 5 Green Cube Gallery, April 2020.

New space and time relations, in which time is less a topographical or temporal division and corresponds foremost to technical specification can be seen in online exhibitions that focus on the execution of algorithms and/or the interaction of its users. To develop their exhibition, *The Recombinants* used an algorithm that was triggered by visitors to the site: "Whoever sees the work becomes part of a processing chain of viewing. The reception of a file produces digital information, which is re-injected into the system as a digital production". [20] Each visit created a new data configuration based on the previous visit and another set of unpredictable results emerged. Instead of a set of events placed one after another in a repetition of the progression of homogenous moments, the data slicing created an open palette that was never the same. Each exhibition folded back upon itself, and produced a new experience corresponding to a technical specification rather than a geographical or temporal division. *The Recombinants* was about modifying and reconfiguring access, as well as about self-replicating time and space rather than continuous time and space. In other words, each work and each interaction happened in relation to something else, albeit that the relation-making was not clear.

This is similar to how Adrian Mackenzie describes the foldings of different relations that happen in machine time. By listing the various types of machine time, such as seek time, run time, read time, access time, real time, polynomial time, time division, time slicing, time sharing, time complexity, processor time, execution time, compilation time…, Mackenzie emphasises its complexity and shows how, in his analysis of the Viterbi algorithm, "The incorporation of past states into each message begins to break down the punctual, discrete nature of repetition. A flow of information begins to look more like a phenomenological 'now,' composed of retentions and protentions". [21] It's the complex mix of past memories and future predictions that makes the present hard to pin down, at least compared to Cartesian time. Networked machine time is a complex assemblage in which computer-based times and the traces of human intervention become entangled, and this merge generates the potentially unlimited experiences of temporality without a clear trajectory, either in the past or towards the future. Yet, it is by embodying rather than merely enacting the increasing influence of algorithms and technology that online curating can develop ways of working that provoke questions and critique, even if implicitly, through the actions it engenders.

Many exhibitions play with the notion of time, either by presenting generated artworks, temporal narratives, 'real-time' data-streams or streaming webcams which can continue for days on end or are around for a specific duration, more akin to a performance, or to ensure "that they don't simply become archived as a still active space". [22] Other types of exhibitions give more control to the users, either by providing ZIP downloads, thereby transforming a user's desktop into the exhibition space and enabling them to re-use the content; by offering a template or tool to create your own exhibition; or as a Google Docs collaborative co-curation event. These exhibitions focus on user participation by either re-appropriating or subverting existing computer tools. Such exhibitions can evolve over time through interventions from the curators, artists, or other users, and by accepting a loss of control they follow the variable temporality of the web. Those choosing to experiment with algorithms, platform specifics or interaction and co-creation embrace alternative forms of temporality, which may lead to the wider acceptance of building one's own times and spaces. Such examples play with the notion of machine time or Internet time, not necessarily in an attempt to negate or cancel time, but rather to propose an alternative set of, and different ways of thinking about, time. In this light, it's interesting to observe how the interviewees consider their project's endurance. While most interviewees agree that the museum is the place where history is preserved, they also point out that

these institutions have little knowledge or interest in how best to continue or take care of their projects.

Future

Museums are seen "as the glue of history" [23], and as important places to be accepted in order to gain wide art historical recognition: "One of the conditions for art to be considered art is still the overruling attitude that it is the context or space [of the museum] that validates a work of art". [24] The work of the museum or the institution is still seen as an important filter and gatekeeper: "to enter the canon, to be collected and exhibited by a museum is still important". [25] At the same time, when considering the future of their work some point to those who made their work possible: the tech sector should "give back to those who have visualized its fruit". [26] Yet others are trying to develop their own (algorithmic) methods to excavate old data: "my idea is to drill 'Ice Cores'". [27] However, most think that it is the museums' "responsibility to represent what is going on and what has happened" [28], but with the provision that it needs to adapt its methods: "digital art should be preserved by museums, although a shift in both the infrastructure and the mindset of such institutions is still largely absent" [29] Such a mindset needs to be able "to understand the contexts, environments, references and purposes of digital artworks". [30] Primarily it has to deal with "an ongoing translation process" [31], in which form and technique are just as important as concepts and aesthetics. Such flexibility can be established either through copying, "often art has been saved through copying [and] it's reasonable to conclude that copying and sharing might save more digital art than the museums themselves" [32], or adaptation, "just as a Greek sculpture functions perfectly in the digital domain, digital art must also be able to assert itself in various and future aggregate states, otherwise it will vanish". [33]

While it is also recognised that institutions are slowly changing and responding to the challenges of preserving digital art, despite such efforts, what persists is the felt-need for something more digital art specific. On the one hand because "institutional tools aren't suitable for mid-scale organisations like us – not many of us have these specific skills or knowledge and few can afford to hire a specialist to do this kind of work" [34], and "the ways museum collections and archives work are structured around very different parameters, think editions, copyright, value, insurance, that are hard to apply when preserving and presenting memes and gifs, which defy scarcity and authorship through their circulatory power and cultural impact". [35] On the other hand, while "museums could be a lively intermix of heritage, research, exhibitions and discourse, somehow I see them becoming ensnared in political and economic traps, bound by all kinds of constraints and losing importance, perhaps in a similar way as other older forms of cultural mediation like magazines, newspapers and TV". [36] At the same time, this feeling is perhaps simply for the reason that "networked culture has usurped the museum as the be-all, end-all of gatekeeping

and career longevity, because so many people have access to and share content online and in a way that creates its own archive", and additionally, "having a proper archive of one's work has become the new normal, and that's an important change for the field". [37] Yet some interviewees propose a new direction, calling for a more shared and inclusive approach, in which a collaboration between institutions and communities or other more specialised initiatives are proposed: "we should ideally be arguing for a fusion of community care and institutional procedure". [38]. Furthermore, "Museums should definitely be more open to acknowledging the work of organisations like Rhizome by including their preservation initiatives and strategies (from their ArtBase, to Colloq to Webrecorder, for example) into the activities of both their conservation and curatorial departments". [39] To summarise, the interviewees recognise the value of the institutional, but there is also a call to institute differently. While some are more implicit, others are more straightforward, in calling for the establishment of digital art institutions, since "it makes no sense to try to enter a structure that is already in crisis". [40] In a sense, these responses align strongly with notions of disruptive and perhaps even revolutionary change: "Often art has been saved through copying [and] it's reasonable to conclude that copying and sharing might save more digital art than the museums themselves". [41] A call for transformation applies to the institution, but also to the art itself: "Just as a Greek sculpture functions perfectly in the digital domain, digital art must also be able to assert itself in various and future aggregate states, otherwise it will vanish". [42]

It is clear that online space and time are distinct from physical galleries, hence presentations that mimic and adhere to the standards of these spaces will ultimately become little more than a weak representation, in the process potentially distancing the audience even further from the art. Whereas online exhibitions were perhaps something of a novelty at the time, in the last fifteen years online exhibitions are participating in a wider info-technical development that has and is impacting multiple areas of society and culture, and thus they have become relevant and of interest to people far beyond the various insider circles. When curating itself has become so widely dispersed, it is crucial to understand the value of online exhibitions and to realise that these experiences require a certain degree of specialised knowledge to fathom the socio-technical attributes and references. An important step in this direction is acknowledging that in the web, time and space can no longer be seen as temporally or topographically divided, and instead correspond to the technical specifications of the web. As such, online exhibitions constitute a specific space-and-time context in which issues of ownership and authorship, trust, networked co-curating, and the intricate socio-technicalities of the web are presented, discussed and (re)appropriated.

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