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# The Art and Care of Online Curating

Annet Dekker

When museums began turning their curatorial attention towards the Web, these new exhibitions effectively mirrored their offline efforts, being the same thing simply presented in a digitised format. Normally, this form of digital curating was characterised by an approach to the display of artworks that presented rows of thumbnail images to the user with catalogue descriptions attached, enabling them to make selections for viewing based on themes, genres, periods or artists. At the same time, artists, designers and independent curators started moving beyond the standardised white cube galleries and began exploring the seemingly boundless and unrestricted space of the Web. This essay will examine how online curating challenges the traditional models and methods for presenting, accessing and distributing art by discussing practices of collaboration and networked curating. By focusing on the socio-technical aspect of curating, it will address how these practices question established museological values and precipitate alternative ways of understanding curatorial authority.

## Introduction

The year 2020 marked a significant shift in online curating. Cultural institutions were forced to close their doors due to COVID-19 and, in an attempt to secure their funding and guarantee the attention of their audiences, resorted to the Web. Unlikely candidates, such as the Uffizi Galleries in Florence, became a hit on TikTok with their absurd video clips showing their prestigious Italian Renaissance collection of fifteenth-century figures "dance along" to Todrick Hall's rap song *Nails, Hair, Hips, Heels*, or by staging the Medusa (with a mask) turning coronavirus into stone. Getty launched *Museum Challenge*, asking audience members to perform their favourite painting or sculpture, and Hastings Contemporary in the United Kingdom wheeled in a robot that visitors could whizz around its prestigious collection. However, many of the examples primarily revealed how the physical gallery space is distinct from the online space (Dekker, 2021). The curated exhibitions mimicked and kept to the standards of the gallery spaces. As someone poignantly remarked when discussing the relevance of the transition

to online exhibitions, it is like moving from 'tab to tab [instead of] room to room'.<sup>1</sup> Comparing the current examples to some of their predecessors, it seems institutions have barely changed and learned little when it comes to curating online exhibitions.

Perhaps this is not too surprising, because, when trying to outline a comprehensive historical trajectory of curating on the Web, there are many challenges to overcome: early examples – and even more recent ones – are often removed, deleted, or simply disappear amid the ongoing processes of the platform that was used, or due to a lack of interest or of the energy needed to endlessly update an exhibition site and/or the artworks. Similarly, there is a lack of archival projects dedicated to Web-based exhibitions. Indeed, despite a tradition of more than 25 years since the introduction of the Web and the subsequent online curatorial efforts, it can be difficult to expand on historical collections, or to remember the exhibitions and events that were held. As also mentioned by Michael Connor, 'The histories are not particularly well documented, and the specificities not so thoroughly mapped' (Connor, 2020). Finally, the expansion and commercialisation of the Web made these challenges even harder to deal with – as they further blurred the boundary between what is or is not art, or what is an exhibition and what is not. In this sense, it is also important to consider the limitations that many institutions have to deal with. As maintained by media researcher Katrina Sluis, the online space is contested,

as it's usually the domain of the communications and marketing team, who are under incredible pressure to convert online traffic into physical audiences. Corporate web servers are tightly controlled, and administered by expensive external web developers who are rarely sympathetic to the installation of unauthorised scripts. So this becomes a boring, yet important factor limiting the format and scale of online projects. (Sluis cited in Dekker, 2021, p. 289)

Pita Arreola-Burns and Elliott Burns from the curatorial collective Off Site Project echo Sluis' observation. After interviewing fifteen contemporary online galleries, they concluded that a great deal of online curation is intrinsically connected to, and influenced by, social media metrics. They noticed how curatorial decisions, including their own, are heavily informed by the need to be visible through likes, comments and shares on social media platforms. As they remarked:

<sup>1</sup> This comment was made by one of the participants in the online workshop *expo-facto: into the algorithm of exhibition?* on 29 January 2021. For more information, see: <https://exhibition.school/expo-facto/> (Accessed: 2 March 2021).

Personally, we feel subject to a cult of performativity, having over the past three years extended our programming and felt an increased pressure to publicise this and thereby promote the artists we show. We have become attuned to the reception of our social media actions, internalising an awareness of why singular Posts succeed over others, be it a visual quality, a time period, multiple images or the inclusion of video. In turn we have implemented those unconscious learnings into our design vocabulary and in all likelihood have allowed the Instagramability of particular styles to influence which artists we approach. (Arreola-Burns and Burns, 2020)

Yet, while online exhibitions were popping up out of nowhere, several online curatorial projects decided to halt their activities, perhaps signalling the precarious situation for online art, or to protest the institution that was celebrating its newly claimed territory with digitised collection tours, while ignoring the decades-long history of online curating. Following these concerns, this is an initial attempt to focus on the social aspect of curating, by looking at how curating is cared for, who is involved, and how it is influenced by online platforms and software.

Clearly, the concept of *care* is used and interpreted in different ways, depending on the academic or professional discipline, country and culture. As mentioned by anthropologists Annemarie Mol and Anita Hardon, 'engaging in *caring* does not serve an unequivocal, common good. To think that it does is yet another romantic dream (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017). Caring practices, like other practices, are rife with tensions' (Mol and Hardon, 2021, p. 197). By reverting to the etymology of the verb "curating", as in "taking care of", and using the verb as an analytical concept and tool, in this article I analyse the activities of caring that take place in online curating: between a curator, the users and the technology involved. In keeping with the analysis and methodology of Mol and Hardon and Maria Puig de la Bellacasa (2017), I see care as a processual activity that develops over time, rather than being performed in a single moment. As Mol and Herdon point out, such an 'activity of *caring* is not taken on board by isolated individuals, but spread out over a wide range of people, tools and infrastructures. Such *caring* does not oppose technology, but includes it' (Mol and Hardon, 2021, p. 199). Moreover, they argue that: 'The technology involved does not offer control, but needs to be handled with care – while, in its turn, it is bound to only work as long as it is being cared for' (*ibid.*). By emphasising the agency of technology in curating, I aim to show how technology does not only need to be taken care of, but can also care.

## Towards collaborative curating

In 1998, net artist Olia Lialina initiated the *Art.Teleportacia* project. The idea was to develop an online gallery that questioned the selling and ownership of net art, or, as stated on the website:

[...] to offer on-demand net.art works over the Internet, *Art.Teleportacia* is challenging the traditional art selling system and the institutionalized establishment of curators and directors by offering an [easy] to access presentation platform, a broad and qualified selection, the best service and support for our customers, and last but not least: context, critics and certifications. (Art.Teleportacia, n.d.)

Her attempts to sell net art were unsuccessful and, in the process, *Art.Teleportacia* was renamed *First Real Net Art Gallery*, and later *Last Real Net Art Museum*. Despite the failed attempts, the project demonstrated a new approach to curating by considering (through hands-on experimentation) the medium of creation and presentation to be on the same level as the artworks. After more than twenty years, the *Last Real Net Art Museum* still exists and its collection consists of 37 versions by different artists of *My Boyfriend Came Back from The War (MBCBFTW)*, Lialina's net artwork from 1996. Merely presenting a list of links, at first the website looks similar to institutional websites of that time. However, *Last Real Net Art Museum* was a provocative gesture towards, and a critique of, museums and galleries that were presenting their digitised artworks as an online electronic catalogue. According to Lialina (2017), they also frequently neglected to show the location bars or turn them off when showing the work offline. Providing the URLs of the websites is profoundly important to Lialina, because, in this way, the works can be experienced in their natural environment. It further indicates that the projects belong to the artists, as they exist on their servers, where they can also be changed, replaced, preserved or deleted. She also considers the location bar as a narrative device and thus part of the artistic concept.<sup>2</sup>

By providing the links to other versions of Lialina's own work, *Last Real Net Art Museum* emphasises the possibilities for appropriation and (re)creation by showing the infinite configurations that are possible, while using the standard interface of an Internet store in addition to presenting discrete projects. In this way, the site also underlines the social network of the Web

2 For more information about the importance of the location bar in Lialina's work, see Dekker (2020).

by linking to the works and the artists. In addition to the online space, the project was translated into physical spaces where the net artworks were transformed in different ways: while some of them were shown in their original hardware casing (albeit functioning via an inserted emulator), others became large projections, immersive VR installations, or could be scrolled on an interactive screen.

In this sense, curating digital art takes advantage of the variability of exhibiting digital art, helped by the increasing affordability of the technology. As such, it expands the curatorial inquiry to include questions concerning the potential of appropriation, online distribution and digital archiving. Moreover, while working on the *Last Real Net Art Museum*, Lialina began collecting all the information relating to *MBCBFTW*: the people who made the iterations, the exhibitions, the sources of the files and the metadata of the artwork. This information proved to be of art-historical interest at the 20-year anniversary exhibition of *MBCBFTW* in 2016, which took place simultaneously at HeK, the House of Electronic Arts in Basel and MU Hybrid Art House in Eindhoven, but more importantly it ensured the preservation of *MBCBFTW*. In the end, the artist is curator is archivist is conservator. Similarly, the practice of care returns in the acts of exhibiting, preserving and archiving the works, but also through appropriation, which can be seen as a way to continue the project (Dekker, 2018). Seeing appropriation as an affective act by the artists who pay tribute to Lialina's initial work continues a process that is set in motion – although mostly unintentionally<sup>3</sup> – by Lialina's attempt to collect all the information about her work. Yet, because she presents them together, they become part of larger project that moves between the different iterations, potentially empowering a (networked) act of care. At the same time, Lialina also engages in appropriation by connecting the works to her larger project without the artists' permission, thereby problematising conventional notions of custody and provenance, as well as the way in which they connect to care.

In the case of *MBCBFTW*, a collaborative effort has not yet taken place, perhaps partly because the artists, although inspired and affected by *MBCBFTW*, merely respond and are not directly invited to participate in the project. In 2007, the TAGallery collective tried to emphasise such collective acts by continuing the investigation of linking as a curatorial method. The link

3 Lialina invited the first five artists to contribute (Lialina, 2017), while the contributions by Constant Dullaart and Foundland were commissioned in 2017 by MU to celebrate the twentieth anniversary of the project.

was regarded 'as the main medium for networking, collaborating, contextualizing along with its role as a sign for mutual estimation in a social environment is a fragile entity' (TAGallery 001 (2007)). It was also a metaphor for the 'ephemerality of Web-based art-forms' (*ibid.*), since links often broke, leading to an empty website or '404-Object not found' messages.

Rather than merely missing a connection, the broken link also showed how net art depends on technical processes that are often beyond the artist's control. In this sense, the broken link as part of an exhibition still signalled the existence of an artwork and, hence, it became a reflection on the artwork, as well as on how it was produced and is maintained. By using the social platform Del.icio.us, TAGallery also tried to extend the concept of a tagged and collaborative exhibition. Tagging was a way to assign different artworks to single or multiple themes, to create contextual meaning, and, at the same time, a means to open up the act of selection. The tags, or keywords, formulated by the collective and the users, emphasised the different interpretations for reading the artworks, resulting in semantically impenetrable exhibition titles such as *dead.art(-missing!)LINKreSources*, *de-re-/con-struct(ur)ed\_LANG(U)agE*, or *link.of.thought\_thought.of.link...*

Tagging was also used to underline the tension between different types of language and methods of communication, from spoken human utterances to computer coding. Finally, by using the medium of the blog, they wanted to explore the practice of collective curating, focusing on dialogue by summarising and juxtaposing experiences, venues, spaces and observations surrounding digital arts curating. Here, collaboration with the users was key, as each new entry became the beginning of a new thread. The curating and the exhibition could be seen as the means to create and emphasise the social network and its subsequent process – enabled by the platform.

## How technology cares

While tagging became a popular form of collaborative curating, with the increase in social media platforms and commercial (sharing) sites such as Facebook, Tumblr, Instagram, YouTube, Are.na and eBay, these platforms also impacted curating in other ways. Some curators were exploring the tools within online platforms to modify their original purposes in an attempt to expand the curatorial scope. As explained by curator Gaia Tedone, this was not only

about subverting a platform, but rather an inevitable consequence of curating in these spaces:

[curating in] such a process 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. (Tedone cited in Dekker, 2021, p. 104)

Instead of merely being controversial or trying to break with traditional curation, curating on existing, and often commercial, digital platforms required a new approach. To find out what this meant as part of the larger curatorial project *#exstrange* (2017) on the auction site eBay, curated by Marialaura Ghidini and Rebekah Modrak,<sup>4</sup> Tedone explicitly started to "collaborate" with eBay's algorithm Cassini to see what the effects of algorithmic curating would be for a curator.

Learning some of the characteristics of Cassini, Tedone put out a call for a "curatorial consultancy" on eBay. Her service was aimed at increasing an artist's or an artwork's visibility, as well as boosting critical reviews, thereby generating revenue through sales – two measures which are usually hard to quantify and control since they depend on highly subjective and volatile criteria such as fame, change, taste and market fluctuations. Engaging with the algorithm involved acknowledging that the latter occupied an embedded position within the platform and that it would have to be accepted as a "relational, contingent and contextual" agent inseparable from its socio-technical assemblage and the conditions under which it was developed and deployed. Of course, Gaia herself was also part of this same assemblage, as were her potential clients. As such, in its articulation as human-algorithmic curation, the service brought together commercial, cultural and socio-technical agendas that characterise the multiple facets of online curation both as a cultural practice, located at the intersection between art, technology and the market, and as a method of 'engaging and participating in online cultures of mass participation' (Tyzlik-Carver, 2016, p. 280).

Ajafa, later identified as the artist Alessandro Sambini, bought Tedone's service to get help in producing his artwork *Portable Wildlife Image Instance*:

4 For more information about the project, see <http://exstrange.com/> (Accessed: 2 March 2021).



his cut-up Tesco plastic shopping bag played with the tropes of contemporary landscape photography and Dada readymades. After a fierce bidding competition, the artwork was successfully sold for 44 euros: an increased market value of 40.5%. On the one hand, the success of the sale can be attributed to understanding and following the logic of Cassini, which was trained to deliver. On the other hand, the auction also benefitted from human interactions, knowledge and experiences – which could not have been anticipated by the metrics of the algorithm – such as in-depth knowledge of the platform and the ability to interact with the algorithm's parameters, disclosed as part of the consultancy service, as well as the fact that the project acquired symbolic value, as it was part of a larger initiative: *#exstrange*.<sup>5</sup>

With her project, Tedone showed how online curation diverges from the logic of conventional practices because of its socio-technical specificity. It shifts the attention from the content to processes and systems, recasting the function of the artwork within a complex network of human and technical agents, other “networked artworks”, digital objects and machines, each with their own task, which together create the “performance”: the interactions build upon each other, and together they construct the experience. Working with eBay's algorithm, Tedone experienced an alliance between herself as the curator, the objects/artists she selected, the users of the platform, and the machine operations of eBay, which can be framed as a transition from online curation to ‘networked co-curation’ (Dekker and Tedone, 2019). Moreover, the experiment demonstrated how technology as part of the process also cares, as it tries to make the best deal for both the seller and the buyer, even if the exact process is not fully understood.

Seeing online curating as a set of socio-technical relations and negotiations that are necessary to produce and maintain something, acknowledging that its outcome may be unexpected, then it can be understood as a speculative practice, where knowledge unfolds between human and non-human subjects, whose ability to know is mediated by how they reach out and by the receptivity of the other. Paraphrasing Puig de la Bellacasa (2017), this interplay between curating machines and machine curating proposes a world constantly made and remade through encounters that accentuate the attraction of closeness as well as an awareness of alterity. Moreover, marked by unexpectedness,

5 For more information about the project and its exact workings, see Tedone (2017), as well as Dekker and Tedone (2019).

they require a situated ethicality (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017, p. 115). In this sense, online curating is about striking a delicate balance between care, dependency and inequality, in which it is important to continuously question the place of care within or beyond notions of power and ethics, as well as the relationships between different dimensions of care.

## Conclusion

The examples discussed in this text show how online curating has expanded and diversified the practice, by reconfiguring and opening up the methods of selecting, exhibiting, categorising and sometimes archiving, including artists, users and the socio-technical environment of the Web. The current flood of online exhibitions can be seen as a favourable institutional effort to explore the Web, albeit often in crude ways. However, if the enmeshed ecology is not taken into account, the separation between the online exhibition and its production development will remain, which will impact how online curating is perceived. Rather than looking at the selection and exhibition of artworks, in which the subject of curating enters the institutional and creates meaning, online curating means looking at the multiplicity of entities and considering how the processes they involve are necessary to understand curating. Acknowledging the socio-technical entanglement of curating online is the first step towards emphasising the potential of collaboration, while, in that process, creating the possibility to reshape institutional authority.

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