

Reconfiguring the Museum

Electronic Media and Emergent Curatorial Models

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When I was a child, my parents took me to the Spring May Shows at the local museums, which, at the time, were the Akron Art Institute and Cleveland Museum of Art in Northeast Ohio, USA. These exhibitions were popular showcases for local talent, and were adjudicated by the museum staff and regional art faculty. As a matter of passing, none of these shows exist in the region at the turn of the millennium, having been supplanted by more profitable touring exhibitions of works which are more popular with the mainstream public. Although I strained to look over the platforms to see some of the works in the shows as a child, I dimly wondered about those who selected the art in the gallery. [1] This was probably the first inkling about a curiosity that would evolve into an erstwhile avocation from my primary practice as a conceptual artist, the exploration of art curation.

In the thirty or so years that I have been experiencing the product of curatorial practice, as well as the decade or so in which I have been involved in the process of curation, the traditional models of this cultural practice are being held circumspect in light of the coming of various media technologies. The traditional model of curation, in its evolution since the 17th Century, centers itself around the 'expert' opinion of the curator as educated connoisseur and archivist of various works. In so doing, the curator determines the works' cultural value, as well as, in present days, their mass entertainment value, which is equally important in the era of ubiquitous free market

Multiple new models of curation have evolved in stark contrast to the traditional model that centers itself around the expert opinion of the curator. Independent curators are utilizing alternative configurations of gallery space or abandoning it entirely, a rejection of the museum as a monopolistic cultural producer.

democracy (at least in most of the Western world).

An important aspect of the process of curation and exhibition is the matrix of power issues and legitimacy that arises in the act of selection, organization and archival. Traditionally, the legitimization of the work or the institution itself does not come from populist or democratic impulses, but from oligarchic materialist practices originated with the birth of the museum. The focus of the museum and the archival of 'significant' cultural artifacts have been determined by oligarchic hegemony issuing forth from centers of capitalist, academic, and political power, and as such, the museum is often termed a 'materialist cathedral.' [2] Such imperatives are reflected in the names of various museums, such as Whitney, Guggenheim, Getty, Kimbell, and Walker. [3] The result of this 'top-down' approach to culture has resulted in the curator's task of thematically organizing bodies of work, frequently with little collaborative interest in the material. But with the advent of the Internet, the centrality in the cultural production of the museum is being called into question by independent curators who are utilizing alternative configurations of gallery space or abandoning it entirely. This resituation of the gallery as problematic cultural space has been

foregrounded in many ways, including the aforementioned elision of the institution and the opening of the curatorial process to allow for collaboration as well as surrender of control to the artists. The traditional structures mentioned here of the curator as centralized arbiter for the museum are, by and large, not conducive (although there are exceptions) to the collaborative process between curator and artist in shaping the nature of a given exhibition. That is, unless a given artist has reached such fame and prestige that this artist may have the ability to dictate parts of the exhibition to the curator. One may question whether this is collaboration per se, in that I would define it as the process in which the artist and curator, after the initial selection of work or agreement to show, work in a process that allows both to shape the final outcome of the exhibition.

In the 1990s, the coming of the Internet and other distributed media has produced marked cultural effects upon technological society and the Western world. The primary effect germane to this discussion is the 'levelling' effect on society that the Internet has had. [4] Although this is not as prevalent as in the times up to the late 90s when more intranets, and even the Internet 2 initiative were

By Patrick Lichty

founded, the implication of Internet culture is that, given the proper e-mail address, the average artist could communicate with leading curators, given that they had time or the desire to read them. In addition, the advent of the World Wide Web fostered in many the sense of communal sharing of cultural data, whether art, baby pictures, or new essays, and so on. [5] The materialist impulse of the museum was brought into question with the coming of net.art, although materialist gallery practices are still extant. Groups such as art collectives would join in practice through the Internet despite being in disparate locales. And lastly, the rise of Internet culture, in the proliferation of interactive works and collaborations, questions the nature of institutional boundaries and the power relations, placing the individuals who possess material in contrast to those with intellectual legitimacy. Such shifts (the changing of capital, societal 'levelling') have inspired many projects in which the curators have entered a more interactive process of collaboration with their artists that is very different from the traditional 'collaborations' evident in the brick and mortar analogues of the traditional museum.

Collaboration in contemporary curatorial practice

The collaborative model in contemporary exhibitions has been more located within the genre of net.art than anywhere else, not surprising if one considers the model of interaction implied by distributed network culture. Although not always held to, the ideal prototype of the Internet community was that of sharing and collaboration, as popularized in the mass media by early e-pundits, such as Barlow, Rheingold, and Negroponte. The relatively 'flat,' rhizomatic, or egalitarian social terrain of the early World Wide Web made for an atmosphere where savvy artists with even an elementary knowledge of search engines and access to the right trade magazines could find the arts 'scene.' Online forums were popular as components of online exhibitions, such as the Walker Art Center's "Shock of the

View" [6] and "EATList" [7], which almost seemed to inspire their own sense of egalitarian debate (providing you had Internet access and the knowledge of the site, which is another issue). A brief note should be made regarding the differences in constituency and content that distinguish exhibition lists like EAT and SotV from online organs like Rhizome and thingist. First, the former organs exist in a limited timespan; as the latter are of an ongoing nature. Also, the focus of the exhibition list is topic-driven in contrast to the community lists' open forum format. However, of note is the nature of communication in these forums, as more artists have become more familiar with the Net. For example, earlier events ensured a sort of gentrification of the audience, as primarily only the 'initiated' would have the combined knowledge of the technology and the places where the events would occur, which acted as a kind of cultural filter. As time has progressed, a wider audience has become aware of the lists [8], and various artists have chosen to use the lists as a form of collaborative medium in which they test the relative sensitivity to noise (spam). However, this is only relevant to the nature of the online community, which is a framework for curatorial collaboration.

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Steve Dietz's Art Entertainment Network at the Walker Art Center [9] is one of the few examples of a major online exhibition which encouraged a form of collaborative curation. Although centralized with regard to the hierarchical nature of the curatorial vision -- Dietz/Walker -- the vision for the exhibition was that of a rotating archive. This ever-changing form would create a curatorial model that reflected the dynamic state of online art practice, and served as a portal for those wishing to see a broad spectrum of online works. The curatorial

model for this exhibition was quite traditional in that the selection or commission of works was basically located around a single curator, although the dynamic nature of the show allowed for a bit of interplay with the artists and the curator. In addition, the inclusion of the online art in a gallery installation (presented within the concurrent "Let's Entertain" exhibition) in the form of a screen embedded in a revolving door allowed the gallery visitor to scroll (stroll?) through the works. The recontextualization of the works in the gallery through the creatively positioned portal allowed some curatorial collaboration in the repurposing of the works with regard to their viewing context. Both the breadth of the exhibit and the doorway metaphor for the gallery portal alluded to a vision of openness and greater inclusion that was refreshing for an institutional show.

Although the AEN provided a relatively open forum for new media art, it was still closely bound to a traditional curatorial model expanded through the lack of physical limitations brought about by the Internet. The other end of the spectrum would arguably include the works that allow free participation within a curatorial project with only a topical guideline as shaping metaphor. Two process-based exhibition spaces

that hint at this procedural approach, and thus hint at the potential for dynamic exhibition spaces, are Bonnie Mitchell's "Merging Identity" [10] and Ed Stastny's sito.org. [11] "Merging Identity" was a World Wide Web art installation that allowed individuals to collaboratively assemble texts and images around the metaphor of bodily experience. In this case, the installation was designed as a collaborative event, but "Merging Identity," through its meta-narrative based on the central theme, created a curatorial focus for the par-

ticipating artists. Also of note was that the installation/exhibition was archived over time to document the changing expressive configurations of the show. In contrast with the AEN, "Merging" leapt from a dynamic set of curated works to a dynamically self-organizing body of work based on general criteria.

Another dynamically user-driven collaborative curatorial model lies within the sito.org website. Similar to the Exquisite Corpse approach made popular by the Surrealists, the SITO site contains a number of ongoing works based on the general criteria of using previously extant work in a sense of free association. An example of this is the GridCosm, in which a square grid of nine squares is defined with the center field consisting of a 'seed' image from which artists reserve and upload their own additional images until the grid is completed, at which time the completed grid is compiled to form the central square of the next GridCosm level. At this time, GridCosm has existed for over five years, and consists of over 800 levels.

It might be wise to consider whether this author might be conflating collaborative projects with collaborative curatorial practices. Two key aspects that might help in clarifying the issues at hand are those of institutional legitimation and artistic quantification of works. Mitchell's work was inscribed within the gallery of the SIGGRAPH festival, SITO at an independent website. The objectifying power of the museum was somewhat present in the case of "Merging Identities" and its location within a gallery, but surely not in the case of SITO. As works perse, each site was seen more as a discrete project than an exhibition of works in itself. The argument of this author is that both exhibit elements of curatorial objectification of works in the interstitial quantification and archival of works at discrete periods. What is at stake is the clarification of creative intent in how the curator is defined; in the case of the AEN, the role of curator is clear, in the two aforementioned works, the curatorial impulse is better described as a para-

metric/algorithmic guidance of a general process.

Another example of an algorithmic curatorial process is evident in works that place the database in the position of metanarrative artwork. Martin Wattenberg's "Idealine" at the Whitney Museum of American Art's Artport [12] asks artists to submit documentary information about works into a database for use by his JAVA applet, which takes the resulting information and maps it by genre, distribution and time. Users of the applet then are offered access to the database of submitted works. Although this project has the potential for open-endedness, Idealine also exhibits aspects of traditional curatorial metastructures that merge with the database data to create a work that could be perceived as artwork and curatorial tool in that it organizes artworks into a sort of broadly-defined 'exhibition' of sorts. However, Idealine also could be classified as a work of online information design rather than a discrete 'artwork' as such; writers such as Manovich are considering whether there can be an art of the database.

Another work that is not curatorial perse, but, in a discussion [13], raised the question whether it constituted a form of curatorial practice, is the RTMark Mutual Fund System. [14] Designed as a clearinghouse for brainstorming and dissemination of corporate subversion projects and their subsequent pairing with funding and labor, this type of net.artwork is considered by its creators more of a fulfillment of the potential for organizing social activism on the net. The system acts as a database organizer, categorizing new 'products' after their submission to the site, at which time there is the dissemination and promotion of said projects in the mass media. If you consider the decentralized executive administrative functions of the RTMark group proper in relation to the organizational function of the projects, sponsors, and workers, one could posit that there exists a sort of dynamic curatorial model within the system. However, the concept does not quite fit the idea of curation as the screening of projects is not

necessarily art-related in scope. In addition, RTMark does not necessarily seek to exhibit a body or work within an art context, but to promote actions of civil intervention in the mass media. Although RTMark in itself is not a curatorial model, it presents structural possibilities for potential net.art exhibitions in the future.

Personal Experiments

The projects mentioned up to this point have been either exhibition models that were closely related to traditional models of extant curatorial practice, or models that radically depart from them, and at this time have only explored polar opposites of our discussion. To consider the range of possibilities in the rethinking of curatorial practice, I would like to present two of my exhibitions, as well as works by independents like Anne-Marie Schleiner. Although my experiments in collaborative curation have been fairly traditionalist in form, each of them has diverged progressively with each iteration, and frequently by accident. This arc of experimentation ranged from the show "Through the Looking Glass" in Cleveland, Ohio (1999) [15], to the show "(Re)distributions" [16]), which was in its 'active' phase until Feb. 1, 2002. Earlier projects are not of interest here, as they were purely traditionalist events that operated solely under the usual call and response model of juried exhibitions.

"Through the Looking Glass" was held near Cleveland, Ohio, and lasted one year after on the Internet. The show began as an ordinary print exhibition organized by myself and Northeast Ohio digital artist Jerry Domokur at the Beachwood Center for the Arts. In early conversation with the center's directors while organizing the event, an interest for a broader project was expressed, so that the Cleveland area could be introduced to emergent forms of electronic art, including net.art. At that time, Domokur and I decided that this would be an excellent opportunity, and a chance to shape a traditional exhibition of digital art into one more representative of contemporary practice through the net-topian ideals of using communications tech-

nology as a tool for synergy between artists.

The project, as in the case of many that incorporate Internet strategies in their construction, evolved greatly from conceptualization to execution. There is little to say about the initial stages of the event's planning; there was only enough funding to handle the rental of computer and projection equipment.

And in a rather ordinary fashion, a standard call for works went out on the Internet. But by the end of the initial planning stages, an interesting pattern had emerged. Apart from work by invited artists, such as Bookchin, Cheang, Verostko, Rees, and nearly 300 works garnered from the raw call, more pieces were added by artists who entered in a round table curatorial discussion. Most active among them were textile artist W. Logan Fry and mixed media print-maker Jerry Domokur who began forwarding information on numerous works from around the world. In addition, Machiko Kusahara made recommendations from the Digital Image group in Japan, which resulted in the acceptance of about ten or so works from that group, which broadened the Asian involvement in the show immensely. During its development, the event had taken on a 'cellular' curatorial model in which various individuals operating under the central premise of the exhibition worked semi-autonomously to assemble works for the show. The result was a survey of over eighty artists and scholars' works describing the state of technological arts and lighting material created on every continent of the globe, including Antarctica.

Although the loosened curatorial model (which was never made explicit) worked well, the actual shape of the body of works left something to be desired. In casual conversation with Steve Dietz of the Walker, a concern about the nature of the show as survey was made manifest. The fact that the exhibition was designed as an introduction for the people of Cleveland to new genres, and as challenging of institutional boundaries through internet-based independent curatorial practices, created a lack of focus. TTLG served its pedagogical function, but did not address any central genre, which was becoming

more important as surveys of work were about to become more widespread. My next experiment in curation was to center on the nascent genres of PDA and Information Appliance art, which took place in 2001 and 2002.

As opposed to the emergent nature of the curatorial format that revealed itself with the TTLG show, the PDA/IA show, entitled "(re)distributions" was to embody the first real conscious departure from the traditional curatorial process. Instead of the usual invitation/call/response model, the plan for acceptance accounted for the very early development stage of most of the pieces, and did not have a cutoff date, but a date when works would begin to be accepted. From that date on, works would be judged on various metrics until the final cutoff date, two weeks before the end of the exhibition. After the beginning of the exhibition, the reality that emerged was that works exhibiting technical virtuosity while showing conceptual engagement with the subject were selected.

The result of this model was mixed. Because of technical issues, some artists asked for my collaboration in creating their work, as they believed that I was creating work on these platforms at an advanced level. In general, my level of expertise was no better than theirs, and the obvious breach of ethics was problematic at best. Suffice it to say that all such requests were politely refused. The next oddity that arose from this model was the fact that, at the time for the exhibition to begin, almost no one had actually decided to finish his or her work or essay. If this effect had not been corrected, the gallery would have been empty at the opening in the absence of a concrete deadline. At the time of this writing, the iterative curatorial process has continued with only one or two updates, primarily due to delays caused by the cultural effects resulting from the WTC explosions on 9/11, 2001, but is planned to continue the full six-month process. An accretion of works that built on extant works in the exhibition has been presented, but conversely, the logistical support required for the event is higher than that for more traditional models. This

is due to the frequent updates to the site as well as ongoing review of works. From this experience, this process, while viable, is not recommended for smaller staff.

Snow Blossom House

Anne-Marie Schleiner's June 2001 "Snow Blossom House" [17] was an online show dedicated to the exploration of erotic themes as depicted in American and Japanese electronic media through games, popular dress-up programs, and other media. In her words, SBH is a "hybrid with traditional curatorial models" in that it combines accepted selection methods with the informal practice of 'collecting links,' access to downloads and the submission of informal reviews. [18] The exhibition is therefore reflective of both previously extant museological practice translated to the Web and the Do-It-Yourself (DIY) aesthetic of the personal website. The merging of conventional methods with commonly used web authoring practices shows the influence of the personal website on curatorial practice; on the web, "everyone can be a curator," to paraphrase Schleiner. While the author's and Schleiner's projects incorporate experiments with time, compilation and collective curation, there is still a centralized sense of curatorial vision within these projects and a resultant fetishization of the body of data as objet d'art. However, the experiments in modifying the traditional curatorial process have resulted in viable exhibitions, and may be seen as having the potential for further experimentation.

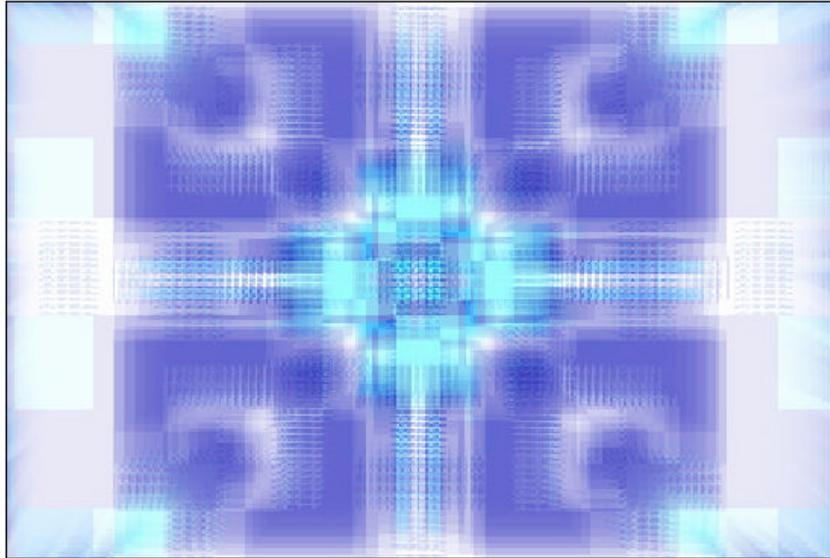
The Internet has caused a proliferation of exhibition opportunities for artists working in the electronic genres, and through the early vision of the Internet as a collaborative workspace, the possibility for establishing varying degrees of collaboration in technological art curation seems evident. However, the issues surrounding a work's legitimacy that are imposed upon any online show avoiding the use of traditional curatorial models by the power structures that are associated with traditionalist museological practice, create varying levels of

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intelligent agent

opportunity for that legitimacy. Much of the fostering of acceptance of online exhibitions within the larger culture is dependent on the media savvy of the curator/organizer and the ability to address the mass media aspects of the online world. In addition, a certain amount of audience targeting in order to start engaging with the potential audience through a certain level of thematic/topical focus is also important for a larger acceptance for a body of work. These aspects of online curatorial practice, both traditional and experimental, are intertwined with any attempt at creating a novel form of gallery practice.

As experimentation continues, the difference between collaborative art, database collection/visualization, communal activity, and more traditional curatorial practices often becomes slim. As various artists and practitioners attempt to create focal points for the exposition of creative processes, these genres will likely intertwine in inseparable, yet discernable ways, such as Idealine's method of database-driven curation. There will also undoubtedly be more independent offerings that incorporate experimental methods, such as Schleiner's and my own work, as well as process-driven projects, such as "Merging Identity" and SITO. One of the key questions regarding these future aesthetic engagements will be the context in which they are seen by the larger art world, as to their legitimation and perceived mode of representation (work, exhibition, database, etc).

If institutions like the Whitney, Walker, Guggenheim, and so on continue their investiture into the online and hybrid worlds, their increased participation will reinscribe the agendas of traditionalist curatorial and museological practices into genres such as net.art. This will create certain challenges for the non-traditional curator, but will also not prevent the further exploration of atypical curatorial practices from taking place. The development of independent curatorial practice in light of the emergent digital communications environment will undoubtedly create an experimental compliment that traditional institutions are bound to adopt -- if the emergence of various independent



curation models (such as collaborative ones discussed herein) become more widespread. The bottom line is that since larger institutions are adopting new curatorial (though more traditionalist) models for the acquisition of technological art, the relationship between artist and curator will be bound to vary. It will be interesting to observe what shape that variance will take, and how it reflects the nature of the online society.

References:

- [1] In the early 1990s, I had a conversation with my mother (who exhibited in many of these shows) that related a question I once asked about who 'got to pick' the art in an exhibition.
- [2] Zolberg, Rena, "An Elite Experience for Everyone: Art Museums, the Public, and Cultural Literacy" in I. Rogoff (ed.), *Museum Culture* (Minneapolis, MN: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1994)
- [3] All names of prominent political or industrial families. It is exceedingly rare for an endowed institution in the US not to be named according to this convention.
- [4] Although there are no concrete references to this term, I attribute it to informal conversations with Simon Biggs on Rhizome.org in the late 1990s.
- [5] This is made evident through sites like iphoto.com, as well as the many online storage sites, online clubs with media gallery provisions, and so forth.
- [6] Shock of the View, Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, MN, USA. September 1998-March 1999

- http://www.walkerart.org/salons/shock-oftheview/sv_front.html
- [7] Entertain-Art-Technology listserv. Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, MN, USA. Archive: http://www.walkerart.org/salons/eat/eat_at_e.html
- [8] It is unknown to me whether in fact enrollment in open lists like rhizome.org has increased over time.
- [9] Art Entertainment Network, Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, MN, USA. <http://aen.walkerart.org/>
- [10] Mitchell, Bonnie. Merging Identity: An exploration of identity, the body, and life online, <http://www.siggraph.org/artdesign/gallery/S00/artsites/thumbnail4.html>
- [11] Stastny, Ed. SITO.org <http://www.sito.org>
- [12] Wattenberg, Martin, Idealine, commission, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, New York, <http://artport.whitney.org/commissions/idealine.shtml>
- [13] At SJSU CADRE Institute graduate discussion, Oct. 30, 2001, San Jose, CA, USA.
- [14] RTMark Mutual Fund System: <http://www.rtmart.com>
- [15] Through the Looking Glass: Technological Art and Creativity at the Turn of the Millennium, April 1999, Beachwood Center for the Arts, Beachwood, OH, Archive: <http://www.voyd.com/ttlg>
- [16] (re)distributions: PDA and Information Appliance Art as Cultural Intervention - <http://www.voyd.com/ia>
- [17] Schleiner, Anne Marie, Snow Blossom House, <http://www.opensorcery.net/snowblossom>