

Rapid Response Art History: Tools and Techniques for a Fast-Changing Art World

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Abstract

Art history has been largely concerned with ‘after the event’ forms of analysis - as evidenced in its heavy reliance on exhibition reviews and catalogues for instance. Yet time-sensitive creative events like Hong Kong’s Umbrella Revolution (2014) remind us of the need for effective archival and critical response mechanisms. Art historians, archivists and curators understand what data they will need to work with in the short and long term if digital and new media, time-based, live, and event-based arts are to be adequately preserved, analysed and historicised. Yet there are no clear models for rapidly capturing relevant materials ‘in the moment’.

The discipline of art history owes much of its knowledge to the invention of imaging technologies which could quickly and efficiently record vital art information [2]; [5]; [6]. However, despite these robustly technological beginnings, it lags behind many other disciplines in its digital capabilities [1]; [3]; [7]. To date, there have been very a few attempts to rectify this. The College Art Association delivered its first panel on the digital humanities in 2012. Subsequently it has hosted an annual conference-adjunct event, THATCamp CAA (The Humanities and Technology Camp), for the last three years (2013, 2014, 2015). Similarly UCLA has hosted two incarnations of the Beyond the Digitized Slide Library (2014, 2015) digital up-skilling workshop for art historians. Meanwhile, the field of digital and new media art has been quick to understand the importance of instant critique and reviewing to the development of its production, creating alternate, informal and anecdotal art histories of networked practices (The CAA is also host to the New Media Caucus which has since 2010 hosted discussions which review the newest technologically-enabled art forms).

Inspired by recent curatorial approaches at the Victoria and Albert Museum (in Rapid Response Collecting), the protest art events of 2014 and art history’s lack of digital expertise (and funded by the AHRC’s ‘digital transformations’ pathway), this panel discussion will bring together art historians, archivists and curators in order to discuss methods for archiving and historicising time-sensitive creative events. We have invited

experts who work with rapidly deteriorating, media, time- or event-based media to share their own work and help gather a set of tools and techniques for responding quickly to art events. This panel discussion will be followed in June 2016 with a London-based workshop in Rapid Response Art History to be held at the Courtauld Institute of Art.

Edwin Coomasaru: “Democratising” Curating: Speed, Sexuality and Selfies”

Democratisation and internet-based curating: for many commentators, seemingly two things that come hand in hand. ‘Democracy’ in this context is often a byword for ‘accessibility’ – similar to, and yet also distinct from, democracy as a system of governance or a theoretical model for politics. In trying to think through the stakes of what it might mean to ‘democratise’ curating using the internet’s more collective and collaborative platforms, this paper will consider potential disruptions of power hierarchies or concentrations traditionally implicated in the role of the curator. To do this, I will focus on selfies and sexuality – in order to tease out the fraught politics of subcultural capital, voyeurism and exhibitionism. Selfies have often been decried by the press for their narcissism, in a climate where pornography and new technology are considered a threat to heterosexual reproduction. Sexuality is often seen as disruptive to social systems by its capacity to become ‘excessive’ or ‘queer’. What does it mean to think about this kind of agency in relation to ‘democracy’, which has recently come to be understood by contemporary philosophers as means of frustrating the status quo and structures of power? The internet – like excessive sexuality – is often associated with speed; in fact, this characteristic marks it out from conventional museums which move at a much ‘slower’ institutional time. Using

the International New Media Gallery's partially user-generated selfie exhibition as an example, this paper will consider whether rapid collecting and sharing of photographic self-representation has more in common with activist protest – and what this might mean for thinking through the potential stakes of internet-based curating.

Louise Shannon: 'Rapid Response Collecting and Curating: Learning from the Victoria and Albert Museum'

In 2013, the Victoria and Albert Museum launched a new collecting strategy, one that challenged the established notions of collecting in a Museum context. Rapid Response Collecting is a new strand to the V&A's collecting activity, curated by the Architecture, Design and Digital department. Objects are collected in response to major moments in history that touch the world of design and manufacturing. These objects are as diverse as the situations in which they are produced, unified by their ability as to change and shape the way we look at contemporary society. The display which changes regularly shows how design reflects and defines how we live together today. Ranging from Christian Louboutin shoes in five shades of "nude"; a cuddly toy wolf used as an object of political dissent; to the world's first 3D-printed gun, each new acquisition raises a different question about globalisation, popular culture, political and social change, demographics, technology, regulation or the law. How does this work in practice? How does a collecting strategy such as this challenge the notions of connoisseurship within the Museum context? How does the Museum represent the mass-produced, ephemeral or highly politicised object?

Sarah Cook: 'From Insider Knowledge to Anecdote to Apocrypha: Reflections on how media art has been and could be historicised'

Does being present and witness to new developments in art make one its defacto art historian, or does taking on that role depend on one's institutional place? Net art and other networked media art practices have been historicised through extra-institutional informal structures of discussion, such as mailing lists, including gossip and first person reporting (often of demonstrations rather than formal exhibition of the works). As younger generations of scholars and cultural producers learn of the early days of networked and media art they read these stories through their own lens of current media literacy, sometimes mistaking features of 'broken' or obsolete works of net art as part of the original intention of the artists rather than a result of changes in the structure of the web. As these works of art were little exhibited institutionally at the time of their

emergence (or since), and there are few institutional curators and art historians responsible for their preservation and ongoing accessibility, the stories which make up the art history of these works are increasingly patchy, based on varied versions of the works themselves. How can a combination of skills and approaches from art history – such as analysis of exhibition reviews and artist interviews – be used to retroactively consider what is required for creating art history of future media art developments?

Morgan McKeehan: 'The Webrecorder's challenge of enabling access to dynamic web-based art'

Rhizome's award-winning digital preservation program aims to support social memory for internet users and networked cultures through the creation of free and open source software tools that foster decentralized and vernacular archives. Its key role is also to ensure the growth of and continuing public access to the Rhizome ArtBase, a collection of 2,000+ born-digital artworks started in 1999. 'Born-Digital' is a term which aids in understanding the media support structure these works were made with and rely on for their experience. These works may not be accessioned as in a museum collection, but in many cases Rhizome remains the only point of access to them. Current digital preservation solutions were built for that earlier time and cannot adequately cope with what the web has become – dynamic, with embedded video, javascript, and other variable elements – in many ways, more rhizomatic. Rhizome is about to undertake the comprehensive technical development of Webrecorder, an innovative tool to archive the dynamic web. Webrecorder will be a human-centered archival tool to create high-fidelity, interactive, contextual archives of social media and other dynamic content. The interesting feature of Webrecorder relevant to this discussion is the way in which the free (open source) service will allow users to archive dynamic web content through browsing, and to instantly review that archived content and download their own copy of it. By permitting users to host a public or private archive collection on the site, Webrecorder lets us all become art historians of net art. In this presentation one of Rhizome.org's team of gurus will describe and demonstrate Webrecorder with reference to the ways it will support the rapid archiving of unstable media.

Charlotte Frost: 'Documenting the Digital Critics: Analysing and Archiving Criticism After the Internet'

From listserv collectives, irreverent podcasters, opinionated bloggers and satirical video performers to sensationalist 'grammers and prolific Facebookers, online art critics have successfully challenged their Greenbergian forebears. Although there have been a

number of recent articles (Gat, 2013; Jansen, 2015; Williams, 2015) and events (Walker Arts Center and MNArts 2015; Rhizome 2016) exploring the nature of art criticism after the internet, which follow much more extensive publication (Elkins, 2003; Rubinstein, 2006; Plagens, 2007; Elkins and Newman, 2008) and discussion (ICA, 2011; Witte de With, 2012; AIAC, 2013) on the Western crisis of art criticism, there have been no comprehensive studies of art criticism after the internet. Based on my forthcoming book, *Art Criticism Online: A History*, this paper will reveal some of my research into the broader history of online art criticism. Highly ephemeral and transient in form, all art criticism is difficult to research and archives are rare. Online art criticism is particularly problematic given many early platforms are no longer live, content is frequently removed or reorganised, and even contemporary platforms seldom offer accessible archives. The paper will therefore consider some of online art criticism's common forms and key characteristics. It will connect it to much earlier types of - often multimodal - art criticism. Finally it consider methods of archiving for online art criticism and approaches to teaching art critical digital literacies.

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