

Study Day: Strategies of Digital Curating 8 March 2019, The Science Museum, London

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Strategies of Digital Curating Study Day took place on 8 March 2019 at the Science Museum. It was co-organised by the Contemporary Art Society and The Serpentine Galleries as a first in a series of events dedicated to the topic of the digital in curatorial and institutional practice. The day kicked off with a welcome by **Katy Barrett, Curator of Art Collections at the Science Museum**. Barrett pointed out that all museums in the Science Museum Group have worked with contemporary artists and digital, with her predecessor Hannah Redler being instrumental in establishing this collaborative direction at the Science Museum. Sadly, Dave Patten who was going to talk about audiences and impact of VR (Virtual Reality) in exhibition-making was unable to attend.

Natalie Kane, Curator of Digital Design at the V&A, offered a rich account on the issues of collecting digital design, which is tied to the evolving understanding of both what 'collecting' and 'digital' mean. The V&A has historically collected digital or tech-enabled design art since the 1960s, focusing on outward manifestations rather than the processes through which these objects come into being or are to be activated. This has meant that various dimensions that are critical to the objects' design – such as their software, or how they would connect to the internet – did not make it into the collection, limiting our present understanding and experience. Given the complexity and multi-dimensionality of the digital design object, Kane emphasised that the cataloguing and classification of digital as a specific category does in fact matter. The position of the Digital Design Curator sits in the Design and Architecture Department of the V&A, and Kane is responsible for informing the broader approach to digital design across the institution.

In terms of V&A's collecting policy, one of the mechanisms through which the institution tries to keep apace with the developments in digital design is rapid response collecting, which just as the name suggests, ensures that the museum can respond immediately to emerging trends, whether it's the appearance of the

Amazon wearable, Nest or an Xbox extension for users with physical disabilities. Still, rapid response collecting does not solve the problem of what exactly needs to be collected beyond the physical object, and whether it is even possible to collect all the necessary components that will ensure the integrated longevity of the digital design object. For example, the notorious game *Flappy Bird* was unexpectedly taken off Apple's AppStore by its designer, leading to a situation where the phones that still had the app became very expensive. Meanwhile, an iPhone as a digital design object raises equally difficult questions around hardware and software. While it is possible to collect an iPhone as a physical object (hardware), the software is proprietary. So, how should museums collect proprietary software? Is emulation enough? These examples show that not only the exact composition of the digital design object may be tricky to determine but equally its life span. In Kane's words, 'the edges of the digital object are hard to see'.

Still, reflecting on these challenges as opportunities to develop a more complex understanding of the wider societal role of collecting digital design, the V&A has developed four areas of priority. The first area – 'making change' – has a focus on key arenas of innovation around robotics, product design and 3D printing. Acquisition of Minecraft as a collected design object raised the crucial question of the role of user-generated content for the identity of that object, making the museum question its own ability to have communities be involved in the collections. The second area – 'making public' – attends to digital objects that are shaping the interaction between objects/networks and audiences. Here, Kane cited a collected 'item' that she is particularly proud of: the first six algorithms of Instagram, given the massive impact that the platform has had on visual culture. Other 'objects' in this category include the Chinese social media platform WeChat and Google Glass. The third priority is 'making thought' and refers to the more speculative uses of technology by artists, such as for example Heather Dewey-Hagborg's artwork *Radical Love: Chelsea Manning*, which deployed forensic DNA phenotyping to produce two 3D printed face masks based on Chelsea Manning's DNA, but with two different gender associations. The fourth priority is on 'making design', looking at understanding digitality not just as tool that underlies design but as a form of design. The latter is made evident in architectural renderings produced with AutoCAD, or the home-use digital fabrication made possible by the MakerBot 3D printer. The issues that are raised in collecting digital design objects are numerous and constantly evolving, calling on institutions to create more flexible approaches in their policies and to become adept at dealing with complex questions around authorship in open-source software and cost implications of proprietary software.

The next talk was by **Charlotte Frost**, the recently installed **Executive Director of Furtherfield**, an organisation for arts, technology and social change. Although in post for only six months, Frost has been an active member of Furtherfield for the past 20 years. Furtherfield has been around since the early 1990s and is the longest running cultural centre for art and technology in London, with a focus on participative practice and well known for early experimentation online for the purposes of democratising both art and technology. Furtherfield has three locations: an online space for co-creational projects and two physical venues in Finsbury Park. In Frost's words, 'adventurous art tech experiences radiate from our venue!' Furtherfield is a collaborative organisation and its mission is to bring together radical friends through co-creation. The organisation produces playful collaborative projects as a way of researching imaginative uses of technology.

Frost herself is an art historian whose Masters thesis looked at how to critique digital artworks, while her PhD inquired into online communities and what they mean in the art field. Furtherfield's founders, Ruth Catlow and Mark Garrett came up with the term DIWO! ('do it with others!'), taking the concept of DIY and collectivising it through collaborative projects. Frost gave an example of *Play Your Place* from 2013, which solicited proposals from audiences on how they'd like public spaces to look like and why. Based around the framework of gaming culture, these scenarios got animated into a game that involved over 3000 participants. It continues to inform Furtherfield's other projects such as *Futurescapes*, development of a public consultation tool with the use of VR (Virtual Reality). Another example is *Digital Zoo*, undertaken in 2014, involving an exhibition installed in shopping centres and an extensive workshops programme, attracting an audience of over 25,000 people. Furtherfield's *in situ* programming primarily takes place in the summer and there is almost always a hands-on approach to the work. A recent significant project in that regard has been *Voice Over Finsbury Park* – a social radio project that involved the residents of Park House, Furtherfield's neighbours, broadcasting their visions of London in the future.

Furtherfield may not collect objects but it collects collective experiences enabled through digital objects. The organisation's current strategic direction is to use Finsbury Park's 150th anniversary (as one of the original people's parks) in order to "platform the park", to facilitate extensive activities across the park in the interest of its wider communities. Citizen Sci-Fi will be a three-year project exploring three themes through fifty events, using technology to collectively visualise the future. For example, artist Rachel Jacobs will run workshops that will bring together local communities with environmental scientists to map out how the park has changed over the years and how it will change in decades to come. Meanwhile, Citizen Sci-Fi Day will explore the potential of scanning technologies. In all of its programming, Furtherfield insists that we can use technology to think about how we can co-develop our lives rather than just fulfil big tech's visions of that future.

The afternoon session kicked off with artist **Jenna Sutela**, who works with sounds, words and other living materials to explore precarious social and material moments, often in relation to technology. To this extent, Sutela identifies slime moulds as one of her long-standing co-producers – a substance that 'only knows what it does', for which brain and its environment are one single system. Sutela mentions the work of the Japanese researcher Toshiyuki Nakagaki, whom she visited in 2016, and who had infamously tested and declared the innate computational efficiency of a slime mould called *Physarum polycephalum*. Sutela also spoke about her interest in the distinction between the human head brain and gut brain, which has manifested in such works as *Gut-Machine Poetry* (2017), which introduced entropic processes into computing, and *Nam-Gut (the microbial breakdown of language)*, a video that presents a microbial breakdown of language with the help of a world jumbling algorithm driven by fermentation processes.

In a recent residency at the Somerset House Studios in collaboration with Google Arts and Culture, Sutela worked together with Memo Akten, artist and creative technologist, and Damien Henry, Google's Head of Innovation. Sutela has been developing a work that uses neural networks in generating a new language based on the movements of a bacteria that – according to recent spaceflight experimentation – could have the ability to survive on Mars. As an MIT Centre artist-in-residence, she is collaborating on a project where

cells are listened to, rather than looked at, as a starting point in sensing microbial life beyond vision. Finally, a project co-commissioned by The Serpentine Galleries and Moderna Museet, Stockholm will continue on the path of producing wetware, where oil and wax will be explored as computing materials and machine learning as a teacher.

The penultimate presentation was by **Lindsey Taylor, Art Curator at the University of Salford Art Collection**. Taylor started the presentation by stating that her approach is to develop the university's digital collection by challenging the concept that collecting digital art is a challenge. The university is based in MediaCityUK in Greater Manchester, thus giving the collection an interesting context. One of the strategic priorities for the collection to collect works about living in the digital world, which may not necessarily be digital in their making. These works tend to be co-commissioned in partnership with other institutions and after being shown, they come into the University of Salford Art Collection. Some artists who have been co-commissioned through this programme include Rachel Maclean, Brass Art, Liam Young and Suki Chan.

For Taylor, strategy of digital collecting does not differ from collecting art in general. Taylor does not believe that one needs to be a 'hybrid curator' in order to work with and collect digital art. She jokes that although a technophobe, she knows who to ask what and has a network of people she can rely on for advice. Given the university context, Taylor believes collecting should be about taking risks and telling the story of now. Meanwhile, her biggest challenge is getting the collection out into the world to be seen. To this extent, collecting digital has its upsides insofar as Taylor believes digital artworks are easier and cheaper to store, to transport, do not need climate control and can be shown in flexible ways.

The final presentation of the day was by **Kay Watson, Curator of Digital at the Serpentine Galleries**. Watson explained that the Digital Team specialises in addressing advanced and emerging technologies, as well as developing a larger digital strategy for the institution. One of the key questions that drives digital programming is the impact of accelerated technological change on society. However, as it has been made clear during the day's presentations, it isn't entirely clear what we mean when we say 'digital' in the context of cultural institutions. Quoting critical theorist Andrew Dewdney, Watson defined 'digital' as a culture and not just a tool.

To this extent, the Digital Team at The Serpentine offers a public-facing programme in dialogue with digital culture and works on the operational dimension of the institution in order to address the profound impacts of advanced technologies, by for example, embedding digital skills in every part of the organisation. The Serpentine – as 'a small but large institution' – has historically focused on exploring and expanding the notion of the artist, and digital strategy continues on this path. The digital curatorial programme started with the appointment of Ben Vickers as Curator of Digital in 2013. Vickers has consequently been made CTO (Chief Technology Officer). Watson's personal background is in digital archiving and database management, and her PhD is looking at photography practices from the 1970s and 1990s.

The digital programme is currently structured around one exhibition per year with an artist who works with advanced technology and an annual digital commission. The latter involves the creation of new artworks

where artists use new tech as medium, tool or theme. Former digital commissions have included Cecile B Evan's *AGNES*, James Bridle's *Cloud Index* and Ian Cheng's *Bad Corgi*. The next digital commission is by Hito Steyerl. Called *Actual Reality OS*, it will function as an open source tool. There is also a public technology initiative, the Augmented Architecture Prize, which aims to attract hybrid practitioners in an experimental commission, as well as the Serpentine Radio's podcast series.

The Digital Team is currently developing a research network as part of The Serpentine's sector convening role for art and technology. In conclusion, Watson remarked that in the very brief time that digital has become part of curating and collecting agendas, she has observed a profound shift in the nature of engagement with technology, from website to augmented reality to CGI commissions, which have been made possible by access to platforms such as video game engines (Unity and Unreal).

During the Q&A, a few attendees stated that they were in the process of rewriting their collecting policies in order to reflect the digital turn and were looking for advice. The speakers agreed that while there can be no template for such a policy as each individual organisation should develop its own approach, there are certain useful reference points. Pip Lawrenson, Head of Collection Care Research, at Tate has developed a rich foundation of knowledge on collecting and preserving time-based media, a lot of which is available online. Similarly, National Archives, the Digital Preservation Coalition and Rhizome were signposted as potential resources on this matter. Watson pointed out that there is perhaps a need for integrated policy advice, whereas Frost mentioned that Furtherfield was exploring the potential of blockchain for rethinking collecting. A more fundamental question around collecting was asked, namely whether the speed of software development is making collecting obsolete. As Kane's presentation has made clear, future proofing is hard or even impossible, and whereas it is always useful to work with the artist in order to determine how archiving of the work should be dealt with – an approach that Taylor has singled out as key to her strategy – it may also be that our philosophical mindset about preservation needs to shift. As Frost stated, it is important to keep on questioning what the art object is here to do and whether maybe a more rigorous approach to documentation makes more sense than preservation. For example, Watson mentioned that Evans wanted *AGNES* to eventually disintegrate.

It was agreed that further investigation of what digital means culturally (beyond composition of artworks and implications for collection of objects) was necessary, particularly as digital infrastructure such as blockchain has as much to do with new forms of social life as it does with a different approach to objects.