**The Art and Care of Online Curating**

**Introduction**

The year 2020 marked a significant turn in online curating, due to the global pandemic cultural institutions were forced to close their doors and, in an attempt, to secure their funding and audience attention they resorted to the web. Unlikely candidates such as the Uffizi Museum in Florence became a hit on TikTok with their absurd video clips showing their prestigious Italian Renaissance collection of 15th-century figures ‘dance’ along to Todrick Hall’s rap *Nails, Hair, Hips, Heels*, or by staging the Medusa (with mask) now turning a coronavirus into stone. Getty launched *Museum Challenge* asking audience members to perform their favorite painting or sculpture, and Hastings Contemporary in the United Kingdom wheeled in a robot that you could whiz around the gallery space to show you their prestigious collection. However, many of the examples showed foremostly 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’s like moving from ‘tab to tab [instead of] room to room’.[[1]](#footnote-1) Comparing the current examples to some of their predecessors it seems institutions have changed, or 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 disappeared amidst the continuing processes of the platform that was used, or due to lack of interest or energy to keep up with the endless updating of 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 twenty-five years after the introduction of the Web and the subsequent online curatorial efforts, it can be hard to build from historical collections, or to remember the exhibitions and events that were taking place. As also echoed by Michael Connor: “histories are not particularly well documented, and the specificities not so thoroughly mapped” (Connor, 2020). Finally, the expansion and commercialization of the web made these challenges even harder to deal with – as it further blurred the boundary between what is art and not art, or, what is an exhibition and what is not. In this sense, it is also important to consider the limitation that many institutions have to deal with. As argued by media researcher Katrina Sluis, the online space is a contested space,

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 (Dekker, 2021).

Curatorial collective Off Site Project, Pita Arreola-Burns and Elliott Burns, echoes Sluis’ observation. After interviewing fifteen contemporary online galleries they concluded how much 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 in social media platforms. As they mentioned:

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 Instagramablity of particular styles to influence which artists we approach (Arreola-Burns and Burns, 2020).

Yet, while online exhibitions are 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 institutional that was celebrating its newly claimed territory with digitised collection tours while ignoring a decades long history of online curating. Following these concerns, in this article I will make a first 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 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 Herdon, 2020). by going back 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 will analyse the activities of caring that take place in online curating; between a curator, the users and the technics involved. Leaning on the analysis and methodology of Mol and Herdon 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 Herdon). Moreover, while 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 workas long as it is being cared for” (Ibid), I’d like expand on this by emphasizing the agency of technology, and thus can also care.

**From link-list to collaborative curating**

In 1998 net artist Olia Lialina initiated the project *Art.Teleportacia*. The idea was to develop an online gallery to question 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 insitutionalized establishment of curators and directors by offering an easily 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.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Her attempts to sell net art failed, and in the process *Art.Teleportacia* was renamed to *First Real Net Art Gallery*, and later as the *Last Real Net Art Museum*.[[3]](#footnote-3) Despite the failed attempts, the project showed a new approach to curating by considering –through hands-on experimentation– the medium of creation and presentation 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 thirty-seven 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 sight, the website looks similar to institutional websites of the time. However, *Last Real Net Art Museum* was a provocative gesture and critique towards museums and galleries that were presenting their digitised artworks as an online electronic catalogue. According to Lialina (2017), they would also often neglect to show the location bar or turn them off when showing the work offline.[[4]](#footnote-4) The method of providing the URLs of the websites is profoundly important to Lialina, because this way the works would be experienced in their natural environment and it showed that the projects belonged to the artists, as they existed on their servers, where they could also be changed, replaced, preserved or deleted by them. She also considers the location bar as a narrative device and thus part of the artistic concept.[[5]](#footnote-5)

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 by linking to the works and 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 were shown in their original hardware casing (albeit functioning via an inserted emulator), others became large projections, turned into an immersive VR installation or could be scrolled on an interactive screen. In this sense curating digital art took 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. At the 20-year anniversary exhibition of *MBCBFTW* in 2016, which took place simultaneously at HeK in Basel and MU in Eindhoven, this information proved to be of art-historical interest 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, continuous a process that is set in motion – albeit mostly unintentionally[[6]](#footnote-6) – by Lialina’s attempt to collect all the information about her work. Yet as 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, appropriation also happens by Lialina by including the works without question into her larger project, thereby she problematizes conventional notions of custody and provenance, and the way they connect to care.

In this 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 be part of the project. In 2007 the collective TAGallery tried to emphasize such collective acts, by continuing the investigation of linking as a curatorial method. Here, the link 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”.[[7]](#footnote-7) It was also a metaphor for the “ephemerality of Web-based art-forms” (Ibid), since links often would break 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 depended on technical processes, often beyond the artist’s control. In this sense the broken link as part of an exhibition still signaled the existence of an artwork, and hence it became a reflection on the artwork and its condition of production and maintenance. By using the social platform Del.icio.us, TAGallery also tried to extend the concept of a tagged and collaborative exhibition. Tagging was as a way to assign different artworks to single or multiple themes, to create contextual meaning, and as a means to open up the act of selection. The tags, or keywords, formed by the collective and the users, emphasized the different interpretations for reading the artworks, resulting in semantically thick 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 approached to underline the tension between different types and methods of language, 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 dialog by summarizing 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 emphasize the social network and its subsequent process – enabled by the platform.

**Networked co-curating**

While tagging became a popularized form of collaborative curating with the increase of 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. As explained by curator Gaia Tedone this was not about only subverting a platform and 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, 2017).

Instead of merely being controversial or trying to break with traditional curation, curating in existing, and often commercial, digital platforms required a new approach. To find out what this meant as part of a larger curatorial project *#exstrange* (2017) on the auction site eBay, curated by Marialaura Ghidini and Rebekah Modrak[[8]](#footnote-8), 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 to helping an artist or artwork to get better visibility and criticality and thus revenue of the sales of their artwork – two measure also 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 recognizing that the latter occupied an embedded position within the platform and that it would be understood as being 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 well as her potential buyers. As such, in its articulation as human-algorithmic curation, the service brought together commercial, cultural and socio-technical agendas that characterize the multiple facets of online curation as both 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” (Tedone, 2017).

Ajafa, later identified as the artist Alessandro Sambini, bought Tedone’s service to get help on the production of his artwork *Portable Wildlife Image Instance*: the half of a Tesco plastic shopping bag, played with the tropes of contemporary landscape photography and Dada ready-made. After a fierce bidding competition, the artwork was successfully sold for 44 euro: an increased market value of 40,5%. On the one hand the success of the sale can be attributed to understanding part of and following the working 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 the in-depth knowledge of the platform, the ability to interact with the algorithms parameters, as disclosed as part of the consultancy service, and that the project acquired symbolic value as it was part of a larger project *#exstrange*.[[9]](#footnote-9)

With her project Tedone showed how online curation, or as she mentioned networked co-curating, 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 artwork’, digital objects and machines each with their own task, and all together they create the ‘performance’: the interactions build onto 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 she framed as a transition from online curation to ‘networked co-curation’ (Tedone, 2017). Moreover, the experiment showed how technology as part of the process also cares as it tries to make the best sale for both auctioneer and buyer, albeit that the exact working is not fully understood.

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

**In conclusion**

The examples discussed show how online curating has expanded and diversified the practice, by reconfiguring and opening up the methods of selecting, exhibiting, categorization and sometimes archiving, and including artists, users and the socio-technical environment of the web. The current flood of online exhibitions can be seen as a favorable 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 recognized. Rather than looking at the selection and exhibition of artworks in which the subject of curating enters the institutional and creates its meaning, online curating means looking at the multiplicity of entities and how the processes they involve are necessary to understand curating. Acknowledging the socio-technical entanglement of curating online is the first step to bring out the potential of collaboration, in the process creating the possibility to reshape institutional authority.

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1. This comment was made by one of the participants of the online workshop ‘expo-facto: into the algorithm of exhibition?’, organized on 29 January 2021, for more information, see, <https://exhibition.school/expo-facto/> (Accessed: 2 March 2021). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. <http://netartnet.net/directory/art-teleportacia> (Accessed: 2 March 2021). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. To emphasise the provocative gesture of the project, and being cautioned that this was not the first attempt, Lialina renamed the project into *Last Real Net Art Museum* (Lialina, 2017). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Lialina wrote another post a few months later in which she is more positive about a changing attitude of some institutions: “[those who] are really open become part of complex networking projects. Those who can't get rid of traditional standards of beauty and interactivity entertain their audience by making links to funny web pages. (…) [However, some] institutions correct their positions, collecting policies, exhibition practices. I would say it’s a victory”. <http://amsterdam.nettime.org/Lists-Archives/nettime-l-0102/msg00200.html> (Accessed: 2 March 2021). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. For more information about the importance of the location bar in the work of Lialina, see Dekker, 2020. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. The first artists to contribute were asked by Lialina (Lialina 2017), and the contributions by Constant Dullaart and Foundland, were commissioned in 2017 by MU to celebrate the 20 year anniversary of the project. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. [https://web.archive.org/web/20150520072415/http://tagallery.cont3xt.net/?p=3](https://web.archive.org/web/20150520072415/http%3A//tagallery.cont3xt.net/?p=3) (Accessed: 2 March 2021). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. For more information about the project see, http://exstrange.com/ (Accessed: 2 March 2021). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. For more information about the project and the exact workings see Tedone (2017) and Dekker and Tedone (2019). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)