

# **The Networked Image: The Flight Of Cultural Authority And The Multiple Times And Spaces Of The Art Museum.**

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## **Introduction**

‘The heroic will to create a ‘radiant future’ has been replaced by managerial activism: a vast enthusiasm for change, reform and adaption that is deprived of any confident horizon or grand historical vision. Everywhere the emphasis has been placed on the need to keep moving, on hyper-change unburdened of any utopian aims, dictated by the demands of efficiency and the need to survive’  
(Lipovetsky. 2005 p34)

This paper looks at the current state of the relationship between museums, digital media and network culture in terms of the paradoxical present (Lipovetsky 2005 p50) and ‘the fiction of contemporaneity’ (Osbourne 2013 p16). A perspective on time is threaded through the discussion as a means to trouble the orthodox narrative of relations between art museums, digital technologies and audiences, which is misaligned with understandings of lived entanglements in and of networked cultures. The United Kingdom Government’s Department of Culture, Media and Sport, (DCMS) report, ‘Culture is Digital’, published in March 2018<sup>1</sup> provides but the latest in a long line of official British Government thinking about art and technology dating back to the Great Exhibition of 1851 in London’s Hyde Park and the subsequent founding of the Science and Victoria and Albert museums in South Kensington. The report expresses the centrality of the coupling of nation and industry in the following terms, ‘[The] Digital Culture Report focuses on the use of digital technology to drive our cultural sector’s global status and the engagement, diversity and well-being of audiences.’ The report’s executive summary expresses the view that technology is the driver of the cultural sector, repeating the long held technologically determinist view that culture follows in the wake of the inevitability of technological progress. In such a view the problem for the arts and for museums is essentially a game of ‘catch-up’, an adjustment to what technology has to offer and the term digital is a ‘catch-all’ for the current products and applications of technology. Something falls seriously short of events and understanding in such policy formulations, which whilst encouraging partnership and collaboration, essentially assert the ontological separation of science and technology from art and culture, at a time when critical academic thought has fundamentally challenged such a foundational divide. Moreover, the

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<sup>1</sup> DCMS, The Department of Culture Media and Sport.

continued view of technology as a driver of cultural change projects the future as an unbroken line of continuity with the present and past, when from many disciplinary points of view the future of humanity and the earth has become more precarious, (Colebrook 2014 p21), whilst human versions of its own past become less certain, (Latour 1991 p67).

The argument that follows has two threads. Firstly it pursues the idea that if culture is digital, then technology is cultural and that will require a different set of understandings of what is at stake for any future and the choices which societies and museums in particular can make. To insist that technology and its underlying sciences are cultural is to admit that they proceed by subjective, social, political and economic values and that “0”s and “1”s are culturally as well as mathematically coded, (Fuller 2012 p72). Understanding technology as culture suggests the need to retrace ontological steps and question the orders, formulas and procedures of technological practices, if what is at stake is the difference between acceptance of a status quo, or choosing a different course of action. Conversely it is important to recognise that culture is in many respects technical and in the particular case of the museum to understand there is a need to understand that the museum itself is a complex apparatus in the ways in which it produces taxonomies of objects. The organization of the museum can be seen here as an assemblage of different specialist activities, knowledges, departments, roles, policies and physical sites. (DeLanda 2016 p2). The second thread of argument actively seeks disjunctures in the narratives of museums and technology. It attempts to do this through the prism of chrono-reflexivity by contrasting the hyper-production of programming and events with the historical narratives of cultural time in exhibition and collection.

As organizations that collect, conserve, study and display objects over long periods of time, museums are time-honoured institutions and some may argue that the duty of the museum is precisely to resist change as the guardians of tradition. Founded upon the practices of aristocratic and bourgeois private collecting and translated into the values of 19<sup>th</sup> century reform and civic society, museums across Europe stand outwardly as the disciplinary bulwark against the increasing ephemeral, temporary and disposable character of societies around them. However, viewed internally, from an organisational perspective, museum professionals would not recognize this characterization of the impervious museum and they would be right. In Britain, since the 1990s, public museums have had to adapt to a number of competing demands to increase and diversify both audiences and income streams. The most successful public museums, notably, but not exclusively, large scale international ones, have changed by adopting corporate organizational models and goals derived from business and finance in a major orientation to consumer leisure and tourism markets. Successful museums followed in the wake of ‘reflexive modernization’, which Ulrich Beck argued emerged to manage risk and

offset the ‘manufactured uncertainties’ created by the growth of the knowledge economy and its applications, (Beck, Giddens & Lash 1994). More broadly public museums have and still are responding to the deregulation of the public sphere and adapting to ‘market forces’. One of the notable consequences of risk management in museums has been a significant move from traditional collection display, which in the art museum has been the chronological hang, to temporary thematic exhibitions and even more recently to continuous programming and events. How, then, has new media, the world-wide-web and the Internet been enlisted in this modernizing of the museum? The research funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council and carried out at Tate Britain in relation to the collection of British Art, and subsequently at Tate Modern in relation to digital media between 2007 and 2012<sup>2</sup> has repeatedly shown that there is more than a general confusion within the public cultural sector about how technologies, applications and networks constitute ‘the digital’ and hence their relation to culture, audiences, and cultural value.

### **What happens in the space of the museum?**

The paradox of the hypermodern museum is that the more it changes the more it stays the same, or rather the faster it recycles its past. If Tate and by implication other art museums have not yet found a way of relating to digital culture, (Bishop 2012) and if network culture is more aligned to Osbourne’s reading of the present as increasingly characterized by a coming together of different but equally ‘present’ temporalities of ‘times’, the chrono-reflexivity of network communications, then what substitutes for contemporaneity in the art museum? Tate Modern is a very good example of the paradox of being subject to but unable to fully recognise the digital condition, nor embrace and work in and with network culture. Tate Modern exemplifies the paradoxical present in a number of highly successful ways. The opening of the new extension to Tate Modern in June 2016 ostensibly provided much needed additional space for collection display, but it functions not as a traditional set of galleries, but as an extension of the city itself, a vertical extension of the Thames embankment path. The six million visitors to the tenth floor of the new extension are rewarded by a free 360 degree balcony affording spectacular views of the city. The extension is essentially a large space of public circulation with cafes, shops, member’s room, offices, workshop and partnership spaces occupying most floors. The extension has been renamed the Blavatnik building as a result of one of the largest donations in Tate’s history by the USSR born billionaire, Len Blavatnik, which secured the buildings completion.

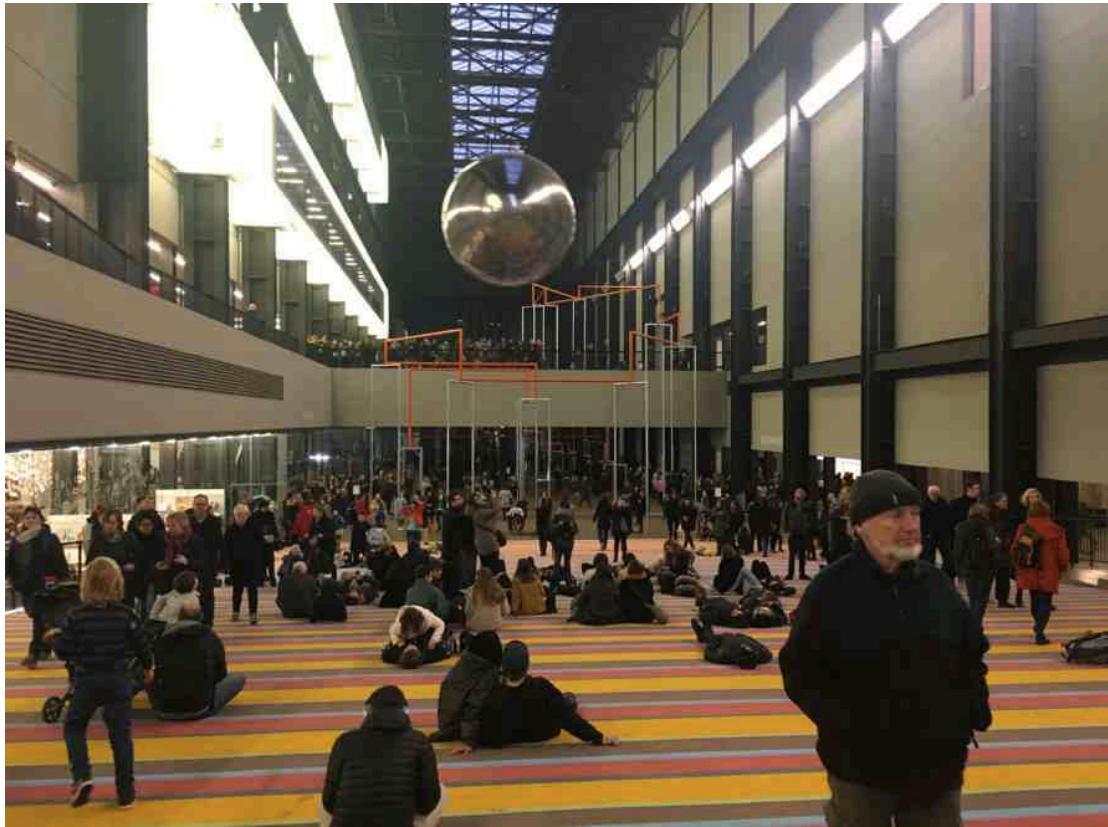
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<sup>2</sup> Tate Encounters: Britishness and Visual Culture, AHRC (2007-2010)



Tate Modern Extension under construction, (2015) Photo: Andrew Dewdney

It was with the opening of Tate Modern in 2000 that the Turbine Hall was recognised to function as a spectacular extension of the urban space of the city, with its industrial cathedral accommodating ambitious installations and large crowds. The current Hyundai Commission, ‘One, Two, Three Swing!’ by Superflex exemplifies this merging with public space in the creation of a literal playground of connected swings.



Turbine Hall, Tate Modern, March 2018. One, Two, Three, Swing. Superflex. Photo: A. Dewdney

Meanwhile the blockbuster exhibition ‘The EY Exhibition: Picasso 1932 – Love, Fame, Tragedy’ returns the visitor to chronological modernist art history. The Picasso Exhibition is sponsored by the global multinational accounting firm, Ernst and Young, whilst Level Three of Tate is now named as the Eyal floor, after a £10 million gift from Israeli born shipping and property billionaire, Eyal Ofer. In passing it is worthy of note that the donations, gifts and sponsorship of Tate Modern come from individuals and companies whose fortunes have been made by global investment in oil, aluminum, shipping and property, the cornerstones of the neo-liberal economy, as well as the global accountants who advise them. The expansion of space, the large numbers of visitors, external partnerships, blockbuster exhibitions and relentless programming led by the strong brand have ensured both the popularity and success of Tate Modern. However, the spaces of Tate Modern are not uniform and the galleries which rise alongside the Turbine containing free displays from the collection as well as ticketed exhibitions are organized on a different logic of time, the chronological time of art history asserting itself to make sense of the objects (paintings, drawings, sketchbooks, film, sculptures and texts) assembled. And as Osbourne noted earlier the art historical logic of Picasso is his place in the evolution of the singular modern. However in networked culture the logic of modernism no longer applies and paradoxically its designated objects are indistinguishable from heritage and therefore no longer participate in arguing for or shaping

the contemporary. It is as if the curators of the exhibition know that this is the case in its appeal not only to the formalism of modernist art, but to the identity of the artist, Picasso is here curated as the paradigmatic paradoxical individual for hypermodern times. Life is to be played out through love, fame and tragedy and the title comes straight out of celebrity media, reflecting not only the curatorial power of marketing, but the recognition of the multiplicity of contexts and times in which visitors will experience the exhibition. One of the significant changes in the way in which audiences experience exhibition is of course networked media, accessible on wifi enabled mobile devices. However in Tate Modern's spaces of exhibition the interpolation of network culture remains veiled and only tentatively acknowledged, whereas visitors are consuming the museum through image capture and sharing for example.



**The Ey Exhibition: Picasso 1932, Love Fame, Tragedy. Tate Modern (8 March – 9 September 20128)**

### **The Digital as Tool**

At Tate and more broadly across museums, as with most organisations, the digital is taken as a set of practical tools used predominantly for administrative, media and communication purposes. On this view the digital consists of hardware and software, providing devices and applications used at different levels across departments. Here digital tools are seen as non

problematic and ‘value neutral’, simply a means to perform a given task. The main problem with viewing the digital as tools is that networked media itself comes to be seen as a transparent channel of transmission with little or no inscribed coded value. This is especially true of the ways in which the museum first responded to the development of ‘social media’ platforms, seeing in them a marketing tool to reach new audiences and cultivate interest and loyalty through the use of personalised platforms. However, one of the pervading messages from museum professional who contributed to the research<sup>3</sup> was that instead of thinking about the ‘digital’ as a conventionalised add-on to existing forms, codes, conventions and practices of both media and institutions, new media draws attention to the larger dimension of a set of fundamental changes in human communication made possible by computation. In this description the digital is a paradoxical culture of staggering global reach; a sprawling and chaotic network of information, connections and associations underpinning everyday life; whilst at the same time being a highly structured, clandestine, data gathering and processing system supporting and informing commercial, state and military formations. In spite of high levels of digital activity, the art museum continues to struggle with its engagement with such fundamental changes being wrought by the digital condition. The museum’s caution and doubt about the value of engaging with network culture is the result their perceived need to retain cultural authority, based upon the taxonomies of analogue collections, and the hierarchical organisational structure of corporate risk management which militates against experiment and change. These two factors above all limit engagement with the potential scale of changes that the digital makes possible across the fields of curating, acquisitions, communication and audience engagement.

### **The Digital as Medium**

A second and related way in which ‘the digital’ is understood and operationalized in the museum is as a medium or media. At Tate this has taken two established forms. As an art medium the digital is slowly forming a distinct canon of collection, with a retrospective history of linking art and technology. An art historical canon for a category of art and technology has been gathering pace for a number of years; digital art (Paul 2015) electronic art, computer art, netart and media art, (Grau 2014) are some of the titles currently in play. Historically, the Institute of Contemporary Arts exhibition, ‘Cybernetic Serendipity’ curated by Jasia Reichardt, (1968), and more recently the Whitechapel Gallery exhibition, ‘Electronic Superhighway - 2016-1966’, curated by Omar Kholeif, (2016) were also attempts to define a field of practice. The art museum is better able to manage a distinct genre or category of art under the rubric of art that uses technology, than it is confronting the idea that the digital as

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<sup>3</sup> Modeling Cultural Value in New Media Cultures of Networked Participation’, AHRC (2012)

culture challenges not only the existing organisation of the museum, but also its categorical distinctions. The art museum is happier seeing the digital as categorically science and technology in clear distinction from its own humanist, modernist artistic practice and art history. The unease of the art/science divide in the museum is largely responsible for a lack of engagement with artists' use of technology, reinforcing separations between art, media and technology, which again limits the perception of the wider digital default of culture and society. In parallel to the digital as an artistic medium, the art museum has seen and harnessed the potential for the digital as a channel of representation and reproduction. Tate has spent considerable time and investment in harnessing the tools and channel of online media to broadcast themselves (technically, narrowcast), and have harnessed the potential of video to arts programming. This is an expression of Tate's commitment to maintaining cultural value based on analogue cultural heritage, which as yet does not connect with the digital as culture. Ironically for a museum committed to the modern and towards openness and equal exchange, the analogue broadcasting model of television and radio emerges as the predominant model of operation in the production of content and in the relationship to audience. Tate has been able to adapt the analogue broadcast model, based upon the one speaking to the many, by embedding high production value documentary art videos on various web platforms.

### **The Digital as Archive**

The digitisation of collections was the historic entry point of the digital in the museum. More than two decades on the sheer scale of the project of digitisation over a period of rapidly changing and upgrading of technologies of digitisation has led to a proliferation of technical issues and problems regarding the quality, format and metadata of images, which now question the very purpose and value of the grand project of digitising everything. Related to the technical minefield of digitisation is a further set of organisational problems related to resource allocation, asset management, use value, copyright, and the need to build and manage a new skills workforce, which is not necessarily professionally invested in the object of analogue collection. Museums such as Tate have taken the route of reproducing cultural value, using their historical knowledge base coupled with the commercial ecologies and business models of the corporate Internet, in order to achieve large-scale distribution of content. Museum's increasing use of arts and cultural documentary video content through online channels has been driven by brand awareness and funding policies emphasising audience development. However, the main change to the digitisation project of online collections has been brought about by image search engines and image sharing platforms, in which digitised images from collections merge in the flow of the networked image.

### **The Academy and the Condition of Knowledge**



Like the museum the academy has been slow to foresee or grasp the transformation of knowledge ushered in by the nexus of science, technology and economics. Whilst the management of the academy has modernized along corporate lines, its organization of knowledge remains traditional. The Tate research cited above was not exempt from the instrumental forces of knowledge exchange outlined by Lyotard (1984) and this was manifest in the ways in which the research findings were distributed and received. The various speeds and times of the reception of the research have been structured by separations of the discourses and practices of the academy, museum and government. This is a situation that reproduces distinctions between theoretical, operational and practical knowledge brought to bear upon common objects and practices in the world. In the museum such knowledge separations are reproduced through subject specialism and mirrored in the museum's organizational practices, but what happens to these knowledge practices when the real world situation to which they correspond accelerates? The collaborative Tate research in question set its site on real world outcomes, addressing problems and questions faced by museum professionals, and yet the outcomes remain primarily limited by the very division of academic knowledge it seeks to overcome. In the published account of the Tate Encounters research, (Dewdney, Dibosa, Walsh 2013 p221), a new methodological position was outlined as post-critical museology in order to both resist and bi-pass the instrumentalism in research and the limits of academic critique. Post-critical museology emphasized that research needed to be collaborative, transdisciplinary and embedded in practices seeking to find ways of doing things differently, however, the pragmatism of the strategy can easily be adapted in the drive for greater efficiency and maximization of impact. Collaboration and partnership are becoming the new watchwords for the humanities research in justifying outcomes in terms of the informational economy. The museum's resistance and misunderstanding of network culture now pose a new question of how museums will deal with and respond to the increasing acceleration of cultural information in networked cultures. What new problems do museums face and how are they responding?

### **Hypermodern Times in the Museum**

Paradoxically for institutions whose analogue objects are rarely malleable, their digital counterparts are subject to new morphologies, modes of distribution and speeds of circulation. The material objects of collection, like the gold held in a reserve bank, now stand as a proxy to the currencies of digital image circulation. The increasing turn to programming over display is a manifestation of a particular form of cultural hyper-production, allowing the museum to become prolific and mobile. This is a hypermodern strategy of maximum efficiency, niche marketing, quick turn around and micro-differentiation of product within the cultural market place, which like the society of fashion focuses upon and appeals to the

individualism and subjectivity of the consumer. The hyper-circulation of digitized images of collection has another affect, which is to reduce the distance in time between objects, rendering the modern, historic and ancient as homogenized heritage.

Hyper-circulation in the museum is a direct consequence of the digitised cataloguing projects began in the 1990s. Digitisation, originally conceived as an archival cataloging tool, became an extension of the museum itself, fuelled by the belief that curatorial and proveniential authority would be reinforced, whilst expanding the reach of collection to new and wider audiences. But since the advent of social media from 2005 onwards, the digitised images from online collections have fled the museum's web-portals to merge in the exponential flows of the networked image. It might be said that the hyper-activity of museum programming, which increases the circulation of the proxy collection, is a new form of 'cultural quantitative easing' because it increases liquidity and encourages more consumer exchange. Programming is a logic of the branded museum in which marketing drives and produces content in order to keep the brand recognised and at the forefront of the market. The rise of programming within the organization of the museum now repositions marketing as 'curator in chief' at the same time as the digitised heritage image escapes the museum. In parallel it is the algorithms of search engines and platforms that co-curate the networked image, rather than simply human users. The alliance of marketing and algorithmic metrics now seriously entailed in creating the links and chains in cultural communication, meaning and value, reinforces the recognition of the argument that technology is cultural and culture is technical and hence the urgency of developing new forms of co-curating and co-operation between humans and computers in network cultures.

### **The Networked Image and the Digital Condition**

The networked image is a hybrid of culture and technology founded in and by the WWW and the Internet over the past two decades as computer power has increased and extended. The networked image is not singular, nor a special kind of conventional visual image, but is a complex and dynamic assemblage of digital capture, data-storage, computational orders and social communication practices. In many senses the term networked image is a temporary placeholder to register a set of radical changes in the conditions and modes of human communication in which the Internet, hybrid media platforms and mobile devices have come to dominate. The use of the term, networked image has two related sources. Firstly it retains the established cultural notion of image as representational, pictorial and conceptual, but problematizes this by the recognition that indexical and archival representation of a unique point of origin is no longer a sustainable definition for the image, even though paradoxically its reproduction in culture persists. There is an ongoing semantic struggle being waged over

the meaning of the term ‘image’, recognising how image is both diffused in culture and operationalised in computation. The image, indeed representation, now have to be understood in the ecologies of networked culture, acknowledging that value and meaning are constituted in and by circulation. In place of representation a new and unspoken set of allegiances between human and machinic agents has supplanted the ways of seeing based upon representation and brings into existence a new politics and set of power relations of the networked image. In a closely related but more specific analysis outlining how human and machinic interactions were entailed in the photographic image the very useful term algorithmic image was developed, (Rubinstein and Sluis 2013). But the networked image seeks a wider definition, recognizing the increasing power and political impact of algorithms in culture and society. This leads to the second source of definition for the networked image, echoed and developed in Felix Stalder’s recent book, ‘The Digital Condition’ (2018). Stalder defines what he calls ‘the digital condition’ as the material and symbolic processes of negotiated and contested social meaning in which a digital infrastructure is now the default. But Stalder is careful to avoid any over determination of the computer, and rejects the binary opposition between digital and analogue, material and immaterial. For Stalder the digital denotes; “the set of relations that, on the infrastructural basis of digital networks is realized today in the production, use, and transformation of material and immaterial goods, and in the constitution and coordination of personal and collective activity.”

### **The Post Digital Perspective**

Stalder acknowledges that his account of the digital condition comes close to the idea of the post digital, a term which arose in Internet art discourse, but which is gaining a wider purchase in media and cultural debate. The post digital describes a perspective, which like that of the digital condition, does not focus obsessively upon technical innovation and improvement in digital information technology. One consequence of the post digital emphasis is a rejection of the usefulness of a number of binaries such as ‘old’ and ‘new media’, the ‘virtual’ and the ‘real’ and ‘material’ and ‘immaterial’ in defining digital technology, (Cramer 2014). Post digital culture might usefully be taken to describe a situation in which the digital is so deeply entailed in such a wider spectrum of the human life world that paradoxically technology itself cease to be its defining feature. More locally for Cramer the post digital describes a situation in which an aesthetic practice developed by early practitioners of new media arts, which emphasized an ethics of sharing of open source software is now more widely recognised as a collective value. But while the post-digital term is a useful rejoinder to techno-utopian rhetoric, fixated as it is by the power of machines, it remains the case that far reaching consequences of the digital condition and the networked image are only now emerging.

### **The Museum's Audience and the Paradoxical Present**

Stalder defines three characteristics of the digital condition, referentiality, communality and algorithmicity through which more and more people in more and more segments of life are reacting to the demands of an overwhelming sphere of information. In such a situation Stalder sees two opposing social and political tendencies within the digital condition, authoritarianism and communality, which like Crouch's view of post-democracy (Crouch 2004. p1) he sees emerging in Western cultures as a consequence of the rise of technocracy. The arguments put forward in support of the digital condition share a similar characterization of the problems, tensions and paradoxes of hypermodernity, (Lipovetsky 2005). The intellectual utility of hypermodernity is that it offers a sidestep move from the exhaustion of the modern versus postmodern periodization debates, by opening out many of the observations of 1980s post modernism in a new account of the present conditions of late capitalist society. Late capitalism is characterized as hyper productive and accelerated in its cycles of production and consumption. Postmodernity is reformulated as a two sided phenomenon, a paradox in which two logics co-exist: increased autonomy and increased dependency, creating the paradoxical individual who on the one hand strives for freedom on the other seeks security and regulation. Hyper individualism is a state in which actors are more autonomous, but where personality is more fragile, in which the individual is 'opened up', fluid and socially independent, no longer tied to fixed bonds of social class, sexuality race or ethnicity. However, paradoxically the state of hyper individualism also heightens the need to belong and to develop separate identities, a result of the paradoxical present's double logic of moderation and excess, order and disorder, subjective independence and dependency (2005 p33), Such conditions have led to a state of affairs in which individuals curate themselves and work on identity, through performance, sensualism and spirituality, whilst cultural reproduction ceaselessly exhumes and rediscovers and memorializes the past. As Lipovetsky asserts, "It is no longer class against class, but time against time, future against the present, present against the future, present against present, present against the past." (2005 p49)

### **Contemporaneity, Modernism and Heritage**

Applying Lipovetsky's notion of the paradoxical present to the art museum resonates with Osbourne's discussion of a decisive shift in thinking about the designation of the terms modern and contemporary, (Osbourne 2014). Osbourne points out that from the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century contemporary has been used as a qualifier or stabilizer of the modern, referring to the most recent period, or new art practices. However he goes on to argue that cont-temporaneity has taken on a new meaning as a condition rather than period, denoting, "a coming together

not simply 'in' time, but *of* times: we do not just live or exist together 'in time' with our contemporaries as if time itself is indifferent to the existing together - but rather the present is increasingly characterized by a coming together of *different but equally 'present'* temporalities of 'times', a temporal unity in disjunction, or a *disjunctive unity of present times*," The backdrop to such a view within art history and curation is the globalization of the art market in which it makes little sense to map the cultural world from the axis of 20<sup>th</sup> century European and North American modernism. The internationalization of the modern has been fully established within art historical discourse, but the pluralisation of moderns, anti-moderns or the altermodern (Bourriaud 2009) present a greater challenge to the very idea of the modern, which can no longer be thought of as the global meridian for the modern and contemporary. What then happens to the experience of the modern in the modern art museum? In 2014, the exhibition Reset Modernity at ZKM in Karlsruhe, curated by Bruno Latour and Christophe Leclercq suggested that since modernity's compass is no longer a reliable guide to time and space there was a need to reset modernity (and post modernity) and to discover and adopt new procedures in order to gain a bearing upon the state of things and hence decide upon future courses of action. The thinking behind this curatorial trope came from Latour's earlier book, 'We Have Never Been Modern' (1984), in which he very clearly explained the central contradiction or paradox at the heart of modernity. Latour argues that Enlightenment knowledge separated the world of nature and things from the world of culture and politics in which the first constituted the sphere of scientific influence and discovery whilst the second world of human affairs. Latour's analysis went on to demonstrate that the world proceeds through entanglements of objects, people and ideas all of which have agency.

### **Technological obsolescence**

The paradox of the traditional museum dissolved by its own demand to constantly generate new content, based upon the currency of its analogue proxy, is reversed in technological development in which an economic engine of profit builds in obsolescence, constantly discarding its material past and ceaselessly repurposing the present in a constant process of miniaturization, telecommand and microprocession, (Baudrillard 1985 p129), (Steyerl 2012 p33). The preservation of 'old' technology as yet holds little heritage value although media scholars and archivists such as Wolfgang Ernst's work on media archaeology (2013 p92) would argue for its future taxonomic and ontological importance. More importantly digital technologies drive towards their own invisibility, their infusion into all material and psychological things and spaces. At the backend of technology ever more secure server farms proliferate to hold a universe of data together with an invisible global labour force tasked with monetizing data; making stored digital data legible, retrievable and profitable, whilst at the front end the smooth surface of operation is ever more mobile, naturalized, socialized and

intimate.

### **What's at Stake: The Art Museum in the Age of the Anthropocene**

‘The point of living in the epoch of the Anthropocene is that all agents share the same shape-changing destiny, a destiny that cannot be followed, documented, told, and represented by using any of the older traits associated with subjectivity or objectivity. Far from trying to “reconcile” or “combine” nature and society, the task, the crucial political task, is on the contrary to distribute agency as far and in as differentiated a way as possible—until, that is, we have thoroughly lost any relation between those two concepts of object and subject that are no longer of any interest any more except in a patrimonial sense’.

(Latour 2014 [p17](#))

How is the art museum to recognise and develop a dialogue with its audience now that the modernist conceit of contemporary art's relevance to society has been surpassed by the paradoxical present? And how is the art museum to reformulate a new set of social goals in the face of the commodification of culture as heritage? What is the space of the museum for now that value and meaning are thoroughly networked? The historic role of the reforming museum was first to civilize and subsequently to educate an audience who were taken to be representative of the public. In neo-liberal, post democratic societies the civic audience has been dissolved, replaced by individual atomized consumers. The museum of the public, that is the museum which structured a civic narrative of cultural value and which gave meaning to objects has become distributed information. Is it necessary and possible to reassemble a new public for the era of networks and find a public in a non-representational system of exchange? Over the past two decades museums have, to varying degrees, adopted corporate organization models of efficiency and market orientation. Museums have been more than encouraged to adjust to the deregulation of the public sphere and in this they now work at the speed of hyper-capitalism. But hyper-production comes at the cost to their historic, critical and public knowledge, which has been converted into a heritage commodity. If anything the museum needs to accelerate even faster than the speed of the conditions that drive it in order to prefigure and materialize a new public. Cultural institutions are trying to adapt to the distributed, hyperlinked model of digital networked communication through which new collectives and collectivities are attempting to reform the idea of the social and publics, but struggle to identify and find ways to work with these new users. The network is in the museum by virtue of its audiences, it is just that the museum hasn't found a way of

recognizing the fact.

The burden of this paper has been that the managerial discourse which links the museum and technology is narrowly instrumentally focused, whilst the curatorial discourse remains skeptical of networked culture, or only admits it as the antithesis to its own knowledge and aesthetic predispositions. Younger museums of modern art, or cultural institutions and organisations whose governance, practices and activities are not defined by collections or national cultural heritage are more adept and flexible than traditional museums in responding to new forms of cultural and social value being developed through creative and open engagement with networked communities. The digital with which this paper started and to which the Tate research attempted to shed light upon, is being usurped by neo-liberal research agendas and the radical, subversive and potentially transformative potential of networks is being ignored. There is a new level of complexity of communication in both art and media that demands new transversal perspectives that can inform acquisition and display in the museum. Whether this might be formulated within or across existing disciplines the underlying issue is the need to create new insights and understandings of the convergence between the discourses of art, media and technology, which aesthetic modernism has historically resisted.

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Suggested words for index:

contemporaneity, hypermodern, paradoxical individual, modern, art museum, networked image, digital condition