SCHOOL OF THE ART INSTITUTE OF CHICAGO

WALL2SCREEN && FLOOR2CONTROLLER

IN THE INTEREST OF SHOWCASING THE DIGITAL AND INTERACTIVE

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Curating in the Expanded Field

Arts Administration 3500

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Art has created and influenced cultural growth from its indigenous and ritualistic origins to what institutions like *The Metropolitan Museum of Art* are today. Curation, the system of choosing, ordering, and arranging a set of things based on a chief idea, has been present for much of that history. With the rise of private object, art, and artifact collections such as studiolos and grottas, collectors begin to culminate their own personal tastes and unified visual aesthetics (Newhouse, 2005). For a large part of history, curation has existed as a "wow-factor" in impressing others, whether it be through the sheer surplus of items one can collect and own to their name or its for its stunning beauty. Though we have come very far in terms of expanding the world of art both physically and conceptually, it seems that the art world at large still values this "wow-factor"- paying top dollar to own and see work by the rich, elite white artists who have long benefited from it. Moreso, the history of curation and modern exhibition models continue to support the same kinds of traditional art- deeply ingrained in painting and sculptural objects. However, as this language and vocabulary for curation and art world expands we should be aiming to look for new ways which accommodates new forms and mediums of art within a digital age.

Moving forward to modern day, since contemporary art and the fields and studies related are so deeply embedded and rooted within the western art world, museums and galleries quickly became highly saturated with those who held the most power- the wealthy heterosexual white male. Shows such *Primary Structures* (1966) at *The Jewish Museum* in New York, NY, although revolutionary in pushing the boundaries of displaying minimalist (sculpture) art in galleries, catered to a very specific archetype of individual (Jewish Museum, 2014). This subversive exhibition broke barriers for art but did little to

dent such a barrier for artists- featuring only three women out of a total of forty-two

artists. The importance and means of showcasing and supporting different voices within

the art world extends to more than just different kinds of art; its importance extends to

different kinds of people from various backgrounds.

Over years of experience through curating, organizing, and managing many kinds of

shows, curators such as Walter Hopps and Harald Szeemann recognized patterns within

viewing and experiencing art in the gallery from certain perspectives and the importance of

the subversion of the average art viewing experience. Both were influenced by constant

contextualization. Hopps, specifically, describes being captivated by visual decision made

by curator Jermayne MacAgy in which she places flowers at the entrance of a Mark Rothko

show: "*It was just a general reminder that you don't start trying to ask why flowers are some*

color- you relax and enjoy their beauty" (Obrist, 2008).

In interest of the constant contextualization of the art object, Stephen Greenblatt

proposes two distinct models for exhibiting works of art- both of which are applicable to

largely to traditional forms of curating art: that which is centered around resonance and

that which is centered around wonder. He goes on to describe resonance is "*the power of*

object to reach beyond formal boundaries to the larger world" (Greenblatt, 1990). Simply,

resonance is the connection of one work to other work, to other culture, to other

experiences directly. What is the history of this print? Where has this ceramic vase been

exhibit before? Who influenced the movement of this painting? Greenblatt continues,

wonder is the power of the "*displayed object to stop a viewer in their tracks to convey an*

arresting sense of uniqueness, … an exalted attention." Wonder acts as the almighty barrier

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of art which separates and elevates it from reality or, as Greenblatt describes, "*the dominant aesthetic ideology of the west… the creative genius of the artist*" (Greenblatt, 1990). This impenetrable screen of art as infinitely contextual through resonance and artistic brilliance through wondrous capabilities limits the scope of work which is exhibited in galleries and prevents access, both physically and mentally, to potential individuals who seek entry and flourishment within these communities.

Some of these concepts and theories of displaying and exhibiting work is effective to a certain extent in relation to digital and interactive work, but suffers from mistranslation when nuances of the differences between traditionally curated work versus new forms of digital art aren't accounted for carefully. Indie game developer Robert Yang is largely familiar with several wrong ways to display specific types of digital work. *It belongs in a museum!* Yang explains a trip to the *Museum of the Moving Image* in Queens, NY where the first person shooter video game *Half-Life 2* is exhibited- a critically acclaimed game familiar to most, if not all, the game developer (gamedev) community (Yang, 2011). The game is installed with a keyboard and mouse upon a pedestal and a projection of the game on the wall as Yang discovers the game resting at a point near the beginning of the story. Angry with the method of installation, he questions why the curator included no instructions or explanation and why they used a keyboard and mouse instead of a gamepad. It was definitely the wrong way to display *Half-Life 2*. He responds by using a series of console key commands to, essentially, break the game. Not only was the curator unhelpful in directing an audience on how to play or experience the game, they were also completely ignorant of how exploitable the game was in such an installation. As a result they suffered the

consequences of not being more informed and literate with the work they exhibited. If this aspect of carelessness isn't tolerated when applied to ensuring the safety and integrity of work in traditional mediums then why should it be tolerated when applied to digital work?

As a result of the large lens of digital art, there are many qualities of each specific work which must be taken into account. This may range from the specific browser to view a website on, to how to reset a looping video on a project if it freezes, to, in the case of Yang's encounter with *Half-Life 2*, knowing the right equipment to provide the audience. For instance, let's look artist Tabor Robak's video installation *Analphabetic Aquarium*- a 4-channel video piece which requires all four parts of the video to start and end at the same time before looping back to the beginning (Robak, 2014). The communication between artist and exhibitor must be very clear between what the artist can provide and what they will need to be provided. Does the exhibition space have four monitors for the work? Does it have a means to display a video? Do they have the correct cables or extensions or adapters to connect to the tech being used? What if one of the videos freezes or crashes? Certainly Robak would be able to assist in repairing or troubleshooting any issues while they're present, but definitely won't be available 24/7 to fix any major issue or minor hiccup which may occur. This lack of communication and reciprocation has manifested itself in respect to artists working outside of digital and interactive means as shown in transcripts like *Why the Exhibit Was Cancelled* where an unnamed artist displays a number of emails in conversation with a gallery curator (Anonymous, 2001). The curator is less than perceptive and responsive to the concerns of the artist and is unwilling to accommodate for the artists' needs- to understand more about the artist's studio practice

and the concept behind their work. This failure to accommodate and comprehend a practice are constantly paralleled within the digital art sphere from institutions and art collectors alike.

However, this isn't a one-way road. While it is important that exhibition organizers and curators become eager to understand and learn how to take care of work and correctly present it to an audience, it is equally as important for artists working in digital and interactive media to make that learning process as easy and as comprehensive as possible. This period of teaching and learning is important not only in explaining more about the background and process of a work but also to promote and expand the growth of digital and electronic literacy to the larger public. Many times digital work is ignored or cast aside because institutions don't want to deal with understanding how digital and electronic processes function- that they aren't art because of aspects specific to digital art such as the open source communities, crowd-sourced information, the role of the artist's physical hand in work, or perhaps easy access of software and hardware to the greater public. By further enforcing a mutually beneficial relationship between exhibitor and artist in the vein of digital pedagogy it encourages museums and galleries, as well as individuals who hold positions of authority in such institutions, to expand their view and comprehension of newer and evolving forms of art.

But how has digital and interactive art existed and previously been shown while outside of these spaces? Outside of the contextualization Greenblatt's space of resonance and wonder? Outside of the Museum of the Moving Image? Outside of the white wall gallery? To find these answers it makes sense to look and go towards where much of that

community exists- the internet. *NewHive*, or *newhive.com*, was launched in private beta in 2011 and again to the public in 2012 to, as CEO Zach Verdin explains, "*provide people with a blank canvas, space for self-expression, and a network of allies*" (Burke, 2014). The website acts as a tool for creating webpages as a form of net art (a subsection of digital art which revolves around its emphasis and relationship to the internet). *NewHive* stands as a platform for "democratization of media" allowing any and all identities to be published, showcased, and network. *NewHive* works are as easy to embed as *YouTube* videos to various webpages which allows for a wider range of accessibility to *NewHive* based work and simple net-based culture sharing. Since the work is made and distributed online it is continuously consumed and contextualized for and by the community of multimedia-based artists on the internet.

The *NYU Game Center* in Brooklyn, NY under the *Tisch School of the Arts* holds an annual show entitled the *NYU Game Center Student Show*, which shows work from students under the BFA and MFA Game Design programs- which includes but is not limited to "*game-based research, screen-based videogames, and mixed-media installations*" (NYU, 2016). Largely populated by videogames, each gets their own station and the audience are invited to walk freely around the showfloor and play as they wish- often in the presence of the gamedev(s) which allows the artists to get direct feedback from the players, and for the players to ask in-depth questions on what they're interacting with. This sort of 1-to-1 direct relationship is often lost in gallery spaces and museums and is only somewhat mimicked through formal artist interviews; talks and lectures. One could make the argument that this is an apples-to-oranges comparison as talking to students developing games is too far off

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from talking to professional practicing and exhibiting artists. However, this same "showfloor" format is also used at larger conventions, such as *IndieCade*, *Penny Arcade Expo* (*PAX*), and *Electronic Entertainment Expo* (*E3*), to showcase games alongside a developer, artist, or representative who explains and answers questions about the work put on display.

Among being a videogames artist, graduate of the MFA Game Design program at NYU, Stephen Clark is also a curator and co-owner of *Babycastles* in New York, NY- the first gallery dedicated to contemporary independent videogames (Babycastles, 2016). Babycastles is volunteer-run nonprofit active internationally as an arts organization and hosts a large variety of events which highlight and promote communities involved with experimental digital art, to game-based lecture series, to electronic and hip-hop music performances. Clark is interested in "*bringing games to other art spaces*" and the "*cross pollination between different crowds*" ideas clearly evident in the style of his curation. *Arcade Review x Babycastles* was a collaborative exhibition between the organizations of respective names involving games chosen by *Arcade Review* writers situated on the topic of old or repurposed technologies (Clark, 2016). Each writer wrote short essays which accompanied, through sculptural installation, the games they reference. Distant from naturalized "*white wall gallery space*" Clark shows reference to museum-like wall labels with the pairing of written essays to the art. Even more removed from a fine-art context is that the items that exist within the show aren't precious objects, and not just for the sake of concept. Some of the essays are printed on regular copy paper, titles are written in marker hung up by duct tape, cords and power strips are visible in some installations- but all this is

secondary to what really matters: the content of the work. When exhibiting games, Clark is interested jumping back and forth between the similarities and differences of the "*hands-off*" format of the gallery and the "*hands-on*" format of the arcade. Nonetheless, while he sees the comparisons that can be made and inferred between the two differing exhibition structures, he also recognizes that "*it's tricky to show games in an environment [like galleries] because most games are meant to be played at home... or on a showfloor.*" [1]

Many times digital work comes into fruition as realities (the physical, the virtual, and the augmented among others) mix and intertwine with each other. Multimedia artists often explore different forms of making and creating to produce work and become hybrids of many different mediums. This kind of work, often times, involves some sort of digital component becoming this huge amalgamation of an artistic chimera that is part video, part sculptural installation, part writing, part performance, part game, or part whatever aspect the work consists of. These types of works are often showcased at *Babycastles* in their annual digital literature focused event *WordHack*: "*a monthly evening of performances and talks exploring the intersection of language and technology*" (Babycastles, 2016). Co-owner of *Babycastles* and co-curator and organizer of *WordHack*, Claire Donato, is a strong advocate for closing the gaps between modes and configurations of making work- as well as a participant in this practice, with an MFA in Literary Arts from *Brown University* in Providence, RI but in constant collaboration with visual artists and computer programmers and performers. Currently, as an instructor at *Pratt Institute* in Brooklyn, NY, she teaches both a creative writing studio and an architecture studio. For Donato, learning in disparate

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[1] Information and quotes gathered here were gathered via online interview with Stephen Clark.

contexts "*[forms] a synergy that further informs [her] belief that writing is visual practice*"

and "*[draws] language from the architecture studio into [her] creative writing studio.*"

Donato, in regards to *WordHack*, explains she has "*lately been most drawn to work that feels urgent… as it is engaged in critiques of our contemporary political landscape via culture jamming and/or other means of direct action.*" She notes several makers she is interested in who are currently working with these themes such as artist and programmer Sam Lavigne, artist and environmental engineer Tega Brain, and creative/artistic activist Steve Lambert. That being said, Donato still believes that "*this thing called Digital Language Art is still becoming*" and curates work for *WordHack*, among other shows, "*intuitively, based on a sense of urgency and also curiosity.*" With this currently evolving and advancing platform for the creation of artistic culture and expression and activism, it's evident that we are living in a time of rapidly metamorphosing information, data, and realities. In respect of that, we should actively be looking for ways to not only present these messages and works, but also for ways to disseminate and document them. [2]

So why isn't digital and interactive art more widely accepted? Why aren't these kinds of works exhibited at more museums and galleries? Why is the art collector market not eating up these new art forms? Why is programming, circuitry, or performative interaction taught in more, if any at all, art classes? There are inherent problems with exhibiting and purchasing any and all art- so why does there seem to be this stigma against digital and interactive work which pushes people away from these art forms?

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[2] Information and quotes gathered here were gathered via online interview with Claire Donato.

It could be that digital art, in most cases, doesn't belong in museums or galleries- the spaces which contextualize the art world the most. Digital art, as a result of mediated experience through internet and screen, has allowed artists from all backgrounds to voice themselves through the anonymity of virtuality. Many forms of digital art have risen up free from the overbearing voice of the white-washed and white-walled prison. Whereas traditional work shown in galleries carries upon it the history of all work shown before it- much of digital art has existed as forms which seek plainly to exist, not necessarily to build upon or break apart the structure from beforehand. Digital work, in the beginning, was free from external context which is widely present within the contemporary art world now. Not every web developer was or is concerned with "what it means to be a website" nor is every game developer interested in every game which came beforehand or "the conceptual meaning of videogames." It's difficult to bring the entire community of creatives of one genre in conversation with an institution that are interested in two entirely different ideas. Often, when we force these relationships the content (and thus, context) of the work is lost. Digital work such as Alan Resnick's video series *alantutorial* (Resnick, 2016) would lose a crucial part of its context if not viewed on *YouTube* through the viewers' computers. Just the same, media like films, TV shows, and games that require a long amount of time to complete start-to-finish aren't able to be fully understood when only a small segment of it can be shown or played.

Or perhaps no one quite knows the value of this kind of work just yet- it's hard to place a price tag on work where so much of it is non-tangible. Is it valuable at all? Compared to what? Contemporary art in traditional mediums have an entire history which

evolved from recording and documenting life to craftsmanship to concept. Where can

digital art find room within this history to flourish? It's possible that digital art is still too

new and needs time to find its place within the art world. In an interview with *CNN* the

Global Director of *Art Basel*, Marc Spiegler, explains that "*it still takes a pretty pioneering*

spirit to be a collector of digital art" (CNN, 2016). Even purchasing work from popular

digital-based contemporary artists today, such as Jon Rafman, Ed Atkins, and Camille

Henrot, is seen as a risk within the art world. Spiegler clarifies that the entire history of the

"*art market*" has revolved around physical objects and that today work has begun to exist

in "*bits and bytes.*" He continues by posing the questions "*How much do they (digital art)*

wanna be in the art world as it exists today?," and how this type of work will define its own

artworld "*where authorship and ownership is less important than collaboration and*

production" (CNN, 2016).

But all art, including those with digital and interactive components, is cultural

production. Yang, in respect to games, explains that they "*are primarily conceptual /*

performance art; games are culture; it's more important to witness a game than to play it."

The mere existence of the work is more important than interacting with it. "*Most people*

haven't played most games," says Yang, "*the most important thing about a game is that it*

exists, because that means you can think about it" (Yang, 2015) Just as most people haven't

seen most art we are still able to think about its importance and effect on the art world. But

if we are unaware of its existence, whether that be at present or in the future, there is no

room for education, conversation, or development of such practices.

By preserving and documenting art we allow for not only the longevity of its existence but the audience that it reaches and, thus, the ideas that are disseminated and built upon or challenged; the makings of a large, more encompassing arts scene and community. It's important to have access to these histories in order to develop a culture and following around them. Many art historians have studied and archived larger artists and corporations which prevents voices from smaller, potentially marginalized voices from being heard by both an audience in their time and thereafter. Gamedev Anna Anthropy says that "*History is written by the victors, or at least their fanboys,*" meaning that the what is recorded for future observers to see is what is popular (Anthropy, 2016). For the most part, we only care about or aware of the most common and successful parts of our past. Anthropy believes that it is "*failures*" that tell us more about experimental directions that the creatives pushed for and serve as better learning experiences as opposed to the "*victories*" (Anthropy, 2016). Moving forward, as creative archivists, curators, and artists begin to have easier and more extensive access to this histories, it is possible that the audience (and subsequently the market) will expand and become more commonplace.

The art world and art market both lean heavily away from work that is digital-based and/or interactive-incorporating. Consequently, there is a lack of representation and inclusivity of marginalized and oppressed voices within the art and creative fields as a lot of digital and interactive work is created by individuals with no means or connection to making work in other forms. Stigma against this type of work in the larger art world prevents it from being viewed from future and wider audiences and, as a result, being curated into less and less exhibitions. There are many inherent challenges when trying to

show or sell this type of work (program deprecation, tech failure, maintenance with continued and prolonged usage.) However, all art has distinct challenges in handling and ownership and, in the interest of showcasing the digital and interactive, we should not allow this to limit the work which is supported. Doing this fosters a larger and more inclusive arts scene and creative community. Even when work is curated in exhibitions institutions are less perceptive to the issues that may occur with digital and interactive work, thus, allowing for a larger margin of error and have little to no way to troubleshoot or problem-solve. To remedy these faults it's important that there is more support for the work at all levels of discipline. This means teaching coding and web design in more spaces, to introducing new technologies to youth so they become familiar with them and electronically and virtually literate, and researching creatives and artspaces in which people work with digital and interactive media and have already begun organizing and curating shows, conserving and documenting work, and promoting communities in which these makers (and those interested) can work and collaborate. These histories and genealogies formed and informed via the communication and relationships built are crucial in the development and advancement of digital and interactive arts culture.

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