

Curatorial Models and Strategies in a Digital Age

Abstract

This presentation is focused on the changing models of curatorial practice in general and then I will proceed to illustrated case studies of my own curatorial experience.

Over the last decade, the progressively blurring boundaries between the different roles of art production and dissemination created an entirely new ecology where nearly every phase, every aspect, and every role embodied in art practice is radically changing. Rapidly emerging technologies contributed to this process. It has been also argued that truly contemporary work emerges at the point of exhibition, consequently the provisional nature of the 'workshop lab in public' or 'lab as exhibition' –a rapidly growing field- seems to keep the contemporaneity of the work alive in a particularly strong way. Today the role of the curator can be seen:

- Curator as producer
- Curator as collaborator
- Curator as champion of objects and/or interactivity
- Curator as hacker
- Curator as broadcaster,
- Curator as context provider
- Curator as communicator
- Curator as outsourcer
- Or even as a politician.

In addition to the rise of new collaborative models, on-line exhibition opportunities such as YouTube or Second Life, cu-

Nina Czegledy

czegledy@interlog.com

Artist, curator, educator, works internationally on collaborative art & science & technology projects.

Senior Fellow, KMDI, University of Toronto; Associate Adjunct Professor Concordia University, Montreal; Senior Fellow, Hungarian University of Fine Arts, Budapest; member of the Leonardo/ISAST Governing Board, member of Observatoire Leonardo des Arts des Techno-Sciences OLATS, Research Fellow Intercreate org, New Zealand, Board Member, Year Zero 01, Toronto and contributing editor to LEA, the Leonardo Electronic Almanac.

Recibido: Abril 24 de 2012

Aprobado: Julio 13 de 2012

Key Words: Media Art, curatorial practice, new collaborative models, on-line exhibition.

Revista KEPES, Año 9 No. 8, enero-diciembre de 2012, págs. 141-155

ratorial selection, dissemination and audience reception, have shifted -beyond previously un-imagined settings and conditions. Today's emphasis on the process rather than on the presented works is owing to the fact that in numerous cases the operating method- due to improvement in communication and presentation technologies- has changed, and I can't repeat enough the word "change" in this context.

A considerable amount of my references are based on the CRUMB or Curatorial Resource for Upstart Media Bliss mail list discussions and IDC or Institute for Distributed Creativity. I will freely quote from the relevant topics of these lists. In postings on this list a discussion ensued concerning analog and digital art.

In her introduction to the curatorial discussion Beryl Graham noted:

Artists, who comfortably use both digital and analog processes, call the relationship between digital processes and material craft objects into question. What are the histories of such hybridity? Are craft and design curators ahead of art in integrating new media into mainstream exhibition?

142

In this context Andy Gracie reported on a Laboratory Life event from Brighton, England.

The organization of this event featured 5 lead artists whose practice engages with science, and 17 collaborators drawn from various artistic and scientific fields. I think that most of the interesting work being done now in what is referred to as media-art in its most general sense: trans-disciplinary and collaborative, when the media becomes subsumed under the process. Mat Trivett commented: "I feel that there a disconnect can be observed between the realms of the digital and the analogue in the way that so called 'digital art' is viewed by institutions and funders and therefore framed to the viewer or audience.

In my own opinion a lot of artists and curators don't necessarily work with digital technologies but possibly more with the lexicon and protocol of digital technologies, the language of network culture as the basis for their work. With laboratory life, this blurring of disciplines and egos relates in a way to the ways in which digital technologies are changing the ways of making. How might a lab be different from a studio or a residency? What does this collaborative process or online processes like the wiki look like in real world scenarios?

I quote so much from these discussions, because they are very current and deal with actual situations. The online blog VVORK, organized by Oliver Laric and others, continues to garner fans and result in offline real-world exhibitions due to its brilliant take on informal research online, displaying images of artworks which take the bloggers fancy, 'tagged' with just title, year, artist and link but no comment.

An interesting example of so-called "crowd curation" is the Click project from 2008, by the Brooklyn Museum - Or the interactive YouTube exhibition by the Guggenheim Museum

Amanda McDonald Crowley formerly director of Eyebeam, New York, refused to be categorized as a curator. "I'm making situations!" she said. Amanda investigated the role of collaboration in curatorial practice asking if it merely constitutes compromise. She also raised the question if workers in the culture industry with its corporate, institutionalized funding dynamics now become new media apparatchiks.

A curator once had to be assigned to a specific collection—the word is rooted in the notion of caring for someone (etymology links curators to insane asylums). In recent years, however, "curation" has been de-linked from any fixed array of things. A curator is no longer a warden of precious objects but a kind of freelance aesthetic concierge. The task now simply involves a clever way of putting works

together to follow a purported theme. *Independent curators* are hired by museums on installation hit-and-run missions. The independent curator has migrated into the realm of commercial galleries. ...Glossy magazines write breathlessly about *beautifully curated* retail emporia. One reads about *well-curated* lifestyles, cheese trays, and sock drawers. Our daily information diet comes to us from curators of the news.

The role of the curator is argued more and more these days. "Me and you and everyone we know is a curator" in December 2010, was

looking for quality in a messy world; more specifically about looking for notions, ideas and ways of working in online culture, and asking ourselves how these could be applied / assessed / made into qualitative content in the offline world (and vice versa).

At the symposium Andrew Keen, author of *The Cult of the Amateur*, reduced the notion of curating to simply gate keeping and following his keynote most of the discussions about curating were limited to the editorial/selection/quality-control aspects of the profession.

Are Curators Unprofessional? This conference from November 12 to the 14th, 2010 in Banff, offered a rare opportunity in Canada to examine the place of the curator within a rapidly shifting terrain of practice, to step back from daily tasks and responsibilities in order to probe the underlying tenets of curatorial work today. The three -day symposium— to my regret I was unable to participate - brought together leading international curators, critics and artists to ask: Is curating a profession? Does curating have a code of conduct? What does it mean to be a professional and when is it necessary to become unprofessional? The answers to these important questions are unrecorded.

As is evident, from the above today we seem to have more questions than answers in the field of curating. Personally, I am working on the intersection of arts, scien-

ce and technology, frequently with complex technologies. Consequently, before describing my projects, I would like to talk about the topic of how much technical knowledge one is supposed to have, as a curator. If one is not a technician, but an art historian (as curators traditionally are, and as museums tend to hire) it is a challenge to keep up with all the new technological advances in skills related to sound, visuals, interactivity, code, etc.

I see myself as a bridge between the artists and the audience. I know much more about technology and its theory as applied to art -as well as art history- than the average exhibition visitor, but I almost always know less than the artist I am presenting -who has specialized in that one specific area for several years-. The trick is to bring these two parties to a level where they can both speak to each other through the artwork.

The traditional point of view is that the artist and the curator inhabit very different roles. Although this is the case in many situations, my own work and that of many of my collaborators aim to break down this sharp demarcation and propose a model of cultural production that recognizes the shared ground of 'certain types' of artists and curators by seeking common-ground. How can we create debate about the meaning, which emerges from exhibitions? And how can curated events act upon concrete socio/political situations?" My practice is often based on collaborative art & science projects including curating. At the 3rd *Quadrilateral Biennale* in Rijeka four of us curators representing four European countries, worked in collaboration, led by Christiane Paul artistic director from the Whitney Museum, New York. On the *Resonance, Electromagnetic Bodies* touring project, I collaborated with Montreal based Louise Provencher. *Resonance* premiered in Montreal and toured in six countries. *The Pleasure of Light*, Frank J. Malina and Gorgy Kepes, co-curated with Rona Kopecky opened in 2010 in the Ludwig Museum in Budapest and toured in 2011 to Poland. Realizing that at this festival

there is an emphasis on biology in the conclusion I will outline my past and current projects thematically linked to Art and Medicine.

From recent projects I have worked on, I would like to first briefly *introduce* “Angles and Intersections” from the 3rd Quadrilateral Biennale in Rijeka, followed by Resonance The Electromagnetic Body and *The Pleasure of Light projects*. Each project required two to three years of research, in collaboration with the co-curators.

The 3rd Quadrilateral Biennale: the curatorial team from four Central European countries worked remotely on developing “Angles and Intersections”. We had regular Skype meetings and met in person only at the installation of the exhibition. The exhibition provided insight into characteristics of media art, such as its connectivity, interactivity, and adaptability, thus reflecting on the current state of information society, while transcending national borders and generating a much wider regional effect. I was responsible for curating the Hungarian artists work and due to various considerations– the selected works were to a great extent portable, minimizing transport and technology costs.

In his work *i Garden*, Marton Andras Juhasz examined the borders between science and art, trying to illuminate the invisible, quantitatively inexpressible relationships between people, technology, and nature.

In her composite, interactive video *Rendez-vous à seconde*, Julia Vecsei explored urban and everyday life by shooting the video in the very same location at different time intervals.

In the video-installation *Mute*, Janos Sugar ironically transformed TV broadcasts of actual electoral debates from different countries into a discussion about power relations within the system of contemporary art.

The WIFI camera of this installation revealed the electromagnetic space of our devices and the shadows that we create within such spaces. With the camera WIFI camera real time “photos” were taken, showing physical structures illuminated by this particular electromagnetic phenomenon

Resonance, Electromagnetic Bodies celebrated the 150th anniversary of visionary Nikola Tesla’s birth with an interdisciplinary adventure reflecting on Tesla’s world of magnetic waves, light and vibration. The project explored the nature of invisible yet discernible material forces and examined how these dynamic energies impact on our cognitive and sensory perception. Following preliminary research including site visits of the Tesla Museums in Belgrade and Zagreb, we approached ten Canadian artists, who have either worked already with this concept or were interested in the electromagnetic spectrum.

From the very beginning we planned *Resonance* as a touring project. Based on initial Canadian funding, after the Montreal premiere at Oboro and Occurence, *Resonance* successfully toured in five European countries including ZKM, Karlsruhe, Conde Duque, Madrid, Tent & V2, Rotterdam, Ludwig Museum Budapest, Outsiders Festival, Paris. I am talking of a project rather than an exhibition as I always attempt to work on modular bases, meaning the inclusion of closely connected conferences, performances, film or video programs. This method requires great flexibility as the events differ from place to place, but produces fascinating results. Concerning *Resonance*, the artwork of the Canadians formed the base of the project, however in each city working with local curators we shaped the events such as exhibitions, conferences, performances, workshops and concerts with the inclusion of local artists and events.

A “historical” cornerstone of the *Resonance* project is Norman White’s *Abacus*. White is best known for his pioneering robotics artwork. He produced *Abacus* as early as 1974. Employing random and structured principles working in harmony to produce a chance effect.

In 2000, Catherine Richards continued to explore the metaphor of our plugged-in existence by creating *Shroud/Chrysalis*. The visitors are wrapped in a protective sheet of copper taffeta – a shimmering material known for its electrical and thermal conducting capabilities. They are safely shielded from the electromagnetic surroundings. Richards conveys the notion that to separate ourselves from our mediated environment we have to enter a shielded cabinet or “wrap” ourselves into the safety of copper taffeta.

It is outside the framework of this lecture to detail all the works included in Resonance, however I would like to mention that most of the artworks were created directly for this project. We have insisted on hiring a technical coordinator for the tour, who based on a so-called “bible”, was able to help remotely or on occasion personally with any installation and maintenance issues.

The creative use of light –light as a dynamic medium– preoccupied György Kepes and Frank J. Malina throughout their artistic career, it is a common element in their artwork and forms a bridging concept for *The Pleasure of Light project*. Their vision and work is best characterized by a distinct combination of interdisciplinary thinking as well as aspiration and creativity expressed through experimentation and radical innovation.

148

Kepes and Malina were pioneers of these ideas in the middle of the last century. They shared a humanist ideal, which was perceived by many as utopist. They worked ahead of their time on demolishing the previously sharp division between art and science, producing a fundamental shift and making the results accessible to common perception.

They bridged the divide between the humanities and techno science by a deep involvement in education and dissemination of interdisciplinary information with an enduring effect on successive generations.

Frank J. Malina trained in engineering and became involved early on in rocket science research and aerospace innovations. On October 11, 1945, the young Malina led the team that launched the WAC corporal rocket to an altitude of 43.5 miles, setting a new world record.

Malina joined the newly founded UNESCO in 1947 in Paris as the deputy science director. As the result of the McCarthy FBI/CIA investigations in 1953 he left UNESCO and focused mainly on his art projects, pioneering new technological art forms.

In 1968, Malina founded Leonardo –a pioneering journal interweaving art and science and technology-, with an unbroken publishing record over four decades long publication history.

Kepes, a Hungarian-born painter, designer, educator and art theorist, moved from his native Hungary to Berlin collaborated on many projects with László Moholy- Nagy first in Berlin and later in the US, continuing the (new) Bauhaus' theory and practice.

Kepes summarized his concepts in “The language of vision”, his world-famed book:

[...] it is our task to establish organic interconnections of the new frontiers of knowledge, the goal is a new vital structure-order, a new form on a social plane, in which all present knowledge and technological possessions may function unhindered as a whole.

In 1947 Kepes accepted an invitation to teach at MIT, where in 1967, he founded the Center for Advanced Visual Studies, dedicated to advance new technologies and creative collaboration between scientists and artists.

György Kepes is often referred to as a “light artist”. He was the first artist in America to use neon tubing on a grand scale,

The project research for *The Pleasure Light* including NASA, JPL, MIT, UNESCO, museums, the families of the artists and private collectors lasted nearly three years. I worked closely together with Rona Kopeczky, the Hungarian co-curator of the Ludwig Museum. In addition to the exhibition, we developed and published the catalogue, including essays from interdisciplinary professionals.

The exhibition opened on September 2nd, 2010 in the Ludwig Museum, Museum of Contemporary Art in Budapest. To illustrate the complex connections linking the worlds of the two artists, a dynamic interactive map greeted the visitors in the entrance hall.

The international conference linked to the exhibition was a closely linked integral part of the project. Now together with Rona Kopeczky, we are working on the next exhibit of The Pleasure of Light project premiering at the end of April in Gdansk, Poland.

And now I would like to focus on projects at the intersection of Art and Biology and by extension Medicine.

The Digitized Bodies Virtual Spectacles project was inspired by the realization that biosciences, communication, and information technologies have produced the fastest growing industries of the last two decades. The rapid development of digital imaging technologies has already reshaped biomedicine in ways that could have been barely imagined a decade ago and has permeated our everyday life, significantly shifting the common perception of the human body. In addition, the products of the most recent visualization of our bio beings permeate popular culture, leading to new economies of information. These new discoveries are presenting fundamental challenges to traditional societal values, but can science and industry really tell the whole story? We are still faced with serious, fundamental questions. How can we obtain precise information about ourselves, particularly

in the coded terms of medical science? How can we decipher the ambiguities surrounding the mediated, documented data body? How can we preserve our individual integrity without becoming mere electronic spectacles? A critical discourse on the objectification of the human body is debated and represented by contemporary artists.

The curatorial aim of the *Digitized Bodies* project has been focused on the investigation of these unresolved issues regarding the body politic, objectification of the individual, bodily ethics and the sometimes-contradictory discourses surrounding certain clinical and experimental technologies that seem to reinterpret the place of the individual as a corporeal entity in society. One of the primary aims of the *Digitized Bodies – Virtual Spectacles* project has been to survey and present international artwork and projects related to this topic, and to create interdisciplinary communication in cyberspace.

Accordingly, the project included an international online exhibition, a virtual forum and electronic catalogue, the on-site presentation of artworks, film/video selections, public forums, publications and performance events in three countries: Canada, Hungary and Slovenia. The participating artists challenged established paradigms and pointed to debates in contemporary art, medicine, communication, ethics and technology.

The project was developed over a four-year period and from an independent concept it grew into an international and multidisciplinary collaboration of significant scope. Over a hundred people from five continents have contributed or participated actively in this co-production, each of them adding their own views and energies in a unique manner that promises further collaboration. The interaction between scientists and artists took a variety of forms such as active participation in forums, round table discussions, writing for our catalogue and being involved in

the CD Rom. As a result, the *digibodies* events, revealed an eclectic and complex picture of the shifting perceptions and paradigms of the human body.

The Digitized Bodies Virtual Spectacles Project was presented over a decade ago. In the last couple years, I began to work on SPLICE At the Intersection of Art and Medicine. This project is still in progress, we organized two sold out Hacking the Body- Prosthetics Workshops at the Thing Tank Lab in January and March of this year.

SPLICE presents a scientific gaze at the human body by showcasing historical anatomical art, both complemented and challenged by contemporary artworks. The exhibition showcases a specific international selection of relevant contemporary art works and at the same time it is the first large-scale public showing of a large archival collection of images from the beginning of the last century at the University of Toronto.

This project is still in progress, the first exhibition was in January of this year in the West Vancouver Museum. The project is still in progress. We organized two successful Hacking the Body- Prosthetics Workshops at the Thing Tank Lab in January and March of this year. I am working now on exhibitions at the Blackwood and UTAC Galleries in October this year with venues in Canada and New York to follow.

We are all aware that for thousands of years –notwithstanding the difficulties and complexities of representation– the human body has been revealed and depicted by various mediums. Lately, artists have been initiating a fresh discourse that involves experimenting with a wide range of representation and body imagery.

The contemporary artists included in this exhibition address representation of the human body from current prevailing perspectives, such as authenticity, validity,

substance, intervention, mediation and provocation. While frequently referring to science they operate in a different context from the anatomical artist whose approach is a direct representation of the body.

Thus art that sensationalizes the body, or investigates it microscopically is absent. Instead, the participating artists are prompted by concepts in which the body is objectified, or used as material in an installation, interactive work, performance photograph or a video.

The scientific renderings from the middle of the last century include pen and ink drawings, watercolour and carbon dust created by Canadian women medical illustrators. Many of the archival artworks have been commissioned by JCB Grant to illustrate his world famous *Grant's Atlas of Anatomy*, first published in 1943 and still in print

Women at that time were discouraged from entering professions such as medical research or clinical medicine. Consequently, Maria Wishart's establishment in 1925 of the Medical Art Service at the University of Toronto remains a pioneer initiative.

While based on factual information and scientific data, these drawings are also personal, frequently beautiful and yet sometimes frightful or grotesque. By looking at the images within an exhibition space and viewing them as art rather than as strictly scientific, we pay tribute to the mastery of these creators who remain hidden in background roles, and the publications in which their work appears.

In contrast to these important historical Canadian renderings, contemporary artists take vastly different approaches in how they depict the human body. Today, for instance the body is frequently politicized, symbolized, digitized in order to manipulate, to dissect and provoke. This provocation is clearly evident in the work

of Dana Claxton's *Paint Up #1*, a striking ceremonial color print confronting the viewer, unflinchingly returning our gaze.

Confrontation is also apparent in *Wellness Totem #1*, by Jon Baturin, who has spent much of the last decade investigating scientific representation and the manipulation of relative truth.

Orshi Drozdik's exploration of *mediated realities* and her search for a feminine aspect is clearly palpable in her *Brain on High Heels* installation. The bizarre multitude of brains forced into tight shoes, the simple and symbolic meaning, the density and irony of the statue all have a similar effect on the viewer as one of the iconic pieces of surrealism.

Eric Fong's *Phantom Series* focuses on the body as a technological, ideological and aesthetic construct. Trained as a physician as well as an artist, Fong brings to his work both aesthetic considerations and a distinct analytical point of view. Joyce Cutler Shaw's interdisciplinary *What comes to mind*, on the brain, and art and neurobiology combines electronic imagery with analog tools, while Catherine Richard's interactive *L'Intrus* installation interprets the internal electromagnetic fields of the body as she comments: "The human heart, the symbolic seat of the emotions, is also one of the body's better known electromagnetic fields".

154

Jack Burman's exquisite photographic images from Medical Museums around the world evoke the memory of the human being in preserved and dissected bodies.

Rebecca Cairn's, photographs and Fred Laforge's drawing represent the generation of emerging artists. The *Æ lab's Dark Room* installation aims to create a contact with inner & outer space, death and the sensuous, while Diana Burgoyne's also demarcates the boundary between the internal and the external in her *What do you think the mind is?* – Interactive sound performance.

Khadija Baker will perform *My little voice can't lie* at the opening. The viewers are invited to hear recorded text from displaced women. Their stories emanate from speakers embedded at the ends of the performer's braided hair.

Additional performances, video screenings and round table discussions are also planned as well as a student exhibition. The metaphors and symbolic language used in all these works assign specific meanings to explain the function of the body in a contemporary cultural context, thus the project demonstrates parallels and contrasts, reflecting the social environment of our era.