

Study Day: Curating and Installing Digital Art 1 November 2019, The Cello Factory London

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“Digital artworks redefine traditional art historical concepts of authenticity, object-hood and originality, and as a consequence, also interrupt the archival system towards renewed ideas for documenting and disseminating data for the future.”¹

Curating and Installing Digital Art focused on the challenges of curating and installing art created with the latest technology. Its aim was to address and relieve curators from “the anxiety” that this type of artwork potentially evokes via their unknown aesthetics and practicalities. That this anxiety is not new was pointed out by V&A curator Melanie Lenz, the history of digital and computer-generated art dates back to the early 1960s. But Lenz also stated that due to the overlap between past and present and the constantly changing challenges “one has to be in a constant learning process”.

Jack Addis, artist and director of the [Lumen Art Projects](#) started off the day by showcasing his vast experience of commissioning and installing digital art pieces. He particularly shined a light on the practicalities of art installations that require different types of technologies; ranging from small but crucial details such as different voltages to finding the right direction for a projection in order to make an audience engage with it. Next to successes such as at the EUREKA children’s Museum, where an installation counted more than 165,000 interactions without failures, it was actually the failures that seemed to reveal the biggest “Aha!” moments during his talk. As a listener of his talk, one only had to look towards a VR headset that was part of Addis’ curated exhibition *DIRECTOR’s showcase*, at which the study day was held. Addis admitted that it took him a while to realise that the VR headset, which previously had worked fine, suddenly stopped working due to an automatic update that this newest piece of technology was doing. Luckily, he figured that a piece of tape on one of its sensors would fix the failure – until it potentially would update again.

¹ Oliver Grau, Janina Hoth and Eveline Wandl-Vogt (eds.) *Digital Art through the Looking Glass: New strategies for archiving, collecting and preserving in Digital Humanities*. Austria: Edition Donau-Universität, 2019

David Colombini, who is part of the Swiss artist collective [Fragmentin](#), presented several of their works that question the impact of technology onto everyday life. [Displuvium](#), which was displayed as part of the show, is an installation that creates an impression of rainfall in the gallery space via a small water-filled pool. The pool is connected to software which randomly chooses a weather incident from a database and reproduces it in the basin; for example, the weather which caused the threatening “nuclear cloud” during the Chernobyl incident in 1986. Another piece he presented, titled [Your phone needs to cool down](#), showed a mobile phone installed in an incubator together with a heat lamp. In both works, the potential health and safety risks, such as water and electricity or an exploding phone (the battery was removed for the exhibition), offered another crucial aspect to be considered in the context of digital curation.

Both talks made clear that when working with technology and the public gallery space, one has to be particularly prepared for the moment of losing control (such as the case of an automatic update), as well as considering a much wider range of risks resulting from the clash between elements of natural and domestic habitat.

The afternoon sessions started with a presentation by the artist Jake Elwes, whose work *CUSP* was also part of the show. In the discussion on the process of acquisition of this work, an AI piece that Elwes has created, further aspects of digital art’s role within the art market and its specific economies, came to surface. In the gallery, the work would be presented on a screen and as part of an edition of 5. Considering that the actual work is an AI which, by definition, is shapeless, the work always requires a new approach and intense conversation between institution and artist every time it is installed. At the same time, despite being an edition of 5, unlike in print, when working with software and programming, the original cannot be destroyed otherwise the work would be destroyed. So this requires an even closer and trusted relationship between artist and collector. Hence, as equally pointed out by David Colombini in his talk, digital art always comes with a manual and a range of inescapable bureaucracy due to its simultaneous fluid and material dimension. For this reason digital works, which are often complex, rarely sell so a digital artist often relies on the fee for showing the work and talking about it, than the sales of it.

Melanie Lenz, the curator for Digital Art at the Victoria & Albert Museum, presented seminal pieces from the V&A digital collection that started in the 1960s, including works from the Japanese CTG ([Computer Technique Group](#)). Through these examples she offered a great insight into the considerations that have to be put into the acquisition of these works from an institutional perspective. This has substantially changed over the course of time, as evidenced by her simple question of “how do we collect code?”. For a piece of computer art from the 1960s this meant to actually acquire the deck card, while in 2019, the process is less straight-forward. Through this example, she also pointed out that before acquiring a digital artwork, the institution has to consider if it is able to actually conserve it, which in the context of digital art poses one of the biggest challenges, after the question of what to actually acquire. Like every piece of technology that can be bought in a shop, digital art has a limited warranty which has a great impact on the decision of acquisition. Based on this, Lenz, Elwes and Columbini all pinpointed one of the greatest paradoxes of curating digital art; namely that despite its technology focus, it requires a strong personal relationship between curator/institution and artist in order to acquire, maintain and show the work.

During the third part of the day all the speakers came together. One of the main questions raised by Carla Rapport, the founder of Lumen Art projects was, if there is a need for a specialist institution in London/UK

to be dedicated to digital artworks, as is the case in other European cities, for example the ZKM in Germany or the HEK (House for Electronic Art) in Basel, Switzerland. Dr Nick Lambert, who had presented the research activities of Roehampton University in relation to how one displays digital art, prior the Q&A, pointed out that the BFI has the technical abilities to be such an institution. But regarding the historic weight of many British institutions, there was a consensus on the panel that a digital art institution might be difficult to integrate into something that is already existing. Considering the specificities and at the same time fluidity of digital art, different models of representation must be opted.