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## Curating in the Postdigital Age

Anna Edmundson

It seems nowadays that any aspect of collecting and displaying tangible or intangible material culture is labeled as curating: shopkeepers curate their wares; DJs curate their musical selections; magazine editors curate media stories; and hipsters curate their coffee tables.

Given the increasing ubiquity and complexity of 21st-century notions of curatorship, the current issue of *MC Journal*, 'curate', provides an excellent opportunity to consider some of the changes that have occurred in professional practice since the emergence of the 'digital turn'. There is no doubt that the internet and interactive media have transformed the way we live our daily lives—and for many cultural commentators it only makes sense that they should also transform our cultural experiences.

In this paper, I want to examine the issue of curatorial practice in the postdigital age, looking some of the ways that curating has changed over the last twenty years—and some of the ways it has not. The term postdigital comes from the work of Ross Parry, and is used to reference the 'tipping point' where the use of digital technologies became normative practice in museums (24). Overall, I contend that although new technologies have substantially facilitated the way that curators do their jobs, core business and values have not changed as the result of the digital turn. While, major paradigm shifts *have* occurred in the field of professional curatorship over the last twenty years, these shifts have been issue-driven rather than a result of new technologies.

## Everyone's a Curator

In a 2009 article in the New York Times, journalist Alex Williams commented on the growing trend in American consumer culture of labeling oneself a curator. "The word 'curate,'" he observed, "has become a fashionable code word among the aesthetically minded, who seem to paste it onto any activity that involves culling and selecting" (1). Williams dated the origins of the popular adoption of the term 'curating' to a decade earlier; noting the strong association between the uptake and the rise of the internet (2).

This association is not surprising. The development of increasingly interactive software such as Web 2.0 has led to a rapid rise in new technologies aimed at connecting people and information in ways that were previously unimaginable. In particular the internet has become a space in which people can collect, store and most importantly share vast quantities of information.

This information is often about objects. According to sociologist Jyri Engeström, the most successful social network sites on the internet (such as Pinterest, Flickr, Houzz etc), use discrete objects, rather than educational content or interpersonal relationships, as the basis for social interaction. So objects become the node for inter-personal communication. In these and other sites, internet users can find, collate and display multiple images of objects on the same page, which can in turn be connected at the press of a button to other related sources of information in the form of text, commentary or more images.

These sites are often seen as the opportunity to virtually curate mini-exhibitions, as well as to create mood boards or sites of virtual consumption. The idea of curating as selective aesthetic editing is also popular in online markets places such as Etsy where numerous sellers offer 'curated' selections from home wares, to prints, to (my personal favorite) a curated selection of cat toys. In all of these exercises there is an emphasis on the idea of connoisseurship.

As part of his article on the new breed of 'curators', for example, Alex Williams interviewed Tom Kalendrain, the Fashion Director of a leading American department store, which had engaged in a collaboration with Scott Schuman of the fashion blog, the Sartorialist.

According to Kalendrain the store had asked Schuman to 'curate' a collection of clothes for them to sell. He justified calling Schuman a curator by explaining: "It was precisely his eye that made the store want to work with him; it was about the right shade of blue, about the cut, about the width of a lapel" (cited in Williams 2).

The interview reveals much about current popular notions of what it means to be a curator. The central emphasis of Kalendrain's distinction was on *connoisseurship*: exerting a privileged authoritative voice based on intimate knowledge of the subject matter and the ability to discern the very best examples from a plethora of choices.

Ironically, in terms of contemporary museum practice, this is a model of curating that museums have consciously been trying to move away from for at least the last three decades. We are now witnessing an interesting disconnect in which the extra-museum community (represented in particular by a postdigital generation of cultural bloggers, commentators and entrepreneurs) are re-vivifying an archaic model of curating, based on object-centric connoisseurship, just at the point where professional curators had thought they had successfully moved on.

## From Being about Something to Being for Somebody

The rejection of the object-expert model of curating has been so persuasive that it has transformed the way museums conduct core business across all sectors of the institution. Over the last thirty to forty years museums have witnessed a major pedagogical shift in how curators approach their work and how museums conceptualise their core values.

These paradigmatic and pedagogical shifts were best characterised by the museologist Stephen Weil in his seminal article "From being *about* something to being *for* somebody." Weil, writing in the late 1990s, noted that museums had turned away from traditional models in which individual curators (by way of scholarship and connoisseurship) dictated how the rest of the world (the audience) apprehended and understood significant objects of art, science and history—towards an audience centered approach where curators worked collaboratively with a variety of interested communities to create a pluralist forum for social change.

In museum parlance these changes are referred to under the general rubric of the 'new museology': a paradigm shift, which had its origins in the 1970s; its gestation in the 1980s; and began to substantially manifest by the 1990s. Although no longer 'new', these shifts continue to influence museum practices in the 2000s.

In her article, "Curatorship as Social Practice" museologist Christina Kreps outlined some of the

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developments over recent decades that have challenged the object-centric model. According to Kreps, the 'new museology' was a paradigm shift that emerged from a widespread dissatisfaction with conventional interpretations of the museum and its functions and sought to re-orient itself away from strongly method and technique driven object-focused approaches. "The 'new museum' was to be people-centered, action-oriented, and devoted to social change and development" (315).

An integral contributor to the developing new museology was the subjection of the western museum in the 1980s and '90s to representational critique from academics and activists. Such a critique entailed, in the words of Sharon Macdonald, questioning and drawing attention to "how meanings come to be inscribed and by whom, and how some come to be regarded as 'right' or taken as given" (3). Macdonald notes that postcolonial and feminist academics were especially engaged in this critique and the growing "identity politics" of the era.

A growing engagement with the concept that museological /curatorial work is what Kreps (2003b) calls a 'social process', a recognition that; "people's relationships to objects are primarily social and cultural ones" (154).

This shift has particularly impacted on the practice of museum curatorship. By way of illustration we can compare two scholarly definitions of what constitutes a curator; one written in 1984 and one from 2001.

*The Manual of Curatorship*, written in 1994 by Gary Edson and David Dean define a curator as: "a staff member or consultant who is as specialist in a particular field on study and who provides information, does research and oversees the maintenance, use, and enhancement of collections" (290). Cash Cash writing in 2001 defines curatorship instead as "a social practice predicated on the principle of a fixed relation between material objects and the human environment" (140).

The shift has been towards increased self-reflexivity and a focus on greater plurality—acknowledging the needs of their diverse audiences and community stakeholders. As part of this internal reflection the role of curator has shifted from sole authority to cultural mediator—from connoisseur to community facilitator as a conduit for greater community-based conversation and audience engagement resulting in new interpretations of what museums are, and what their purpose is. This shift—away from objects and towards audiences—has been so great that it has led some scholars to question the need for museums to have standing collections at all.

### Do Museums Need Objects?

In his provocatively titled work *Do Museums Still Need Objects?* Historian Steven Conn observes that many contemporary museums are turning away from the authority of the object and towards mass entertainment (1). Conn notes that there has been an increasing retreat from object-based research in the fields of art; science and ethnography; that less object-based research seems to be occurring in museums and fewer objects are being put on display (2). The success of science centers with no standing collections, the reduction in the number of objects put on display in modern museums (23); the increasing phalanx of 'starchitect' designed museums where the building is more important than the objects in it (11), and the increase of virtual museums and collections online, all seems to indicate that conventional museum objects have had their day (1-2).

Or have they?

At the same time that all of the above is occurring, ongoing research suggests that in the digital age, more than ever, people are seeking the authenticity of the real. For example, a 2008 survey of 5,000 visitors to living history sites in the USA, found that those surveyed expressed a strong desire to commune with historically authentic objects:

respondents felt that their lives had become so crazy, so complicated, so unreal that they were seeking something real and authentic in their lives by visiting these museums. (Wilkening and Donnis 1)

A subsequent research survey aimed specifically at young audiences (in their early twenties) reported that:

seeing stuff online only made them want to see the real objects in person even more, [and that] they felt that museums were inherently authentic, largely because they have authentic objects that are unique and wonderful. (Wilkening 2)

Adding to the question 'do museums need objects?', Rainey Tisdale argues that in the current digital age we need real museum objects more than ever. "Many museum professionals," she reports "have come to believe that the increase in digital versions of objects actually enhances the value of in-person encounters with tangible, real things" (20).

Museums still need objects. Indeed, in any kind of corporate planning, one of the first thing business managers look for in a company is what is unique about it. What can it provide that the competition can't?

Despite the popularity of all sorts of info-tainments, the one thing that museums have (and other institutions don't) is significant collections. Collections are a museum's niche resource – in business speak they are the asset that gives them the advantage over their competitors.

Despite the increasing importance of technology in delivering information, including collections online, there is still overwhelming evidence to suggest that we should not be too quick to dismiss the traditional preserve of museums – the numinous object. And in fact, this is precisely the final argument that Steven Conn reaches in his above-mentioned publication.

### Curating in the Postdigital Age

While it is reassuring (but not particularly surprising) that generations Y and Z can still differentiate between virtual and real objects, this doesn't mean that museum curators can bury their heads in the collection room hoping that the digital age will simply go away.

The reality is that while digitally savvy audiences continue to feel the need to see and commune with authentic materially-present objects, the ways in which they access information about these objects (prior to, during, and after a museum visit) has changed substantially due to technological advances. In turn, the ways in which curators research and present these objects – and stories about them – has also changed.

So what are some of the changes that have occurred in museum operations and visitor behavior

due to technological advances over the last twenty years?

The most obvious technological advances over the last twenty years have actually been in data management. Since the 1990s a number of specialist data management systems have been developed for use in the museum sector. In theory at least, a curator can now access the entire collections of an institution without leaving their desk.

Moreover, the same database that tells the curator how many objects the institution holds from the Torres Strait Islands, can also tell her what they look like (through high quality images); which objects were exhibited in past exhibitions; what their prior labels were; what in-house research has been conducted on them; what the conservation requirements are; where they are stored; and who to contact for copyright clearance for display—to name just a few functions.

In addition a curator can get on the internet to search the online collection databases from other museums to find what objects they have from the Torres Strait Islands. Thus, while our curator is at this point conducting the same type of exhibition research that she would have done twenty years ago, the ease in which she can access information is substantially greater.

The major difference of course is that today, rather than in the past, the curator would be collaborating with members of the original source community to undertake this project. Despite the rise of the internet, this type of liaison still usually occurs face to face.

The development of accessible digital databases through the Internet and capacity to download images and information at a rapid rate has also changed the way non-museum staff can access collections.

Audiences can now visit museum websites through which they can easily access information about current and past exhibitions, public programs, and online collections. In many cases visitors can also contribute to general discussion forums and collections provenance data through various means such as 'tagging'; commenting on blogs; message boards; and virtual 'talk back' walls. Again, however, this represents a change in *how* visitors access museums but not a fundamental shift in *what* they can access. In the past, museum visitors were still encouraged to access and comment upon the collections; it's just that doing so took a lot more time and effort.

The rise of interactivity and the internet—in particular through Web 2.0—has led many commentators to call for a radical change in the ways museums operate. Museum analyst Lynda Kelly (2009) has commented on the issue that:

the demands of the 'information age' have raised new questions for museums. It has been argued that museums need to move from being suppliers of information to providing usable knowledge and tools for visitors to explore their own ideas and reach their own conclusions because of increasing access to technologies, such as the internet.

Gordon Freedman for example argues that internet technologies such as computers, the World Wide Web, mobile phones and email "... have put the power of communication, information gathering, and analysis in the hands of the individuals of the world" (299). Freedman argued that museums need to "evolve into a new kind of beast" (300) in order to keep up with the changes opening up to the possibility of audiences becoming mediators of information and knowledge.

Although we often hear about the possibilities of new technologies in opening up the possibilities of multiple authors for exhibitions, I have yet to hear of an example of this successfully taking place. This doesn't mean, however, that it will never happen. At present most museums seem to be merely dipping their toes in the waters.

A recent example from the Art Gallery of South Australia illustrates this point. In 2013, the Gallery mounted an exhibition that was, in theory at least, curated by the public. Labeled as "the ultimate people's choice exhibition" the project was hosted in conjunction with ABC Radio Adelaide. The public was encouraged to go online to the gallery website and select from a range of artworks in different categories by voting for their favorites. The 'winning' works were to form the basis of the exhibition.

While the media spin on the exhibition gave the illusion of a mass curated show, in reality very little actual control was given over to the audience-curators. The public was presented a range of artworks, which had already been pre-selected from the standing collections; the themes for the exhibition had also already been determined as they informed the 120 artworks that were offered up for voting. Thus, in the end the pre-selection of objects and themes, as well as the timing and execution of the exhibition remained entirely in the hand of the professional curators.

Another recent innovation did not attempt to harness public authorship, but rather enhanced individual visitor connections to museum collections by harnessing new GPS technologies. The Streetmuseum was a free app program created by the Museum of London to bring geotagged historical street views to hand held or portable mobile devices.

The program allowed user to undertake a self-guided tour of London. After programming in their route, users could then point their device at various significant sites along the way. Looking through their viewfinder they would see a 3D historic photograph overlaid on the live site – allowing user not only to see what the area looked like in the past but also to capture an image of the overlay.

While many of the available tagging apps simply allow for the opportunity of adding more white noise, allowing viewers to add commentary, pics, links to a particular geo tagged site but with no particular focus, the Streetmuseum had a well-defined purpose to encourage their audience to get out and explore London; to share their archival photograph collection with a broader audience; and to teach people more about London's unique history.

### **A Second Golden Age?**

A few years ago the Steven Conn suggested that museums are experiencing an international 'golden age' with more museums being built and visited and talked about than ever before (1). In the United States, where Conn is based, there are more than 17,500 accredited museums, and more than two million people visit some sort of museum per day, averaging around 865 million museum visits per year (2).

However, at the same time that museums are proliferating, the traditional areas of academic research and theory that feed into museums such as history, cultural studies, anthropology and art history are experiencing a period of intense self reflexivity. Conn writes:

At the turn of the twenty-first century, more people are going to

more museums than at any time in the past, and simultaneously more scholars, critics, and others are writing and talking about museums. The two phenomena are most certainly related but it does not seem to be a happy relationship. Even as museums enjoy more and more success...many who write about them express varying degrees of foreboding. (1)

There is no doubt that the internet and increasingly interactive media has transformed the way we live our daily lives—it only makes sense that it should also transform our cultural experiences. At the same time Museums need to learn to ride the wave without getting dumped into it. The best new media acts as a bridge—connecting people to places and ideas—allowing them to learn more about museum objects and historical spaces, value-adding to museum visits rather than replacing them altogether.

As museologist Elaine Gurian, has recently concluded, the core business of museums seems unchanged thus far by the adoption of internet based technology: “the museum field generally, its curators, and those academic departments focused on training curators remain at the core philosophically unchanged despite their new websites and shiny new technological reference centres” (97).

Virtual life has not replaced real life and online collections and exhibitions have not replaced real life visitations. Visitors want access to credible information about museum objects and museum exhibitions, they are not looking for Wiki-Museums. Or if they are, they are looking to the Internet community to provide that service rather than the employees of state and federally funded museums. Both provide legitimate services, but they don't necessarily need to provide the *same* service.

In the same vein, extra-museum ‘curating’ of object and ideas through social media sites such as Pinterest, Flickr, Instagram and Tumblr provide a valuable source of inspiration and a highly enjoyable form of virtual consumption. But the popular uptake of the term ‘curating’ remains as easily separable from professional practice as the prior uptake of the terms ‘doctor’ and ‘architect’. An individual who doctors an image, or is the architect of their destiny, is still not going to operate on a patient nor construct a building. While major ontological shifts have occurred within museum curatorship over the last thirty years, these changes have resulted from wider social shifts, not directly from technology. This is not to say that technology will not change the museum's ‘way of being’ in my professional lifetime—it's just to say it hasn't happened yet.

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