Curating the Everywhere Museum of Everything

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ABSTRACT

The Everywhere Museum of Everything is a research and action proposal; founded on the array of aestheticised online content, which can be purposefully and critically curated in order to create a meaningful territory of contemporary online culture, art and knowledge creation. This abundance of content is rooted in a culture of consumerism, blackboxed mobile applications and social networks. Individual experiences in the physical world have been transformed by onlineness, a combination of the pervasive use of mobile devices and applications over Internet access, used to share opinions and evidence through original and remixed media, often complemented by hashtagging. Even if the majority of this content quickly becomes irrelevant and forgotten, it can still be accessed through an augmented view of the world, as digital media is frequently anchored to locations through geotagging or referencing. This vast collection lacks systematization and classification, but presents multiple possibilities for artists, curators and scholars.

Introduction

Aestheticisation is fundamentally an economic strategy, delivered through advertising and marketing, and developed over in-built obsolescence and the need for continuous replacement and novelty, and the aesthetic styling of products and experiences. In order to become global and ubiquitous, aestheticisation thrives over the digital immaterial, and relies on the virtualization of social experiences and interactions. Individual aesthetic competence, linked to visual and other sensorial attributes, appears to override ethics and critical thinking, and has been thoroughly presented and detailed by Lipovetsky and Serroy (2013).

Digital art contributes to the fundamental equality between aesthetic forms, objects, and media (Groys 2008) where text, images and sounds are combined in an environmental continuum that conveys instant, emotional experiences (Youngblood 1970). This seamless combination thrives on an addiction to the spectacularisation of everyday situations, centred on experiences of seduction and celebration, but not limited to (or by) them.

Body modifications, music, accessories, selfies, leisure activities, but also immigration, poverty, politics, LGBTQ issues, war, abuse, torture, famine, among others, are part of the

same phenomenon, also described by Bayley as 'Ugly: the aesthetics of everything' (2013).

COVID-19 has triggered a wealth of photographic evidence of empty streets, makeshift hospitals, exhausted health workers, balcony singers, mass burials and people wearing all kinds of respiratory masks and face shields. These have become the predominant, massshared and remixed aesthetic paradigm in digital photography during the pandemic. Confinement during the pandemic has also fostered a surge in the online display of aestheticised digital content, including surrogates for live shows, gallery and museum events: streaming concerts, virtual gallery tours, online poetry collage and Zoom improvised performances. All of these have become increasingly popular and pervasive; with thousands of individual creators sharing their casually curated work online, from the seclusion of their homes.

This may trigger interrogations as to how far the massification of creativity, the spectacularisation of the mundane and their dissemination actually contribute to desensitization through repetition, eventually removing meaning, function and critical interpretation, to focus mainly on compositional aspects and ephemeral gratification, while establishing a new standard or even a new normal.

The creative slave

Consumers, who were transformed into prosumers during the Web 2.0 era, are now being transformed yet again into an autophagic combination of consumer, producer and product. The material they share, their actions and the locations they visit, the people on their contact lists, their shopping habits, tastes, personal details, and information are being collected, analysed, catalogued, sold, and used to influence their consumption and production habits.

This data gathering process is not new, but there is a lesser-mentioned symmetrical counterpart in most urban centres, where connectedness has become a commodity, similar to water and electricity. Public venues have not only recognized the importance of onlineness, as they have embraced and are actively fostering it through free Wi-Fi, as a means to deepen engagement, often using the same devices to deliver informational content, to encourage the capture of still and moving images and their upload to social networks, monitoring while routes, actions preferences (Bickersteth and Ainsley 2011).

As individuals are compelled into posting selfies, arties² or other digital media-type content, comments and reviews, their actions result in two distinct processes and perspectives:

- (1) From the institutional or corporate of the perspective visited places, individuals are directly revealing personal data regarding their preferences, tastes, friends who accompanied them and can be identified in photographs or videos, and indirectly revealing daily routines, political views and sexual orientation, among many other characteristics.
- (2) From their individual perspective, individuals are contributing to the thickening stream of digital media and information on their friends and followers' timelines, expecting to generate immediate one-click responses, comments and shares.

The common perception of the creative mind as a master and the epitome of freedom needs to be challenged, since considering the creative mind as a slave actually produces a better understanding of the inter-disciplinary creativity allure: through ingrained routines in social networks individuals engage in a reduced number of vicious circle-like behaviours, from which most of them find or seek no escape,

under the illusion of freedom (Hass 2011; Veiga, Tavares, and Alvelos 2017). Social networks rely on peer recognition as a controlling force, and drive a significant part of the ubiquitous and pervasive role of mobile technologies in society. The power of the like pressures individuals to get noticed, as social media users crave feedback and responses (Rosen 2012).

With the introduction of the timeline concept, the ever-increasing production and publication of aestheticised digital content and media, including digital art, is thus part of a contemporary paradox, embodied in its increasingly shorter life span. In order to remain present in their friends and followers' timelines, institutions individuals and alike generating more posts, seeking user engagement emotional responses much coveted viral effect. Hauffa and Groh (2019) estimate that on Facebook, on average, publication engagement disappears within thirteen days, and that the most significant interaction counts occur within the first two days.

Hundreds of millions of artified³ content items can be found, for example, on YouTube (over 500 h of video uploaded every minute), Instagram (one billion monthly active users), TikTok (800 million monthly active users), Twitter (340 million monthly active users) or Pinterest (322 million monthly active users). #art is the 16th most popular hashtag on Instagram and registers over 621 million occurrences, along with 51 million for #digitalart and 5 million for #digitalartist.⁵

A quick search on Google with the string digital art returned⁶ an excess of 5.470 million results, including original digital illustrations, photo manipulations, 3D renderings, anime, cartoons, memes and digital copies of renowned artworks alike.

Social networks have also contributed to the massification of—mostly aimless—curatorship, and the paradigm notably introduced by Pinterest—the first social network focused on

individual curation, whose main page consists in a constantly novel mosaic of images, with infinite scrolling, sorted by date of publication—depicts the effective corporate assumption of both the ephemeral nature and the large scale of individual-generated content.

Blackboxing

Mobile devices are now responsible for more than half of web traffic, as individuals predominantly use blackboxed applications rather than mobile web browsers.7 Digital creators, artists included, engage in data codification processes through mobile devices and applications, leading to the increasing popularity of blackboxing, defined by Latour as 'the way scientific and technical work is made invisible by its own success' (1999, 304). These easy and appealing to use black boxes hide complex functionalities, purposes limitations. They stand for a kind of know-how without knowing, and have been thoroughly discussed by Stiegler (2010). Black boxes allow individuals to apprehend, capture, generate, transmit, duplicate, replicate, manipulate, remix, edit, store, and retrieve multi-sensory digitally encoded information.

The belief that individual creativity and expression is boundless, while at the same time it depends upon the use of the above-mentioned black boxes, is widespread and fostered. Adobe Photoshop is the ultimate example of a black box, as even the verb to photoshop and the adjective photoshopped are now officially adopted terms, referring to the process of altering a photographic image, even though the actual low-level bit-based pixel operations remain a mystery to the majority of its users.

Black boxes are among the most profound technologies: those that disappear, weaving themselves into the fabric of everyday life until they are indistinguishable (Weiser 1999), yet impenetrable. The blackboxed nature of this

weaving and the implied blurring of concepts leads to the indisputability of their pronounced impacts in the concept of the self, of reality, of metaphysics and all their interactions (Floridi 2015). 'Fake: The Real Deal?', 9 an exhibition that explored and blurred the concept of authenticity from a variety of angles, presented the following claim: 'From fake meat to fake emotions, if faking it gets the job done, who cares?' (Catts et al. 2018). If the process of blurring authenticity and fakeness may shock, it is certainly not dissimilar in nature to the well established blurring of virtuality and physicality, or that of human, machine and nature.

Digital urban art

The individual production of aestheticised content is often geo-referenced, since location has regained its importance in the age of globalization, through the need to provide evidence of visits to trendy (or otherwise perceived as significant) places.

Blanché clearly distinguishes between graffiti, street-art and urban art. He proposes the umbrella term Urban Art as more appropriate 'for any art in the style of Street Art, Style Writing or mural art' (Blanché 2015, 38). As a recent phenomenon it can unsurprisingly be appreciated in museums, such as Urban Museum Nation, 10 the of Urban and Contemporary Art, 11 the Punto Urban Art Museum, 12 or the Underdogs, 13 as well as in art galleries and auctions.¹⁴ However, it is within the original urban context that the author posits the concept of digital urban art, to be understood as all aestheticised digital content that is linked (either through geo-referencing or geo-tagging) to physical locations.

If, in the physical world, tagging emerged as a form of graffiti, selectively used as a personal or crew signature, in the digital world tagging was formally introduced as a means to organize, manage, and search content. Since its introduction into social media networks, tagging is also used as a way to connect, communicate, develop and maintain relationships, and most individuals are both used to tagging and getting tagged.

In the augmented world individuals will, in all probability, use (hash)tags as classification, comment or protest, and tag their friends, celebrities or targets so that their digital urban art, including likes and comments, will generate the most social influence, peer pressure, popularity, entertainment, instant gratification, affection, and convenience (Dhir, Chen, and Chen 2015). The massification of aestheticised digital content has thus consistently been fuelled by blackboxing and blurring, fostered by platforms and mobile applications, such as Instagram, YouTube and TikTok, only to name three of the most widespread and popular, to create vast layers of artified tagged urban art.

Digital images potentially contain or may feed extensions beyond their aesthetic attributes, such as Exif metadata, morphing, eye tracking, face recognition, biometric data, cyber security metrics, computer glitches, machine learning and Generative Adversarial Networks, among others. Mass-surveillance already uses most of these techniques, but the extent of their potential remains mostly unknown for the ordinary citizen.

This can be rendered visible by artistic and cultural interventions over digital urban art, as they enhance locative literacy: the ability to read, write and communicate is vital for an individual to act, to take power, to have agency. The awareness of how flows and layers of information intersect with and augment a person's locality, and the ability to intervene on this level, are further amplifications of this literacy. These interventions digitally enhance urban locations by creating a neuronal network, a digital noosphere (Ascott 2007), a dynamic testimony of our OnLife (Floridi 2015).

The Everywhere Museum of Everything

The Everywhere Museum of Everything (TEME) is a sobriquet for the global array of geo-tagged and geo-referenced digital urban art, incessantly produced and uploaded worldwide, even inside other museums, potentially transforming urban space into the largest augmented reality (AR) exhibition ever to exist.

Museum is a powerful and respected word, especially since the institutionalization of Museology in 1977 (Soares 2019) evoking monumental spaces and vast collections of artefacts. Its deliberate use in this context is not only motivated by the vastness of TEME's potential collection, but it is also inspired by the emergence of the Nouvelle Muséologie and the challenging of the traditional museum model (Rodney 2019) into transdisciplinarity, public and social-service orientation (Hein 1998), as well as the adoption of digital strategies by most reference museums (Pagel and Donahue 2013).

In 1920 there were around 1.200 museums in the USA, in 1980 the number had risen to 8.000, and in 2017 there were over 35.000 museums. 15 The European Group on Museum Statistics estimates around 20.000 museums in Europe. 16 Not all museums are art museums, but all museums convey an aestheticised view of their collections and are nowadays permeable to art and art practices. Contemporary examples such as the Museum of Bad Art,17 Leila's Hair Museum, 18 the Cup Noodles Museum, 19 The Museum Of Broken Relationships, 20 the Museum for Peace²¹ or the Sulabh International Museum of Toilets, 22 are a clear sign that anything and everything can be the subject of aesthetic musings-far from implying that everything in a museum must be considered as

The concept of museum is also challenged by several commercial initiatives such as the

Museum of Selfies,²³ The Museum of Candy²⁴ or The Museum of Feelings,²⁵ who are but examples of corporate creativity. However, they reinforce an actual perception: museums can specialise in any subject, and the whole Earth has become both the subject and target of mundane aesthetics (Whitfield and de Destefani 2011).

But TEME wishes to go beyond the basic layers of digital urban art. These layers can be regarded as prima materia (in terms of curating, art and academic practice) with more than just enthusiastic or opportunistic monetization goals in mind. Hacking them and the underlying technologies and networks, baring the political intentionality behind the massification of individual creativity through blackboxing, blurring and the full extent of the role undertaken by mobile devices, is still a relatively unexplored ground for most digital artists.

TEME will highlight and showcase the more complex artworks and research that critically use those digital urban art layers in order to expose and de-blur underlying intentions and mechanisms. Pioneering examples include artworks focused on sex workers (Ryan 2014), human emotions in urban areas (Nold 2018), eavesdropping on private conversations (Collins and Linsley 2019), food and water caches for migrants (Cardenas et al. 2009), challenging the integrity of national borders (Oliver 2012), city demographics social dynamics and (Mohammady and Culotta 2014), brand information (Nam, Joshi, and Kannan 2017), determining home locations (Jurgens et al. 2015), and inferring likely friends (Sadilek, Kautz, and Bigham 2012).

These artworks provide good examples of what can be achieved. However, initiatives such as the above are still scattered and isolated in time and geography, and could thus benefit from a systematic effort in collecting, cataloguing and presenting them to worldwide audiences,

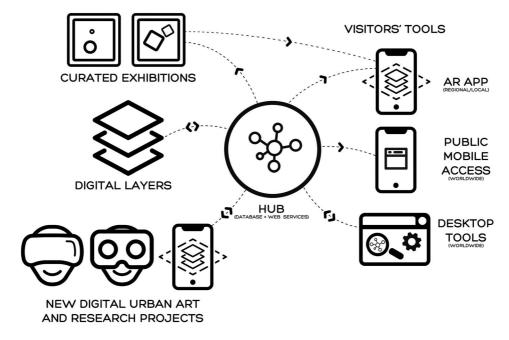


Figure 1. Conceptual architecture of the Everywhere Museum of Everything. Source: author.

accompanied by a repertoire of communication strategies, which simultaneously educate and incite the public into layered contextualization and critical appreciation.

Developing the Everywhere Museum of Everything

Long-established museums are making growing efforts in order to reach connected audiences, with over 1000 current offers of virtual tours and online collections on Google Arts & Culture alone (Sood 2016). During the COVID-19 pandemic the Network of European Museum Organizations (NEMO 2020, 1) advised its members 'to acknowledge that the digital museum is not a distant promise', therefore asking '(...) stakeholders to increase their digital efforts in the future (...). Allowing digital services and activities of museums and the engagement of digital audiences as factors of success in assessment frameworks is proving more important every day.'

TEME is an online museum by inception, which can be further developed by purposefully

curating its vast collection. Purposeful is a key word in this endeavour, since to this day TEME has been mostly disjointly and accidentally curated.

Its development relies on an online central hub, consisting of a database and web services, where its full catalogue is classified and georeferenced, as shown on Figure 1. Rather than present new classification solutions, the author posits the analysis, adaptation and use of prior work, such as the Getty's Categories for the Description of Works of Art (CDWA) and the Cultural Objects Name Authority (CONA);²⁶ as well as the two-decade work already implemented at ARTstor.²⁷

TEME is already undergoing an initial survey, in order to catalogue relevant and extant artworks of digital urban art. TEME will also foster the development of new artworks over the existing digital urban art layers, aimed at revealing new insights, providing new experiences or site-specific interventions, facilitating their enjoyment at their respective locations and contexts through thematic (including keyword, author, subject, media type

and date) and geographic curation (by creating visitor routes at international, national, regional or local levels).

But TEME will also foster the development of novel AR applications for mobile devices that allow urban audiences to experience, understand and explore the digital layers around them. A comparative analysis of existing AR toolkits, such as Wikitude,²⁸ Vuforia²⁹ and Artoolkit,³⁰ is already underway, as well as a cross-analysis of their capabilities to interface with relevant social networks APIs.

These goals alone already present enough research potential and complexity, contributing to developing TEME's greater mission: bringing together artists, curators and scholars, raising awareness, promoting critical creation and thinking, while improving the understanding of digital urban art, its societal impacts and potential.

Diversification of curatorial, theoretical and educational methodologies is crucial for discovering the best suited contexts, collaborative environments communicative means for digital art. It has become more feasible and more effective by such factors as the enhanced accessibility to and manipulability of information, the speed and ease of systematic resource building, and the power of networking, which all significantly evolved with the digital technology. These decisive factors and layers of digital culture set up a strong context for critical assessment of some long-established academic practices that have become inert, counterproductive and damaging to the promotion of digital art (Grba 2018, 91).

The development of a first version of the project will progress along the following stages:

- (1) Classification of extant artworks that make use of public digital urban art layers (ongoing).
- (2) Development of AR mobile tools for the exploration of existing digital urban art layers (on-going).

- (3) Selection of pilot locations where those AR tools can be used for novel augmented reality urban art pilot projects and their development.
- (4) Overall validation of TEME's classification methodology based on steps 1 and 3, with ensuing adjustments.
- (5) Launch of a worldwide open call for the inscription of similar artworks.
- (6) Launch of a public web-based interface where the collected information is made available, curated and presented, promoting the use of TEME's AR tools by audiences, scholars and artists.

A pilot is expected during the third quarter of 2021.

Conclusion

There are currently fewer barriers to becoming a digital artist; there is more public art, more media-based and dematerialized art practices, virtual and augmented interventions, online art events (Veiga, Tavares, and Alvelos 2017), but not enough critical thinking and questioning. Many active and participating individuals, generating their own artified content, are challenging the conventional identity of the artist.

There is no longer a single art audience or a universal definition of what contemporary and digital art can be or do. Institutional hegemony in the naming of what is art and what is not has been challenged and disregarded under (mostly commercial) appeals to the freedom of selfexpression through increasingly affordable and ubiquitous blackboxed technology, resulting in a mass-production of aestheticised and artified digital content.

Hacking those black boxes and their output can foster creative processes through which artists and scholars invite audiences to acknowledge their position in the supply chain for giant multinationals, as they recombine those same technologies and networks into freed creation tools, teasing and taunting their original purpose.

This is art (...) that refuses to resign at the advent of a global formal, abstract system, but uses it as both the invitation and the means to question the very limits and boundaries of that system, in the name of emancipation. (Nash 2017, 123)

In order to achieve that emancipation, digital art must regard technology as a tool, not a master: technology should not be used only to obfuscate and blur those underlying connections. That very same technology can be used to freely and critically analyse and expose hidden relations and meaning. Technology can also be driven by the pursuit of knowledge, art and culture, rather than entertainment, self-gratification and aestheticisation alone.

This can be further amplified through the use of mobile technologies: the devices already used in connecting individual stories to their original locations will then be able to render visible those networked layers of hidden testimony and provide further insights, transforming the perception of those locations from mundane to haunted, exposing and exploring interwoven textures, connections, implications and revelations in social and physical realities (Sample 2014).

Museums are among the best-placed institutions to help steward humanity's journey toward a more sustainable future, through their ability to reach diverse audiences, delivering innovative formal and informal learning programmes, developing critical thinking and vision, providing context and seeking relevant social impact while assuming a non-neutral role in shaping the journey towards sustainability and circular economies. Let us purposefully curate the Everywhere Museum of Everything.

Notes

- See https://www.designboom.com/art/ instagram-photos-look-the-same-instarepeat-07-30-2018/, accessed 2020/04/15.
- 2. An artie is a selfie taken next to an artwork, as evidence of visit.
- 3. To artify = to incorporate art elements and techniques or design principles (source: Urban Dictionary).
- 4. Source: https://www.statista.com/, accessed 2020/04/15.
- Source: https://influencermarketinghub.com/ 25-most-popular-instagram-hashtags/, accessed 2020/04/15.
- 6. Source: https://www.google.com/, accessed 2020/04/15.
- Source: http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/cache/ infographs/ict/bloc-1a.html, accessed 2020/ 04/15.
- 8. See https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/photoshop, accessed 2020/04/15.
- 9. https://dublin.sciencegallery.com/fake/, accessed 2020/04/15.
- 10. https://urban-nation.com/, accessed 2020/04/
- 11. https://www.muca.eu/en/, accessed 2020/06/ 04.
- 12. http://puntourbanartmuseum.org/, accessed 2020/06/04.
- 13. https://www.under-dogs.net/, accessed 2020/ 06/04.
- 14. https://www.tateward.com/departments/urban-art, accessed 2020/06/04.
- 15. https://www.imls.gov/news-events/newsreleases/government-doubles-officialestimate-there-are-35000-active-museums-us, accessed 2020/04/15.
- 16. http://www.egmus.eu, accessed 2020/04/15.
- 17. http://museumofbadart.org/, accessed 2020/ 04/15.
- 18. https://www.atlasobscura.com/places/leilasha ir-museum, accessed 2020/04/15.
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