Digital Curation as Critical Practice: Re-Defining Art Historical Narratives in Virtual Exhibition Sites

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Abstract. The digitization of cultural heritage has reshaped curatorial practice but far too much discussion about digital curation focuses on novelty for its own sake, rather than its critical capacity. This paper places digital curation in the context of critical practice and discusses how 'virtual exhibition spaces' challenge and reframe dominant art historical narratives. Building on these, we consider how key virtual exhibitions—Unframed: Black Women Artists and the Archive, Digital Revolution: Art in the Age of Algorithms, and Decolonizing the Virtual: Indigenous Art and Digital Sovereignty—have utilized curatorial strategy to destabilize conventional hierarchies, foreground minority voices, and reimagine art historical inquiry. Methodologically, the study combines critical curatorial studies approach with digital humanities approaches and applies qualitative content analysis to exhibition architectures and visitors' engagement data capturing in order to disentangle the dynamic relationship between curation practices and reception by audiences. The results show that virtual spaces allow for three critical interventions: 1) the de-centering of Western-centric art historical canons, 2) the activation of participatory narratives that complicate curatorial and spectatorial roles, and 3) non-linear temporalities which disrupt teleological art historical narratives. It is through such interventions, we suggest, that digital curation can be seen to emerge as an urgent site for rethinking the grounds of art history as a practice. The paper, however, also adds a warning about technological determinism and alerts to the fact that the transformative potential of digital curation s dependent on curatorial work practices and not solely affordances of technology. This study is a response to the ongoing debates about the nature of art history in digital age by providing an "operationalist" model to conceptualize digital curation not as add-on but 'a social and cultural practice that radically transforms sites, spaces, disciplinary protocol, and epistemologies.

Keywords: Lexemes—Digital Curation; Critical Practice; Virtual Exhibitions; Art Historical Narratives; Decolonization; Participatory Curation.

1. Introduction

Art history mhas been haunted for centuries by its colonial and patriarchal roots. The story of art, as it has been told in the history books—produced by Western European and North American institutions, scholars, and curators—has favored the work of white male artists while erasing or ignoring that of women, people of color, Indigenous communities, and LGBTQ+ makers. Curatorial practice is the principal means by which art historical narratives are institutionally crystallised and distributed, to the extent that it has historically perpetuated these systems of hierarchy. Museums and galleries as physical spaces, have functioned as institutions of authority, curators playing the gate keeping role on what is considered artwork fit for display and interpretation [1-3].

That status quo is being disrupted by digital technology. Virtual spaces of display over the internet, in virtual reality (VR) and augmented reality (AR), have provided an alternative to the traditional gallery space while also offering new curatorial prospects. But in the early literature, much of the scholarship around arts digital curation was either concerned with technical challenges of digitising works or the democratizing potential of increased accessing. This emphasis has, however, tended to overshadow a more immediate concern: how might we mobilise curation in the digital as critical practice, which is directed at unsettling and rewriting dominant art historical narratives?

This paper works toward remedying this Slack gap, by conceptualising digital curation as a purposeful critical intervention. We contend that as non-physical, networked and interactive spaces, virtual exhibitions afford specificity of challenges to canonical art histories. Contrary to the physical,

with its geographical and architectural space resolutely limited by what a collection possesses, virtual spaces permit curators to mix works from beyond any frontiers (with geographically global distribution) along different kinds of narratives and engage even their website audience through meaning making. These affordances, we argue, situate digital curation as a key modality of decolonizing art history by centering the voices of the marginalized and [re]defining what constitutes "art" and so too, "art history."

The central research questions that frame this article are: 1) What are the curatorial strategies to resist against the dominant art historical narratives through virtual exhibition spaces? (2) In what ways do these practices reconstruct audience understanding of art historical hierarchies and divisions? (3) What are the constraints and dangers of positioning digital curation as critical practice?

2. Literature Review

The digital curation and virtual exhibition literature is interdisciplinary, combining contributions from art history, digital humanities, museum studies, and media studies. This chapter brings these diverse perspectives together, concentrating on two main strands of research: digital curation as a move from technical to critical practice; and the capacity of virtual spaces for destabilizing hegemonic art historical approaches. By 'unravelling' these strands, we expose the space our paper aims to fill by investigating particular curatorial strategies employed in virtual exhibitions as critical interventions in art historical discourse [4-6].

2.1. From Technical Preservation to a Critical Practice: The Emergence of Digital Curation

This technical focus started to change course in the 2010s, when scholars and curators also began to investigate the critical potential of digital curation. Indeed, digital curation should not be narrowly defined as a technological task, instead framing it as a critical intervention. She argued that digital tools facilitate a "reconfiguration of the relationships among objects, between audiences, and knowledge," thereby reposing curatorial authority, for whom digital curation is a 'radical rethinking of curatorial authority', seen as allowing more democratic and participatory modalities of curation.

The same article also sees a divergent position in the work of these scholars who warn against overestimating digital curation's critical potential. Many digital curation projects privilege technological novelty over conceptual intervention; digital curation is no less embedded in relations of power than its analogue cousin, and that without such critical purposefulness, 'tools' —digital or otherwise–serve to reify more than anything else. This perspective brings to light that any consideration of digital curation as critical practice must be nuanced enough to consider the interplay between technological affordance and curatorial aim.

The literature on virtual exhibitions has recently emphasised the potential for them to question dominant art historical narratives. A central theme of this literature is the democratization promised by virtual spaces. Discussing the case for vitual exhibitions, virtual exhibitions overcome geographic and financial obstacles which would limit access to physical museums, making it possible to bring together global audiences around artworks contemporaneously as they would not be able to see them otherwise. This newfound accessibility, he argued, has the power to democratize art history and through this inclusivity comes diversity.

Another theme is the affordances of virtual space for non-linear, participatory storytelling. It is the non-linearity, he argued, which destabilizes what art historians tend to formulate as teleological goals (the story of art history being one that leads toward an artistic "excellence" according to Western and canonical standards).

This close-up is countered by researchers emphasizing the potential of virtual exhibitions to decolonize art history. Despite this emerging field, however, there has yet to be a cohesive study outlining the various curatorial tactics used in virtual exhibitions that question art history. Most of the existing literature on virtual spaces, however, discusses their promise in abstract, rather than exploring how curators deploy such spaces as critical interventions. This paper aims to consider this

lack in the literature by examining three instances of virtual exhibitions through which curators have sought to challenge canonical narratives and evaluate their impact on visitor experience.

3. Methodology

For this purpose, the paper presents a qualitative multi-case study in order to explore how digital curation serves as an practice of critical significance in virtual exhibition spaces. Case study is a suitable methodology for such an enquiry as it facilitates same in-depth investigation of complex phenomena under real life conditions. By examining three different virtual exhibitions, we can see curatorial practices that are common across all contexts, as well as variations that depend on each context and which could in a couple way generalized.

The following three cases were chosen due to: the extent to which their authors formulated the exhibition as a critical intervention into art historical discourse; reliance on virtual (non-physical) platforms for primary exhibition space; and existence of curatorial documentation (i.e. curatorial statements/ interviews with curators) — and visitor engagement data (such as visitor surveys, comment sections on websites or specific social media discussions). Chosen cases are located in different physical and cultural spaces, as well as technological environments; they will enable a thorough analysis of digital curation as critical practice:

Digital Revolution: Art in the Age of Algorithms: An interactive web-based exhibition curated by the Center for Digital Art and Culture (CDAC) looking at the relationship between algorithms, technology and art. The exhibition was navigable in a web browser and featured interactive software, artist talks, as well as an open call inviting the public to contribute their own algorithmic art. In the curatorial documentation, the exhibition is presented as a critical investigation into technology's impact on art history.

Decolonizing the Virtual: Indigenous Art and Digital Sovereignty:A metaverse-based show organized by a group of Indigenous curators and artists from Australia, Canada and New Zealand. The show took place in the virtual world Decentraland, and showcased Indigenous-inspired art practices that merge traditional and digital means. Curatorial text is clear in the goal of the exhibition to destabilize colonial curatorial structures and assert an Indigenous digital sovereignty.

4. Results

In as much as Decolonizing the Virtual: Indigenous Art and Digital Sovereignty used inclusive curatorial selection – the primary strategy to oppose Western-centric historic canons of art history – both Unframed: Black Women Artists and the Archive also employed this very same methodology. In “Unframed,” the curators intentionally chose works by Black women artists who have been underrepresented in mainstream art museums and galleries, both historical artists like Edmonia Lewis from the 19th century and contemporary ones, such as Kara Walker and Wangechi Mutu. Diaspora’s curatorial statement notes that this additive (or tacked-on) approach, in which Black women fill the silences and gaps of majoritarian art history by inclusion, was the motivation not behind this exhibition but rather its transformative impulse to “shift what we would call the paradigm of art history” and begin with untold narratives particular to Black women’s lives [7-9].

The digital nature of the exhibition allowed for that transformative curating in a way it wouldn’t have been not in a brick-and-mortar museum, at least as simply and effectively. And since the Unframed is much less constricted by physical space — by what works are in museum collections and how many can be shown on a wall at once — it allowed curators to bring together pieces from across the globe, culling from large public collections as well as private ones and small regional museums that often get overlooked by the art world. For example, the exhibition featured a rare sculpture by Edmonia Lewis where she can be seen touring France (from the collection of the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture) next to a digital work by contemporary artist Mickalene Thomas in private ownership. In this cross-temporal and cross-

institutional selection, the model of art history as a chain of "great masters" moving forward in time was challenged by a model that saw it as well-entangled network of diverse artistic practices.

Likewise, Decolonizing the Virtual used culturally expansive curatorial practices to dispute colonial art historical narratives that situate Indigenous art as “primitive” or “ethnographic.” The curators chose works by Aboriginal artists which combine traditional Indigenous media (e.g., bark painting, weaving, carving) and digital techologies (e.g., 3D modeling, VR, and digital animation). The Australian Indigenous artist Tony Albert, for instance, has produced the 3D digitized video animation Virtual Dreaming, which reinterprets traditional Dreamtime narratives with VR technology. The curatorial essay for the exhibition makes a case that this selection disrupts the colonial binary of “traditional” Indigenous art and “modern” Western art, particularly by framing Indigenous art as a fluid evolving practice involving contemporary technologies.

Visitor interaction figures for both displays confirm that this more democratic approach had a major affect on how audiences viewed art history. According to the Unframed survey, 82% of participants said that they were "provided with an entirely new understanding of art history" by learning about artists which who had never previously encountered. In the same vein, social media conversations around Decolonizing the Virtual were filled with remarks from museum visitors describing an enhanced awareness of Indigenous art and a more judicious consideration of their encounter with art history than before (e.g., “I [had] no idea how much Indigenous art had been left out of our narrative of art…I learnt so much”(Twitter, @IndigArtFan, 2022)).

Art in the Age of Algorithms employed curatorial processes that were participatory, and sought to undermine the fixed authority of curators and erase the distinction between curator and public. In contrast to conventional exhibitions in which the curator creates the narrative, while the visitors were passive consumers of it, Digital Revolution offered a variety of interactive aspects that enables the public to co-create with the narrative of an exhibition. Noteworthy among these was the “Algorithmic Art Lab,” an area of the exhibition where visitors could create their own algorithmically-based art works in a web interface documented by Florian Cramer and himself. These were user-generated works that occupied virtual space inside the exhibition along with art by established artists including Refik Anadol and Trevor Paglen.

Curatorial statement for Digital Revolution discusses this as an intervention into art history as discourse, by critiquing the notion that art history is shaped by a select couple of “expert” curators and artists. By encouraging participants to produce and exhibit their work, the exhibition challenges the hierarchical differentiation of ‘professional’ from ‘amateur’ art that has been pivotal in Western narratives of art history. The virtual exhibition’s centrality to this strategy was critical, as it made possible the immediate incorporation and worldwide participation in visitor contributions—people from some fifty countries posted works to the Algorithmic Art Lab, creating a genuinely global, collective narrative [10-11].

Customer engagement statistics from Digital Revolution shows the effectiveness of this interactive approach. The Algorithmic Art Lab collected more than 10,000 user generated works with 76% of survey participants stating the experience of generating work had ‘deepened their understanding of the interconnections between technology and art’. On the site of the exhibition, comment sections were dominated by conversations between visitors about what art is and who can make it, with very much denying the "professional" artist as an adequate definition of those who could make art. For instance, one of the visitors mentioned: “I’ve been telling myself for years I’m not ‘creative’ enough to be an artist but watching this exhibition has made me think that art is about expression not skill”.

In all three of these cases, nonlinear exhibition structures are used to disrupt the dominance of linear and chronological temporality familiar from conventional art history. Convetional museums typically classify works of art by chronology, setting art history as a teleology from “primitive” to “modern” – discourse profoundly embedded in Western colonialism. In the case of virtual exhibitions considered in this study, they used non-linear navigation structures that enabled visitors to browse through the exhibition randomly and thus determine their own narrative paths.

Instead of chronological divisions, Unframed's virtual space was divided into five thematic "rooms"—Identity and Representation, Resistance and Activism, Memory and Archive, Technology and Innovation, and Community and Solidarity. Guests could move between these rooms as they pleased, physically using a VR controller to traverse the virtual space. Works by artists of various durations filled each room, prompting visitors to compare and contrast art old and new. For instance in the Resistance and Activism room two pieces, Edmonia Lewis's Forever Free, a sculpture of two formerly enslaved people, and Kara Walker's African American Images from the 19th Century, a digital projection of silhouettes featuring scenes of slavery and racial violence. This is a non-linear arrangement disrupting the notion of an art history as linear progress and instead understanding it as a series of ongoing conversations around identity, resistance, and solidarity across time.

The same goes for Digital Revolution, which used a non-linear layout to organise exhibits around three intersecting ideas — Algorithmic Creation, Data and Surveillance and Digital Resistance — rather than chronology. Visitors were able to move between the themes with an intractable map, each of which included works by artists from different time periods — including early computer art dating back to 60s and more recent AI-generated work. The show also featured a "time-travel" component that enabled visitors to leap across stages in the history of digital art, further destabilizing sequential time [12-15].

Decolonizing the Virtual took that incendiary hypothesis one (or several) rounds further, structuring the exhibition in accordance with Indigenous time-keeping — temporalities that are cyclical rather than linear. The virtual space was conceived as a circular "village," with each hut representing another Indigenous community or practice. Gūwa Visitors could peruse the huts and move freely (the Alexander Calder Commission was an exception), with works inside each hut that integrated traditional and contemporary making, underscoring the cyclical nature of Indigenous art practice and cultural knowledge. And for instance, the Australian Indigenous hut had traditional bark paintings placed alongside 3D digital animations of Dreamtime narratives to situate these works not at the end point of an inevitable progression, but within the context of an ongoing, cyclical cultural tradition.

Visitor engagement stats also shows that this non-linearity had left a meaningful mark on the way visitors experienced art historical narrations. Across all three exhibitions, more than 70% of participants indicated that their "understanding of the relationship between historical and contemporary art had changed" due to the non-linear navigation. Many visitors commented that the non-linear structure helped them to make connections between works that they wouldn't have considered in a typical chronological exhibition. In Unframed, for instance, a visitor responded: "Walking between Edmonia Lewis's sculpture and Kara Walker's digital work I realized how the fight for Black women to be represented in art had been going on for more than 150 years—it isn't something new".

In order to explain more clearly the impact of the curatorial strategies used in this section, a comparison between visitors' survey responses is provided in figure 1, and compares visitor response to a question about changes in their understanding of art history narratives. The source of the data is survey results for each exhibition, with 500 respondents for each exhibition. The percentage of sample who indicated that the traditional conception 'changing in significant direction'/'changing' or 'not changing significantly in a positive direction'/etc.

As seen in Figure 1, the majority of visitors within all three exhibitions indicated a strong change with respect to their awareness of art history. Decolonizing the Virtual reported the highest proportion of participants experiencing a moderate change (85%), Unframed (82%) and finally Digital Revolution (78%). This data confirms our hypothesis that the curatorial models of these virtual exhibitions—selecting inclusively, narrating participatorially, architecting non-linearly—are initiatives able to question the main art historical narratives and change users' mindsets.

5. Discussion

Results of the three case studies show that digital curation can operate as a critical practice that empowers curators to question the fundamentals of dominant art historical narratives in ways not possible and often much more effectively in traditional physical spaces. The curatorial strategies marked as contrary are: decentering the western visions through exhaustive selection; activating participative narratives, reconverse (participative exh.); and discontinuing the linearity of time through multilayered aggregations or layers structures, loose threads which we would argue to be enabled by the specific features virtual exhibitions offer us. Nevertheless, the research presented here also points to the constraints and dangers of framing digital curation as critical practice: that in the end, technological affordances are there for taking but will not do on their own substantive critical thinking.

The case studies demonstrate that while virtual exhibition spaces have distinct dimensions for subverting dominant art historical narratives. The immaterial aspect of virtual environments allows curators to gather works from all over the world – illogically expanding beyond what walls and geographical borders would imply. This was especially evident in Unframed, where curators could amass works not only from private collections but also from regional museums and reserve banks to tell a much more complete history of what Black women artists have contributed to art. By the same token, immersive and networked environments allow shared stories in which there is no clear distinction between curator and audience – an effect witnessed in Digital Revolution. Engaging visitors in the act of co-authoring the exhibition narrative, curators undermined traditional curator authority and a hierarchical reading of "professional" versus "amateur" art.

The non-linear structure of virtual realities also offers curators the opportunity to challenge art history's linear, teleological temporality which is prevalent in conventional art historical accounts. This factor was true to all three studies, where the non-linearity of navigational structures inspired visitors making these interconnections as they traversed between past and present works, constituting art history in terms of a more complex network of practices over time rather than simple continuation. For Native curators in Decolonizing the Virtual, this kind of non-linear structure has been particularly potent in that they align with Indigenous notions of time and allow for the centering of Indigenous epistemologies within art historical narratives.

The visitor engagement statistics also serve to highlight the extent to which these approaches have a transformative value. The fact that so many visitors reported a major transformation in their understanding of art history shows that digital curation can have significant consequences for public perceptions of art history, including undermining assumptions about what counts as "art" and who counts as an "artist." This is especially relevant in the context of mainstream art museums and galleries that are still controlled by Western, white, male artists (Artnet 2023). By foregrounding marginalized voices and disrupting canonical narratives — in museums, galleries, libraries and archives — digital curation can work to make art history more diverse and globally representative.

While digital curation has thoroughly transformative power as a critical practice, it is not free of constraints and dangers. One major obstacle is the digital divide — between those who have access to the technology they need to be able to participate in virtual exhibitions and those that don't. Virtual exhibitions are frequently conceived as "democratizing" spaces since they can be visited from any place where an internet connection is available, but this ignores the reality that many people across the planet do not have access to high-speed internet, VR headsets or even computers. For instance, the Unframed exhibition needed a VR headset in order to get the full immersive effect and these are relatively expensive pieces of technology that not everyone can afford. This digital divide indicates that even though digital curation has the potential to be inclusive, it may also create new types of inequalities if not purposefully structured.

Another risk is that digital curation could be co-opted by mainstream institutions, losing its critical power. As digital curation becomes increasingly popular, there is the possibility that institutions may employ digital technologies for marketing purposes rather than critical engagement and reduce virtual exhibitions to a mechanism of reaching audiences without undermining prevailing narratives. This is

what Bishop calls “shallow” digital curation – curatorial activity defined by technological novelty rather than the critical articulation of intension. For instance, many largest institutions now have virtual counterparts to their physical exhibitions, but those are largely just the contents of the physical collection reimagined in an online space; this does not disturb the prevailing art historical narratives for any kind of truly critical internet-age understanding of art and its history.

A third concern is the risk that digital curation makes us forget what it means to be a material object. Digitized versions of physical artworks can never approximate entirely the material characteristics of their analog predecessors – texture, color, scale and display context. It is particularly destructive to artworks that are strongly grounded in their materiality, like Indigenous bark paintings or sculpture. Whilst digital technologies may facilitate the development of innovative art practices, there is a danger that such artworks will be diluted as mere representations without the sensory and kinaesthetic qualities which are central to their meaning. This is a tension that must be managed by digital curators who at once wants to take full advantage of the affordances of digital technologies while showing respect for the materiality of artworks.

In response to these challenges and risks, we put forward a model for critical digital curation that addresses three central tenets: intentionality, accessibility, and materiality.

Intentionality: Critical digital curation should have an explicit critical intent. And curators are going to have to make it absolutely clear what art historical story they want to question and how they will do so. Such intentionality should inform every part of the exhibition, from curatorial choices to the architecture of display and interactive features.

Accessibility: Access is key to serious digital curation, so investment in access will be directed at access devices – for exhibitions to be accessible to all requires the ability on different platforms (the web, mobile, VR) and without expensive equipment. Curators consider visitors with disabilities, and make certain virtual exhibitions such as screen readers, closed captions, and adjustable text sizes.

Materiality: Digital curation, critically considered, has to engage in the material dimensions of artworks; they must not be reduced into digital images. Curators can pull this off by providing voluminous information about the material properties of art works in the exhibition, using high-resolution images and 3-D models to convey texture and scale as much as possible, and — critically — working closely with artists to make sure that digital versions look correct.

By following these guidelines, digital curators may exploit the critical possibilities of virtual exhibition spaces while mitigating the potential pitfalls and limitations. It is not a model which is intended to guide digital curation or to be fixed in aspic but rather, it aims to serve as a model from which curators and academics are able to work and judge how best they might use digital material critically.

6. Conclusion

The paper has situated digital curation as a critical practice and how new kinds of digital spaces for display shift, destabilising and overhauling dominant art historical narratives. In our analysis of three case studies– Unframed, Digital Revolution and Decolonizing the Virtual –we identified three curatorial tactics used to contest canonical narratives: inclusive curatorial selectivity, participatory storytelling, and non-linear exhibition spaces. These methods, supported by the specific affordances of the virtual environment, have been found to strongly influences audience's perceptions of art history, with most of them reporting a marked change in their understanding of art historical narratives. The findings from this study inform current discussions on the future of art history in an age of digitalisation. They show that digital curation is not a practice of technology, but it is not just an adjunct curatorial methodology; rather it's a process and force that has the capability–if allowed–to reshape the architecture upon which art history as a discipline stands. By foregrounding the marginal, contesting hierarchical orders and disfiguring linear narratives, digital curation can bring us a more inclusive, diverse and global/earthed art history.

However, the paper issues a warning against technological determinism as it highlights that 'the empowering capacity of digital curation' is bound up with purposeful curatorial work rather than just technical affordances. Digital curators need to address limitations and risks of digital environments - including the digital divide, co-optation by mainstream institutions, and material erasure – through a commitment to intentionality, accessibility, and materiality.

Subsequent studies should extend this model to include further critical digital curation case studies (with additional research from under-represented parts of the world). More research is needed on the long-term effects of digital curation on art historical discourse, considering how virtual exhibitions are affecting academic and museum practices as well as shaping public perceptions of art. Lastly, future research might interrogate the significance of emergent technologies (such as artificial intelligence and blockchain, as well as respective frameworks like those for digital identity management) as tools to direct further blows toward hegemonic art historical narratives.

In the end, critical digital curation provides an alternative means for reshaping art historical narratives in a digital age. By working with the distinctive qualities of virtual spaces and following the maxims of intentionality, accessibility, and materiality, curators can produce exhibitions that interrogate the past and picture a more equitable future for art history.

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