CRUMB DOCTORAL RESEARCH: REFLECTIONS ON CREATING AND EXHIBITING DIGITAL ART

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Abstract

Based on doctoral research undertaken at CRUMB, the online resource for curators of media arts, this paper gathers together knowledge from different experiences of producing and presenting digital arts, from the perspectives of both curators/producers and artists. Suzy O’Hara reflects on art, technology, and the commercial digital sector, Marialaura Ghidini discusses hybrid models of offline and online curating, Dominic Smith writes about models of open source production compared to participative systems in new media art, Victoria Bradbury investigates the performativity of code, and Roddy Hunter identifies curatorial models of practice that articulate the principles of The Eternal Network.

Keywords: New media art, curating, production, exhibiting, participation, audience, performativity

In this paper, curators, producers and artists from CRUMB - the resource for curators of media art - share knowledge from different experiences of creating and presenting digital art projects. In response to ISEA2013’s theme, ‘Resistance is Futile’, this paper (resulting from a shared panel of presentations) is concerned with how art allows us to imaginatively experience and critically reflect on the implications of new technologies and digital media in our everyday lives, from databases and information visualisation to the way people act in a social network.

CRUMB was co-founded in 2000 by Sarah Cook and Beryl Graham. Over the years it has sought to, on one hand, enhance the professional development of curators engaging with the ever-changing field of new media and digital art by sharing practical knowledge, and on the other, to support masters-level, doctoral, and post-doctoral research into the field of new media art and curating by identifying new methods and ways of working. The authors - currently engaged in doctoral research or having completed PhDs with CRUMB – all use established methodologies of research through art practice as well as new methodologies from curatorial practice. In the following discussion they share the use of case studies in order to analyse both the history of others people’s projects, and their own series of projects. Some of the research presented here is in-progress, including interim findings and identification of patterns of practice.

Suzy O’Hara, for example, has explored differences between commercial digital and artistic sectors in producing or commissioning work which centres on values, time and money. Marialaura Ghidini has identified the ways in which online and offline iterations of art have close or distant relationships, particularly in relation to exhibitions and publications. Dominic Smith, through his Open Source projects, has identified the importance of complex systems of crediting authorship, and the key practice of both instigating projects, and developing projects instigated by others. Victoria Bradbury has been exploring elements of performativity in her artworks, and has analysed factors of translation and language in particular. Roddy Hunter has researched the relationship between historical and contemporary practice in networked curatorial practice, and has “re-modelled” past networked pieces as performance.

It is through their affiliation with CRUMB that these research practices present ways of working which aim to fit with the particular characteristics of new media and digital art, and it is hoped that these collective findings will be of use to fellow practitioners.

Collaborations between the digital and artistic sectors: how convergent, digital, technological platforms are informing curatorial practice for physical and digital spaces

Suzy O’Hara

The evolution of digital culture has brought us ‘pervasive media’ and ‘ubiquitous computing’, emerging fields that combine new technologies with rich media, experience design and user context. These technologies, coupled with the convergence of media platforms in the commercial digital sector, has led to the surfacing of a hybrid art ecology, which is nurturing the cross-fertilization between collaborators from the commercial creative media and technology sectors, and public art worlds. Suzy’s research analyses the growth of, and tensions arising from, strategic alliances between these two sectors.

In the media art field, it has been widely recognised that collaborations that bridge cultural boundaries have provided practical ways for each discipline to develop [1]. The Baltan Laboratories and Kitchen Budapest collaboration are two exemplary labs that critically reflect upon and share experiences and the methodologies they applied throughout each phase of their collaboration chronologically, to assist others interested in different forms of production and collaboration [2]. There are many more examples of experimental environments and platforms which have generated deep, new knowledge in this area, including:

Fig. 1 Dear Angel (2013) by Stevie Ronnie, installation shot in Globe Gallery June 2013. (Photograph © Colin Davison, Rosella Studios)
creative media labs, media focused organisations and galleries, electronic art festivals and symposiums (examples of which include; Eyebeam, Furtherfield, Abandon Normal Devices [AND] Festival and ISEA).

Over the past ten years, the interdisciplinary ‘open lab’ space has emerged as a model for facilitating creative collaborations with the commercial creative media and technology field. Spaces such as The Pervasive Media Studio, Media Lab Prado and Fabrica (Benetton Communication Research Centre), have begun to significantly blur the lines between commercial, cultural and research fields. The digital technology sector has also witnessed a rapid proliferation of business-led interfaces that successfully harness the power of the global network to engage and mobilise new ‘networked’ audiences for culture via the Internet, including: YouTube, Vimeo, Google Art Project and Kickstarter. These developments have forced the wider art field to reflect upon how it can engage with technology in a meaningful, purposeful way that will, in the near future, see its artists, venues (both offline and increasingly online) and audiences thrive.

Simultaneously, through the significant work of Beryl Graham and Sarah Cook, co-founders of CRUMB and other curators, academics and artists, there has never been such appreciation, understanding or exposure within contemporary art organisations for artwork that: ‘is made using electronic media technology and that displays any or all of the three behaviours of interactivity, connectivity, and computability in any combination’ [3].

By mapping the histories, systems, behaviours and terminologies of new media art onto those more familiar to curators of art, these practitioners and researchers began to address the issues of translation between the technology and art world. Thus, corollaries within languages, systems and terms relating to new media art and its evolving categories of behaviours and the art world constitute the bridge that link ‘Turing-land’ and ‘Duchamp- land’ proposed by Lev Manovich in 1996 [4].

A key element of Suzy’s ‘CRUMB’ research methodology is to critically reflect upon the methodologies she employs in the curation of a series of live case studies and a sharing of the outcomes that are generated. ‘Dear Angel’ was the first of this series of practical, curatorial case studies. Suzy presented an exhibition of new commissions by both media and non-media artists, within a traditional white cube gallery space. The exhibition examined curatorial issues relating to: online and offline contemporary communication tools and platforms; opportunities for mass, audience participation afforded by digital technologies in the production and experience of art; and contemporary engagement with ‘place’ in the context of an evolving digitally pervasive society. ‘Dear Angel’ allowed Suzy to focus on exploring how those engaged with the wider arts sector (and its audiences) are currently utilizing and engaging with developing digital technologies, and the art that is being produced and distributed in this realm.

Early identified differences between the commercial digital and public art sectors when producing or commissioning artwork centre upon values, time and money. Future case studies (which will include a commercial technology partner) will provide Suzy with an opportunity to focus on the impact of these differences on curatorial practice and the wider arts world, and in so doing, continue to progress understanding and address issues of translation between the two.

Hybrid curatorial models:
Working in-between the online and offline
Marialaura Ghidini
In the field of contemporary curatorial work spanning the past 10 years, websites have not only been adopted as display platforms but also as sites of distribution, encouraging the bringing together of online and offline modes of operation. Curators have taken advantage of the distributive properties inherent in web platforms to re-formulate formats and re-appropriate forms of communication that can be located in-between the online and offline. Thus, the “moving across sites” [5], and working with multiple platforms and their inherent systems of dissemination, are some of the predominant features of such hybrid models. It is to be noted that this hybridity is rooted in the everyday, in the quotidian modes of communication – and production – that have arisen with and after Web 2.0, which has increasingly provided us with ubiquitous and simplified web-based tools [6]. An example of practice highlighting this interweaving is curatingYouTube.net, a project run by Robert Sakrowski which operates by exploiting the system provided by the video sharing platform YouTube to organise online group exhibitions, but also offline projects such as the radio broadcast series Acoustic Journeys.

In her doctoral research with CRUMB, Marialaura looks at the changing conditions that the adoption of web-based platforms has brought about within the field of curatorial practice. Her research focuses on case studies which employ websites in conjunction with other forms of curatorial work.

Fig. 2 On the Upgrade – WYSIWYG (2013), with artworks by Jamie Allen, Renee Carmichael, David Horvitz, ICOSE, Michael Kargl, Sara Nunes Fernandes, Julia Tcharfas, Maria Theodoraki, Richard Sides and interviews with the featured artists, published by or-bits.
offensive, such as gallery exhibitions, time-based events and print publishing, with the aim to investigate the “trajectories they generate from the inside to the outside” [7], and the whats and hows of what she has termed hybrid curatorial models operating in between the online and offline. The first stage of this research involves analysing the specificities of modes of display, production and distribution online over the past 10 years. Through merging theory, observation [8], practice and action, she is analysing this field of work in relation to four elements: interface design, or “organisational aesthetics” [9], the form of the content and its aesthetics [10] and the socio-cultural phenomena, or “logics” [11] emerging from and around current web-based technology. This research is entwined with her curatorial practice, specifically the work with or-bits.com [12], a web-based curatorial platform which supports and promotes artistic practices and research around online production, display and distribution. This is undertaken through the organisation of online exhibitions and the presentation of critical writing on its blog, but also ‘offsite’ projects, such as gallery exhibitions, events and print publishing. Via the curatorial experiments of or-bits.com, she has been observing the workings, implications and possibilities of curating across sites and adopting multiple platforms for the display and dissemination of artworks. The recent Print on Demand (POD) book project, On the Upgrade – WYSIWYG, which includes new commissioned artworks by artists featured in previous or-bits.com online exhibitions, explores the transition between the web interface and the book interface and the artistic processes of translation that occurs when moving between these two sites of display and engagement, as well as the potentials and limits of POD services and distribution.

Exploring the hybridity of this field of work requires a search for nomenclature, taxonomy and categorisation. As noted above, the multiform methodological approach adopted by Marialaura merges theory, observation, practice and action. This has been key to developing a research method that is not only tied to curatorial studies, but also opens up to investigation the role of the Web as a mass medium which impacts and is impacted by socio-political and economic structures that are embedded in our everyday lives.

Through locating and analysing these new models of curatorial practice, this research aims to point out how their characteristics derive from the changes in the way in which contemporary art is produced, distributed and supported. These transformations are related to the variable and distributive nature of the contemporary art object and the act of production, which Marialaura sees are rooted in the conceptual art practices of the late sixties and seventies. This research has identified how such transformations, in turn, are transforming the way in which the support structure of contemporary art functions in relation to the spaces and places that have conventionally housed, nurtured and promoted the work and practices of contemporary artists, such as the museum and public gallery space.

**Open source ways of working**

Dominic Smith

Dominic’s PhD thesis with CRUMB [13] concerned models of open source production compared to participative systems in new media art. He began this research at a time when open source was of interest amongst artists and arts groups for its potential to provide a new model for artistic practice [14]. He became a participant in its associated communities whilst adopting behaviours and practices as they could best be applied to the arts. This interaction took place across a mixture of offline and online spaces, engaging with what Tiziana Terranova describes as the “peculiar semi-fluid mechanics of network space” [15].

One such project that was iterated throughout his research was the RIE (Random Information Exchange), which was an exploration into social, participatory engagement and iterative working practices. He toured this project facilitating and supporting participation.

RIE examined whether the nature of the open source tools and process used were reflected in the artefacts created, i.e. would the outcomes have open attributes. Two things became apparent

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**Fig. 3** The first version of the *Shredder 0.2*, presented as part of Kate Rich’s Feral Trade Café at AV10.
from the behaviour of the project participants. Firstly, the freedom inherent in the open source tools used made it possible to create a networked situation where new ideas and work could flow easily, in an almost Zen like state similar to that which is identified in The Jargon File (2004) as “hack mode”[16]. It also became apparent through the gatekeeper role he took on during iterations of RIE and further research [17] that artists have a strong desire to lead and gatekeep when engaging with open source. This led to a later period of practice-based research via The Shredder.

Julian Priest, David Merritt and Adam Hyde originally developed The Shredder as part of the Geekosystem [18] project. The core idea was that by shredding proprietary computer manuals and mixing the paper with coffee grounds (the two staple components of a geek’s day) the material can be made useful again as a medium for plant growth.

The process of making his own iteration of The Shredder became a useful investigation into what happens when an artist iterates another artist’s project. Priest agreed to Dominic’s iteration and passed on a simple set of instructions. He worked with a mycologist to devise an alternate approach, forking the original process. Together they developed a system that used the mix to grow edible mushrooms.

This project and others developed during Dominic’s research with CRUMB illustrate the numerous ways of producing work that makes use of open source principles. But when sharing, distributing and protecting work under the term open source, one enters a complex area in which the differing approaches in the variety of licenses can render any single definition of open source as subjective. Through successes and failures in Dominic’s attempts to adopt open source principles in his own work he was able to show that artists can apply the term open source to aspects of their practice, but there are key elements that must be adhered to, such as licensing, a public repository, release cycles and free distribution of code. These elements create a meaningful framework for successful collaboration and sharing. The Shredder is a good example of this approach to success and failure in research practice. It had a repository in the form of a wiki for sharing code (in the form of notes, resources and method), a release cycle and free distribution in the form of the installation packs Dominic developed. These three elements are considered a successful attempt to adopt open source principles. However this project lacked the adoption of a specific open source license. This limited wider participation, as there was no formal framework for group behaviour. The use of an open source license creates a recursive situation in which the necessary elements occur for successful adoption of open source principles.

The performativity of code
Victoria Bradbury
As an artist/researcher with CRUMB, Victoria is investigating the performative aspects of code in the context of participatory installation art. Her approach involves analysing artists’ works and relevant literature, starting from Inke Arns’ phrase ‘the performativity of code’ [19], interviewing artists, and creating and reflecting on several new artworks.

In order to process the data as it is collected, Victoria wrote a Processing sketch that allowed her to build diagrams around her four major areas of research: Instructions, Body, Code and Object. She then broke these topics into two-part comparisons such as Performative Code/Performative Body. By situating artists’ works and literature within the diagrams, Victoria is able to locate case studies by identifying pieces that fall into the intersections of these topics.

Beijing-based artist Fei Jun’s recent body of work is situated in the middle of her categories. In his 798 Talk Show, Fei Jun sets up a situation for participant-performance through a mobile phone interface and a publicly projected game space. Visitors are invited to choose a character and move through a rendering of the 798 art district while virtually live-chatting with neighbouring others whose identity may be a mystery. In Gesture Cloud, Fei Jun and Judith Doyle capture human work and gesture through a custom motion capture interface that exchanges coded action between Toronto and Beijing [20].

In 2012, Victoria spent seven months in China where her project Toast emerged. This interactive work draws upon the idea of a toast, a social code enacted at Chinese meals or banquets that allows guests and hosts to express gratitude to one another. Victoria selected the toast as a performative gesture with a pre-established context with which participants in China would already be familiar. Toast includes instructions that ask participants to speak a toast or tribute into a microphone in either Chinese or English. This speech is then processed by code that converts it to text, translates it into the opposite language, and finally places this translation in a speech bubble that appears next to the participant’s live image. Victoria tested Toast in a variety of venues including Shanghai’s Xinchejian Makerspace and an open studio exhibition in Feijiacun district.
Beijing. In the Feijiacun iteration, participants performed their toast to an image of an empty dining table as they imagined friends or colleagues receiving their words. The translation that returned was usually far from the speaker’s original intent, causing sometimes humorous or awkward juxtapositions and allowing for a variety of interpretations in the final display of the speech.

Thus far, “problems” with code and “problems” with human interactors have become evident. With code, the interaction is often simple and scripted. David M. Berry writes that computer languages (unlike the body) are limited in expressiveness to what a computer can understand, and notes that information about the world has to be mediated (or discarded) in order for it to be represented by a computer [21]. Humans, however, are capable of complex communication and reflection. In Avante Garde performance, Gunter Berghaus asks, “is every interaction with a media artwork indeed a performance?” [22].

Through a practical approach that involves testing this research through her own projects while reflecting on the work of others, Victoria has identified that characteristics of translation and language are important to consider when computer code and codes of human engagement are enacted together. She is able to then analyse what is happening at the moment that code and object meet participant.

**Video breakfasting together, if you wish (after Robert Filliou)**

**Roddy Hunter**

At CRUMB, Roddy is identifying and developing curatorial models of practice after globalisation that articulate the principles of *The Eternal Network*, created by artists Robert Filliou and George Brecht in 1968, in which the network itself is the artwork. More than solely a means of distribution or medium of production, *The Eternal Network* became a conceptual context for ‘permanent creation’ [23]. Roddy’s research explores the attractiveness of networks as decentralized or distributed environments bypassing institutional curatorial spaces. There is often a political as well as aesthetic dimension to the attractiveness of networks-as-artworks. This may now be undermined by a dependence of these networks upon the Internet, argued to be ‘the most material and visible sign of globalisation’ [24]. Lovink [25] observes that the ‘pace [of globalisation] has increased with the advent of new technologies, especially in the area of telecommunications’ and so artists, activists and commercial, corporate players alike have employed online networks in search of their respective ‘utopias’. Lovink elaborates that ‘we need to develop a long-term view on how networked technologies should and should not be embedded in political and cultural practices’ [26].

How far has the ‘globalism’ of communication sought by Filliou and others been supplanted by ‘globalisation’ in its neoliberal, doctrinal sense? [27]. How can we rethink curatorial strategies in respect of the network-as-artwork’s media of production, means of distribution and experience of reception? In short, how can we find ways to curate *The Eternal Network* after globalisation?

As a practising artist with a long history of performance work, one who considers new media curating as a creative and critical cross-artform activity, Roddy is conducting experiments which re-model Filliou’s distance artworks that, while networked, (insofar as they involved remote participation) did not always require verification of transmission (*Telepathic Music*, 1977-9) or even real-time engagement. Filliou seemed fond of creating allegories of telepresence in video works such as *Video Dinner, Video Breakfasting Together, If You Wish* and *Video Breakfasting with Roy Kiyooka* (1979). These were very lo-fi works in which Filliou, in a pre-recorded video via a TV monitor, discusses his various interests with a spectator who plays along with the pretence that the discussion is ‘live’. While contemporaries of Filliou such as Roy Ascott were fully engaged in exploring new technologies to broaden possibilities for ‘telematic exchange’, Filliou seemed to lack capacity or desire to deal with technologies to the same extent. For ISEA 2013, Roddy gave a performance-presentation via Skype which remodelled those video works of Filliou’s mentioned above, and borrowed text from another (*Travelling Light – It’s a Dance Really*, 1979). It was 05:00 AM where Roddy was and 2:00 PM the same day at ISEA in Sydney. Roddy asked the audience how old they were, whether they were happy, what they felt about love and shared plans to host *The All Day Video Breakfast* (www.thealldayvideobreakfast.info) as a global telematic event on 17 January 2014, the date Filliou proposed as ‘Art’s Birthday’. Roddy also took a group photograph and self-portrait which he tweeted following the discussion.

![Fig. 5 Roddy Hunter, Video Breakfasting Together, If You Wish (after Robert Filliou) (2013)](image-url)
or curatorial – allow audiences to imaginatively experience and critically reflect on the changing manifestations of new technologies and digital media in art.

References and Notes

6. Geert Lovink briefly and aptly describes the development of the Web in four stages stating that the rebirth of the web into the Web 2.0 and “its evolution into a mass medium” after the dot.com crash is characterised by “three distinguished features: it is easy to use, it facilitates sociality, and it provides users with free publishing and production platforms that allow them to upload content in any form”. Geert Lovink, Networks Without a Cause (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2011).
8. Sarah Cook and Beryl Graham suggest to look at the “behaviour of the artworks” thus concentrating on the process rather than the object, the outcome, when curating and discussing “new media” art. Sarah Cook and Beryl Graham, Rethinking Curating (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2010)
10. Media critic Vito Campanelli has carried out extensive research into the form and content on the Web along with its relationship with the offline in his book Web Aesthetics. Campanelli's aim is to “understand the relationships between human beings and the Web” in a time in which “digital technology encompasses contemporary existence” and thus has to be understood as part of a “whole media complex” for which “offline phenomena” can often be analysed and discussed in relation to it. Vito Campanelli, Web Aesthetics. How Digital Media Affect Culture and Society (Rotterdam, NL: Nai Publishers, 2011).
11. Lovink [2]
12. or-bits.com's mission is to support the production of new works and writing and instigate an exploration of the creative and critical possibilities of the web as language, medium and subject. Its activity spans from web-based exhibitions to related offsite, curatorial collaborations and talks. <http://www.or-bits.com>