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## Ephemerality and expectation

Benjamin Weil

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## RIVETS + DENIZENS

collaborative curatorial models  
in theory and practice

### Ephemerality and expectation

Benjamin Weil on Feb 1 2002

rivets and denizens

**[Rivets + Denizens]**  
Collaborative Curatorial Models  
in Theory and Practice  
Curated by Ron Goldin

#### Introduction

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**Benjamin Weil, new media curator at SFMOMA, addresses ephemerality, expectation, and the extroverted artist. A discussion of the role of documentation in art practice and the evolution and interplay of the curator/artist.**

**Ron Goldin: Do you think recent events, specifically the global witness of the Sept. 11 tragedy, in addition to a sobered "new economy" whose original foundation was reliant on intangible models, has sparked a cautious step away from the ephemeral, both in art practice as well as in our society as a whole?**

**Benjamin Weil:** It is very hard to tell what has triggered what. I am not sure September 11 is really anything else than the epitomy of a crisis that is much larger than that absolute hyper-real tragedy. What strikes me is the growing awareness in our western post-industrial societies (and primarily so in the US) of a very confusing blurriness between reality and fiction. Infotainment and edumercial, or whatever conflational combination one can think of, destabilizes the understanding of how to comprehend specific information. This confusion is very visible in such mainstream Hollywood production as "Vanilla Sky", for instance, and in a more sophisticated fashion, in such production as David Lynch's recent "Mulholland Drive". One could trace that back to "The Matrix", or even to Steven Lisberger's "Tron". It is also the war in Iraq and its coverage that was somewhat a bad copy of "Top Gun"... There are plenty of examples in contemporary culture...

What is undeniable is that the shift in the economic climate results in a less daring cultural moment. When there's opulence, experiments seem like a normal compliment to more traditional endeavors. These days, it is more difficult to convince people about the fact cultural evolution does not stop because of the economy. I believe we are still at the beginning of a fundamental shift, which probably is less probable now to be carried out, or found in traditional institutions. From that extremely chaotic moment will emerge new ways of understanding what we are exposed to, what we are looking at. I do not know why, but I think for instance of this whole idea of a scenario that is manifested through very different forms. A common narrative structure will inform a film, a computer game, a line of products, educational tools, and what not. There's no longer a necessary hierarchy to understand this cultural nebulous of sorts.

In regards to art, I think the confusion also is due to the ever-increasing blurriness between the locus of production and the one of distribution or experience is something traditional venues for visual art have a really hard time dealing with. Artists have also shifted from being loners, secluded from the world, creating in a studio, to cultural producers, very much engaged with the course of our time, and creating social and cultural comments in collaboration, and borrowing from all kinds of models, ranging from film to philosophy, to advertising, to science, and so on.

It is time to engage in a thorough reflection on how to reconcile the notion of history, and historical, as best incarnated by the traditional museum, and the one of progress, forward thinking structure that produces, commissions, supports, and reflects upon new ways to display, distribute, and emulate experience of new contemporary art forms. Then again, it is important to remember that the experimental nature of what is being produced today should exist both inside and outside of the institutional frame.

We probably will not escape the need to re-examine criteria used to understand what is a valid art form, and what is not.

**RG: Both SFMOMA's 010101 and the Whitney's BitStreams featured "companion websites" to their show's physical venue. It seems like some things have changed (ex. Janet Cardiff's "Video Walk" is a giant step from 'please move away from the painting...') but some things have not, such as the resistance to works (or entire media, in the case of net.art) that provide a less immediate gratification. Are expectations of art becoming more entertainment-based than the "secular church" that the museum has traditionally signified? Or do people approach a new media object with the same expectations they do a Rodin?**

**BW:** Your question takes us back to the notion of criteria used to understand what we are looking at. The same way we may be confused, as consumers, by the ever evolving form of information, and whether it is news, fiction, advertising... for instance, it is increasingly harder to know how to filter advertising out of news, games, or television: think about product placement in computer games, or maybe even news reel, for instance!

New art forms, that take radical departures both in terms of form, and content, and, to a certain extent, context, call for a rethinking of how we evaluate things, how we appreciate them, how we comprehend them, etc. While it is for instance possible to talk about the formal quality of a networked based piece, referring to the intrinsic qualities of its coding, this calls for an understanding of how this is to be understood by people who may not be able to tell the difference, because they have not trained their eye. I recall a time when I would systematically look at the source code of a web page... I would not do that any longer because chances are it would have become Chinese to me: things have changed extraordinarily fast! And while I think it is an interesting parameter, this is such a new realm, and a new medium explored by artists, whose training is not necessarily "fine art", that the intellectual and emotional adjustment is very difficult. It requires flexibility, and, let's face it, a lot of time! Think how hard it was to understand Cubism, even though it was still oil on canvas or traditional media. You can imagine how a society that has barely digested Duchamp can accommodate such leaps as the ones introduced by networked art forms: not only you need to understand the notion of browser as formal frame, the net as context, but you also need to accept the idea of looking at art on the screen of a machine one more often relates to as a practical instrument.

So, while I think museums such as the Whitney or SFMOMA - and many others, particularly the Dia Center for the Arts, and the Walker Art Center, both real pioneers as far as networked media is concerned - are genuinely interested in exploring ways to incorporate these emerging forms, there is still an enormous amount of work to be done in order to understand what is the best role to play for such institutions, how to create an appropriate frame to best enable access to these experimental forms, provide tools, relate these art projects to the more traditional media, etc. That is, I believe what both "BitStreams", and even more so "Data Dynamics" sought to do at the Whitney. And similarly, the web commissions and educational component of 010101, but also Crossfade (<http://www.sfmoma.org/crossfade>, a collaboration with ZKM, Goethe Institut, and the Walker art center).

Sometimes, there is a temptation for the museum to merge the notion of accessibility or approachability with the one of populism. This is undeniably a very dangerous confusion, informed primarily, I believe by the economic model the museum functions with: sales results, of tickets and by-products have become a way to judge the success of a program, which of course is quite a limited way of thinking about real cultural impact. That's because there has been a dramatic shift in the past 20 years (since the Reagan administration decided to eradicate public funding for art). However, it seems to me we have not yet found a way to really engage different publics to become real stakeholders of the cultural institution, rethink the model of financially supporting the museum as a seminal cultural tool... Rather, this still depends of "the kindness of

strangers", and merchandizing strategies that look increasingly like the entertainment industry. We will not spare ourselves from engaging in this reflection, if we want to steer clear of artertainment.

**RG: Documentation of the production of new media arts is a central concern, especially pertaining to the issue of ephemerality. Documentation is the only tangible, somewhat-static byproduct of some new media art practices. You've mentioned that art can be thought of as a proposition, rather than an object. How does an artwork focus our attention to the very process that brought it into existence? Is this the concern of the artist, as part of the art making, the curator as a historian/ facilitator/ translator, or is this perhaps the collaborative element that is required of the representation of all new media objects presented to a public audience?**

**BW:** Technology changes very fast. The context in which work is made also changes. The combination of those two factors creates a situation of accelerated obsolescence of a given form. This often results in the loss of the original form and meaning. The moment artists choose to work with technology that is primarily developed for uses other than art, and, as a mass product, is conceived so as to be constantly evolved, they are faced with formal instability. This condition, by the way, not only applies to computers and software: one can probably trace it back to the Ready-Made, and is also the case with artists, who later on elected to work with mass produced objects, or perishable materials. Working with instable media, they are basically faced with two options: one is to completely abandon the idea of preserving anything, let the art work "die"; the other is to try and think about models that may help design solutions to transmit the "essence" of an art project, beyond its "original incarnation". Music and theatre are two cultural forms, which function with the premise of formal instability. One can see those as systems of notation, instructions of sorts: a set of intentions, which then can be restaged, re-interpreted, and thus kept alive through time. Hence, the interesting conceptual basis they offer to offset the problem of working with instable media. Work created today with technology is by nature ephemeral. In order to preserve the artistic intent, one must start thinking beyond the constraints of obsolescence, while trying to "frame" the various dimension of an artistic proposition. There's undeniably a "look and feel" of a given work, which denotes an anchoring in a given cultural moment. While it is possible to preserve the artifact, it is harder to justify evolving the role of the preserving institution into a repository for technology. Curators, who work with instable media, and particularly with technology, are faced with having to engage in a very close dialogue with conservators, in order to start outlining strategies that may then be implemented to better preserve formally instable art projects. The museum, in collaboration with the artists, as well as a network of experts from all fields, have engaged in the systematic of documents in many different forms (artists interviews, installation records, technical data, and so on. This accumulated documentation traces the formal evolution as well as the perceptual shifts that may occur in the course of this iterative way of understanding the artists project. Together, this set of documents, along with the "original version" of the artwork, constitutes what I would be tempted to call a data maze. Akin to the cultural constellations as defined in the work of Henry Jenkins, the data maze is probably the way to best understand how the museum may safely proceed with its task of being the repository for cultural heritage.

The work of art never existed outside of a formal and cultural context. Even the Wunderkammer -- which can be understood in many ways as the ancestor of the modern museum -- created specific viewing conditions, which in turn determined the way a given work could be grasped. What happens with instable media is that the data maze emerges as an inherent part of the artwork, in a manner that makes it much harder to dissociate or hierarchize: the way it artistic intent was initially carried out, the way it has been communicated at various given times, the layers of interpretation added with the various iterations and consequent "evolutions" of the work.

To go back briefly to the role of the curator, this is why I believe commissioning works is an interesting manner to foster a dialogue with the artists, so as to create good conditions for the transmission of work to future generations. This of course implies an evolution in the nature of the relationship between the institution and the artist, as well as a revision of the understanding of the notion of collecting.

**RG: It is very common for curators to treat their work with "artistic inclination", that the job of curating is an art endeavor in and of itself. Artists**

**are also becoming more involved in the curation of their own works, as well as their peers. Is there still a clear line today between curator and artist and what is the distinction?**

**BW:** The role of the curator is undeniably evolving. There was a time when the curator was working with finished art works, made primarily by artists who she/he did not have to be in contact with, applying scholarly knowledge to create a frame for the work. Working with living artists, curators have eventually become editors of sorts, presenting selected works from an artistic career, establishing hierarchies between what they deem better and less good. More recently, the curatorial process has become the result of a dialogue between the curator and the artist, who most of the time becomes directly associated with the process of showing the work, even though the curator puts together the exhibition. The curator, however, never authors the artwork itself. She or he merely fosters the creation of a field of interpretation for it. I do not necessarily believe that artists can actually curate their own work, unless you understand the notion of curating as being specifically context-conscious.

Even in the case of instable media, where the artwork is in perpetual flux, and the relationship of the institution with the artist ongoing, at least as long as the artist is willing and/or able, the artist remains the author. The curator remains a facilitator, a dialogist, and a translator. She or he is also the guarantor of the intellectual integrity in the process of preservation and interpretation: the moment one of these works enter a public art collection, the curator and the artist become the actors of a dialogue or collaboration, which also involves preservation and conservation specialists, in order to ensure that each formal evolution of the work consequent to media updates does not affect the original artistic intent.

**RG:**

*"... when visitors choose to enter a museum, they know what they're in for. But if art is coming to the street, one way or the other, it has to somehow morph into a more adaptable and fluid form, which reaches out and yet does not impose on the potential viewer. Since the Web is a public environment, one can easily see how the strategy is to reach out and offer an eclectic array of projects that investigate the medium and truly help to shape it." (Benjamin Weil, **Gallery 9: AdaWeb**)*

**The language of the Web provides a context which is non-static, and therefore, the medium is a more challenging but perhaps more powerful framework which a curator/artist must incorporate into the project. Is the Web, legalities aside, a more public space than the museum? Is the public nature of authorship on the Web, with its collaboratively constructed, open-source signification, a model that is entirely incompatible with the museum?**

**BW:** A few years ago, I set myself to explore the notion of art in public space. I curated an exhibition of poster projects, which were shown in urban settings, fly posted by the very same people who put posters in the street. I recall having to research the specificity of local culture. In Cologne, where the show was first installed, I had to work with young musicians. They knew where to put the posters, how to make sure they did not get covered too quickly, what were the unspoken limits beyond which one could not go... Similarly, an exhibition of artists projects on the water buses in Venice (Italy) was an opportunity to find out how art in the real public space (in a way, maybe real is "unmapped"), how it could function without the shield of art. Online, it is a little bit the same thing... one can test the "cultural validity" of a project until it is deemed as art. This does not necessarily imply that being named art is anything else but creating a context to understand something that is décalé.

**Public space** is a very difficult notion to tackle. One thing we have learnt from the network, maybe, is the idea of public art that no longer needs to be a monument.

The notion of good art as good craftsmanship is something our western societies have lived with until very recently. One can probably trace the break to Duchamp, who somehow pronounces the "divide" between the notion of the artist as a good craftsman, and the artist as a thinker, an actionist, whose means to communicate are only as good as they help convey what she or he is trying to express. The artist coming out of that school of thoughts may cook one day, and do a film the next. She or he may publish a book, or take a car trip across the country. The notion of art as performance, or action, can merely be recorded; props can be conserved as relics.

What this type of ephemeral proposition shed lights on is the importance of a cultural context for art. Art history provided this context, a classification, and a set of cultural tools to understand a given moment in history.

What we may realize by examining art history is that artists in fact always were creating with a large number of collaborators. The myth of the artist working alone, secluded is a modern myth. Prior to that, artists worked in studios, where they directed students and studio assistants to produce their work.

It is very difficult to do this without knowing exactly what we talk about when we say technology. Are we talking about a set of tools, are we talking about a process, a place?

There's probably a multitude of answer to this ongoing question. In my mind, there's no doubt, however, that we cannot avoid talking about community, production, and distribution, if we want to understand the dynamics between art and technology.

I do not think we are talking about technology only as a set of tools. Rather, as Gerfried Stocker points out in his introduction to the ARS electronica festival of this past year, it is about who makes art, how they make it, and where they make it, introducing a new set of skills, and hence, perspectives.



## ::CrossReference

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