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Alena Williams

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Net Art and Process

Some Thoughts on Curatorial Practice
Alena Williams on Feb 1 2002

Are there still some kinks to be worked out in the integration of net art and museum culture?

On a very fundamental level the bureaucratic system of exhibiting and collecting art—a system which has historically been at odds with the demand for equal access to the art museum—has met its match with the advent of the internet. Presenting work in a nomadic fashion, cobbling together pockets of activity around the globe, online or in any space that might accommodate their needs, net artists are not only curating their own exhibitions with increasing frequency (certainly outpacing the efforts made by traditional artists), but they have also sidestepped the obstacles associated with art museums altogether by launching their own exhibitions online. Inevitably, certain questions have emerged from the marriage of these seemingly disparate traditions: How does one exhibit work, which is best experienced in an online environment, in the gallery space? How can we account for artistic communities and presentations of art, which have flourished beyond the reach of art museums?

As curators and institutions strain to wrap their brains around the obstacles which accompany the introduction of the internet to the gallery space, we must wonder if there can really be a sustaining shift in the museum’s collection and exhibition process, like those initiated by the online community. Conceptual artists in the 1970s and 80s, like Hans Haacke, Louise Lawler, Fred Wilson, and Barbara Bloom—whose installation projects involved the appropriation of museum props and systems of collection and presentation as materials for the critiquing of museological methods—began to develop work which directly engaged with the institutional “authority” of the museum by laying bare its methods of creation. Additionally, the inevitable recognition of the reader as a decisive agent in the culture wars emerging from such post-1968 developments as Derridean politics, feminism, and multiculturalism was also essential for the subversion—or at the very least, the unveiling—of the museum’s hierarchical system of production. Today, many writers and scholars theorize net art as a continuation of this critical reexamination. Interactive, networked, and publicly accessible—net art is believed to have again called into question the museum practices which have plagued the culture industry for more than a century.

One much-publicized instance occurred in 2000, when RTmark, one of the nine net artists included in the Whitney Biennial, redirected unsuspecting users, who attempted to load RTmark’s index page from the Whitney’s site, to other locations on the internet. Offering to share their “real estate” as one of the precious few sites linked from the Whitney’s website, was RTmark’s direct attempt to at once protest the museum’s validation function and “share the wealth” of their attachment to this powerful institution amongst their peers. It also, for our purposes, most clearly reveals the inherent divide between the hierarchical structures of art institutions and the decidedly more democratic tendencies at work within the internet sphere. Although net artists’ incursions in and around the museum and gallery space are, generally-speaking,
represent a range of artistic practices and strategies, which were already set apart conceived as a resource, a platform for the presentation of new media art. It transparent archival process can be to everyone's advantage. Since its inception, it was collaborative curatorial practice, and most clearly demonstrates how the adoption of a Rhizome's net art community, perhaps represents an ideal, alternative model for In this way, the Rhizome ArtBase, the archive of new media art developed for dissection.

With the steady incorporation of the web into the mainstream arts scene, the launching of exhibitions and the building of archives has become an increasingly creative and authorial practice. However, the act of curating used to be a clandestine affair. Those holding the position would have once worked quietly within the institutional archives, orchestrating their exhibitions anonymously from “behind the curtain,” but now in the past ten to fifteen years the process of curating and the person who practices it have emerged center stage in public discourse. Not only are we at a point in history when museum practices routinely come under fire by critics and scholars in the academy, but the curator’s work is also quite openly followed in newspapers, critiqued in the trade magazines, blasted in fervent discussions carried out in internet-based newsgroups and listservs. Somehow, amidst the poststructuralist ruins of modernism, the exhibition has become the new art object, and its curator the new ‘author.’

In effect, the very act of curating has become a creative endeavor in itself, and there are a number of prominent examples of this trend. A case in point was the 2001 biennial at SITE SantaFe in New Mexico, which was curated by Dave Hickey, a critic and recent recipient of one of the prestigious MacArthur “Genius” grants. Entitled Beau Monde: Towards a Redeemed Cosmopolitanism, Hickey’s exhibition was touted as an “achievement” in curatorial practice due to his vanguard approach towards exhibition design and conception. Artwork was exhibited without wall labels, overlapping one another to the point that museum visitors could not make a distinction between one artist’s contribution and the next. Hickey’s biennial is an extreme example of our current tendency to privilege curatorial vision over the artist and the art object. The mere association of a particular curator’s name with an exhibition immediately indicates the project’s ideological agenda and aesthetic orientation, even the very nature and content of the contributing artists’ work. The curator can now be as highly billed as the artists they exhibit, and their ‘authorial’ stamp can be found on exhibition announcements cards, advertisements, and press releases. Moreover, the curatorial statement has become a textual justification for every inclusion and exclusion of current exhibitions, much like the author’s preface or foreword. Have curators worked against the utopian ideal of institutional democratization by promoting themselves on the one hand, and offering visitors heavy-handed curatorial directives on the other?

For some of us, the curator’s newfound celebrity ominously heralds the valorization of yet another mythic, undeserved, genius. But I think the curator’s celebrity signals a significant shift in the sphere of curatorial practice, a transformation which has in a sense been pre-figured by net art practices which lay bare their own processes of creation. The unmasking of the curator, much in the same way that the self-referential work of jodi.org reveals the underpinnings of the web, represents the unveiling of a process, which was at one time virtually invisible to the greater public. The exhibition has been turned inside out; audiences are made aware of how or why work was included in the exhibition before they even set foot in the gallery (should they choose to read the introductory wall text). This circumstance dramatically transforms the public from passive museum visitors into active critics of curatorial foibles and lapses in judgment. Within the net community in particular, the slightest programmatic change can elicit the most heated debates. A recent discussion on Rhizome Raw—our unfiltered mailing list for the discussion of ideas, projects and events in the field of new media art —regarding Rhizome’s new commission program is a prime example of the kinds of deliberations which can occur (archived at Rhizome under "We’re Tired of Trees"). The implementation of our new grant-giving program, which involves a formal grant proposal and application process, was interpreted by some members of the community as an unfortunate adoption of a blunt, outmoded tool for the support of innovative, original work. In situations like these, curatorial strategies which are even remotely perceived as elitist or hierarchical are quickly and decisively ferreted out, and lain out for dissection.

In this way, the Rhizome ArtBase, the archive of new media art developed for Rhizome’s net art community, perhaps represents an ideal, alternative model for collaborative curatorial practice, and most clearly demonstrates how the adoption of a transparent archival process can be to everyone’s advantage. Since its inception, it was conceived as a resource, a platform for the presentation of new media art. It represents a range of artistic practices and strategies, which were already set apart
from pre-existing museological systems. Unlike traditional institutions, the submission process is artist-driven, the parameters for the indexing and cataloguing of art are clearly defined, and the criteria for inclusion—employed simply to delineate the archive’s scope—is publicly accessible. In essence, our archive represents an effort to rethink how groups of art objects are accumulated, categorized, and maintained. Artists are involved in every step of their works’ induction into the archive, from submission, to indexing, to updating. Additionally, the ArtBase exhibits many characteristics regularly attributed to a group exhibition, or even a single artwork when considered on a formal level. The archive works like a diverse, collective response to a singular challenge posed by the medium itself, which has encouraged artists to invent new strategies for bridging, nullifying the divide between art, programming, and practice. Hyperlinked by keywords and artists names, it works in a conceptual way—shifting, diversifying, redefining itself with every new addition to the archive (an eloquent representation of this is Mark Tribe and Alex Galloway’s Starry Night, but there are also many other recent additions to the archive, like Deanne Achong’s Excerpts from An Archive, which reflect the metaphoric possibilities of archive building). Its 500 objects represent a dynamic, discursive web of artistic production and contemplation, searchable along keywords, genre, type, technology, while also embodying an open, creative venture that is collaborative in nature and very much in line with what is transpiring in the sphere of curatorial practice.

As most of us have witnessed, the push for online content in art institutions has changed the way we gain information from the museum, whether onsite or remotely. Publicly accessible, searchable databases and “digital” art shows are increasingly a part of the recent effort to transform art institutions into dynamic hubs which mediate between arts, technology, and culture, but these strategies are largely borrowed from models already at work on the internet which have reinvented the way that archives are conceived, managed and operated. Although the ArtBase is one such model, it is not completely flawless. It could be said to emulate those very outmoded museological systems it seeks to reinvent simply by virtue of its aim to amass an archive. Luckily, the archiving methods employed at Rhizome have the ability become even more democratic. Soon members of the community will be able to become even more involved in the constitution of its content. This modification has already begun with the expansion of our archive’s scope—the ArtBase has gone from a strict system of online experiments to the inclusion of software art, computer games, and documentation of new media performance and installation.

And thus, we must inevitably ask if the regular interchange between online ventures and art institutions is our best shot at transforming the nature of traditional collection and exhibition systems. Is the mere “outing” the curator enough to have a sustaining effect on curatorial practice? In the past century, the avant garde’s attempt to significantly restructure the museum may have been stymied by the institution’s gravitational pull towards acquisition proposals, attendance figures, board meetings and annual reports, but perhaps the rigorous deployment of alternative curatorial strategies within the internet sphere can insure that such efforts do not go in vain today.

Rhizome ArtBase— http://rhizome.org/artbase
RTmark— http://rtmark.com
We’re Tired of Trees— http://rhizome.org/object.rhiz?2997
Starry Night— http://rhizome.org/starrynight
Excerpts from An Archive, Deanne Achong— http://rhizome.org/object.rhiz?2993

::CrossReference

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:: Net Art and Process - Feb 1 2002