

*Establishing a Database Connection* aims to critically consider how the digital file database of the Leonard & Bina Ellen (LBE) Art Gallery's collection can be activated beyond the pure intention of data preservation and storage. The premise for this residency project is to introduce a digital counterpart to the methods explored in the 2009 LBE Art Gallery exhibition *As much as possible given the time and space allotted* (AMAP). In this exhibition, curators Rebecca Duclos and David K. Ross explored ways "to systematically remove as many artworks as possible from the LBE Art Gallery storage vault and ... [be] sequentially installed in the exhibition area using all spaces available."<sup>1</sup> By mining the main directives explored in AMAP ten years later, this new project investigates how this type of performative gesture can be enacted through the Gallery's digitized collection database.

Part exhibition framework experimentation, part interface design investigation, the project's intention is to reveal latent or fortuitous connections among collection objects. Traditional systems of archiving and presenting gallery collection databases online have been largely based on searchable terms or organized by categories such as artist, medium, and/or movement, which yield predictable and oversimplified results. Through an unconventional retrieval and display system, this project aims not only to relate objects' visual, technical, or conceptual characteristics, but also to evaluate how the embedded language assigned by the collection's managers to each object may affect one's perception of, or connection to, the collection as a whole.

This project's research methodology extends that of AMAP in that it considers what performative and systematic curatorial methodologies (rather than typical museological models) can reveal about the LBE Gallery's collection, as well as how these dynamic systems create chance juxtapositions between works.<sup>2</sup> The curators of AMAP intentionally relied on a system of retrieval and display that depended upon a work's position in the gallery's vault in the aim of removing bias and rendering their roles mainly administrative. This system was described by art critic Leigh Markopoulos as "an algorithm of sorts [used] to determine form and content ... to subvert traditional exhibition and museological practices."<sup>3</sup> *Establishing a Database Connection* explores the concept of the curator as aggregator in a more literal sense. This is attempted not only by systematically developing a data aggregator in order to realize our project, but also through a digital cataloguing of the LBE Art Gallery's collection database that has been carried out by its curators, interns, and volunteers over many years. *Establishing a Database Connection* frames its expansion of themes presented in AMAP by drawing on media theory and contemporary museological critique with particular attention to recent critical scholarship on the politics of algorithmic organization as it relates to the broader digital condition, but also, more importantly, to what it might mean for the circulation of data related to collection artworks, their materiality, and the gallery/museum's relationship with digitization and virtuality.

The design of this interface intends to subvert conventional methods of online navigation and search habits by removing graphical elements, or barriers, associated with accessing knowledge and information gatekeeping (i.e., search boxes, toolbars, menus). This aspect of the project draws on recent scholarship that considers serendipitous interface design, user experience, and the habitualization and defamiliarization of how one engages with online platforms. As an alternative to traditional compartmentalized and linear interface design, non-linear navigation has the

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1 Rebecca Duclos and David K. Ross, "As much as possible given the time and space allotted," catalogue, Leonard & Bina Ellen Art Gallery, <https://bit.ly/2UVqHq7> (accessed April 10, 2019).

2 Ibid.

3 Leigh Markopoulos, "The Accidental Exhibition: Chance as Curatorial Critique and Opportunity," *Journal of Curatorial Studies* 1, no. 1 (2012): 20.

potential to build an information space that prompts serendipitous connections, aleatory juxtapositions, and flâneur(se)-like fluidity to emerge among the artworks present in the LBE Gallery collection. To facilitate this, the design of the interface is pliable, responding and reacting to the visitor's actions; directional – creating pathways among the visitor's connections; and generous, offering plentiful and unexpected results.

The interface has a beginning, but no definitive end point. Each work selected by a visitor triggers new linkages or associations within the database based on descriptive words that have been assigned to each work by the administrator or curator in data fields such as “keywords” and “subject.”<sup>4</sup> Although algorithmic or machine-like systems of organization are employed, the arrangements and connections are ultimately made by humans: the administrators and the users. Each individual selection influences the choices that will follow, building out from it a spatial, relational constellation or lattice of connections between works. Every selection thus becomes a reflection on the narratives that can emerge, are implied, or are missing.

## Database and Narrative

In the most general sense, the database is defined as a structured collection of data,<sup>5</sup> often one that not only organizes the information it holds, but also has the ability to be queried and extracted from. If we think of the database in these terms, and in the context of a cultural institution like the LBE Art Gallery, how can we subvert or appropriate this system of organization, retrieval, and display to construct chance-based narratives and new connections between artworks?

The “data” that is referred to in the context of this project consists of but is not limited to information associated with each physical object in the gallery's collection, such as the artist's name, artwork title, year, acquisition number, medium, or description. In the broader context of the cultural institution, the database functions primarily as an administrative tool of collection management allowing for the organization and quick retrieval of this data. Typical online cultural collection databases use automatic filters that return results which favour popular works and relegate less-known works to the “bottom of the pile.” Alternatively, this project employs a faceted search method, grouping artworks based on tags that have been extracted and parsed from the “keyword” and “subject” database fields. These fields represent subjective interpretations of each artwork by the gallery's curators, past and present. Just as AMAP allowed for “a series of unbiased selections to inspire an unconventional connoisseurship that highlights process over pedigree,” Establishing a Database Connection looks to shift the agency from the predetermined algorithm to the visitor who can make associations and build a narrative by navigating through the database in a serendipitous, open format.

The relationship between the database as a cultural form and the production of narrative is one that was originally raised by media theorist Lev Manovich in his 1999 text *Database as Symbolic Form*, wherein he argued that while “a database can support narrative” (i.e., while it can provide a structure for information to be built into a narrative), “there is nothing in the logic of the medium itself which would foster its generation.”<sup>6</sup> This is to say that the database, in its essence, is concerned only with the efficient searching and retrieval of information, and cannot facilitate, in this context, the same role as the gallery or museum, which contributes to the contextualization or display of its collected objects. On this subject, critic Mike Pepi reminds us in his 2014 essay *Is a Museum a Database?* that “we cannot seek data in the museum the way we look for it in the database,” meaning, the database is not designed to produce meaning or contextualize

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4 The type of administration being referred to in this analysis is mentioned within the context of collections management, not general gallery administration.

5 Lev Manovich, “Database as Symbolic Form,” *Convergence* 5, no. 2 (1999): 81.

6 Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2010), 228.

holdings for those who interact with it. However, the database can set the stage for narrative to be established, and, as Pepi adds in his 2019 revisitation of the above essay, titled *Is a Database a Museum?*, that “narrative is the missing link, be it provided by a curator or an algorithm.”<sup>7</sup> *Establishing a Database Connection* seeks to explore this relationship between database structures, the LBE Art Gallery collection, and the generation of narrative therein.

The potential of such collection database interface models raises many additional questions and critiques regarding the LBE Art Gallery and its relationship to digitization and database logic. To compare the roles of gallery and database can be problematic in that it poses the risk of reducing the role of the gallery as a site of critical exchange and presentation of ideas to a flattened repository that is passive, superficial, and decontextualized. However, analyzing the LBE Art Gallery’s collection through database and algorithmic logic can instead enable new ways of thinking about narrative and exhibition making – ways that aim to reveal the underlying or invisible structures in the storage systems of gallery and computer alike. Through this method of engaging with the collection, this project questions how the database can become just another way of generating chance-based narratives, and how it might uncover unexpected connections, inconsistencies, or biases among a collection’s objects.

## Activating the Database through Interface Design

When visiting online databases (and websites in general), as users we expect to see familiar navigation elements such as a menu, search bar, or filter settings that can help orient and guide us – but what happens when these items are displaced, concealed, or removed entirely? *Establishing a Database Connection* experiments with the method of defamiliarization as a means to subvert traditional online collection database exploration and to consider how familiar systems of navigation might create merely an illusion of access and choice. Defamiliarization is effectively the antithesis of habitualization – which, according to Russian formalist poet Victor Shklovsky in his seminal 1917 essay “Art as Technique,” is a perception of the world that is “unconsciously automatic,” uncritical, and passive.<sup>8</sup> The goal of defamiliarization in approaching design, however, is not to produce the most efficient or streamlined arrangements, but to prompt an active spectatorship among those who engage with such an interface.<sup>9</sup> By prompting a creative and curious search procedure, *Establishing a Database Connection* aims to challenge subconscious behaviours and provoke an inquiry into both the collection holdings and the system which enables us to access them.<sup>10</sup>

Pathways are used as a method to achieve such a search procedure. The concept of pathways as a metaphor for nonlinear creative exploration within online interfaces for museum or gallery databases is presented by Timothy Daniel Wray in his dissertation “Pathways Through Online Museum Collections.” The pathway is employed as a design theory for visualizing and exploring online museum collections and is, Wray argues, a mechanism that encourages serendipitous discoveries among collection objects. It offers a chance to be led to the unexpected, to navigate a visualized search history represented by a constellation of connections between objects,

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7 Mike Pepi, “Is a Database a Museum?,” Canadian Centre for Architecture (CCA), 2019, <https://www.cca.qc.ca/en/articles/69294/is-a-database-a-museum>.

8 Viktor Shklovsky, “Art as Technique [1917]” in *Russian Formalist Criticism: Four Essays*, ed. Lee T. Lemon and Marion J. Reis (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2012), 4; Peter Buwert, “Defamiliarization, Brecht and Criticality in Graphic Design,” *Modes of Criticism*, November 16, 2017, <http://modesofcriticism.org/defamiliarisation-and-criticality/>.

9 Buwert, <http://modesofcriticism.org/defamiliarisation-and-criticality/>.

10 Ibid.

concepts, ideas, and individuals.<sup>11</sup> The design of *Establishing a Database Connection* borrows from Wray's concept and is thus intended to encourage acts of information flâneur(se)-ing: a curious, investigative, and creative seeking after information.<sup>12</sup> The act of wandering through the database is thus facilitated by a pliable, generous interface design – one that encourages movement and enables an exploratory method for seeking and gathering information.<sup>13</sup> As a mechanism, pathways semantically structure content to support connectedness and the discovery of new meanings within gallery or museum collections.<sup>14</sup> It is through such a design that a playful and subjective interfacing may occur – one that is not unlike browsing the stacks of a library and finding an interesting title five books over from the one you were looking for.

When elements like search bars or filters are intentionally removed, database objects can reveal themselves through interconnected manual searching and gathering actions performed by the searcher. In basic search mechanisms, oversimplified connections are often made with the intention solely to aggregate or accumulate information. Art historian David Joselit notes that this is reflective of contemporary data mining practices, where the collection of information functions as an accumulation of capital whose value is determined by the patterns it generates.<sup>15</sup> This project asks, therefore, how data is valued in the context of the LBE Art Gallery collection database, and how it may be activated in order to promote new, unusual, and serendipitous connections among the collection's holdings. It is the hope of this project that unexpected connections between artworks in the gallery's collection will take place, and that such connections may create space for its visitors to have greater agency and remain in possession of their own rationalizations. Like AMAP, the probability of a matrix of possible outcomes remains the objective, rather than consuming something that has been predetermined, pre-aggregated, and neatly compiled.

## Constellations

This project seeks to raise many questions regarding the clusters of relations that can emerge through the digitized representations of the LBE Art Gallery's collection. What is lost or gained through such relations or interactions? How does one activate a digital database of collection data – an often fragmented, static, and private repository – as a dynamic, networked, and potentially unlimited representation of the collection for the public?

Navigating by way of intuition or intrigue, the visitor's selection is released to float within an open plane, ultimately allowing for a sort of "digital wandering" along interconnected, nonlinear pathways through the gallery's collection database. These pathways, mapped and displayed according to the visitor's own subjective interests, form lattices of connections among works in the collection based on the language that is associated with each work as it appears in the database. As this action is repeated, an algorithm within the database panel simultaneously recommends new works according to the visitor's last selection. This method of navigating, one that is based on path-finding, is proposed by Wray to be like moving through a type of *information landscape*, or engaging with a "form of networked knowledge that allows an information seeker to navigate and orient themselves within semantically linked data."<sup>16</sup> Similarly, AMAP made space for a multitude of connections to emerge organically among collection objects as they were installed side-by-side in the LBE Art Gallery according to a selection system that navigated the

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11 Timothy Wray, "Pathways Through Online Museum Collections: Designing Serendipitous User Experiences Using Formal Concept Analysis" (PhD diss., University of Wollongong, 2015), 25–26.

12 Ibid., 20.

13 Ibid.

14 Ibid., 28.

15 David Joselit, "The Epistemology of Search," interviewed by Troy Conrad Therrien, *ARPA Journal*, November 13, 2014, <http://www.arpajournal.net/the-epistemology-of-search/>.

16 Wray, 17.

Gallery's vault in order to extract unbiased selections (i.e., based on probability and chance over predetermination).<sup>17</sup> Through this kind of navigation, *Establishing a Database Connection* encourages its visitors to shape unexpected constellations based on their own interests and goals, yet are ultimately led by the language inputted and maintained by the collection's curators and administrators.

The semantic clustering of digital objects in order to draw links among physical ones housed in collections allows for what is defined as a quality of *connectedness*. This way of navigating through constellations of data demands information access systems that transcend traditional systems of information organization and classification in order to evoke new experiences and provide meaningful contextualization for works of art.<sup>18</sup> To build conceptual relationships between objects in this way utilizes aspects of the technique of formal concept analysis, described by Wray as a method of knowledge representation that employs the philosophical logic of human thought (i.e., a user's navigation choices) as a means to generate conceptual neighbourhoods or lattices of related content.<sup>19</sup> This method is therefore applied to form concepts that are relational and spatial, and which can be used to understand or construct different narratives between objects in the LBE Art Gallery's collection database.

## Digital Objects

What does it mean to draw connections between digital objects that represent physical ones? Each physical object in the collection is represented within the interface either by its photographic documentation or an associated description existing in the database. It is generally believed that photographic or other surrogate documentation represents a limited way to experience a work, as it does not reproduce its material qualities or presence. However, in digitizing the collection, such digital surrogates become entirely new objects in and of themselves. Although these digital objects are not meant to act as replacements for the physical ones in the collection, their documentary value and the data they are composed of should be considered significant.<sup>20</sup> The librarian Jasmine Burns has termed this concept "virtuality," in which digital surrogates should be viewed as individual objects separate from their physical counterparts.<sup>21</sup> By understanding these objects in this way, Burns adds that "the surrogate draws its significance from the ongoing narrative of its physical counterpart and serves as a mediator between the viewer of the surrogate and the creator of the original work."<sup>22</sup> In the translation of the physical gallery holdings into metadata and digitized files, their materiality is not lost and becomes, instead, an augmented version of its physical twin: an extension of the original with a quality and materiality of its own.

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17 Duclos and Ross, <https://bit.ly/2UVqHq7>.

18 Timothy Wray, "Pathways Through Online Museum Collections: Designing Serendipitous User Experiences Using Formal Concept Analysis," (2015), 11–12; Glen Hoptman, "The Virtual Museum and Related Epistemological Concerns," in *Sociomedia: Multimedia, Hypermedia, and the Social Construction of Knowledge*, ed. Edward Barrett, MIT Press, 1992, 141–42.

19 Ibid., 29.

20 Jasmine E. Burns, "The Aura of Materiality: Digital Surrogacy and the Preservation of Photographic Archives," *Art Documentation: Journal of the Art Libraries Society of North America* 36, no. 1 (2017): 2.

21 Ibid.

22 Ibid., 6.



As this project interfaces with the LBE Art Gallery's collection database, it seeks to present, in the same spirit as AMAP, a self-curating or outwardly unmediated presentation of the collection that welcomes limitations, inefficiency, and human error. *Establishing a Database Connection* mirrors this embrace of such obstacles and considers additionally how the associated information that is kept within the gallery's database might highlight notions of efficiency, access, and visibility.

The LBE Art Gallery's collection database, generally, is not entirely available for public use; most details are accessible only by the gallery staff.<sup>23</sup> While anyone may request to access the database for research purposes, its value as a resource is partly based on whether or not an individual already knows what they are looking for. To interface internally with the collection database, for example, demands prerequisite knowledge of how to use that specific collections management software. Thus, the collection database may be what is termed a "dark archive" – an archive that grants but limited public access and serves chiefly to preserve the information it contains.<sup>24</sup> *Establishing a Database Connection* seeks to embrace and critique such limitations as they present themselves and, as a result, to ask: what are the limitations that prevent this dark archive from being accessible?

AMAP sought to counteract the enduring belief that galleries and museums refuse to share their collections or to make visible such objects that might be concealed within the vault.<sup>25</sup> For the curators of AMAP, the balance between the risk of presentation and the safety of preservation was one of the more compelling aspects of their institutional critique. In the case of *Establishing a Database Connection*, limited copyright permissions for specific artworks prevent more than half the collection from being displayed without visual documentation. This limitation places a greater emphasis on the textual descriptions of works and highlights the vulnerability of digital images, often overlooked or unnoticed in the context of the internet's image-saturated environment. Artist and filmmaker Hito Steyerl reminds us of the risks images face when they are subjected to such arenas, wherein "works have become travelers in a digital no-man's land, constantly shifting their resolution and format, speed and media, sometimes even losing names and credits along the way."<sup>26</sup> On this account, what does it mean for such documentary objects to become fragmented within these expansive networks, separated from their archival contexts?<sup>27</sup> What additional meaning, values, or lives might these images take on under these conditions? What risk to their integrity is incurred via their circulation, displacement, or fragmentation?

Additionally, through this unmediated approach, access to works might be limited due to many other factors, like human error, highlighting an apparent inefficiency or inadequacy of the information associated with the collection. In her article "Algorithm as Curator: Non-Narrated Collection Presentation," art historian Manique Hendricks notes that the strength of an algorithm lies in its ability to organize information with semantic neutrality. However, she adds that the

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23 The gallery has digitally archived part of its collection through online databases such as The Canadian Heritage Information Network (CHIN), Artefacts Canada, and the Info-Muse network of the Société des musées québécois (SMQ). The virtual exhibition *Collecting: The Inflections of a Practice*, curated by Melanie Rainville, also presents more than 250 works from the collection in connection with issues and limitations around collecting. See [http://archive\\_ellengallery.concordia.ca/collectionner/en/](http://archive_ellengallery.concordia.ca/collectionner/en/) to learn about some important moments in the history of the gallery and its collection. See also the collection's page on the gallery's website: <http://ellengallery.concordia.ca/collection/diffusion/?lang=en>.

24 Annet Dekker, "Publishing and Exhibiting Online; Or, How to Create and Sustain a Performative Archive," audio recording, November 16, 2017, [https://afterall.org/2018/01/26/Annet\\_Dekker\\_Presentation.mp3](https://afterall.org/2018/01/26/Annet_Dekker_Presentation.mp3).

25 "Lunch Time Talk: Janet Brooke," digital video file, 2009, Leonard & Bina Ellen Art Gallery Archive.

26 Hito Steyerl, "In Defense of the Poor Image – Journal #10 November 2009 – e-Flux," E-flux.com, 2009, <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/10/61362/in-defense-of-the-poor-image/>.

27 Burns, 6.

human curator's task is to take risks and to contextualize works – and that the human's choices may be much more surprising than those of a pre-programmed algorithm.<sup>28</sup> Within this project, works are linked through an algorithm-like operation that creates connections between selections of curator-imputed language, experimenting with both empirical and conceptual systems of organization so that one may produce and explore dynamic connecting pathways within the collection database. This, however, also may suggest a critique of digital labour, so often overlooked or unaccounted for in the process of building such databases. This notion may also echo a similar aspect of AMAP, namely that the labour model used to install such an ambitious exhibition – wherein hired student technicians operated together like a machine or a Fordist production line – was woven into its performative quality.<sup>29</sup> By accepting and making visible such limitations within the interface, this project seeks to develop a dialogue around the variability of human versus machine efficiency, the visibility of systems, and the fragile nature of digitized files – especially in the context of gallery archives or databases, which are often fragmented and in flux, and the product of endless digital labour.

## Classification Systems and Bias

There is a long tradition within both art history and cybernetics of considering how dynamic systems can be created or how feedback can be harnessed in order to generate critique of the control of organizational structures. In the context of the LBE Art Gallery's collection database, as well as the dynamic web, many determining factors may delineate what is visible or invisible. These factors can be human or non-human, depending on whether content is made available through curatorial selection processes or a data organizing algorithm.<sup>30</sup> In referring to such algorithms, it is becoming a common realization for many that these systems have introduced new agents of control when it comes to access and visibility.

However, information gatekeeping can represent a commonality between the cultural institution and the interfaces that make up the majority of the online platforms with which we engage daily. In recent years, many galleries and museums have begun re-evaluating the types of narratives they uphold or what kinds of stories are being told over others. Alongside this shift, generally, technological solutions have often been heralded as a kind of neutral or unbiased solution to human-generated bias. However, critic Mike Pepi states that the database is wrongfully considered to be a neutral entity, as “every database contains the hidden choices and structures of its maker.”<sup>31</sup> Although neither gallery/museum nor database are ever free from bias, it is the aim of *Establishing a Database Connection* to reveal how collection databases (or databases in general) and organizing algorithms are better at concealing these biases, creating false impressions of independent choice and free access to information.

This is technically facilitated through systems like content organizing or recommendation algorithms, which build upon or learn from users' interests, or via search engines that can only operate based on an individual's prior knowledge. This phenomenon is what is commonly referred to as a “filter bubble” – a perception biased by one's inability to access information

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28 Manique Hendricks, “Algorithm as Curator: Non-Narrated Collection Presentation,” *Stedelijk Studies*, May 6, 2019, <https://stedelijkstudies.com/journal/algorithm-curator-search-non-narrated-collection-presentation/>.

29 Duclos and Ross, <https://bit.ly/2UVqHq7>.

30 Communications scholar Taina Bucher defines these algorithmic systems “as the coded instructions that a computer needs to follow to perform a given task.” She continues in stating that, “algorithms are deployed to make decisions, to sort and make meaningfully visible the vast amount of data produced and available on the web [...] tell[ing] the story of how our lives are networked and connected.” Taina Bucher, “If ... Then: Algorithmic Power and Politics” (New York Oxford University Press, 2018), 19; 2-3.

31 Mike Pepi, “Is a Database a Museum?,” Canadian Centre for Architecture (CCA), 2019, <https://www.cca.qc.ca/en/articles/69294/is-a-database-a-museum>.

online that does not reinforce or conform to one's beliefs or interests. Typical online gallery collection databases are navigable via organizing or recommendation systems, enforcing a combination of institutional gatekeeping and machine bias enabled by streamlining algorithms. Steyerl reminds us that the contemporary condition of perception is machinic, whereby "vision loses importance and is replaced by filtering, decrypting, and pattern recognition."<sup>32</sup> Therefore, what information may be considered valuable, and what information is simply secondary (or perhaps dispensable) within a collection database? How can we engage with digital collection archives and databases in nuanced, unpredictable ways that embrace inefficiency, human error, and the transparency of their contents? More importantly, how can curatorial guidance and activation reassert agency within this context?

Just as a curator sets a collection in motion by mediating, establishing context, and interpreting the works in the gallery's physical holdings, in this context the curatorial hand is passive and is represented through the subjective language used to describe and contextualize each database object. Within the database, keywords have been assigned by the database's various administrators and parsed as tags as a method of organizing and creating connections among objects. The author of *On the Existence of Digital Objects*, Yuk Hui characterizes tagging as "an organization of relations that destabilizes the conception of objectivity and monolithic meanings" and observes that it is "an example of how different possible worlds may be brought together."<sup>33</sup> Although these tags have been produced by the curators, and not the database user, the visitor is not passive. Instead, they are encouraged to be critical of the word choices and language embedded alongside these works. Within this interface, keywords will appear as a visitor selects each new work, and become part of one's constellation of information. As a visitor traverses the interface, actions such as hovering or clicking will highlight other artworks associated with a particular keyword, and vice versa. From here, the visitor is encouraged to question the associations that are being automatically generated.

For example, an oil painting titled *Caroline de la Rivière* (1990 – 91), by Martha Fleming and Lyne Lapointe, was described by the gallery's curator at the time as "portrait of woman, background landscape" in the database's subject field. This returns us to other collection works which also feature "portrait" depictions of "woman" and of "landscape." What is missing from this visual description is that the subject of the portrait, a young woman, is depicted with mustache and goatee. Here, Fleming and Lapointe subvert gender definitions and trouble art genres – especially in light of the fact that this painting directly references a work by French neoclassical artist Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres titled *Mademoiselle Caroline Rivière*. These details, however important, are not reflected in the artwork's description, most likely in an attempt to remain objective, or to suggest a sort of "neutral" position with regard to archival purposes. How then may one begin to question the perceived "neutrality" of these systems, wherein bias is in fact revealed through its concealment? It is not the intention of this project to reduce these objects to their tags, but rather to encourage a dialogue around their classifications and labels.

As lattices of connections are composed via a user-activated algorithm, a networked and nonlinear co-curation takes place between curator and machine, whereby works in the collection take on additional meanings through the connections being mapped and the complex juxtapositions into which they thus are drawn. Independent curator Annet Dekker describes such a gesture as attributing new values to data objects through enacting a specific aesthetic; it is both a curatorial performance and way to demonstrate the performativity of a database. Within such an experimental performance, it is the hope of this project that new connections are established, or at least attempted, through such operations.

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32 Hito Steyerl, "A Sea of Data: Apophenia and Pattern (Mis-)Recognition," *E-flux Journal*, no. 72 (April 2016): 2, accessed September 30, 2019, <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/72/60480/a-sea-of-data-apophenia-and-patternmisrecognition/>.

33 Yuk Hui, *On the Existence of Digital Objects* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016), 215 – 16.



## Residency Context

The *Expanding Exhibitions* residency is a four-month residency situated at the Leonard & Bina Ellen Art Gallery at Concordia University in Montreal. Its aim is to produce a digital project that mines the gallery's exhibition and curatorial histories to develop a parallel, augmented, or counter-digital narrative in regard to one or more specific exhibitions. Its desired outcome is to examine new exhibition frameworks and to engage far-reaching and diverse audiences through a networked digital platform.

Specific concepts that have been pulled from *As much as possible given the time and space allotted* (AMAP) include but are not limited to: a non-narrative and systematic curatorial methodology, a critique of hierarchies, private/public access within exhibition spaces/institutions, risk and the balance between preservation and presentation, performative displays, and adapting or submitting to limitations, inefficiency, and error. Additionally, and in the spirit of AMAP, this project reflects on the role of the curator in creating narratives, offering the visitor (and the works) new agency to speak for themselves within a saturated space.

## The Leonard & Bina Ellen Art Gallery Collection

Since the gallery's establishment in 1966, its commitment to its associated university community, as well as to the collection of contemporary Québécois and Canadian artwork, has been its priority and focus. Although the Gallery's collection represents various movements and styles that have shaped Canadian art history, the majority of its approximately 1,800 works date from the latter half of the twentieth century. Over the course of its collecting history, the LBE Art Gallery has presented a non-narrative acquisition history, with gaps and inconsistencies. Such inconsistencies may be attributed, for example, to the inclusion of decorative objects sourced from flea markets, the accession of non-Canadian or ethnographic objects, or the loss, theft, or misplacement of artworks due to inadequate conservation protocols.

Materially, the collection is characterized mostly by works on paper, but it also contains paintings, prints, photographs, videos, sculptures, and more. The Gallery's current collecting practices are the result of a seven-year moratorium set in place between 2003 and 2010 by its current director. During this time, acquisition policies were reconsidered in light of this disparate collecting history and redrafted in the aim of tightening the parameters of the Gallery's collecting practices the more closely to reflect its programming. As well, over the last ten years, the Gallery has outlined its commitment to the decolonization and indigenization of academic and cultural institutions, as well as to acquiring, on a regular basis, works by Indigenous artists.<sup>34</sup>

In the same spirit, this residency project explores the non-linear pathways inherent in the LBE Art Gallery's collecting history. Encouraging oblique relationships to emerge between works may thus become a means to better reflect the gallery's current mandate, which is centred around research, experimentation, and critical inquiry.

## Credits & Acknowledgments

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Consultation	Christopher Moore, Sabine Rosenberg

We wish first and foremost recognize that this project would not have been possible without the generous donation of Reesa Greenberg toward establishing this residency program. Additionally, we would like to extend our appreciation to the Leonard & Bina Ellen Art Gallery for initiating and facilitating this unique opportunity to engage with the Gallery's exhibition history through the *Expanding Exhibitions* residency. We especially would like to acknowledge the close collaboration and guidance of the Gallery staff, with special thanks to Michèle Thériault (Director), Robin Simpson (Public Programs and Art Education), and Julia Eilers Smith (Max Stern Curator). We also wish to thank the Department of Design and Computation Arts, the Department of Art History, and Concordia University for their support and collaboration. Finally, we would like to pay tribute through this work to the curators of the exhibition that inspired it – Rebecca Duclos and David K. Ross – and to thank them for their enthusiastic involvement in this endeavour.

– Gavin Park and Kristina Vannan