

[Master Thesis Extended Abstract]

Experimental curating in times of the perpetual beta: strategies and platforms for online-based art.

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As new exhibition platforms for online-based art appear and as art institutions seek new forms of engaging their public within emergent formats on the web, the need to better understand previous practices arises. Although there has been significant initiatives towards a somewhat historicization of online-based art, a historical overview of online-based art exhibitions is scarce. Taking this lack in consideration, the thesis presents and analyzes examples of past and current exhibition platforms and curatorial strategies for online-based art in order to identify the potentials and constraints of the field and, subsequently, suggest further developments and possible actions. For this purpose, the research initially investigated how online-based art has been exhibited in the last twenty-seven years to then be able to identify the underlying characteristics of projects that seem to be, in one way or another, questioning or pushing the existing boundaries of the field.

The analysis was then based on the premise that the current scenario of online-based art exhibition faces four general concerns: in how to present the artworks in both physical and online spaces; in establishing engagement and agency of both the public and the art sector itself (especially when implementing online platforms or algorithm-based curating); in reaching a diverse public, but also a network of emergent practitioners; and in establishing conceptual congruency, as discrepancies appear in the relationships between project concept, contemporary web culture and current economical and legal stances. Furthermore, the thesis sustains the hypothesis that, with the ongoing technologically-driven changes and challenges of the field, the forms through which online-based art has been exhibited in the last twenty-seven years has also shifted and, more so, it is also shifting the role of curators and their relationship towards spaces, the artists and the public.

The thesis has then selected projects which indicate a movement towards those shifts, including analysis and interviews on: ZKM's *Art on Your Screen* platform, which aims to strengthen the relationship between artists and the public, as well as between the physical and the online sphere, by exploring the interface's participatory potentials; the *Palais des Beaux Arts* in Vienna, which illustrates this symbiosis between different spheres by creating a virtual museum within a determined physical space; the Link Art Center's *Link Cabinet*, which demonstrates how interface

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challenges can be addressed by clearly separating current exhibitions from their archive; the Archive of Digital Art's (ADA) online exhibition, which in contrast suggests a thin line between the exhibition and archival spaces and strategies; the Akademie Schloss Solitude's Schlosspost web residencies, which rethinks the relationship between curators and artists through a more collaborative online approach; and the Museum of Digital Art's (MuDA) and Platform Stockholm's *Curatron*, which explore the potentials of algorithms in seeking and exhibiting artists within the Internet.

While Chapter One presents the significant shifts in exhibiting online-based art since the 1990s, Chapter Two shows through the analysis of the selected projects that issues in *presentation* and *engagement* could be better addressed by developing further experiments with the concept and structures of the interface, aiming towards a more transdisciplinary approach. Chapter Three provides a more thorough contextualization in order to understand the concerns with *reach* by highlighting the current network and community-building strategies and their importance today. Moreover, the thesis has identified what seems to be an ongoing shift in the role of the curator as they rely on the technological developments of the field. This role has been described, through the interviews conducted, as more collaborative and less hierarchical, as curators work in conjunction with other involved parties and give more independence to artists to adapt the exhibition space and engage directly with issues in exhibition design.

Lastly, the thesis has identified in both past and current initiatives an *experimental* approach towards exhibiting online-based art, as projects have ventured through the Internet in order to explore and experience the potentials offered by the medium for art and exhibition-making. Projects such as *äda'web* explored the malleability of the Internet's structures by constantly adapting their interface and making the platform itself a space for artistic experimentation. In other projects, such as *net_condition*, being experimental largely meant taking risks in emerging fields and adopting more unconventional or less accepted methods towards exhibition-making. For more recent projects, such as surf-clubs or social media exhibition platforms, being experimental means developing practices which has not yet been termed. It is finding itself to be just within the borders of artistic and curatorial discourses – not fully inside, nor outside. For projects such as AOYS and Palais des Beaux Arts, it means testing those boundaries and rethinking the very notions of space. Or for projects such as Link Cabinet and ADA, it means to question the existing conceptions and their limitations. And in this process, to experiment is to reconfigure the well-known and define the unnamed.

To experiment, however, also means to acknowledge the possibility of failure. It means to work with the unknown and, as such, accept the fact that the outcomes do not always turn out as wished for or as predicted. It can then differ from the notion in the sciences, where the term experiment often refers to a method of investigation which values empirical evidence as a means to

obtain knowledge and truth. However, our vernacular notions of experiment often attributes a more loose approach, where one “tries things out” and through trial and error obtains a result (which can vary occasionally).

Nevertheless, the concept of “experimental art” has been largely associated to practices of the 1950s to the 1970s, where being experimental meant largely questioning the existing boundaries. Parallely, art making in that period was also marked by a growing interest in new technologies. By the 1960s, this interest sparked collaborations between artists, computer scientists and engineers, many of which would later contribute to the formation of the iconic Experiments in Art and Technology (E.A.T.). And like E.A.T., many of the analyzed projects in this thesis were themselves *experiments*, in the sense that they were *exploring* the potentials and applicability of new technologies in the arts. To explore or to experiment is, in this context, to not only seek new methods and concepts, but to also incorporate emerging technologies and diverse practices.

In this sense, with every advance in technology, a new wave of experimental practices in the arts emerges – as we see now with a sudden hype of Virtual and Augmented Reality and of Artificial Intelligence. In all cases, those are not new fields. On the contrary, they have a relatively broad background of application in the arts and sciences. However, they are still in the “experimental phase”. And, like online-based projects, they will continue to be, as the software-based tech market is based on the principal of the *perpetual beta* (a development model where a software is launched still in its “experimental phase” or launched “in the open”, based on the “release early and release often” motto and on the concept of the user as co-developers).

These constant and systematic shifts in software-based technology then asks for an equally open and malleable practice which can follow further developments. The present scenario asks, therefore, that artists and institutions maintain themselves as constant *experimenters*. In this context, artists, curators and institutions must acknowledge and should incorporate these development models within their practices in order to keep their projects running. Therefore, being experimental for online-based projects means not only to explore the potentials of technology, or transgress the imposed boundaries, but, within a technological point of view, to be open and prepared for further developments. That is, being experimental means being a perpetual beta.

Moreover, being experimental in such a scene means adopting a more collaborative approach to exhibition-making and curating as the development of such projects require the participation of multiple disciplines. Additionally, as the projects analyzed show, this collaboration means establishing less hierarchical relationships with artists, making space for *co-development*. Transdisciplinarity is, therefore, the key concept and the exhibition platform or the art institution as a whole can be a rich environment for the development of these experimental practices.

And although experiments and innovation have been largely associated to the science lab or institute, the current scenario of curating and exhibition-making for online-based art calls for

projects which work with the concept of the exhibition space as a “living laboratory”, where the exhibition is made open to transformation and is also the space for research, innovation and knowledge production in times of perpetual betas. As this need to constantly reconfigure itself permeates the practices exhibited, the exhibition platform can be the very space of online-based art experimentations.