## The Aesthetics of [dis]play.

**The Aesthetics Group:** Jeanette Doyle, Cathy O'Carroll, Mick O'Hara, Connell Vaughan

At stake in the recent drive to online exhibition are the aesthetics of display and the politics of the presentable.

In this presentation we focus, in turn, on the poetics of interruption, the relationship between the archive and its delivery in terms of digitally mediated performance, using the historical precedent of digital display in the museum context.

In the current crisis (Covid-19 pandemic), which foregrounds the digital realm as the site of engagement with museum collections, we reflect on the crucial role of *display* in aesthetic experience. Representation on museum websites and social media posts has a different register than the idealised physical encounter with the material exhibition. Here display remains intrinsically *technical* and operates according to practical contingencies and certain ideological frameworks.

The *technical* aspects of display are evidenced in the allegiance to notions of 'judgement', 'disinterest' and 'autonomy,' exemplified in the legacies of the White Cube and modernist aesthetic. Even something as apparently "disinterested" as the Kantian ideal of judgement remains a meta-narrative wrought across accepted display templates. More than a stylistic preference, this is ideological. In contrast to the ornamental frivolity of the classic salon hang it carries a legacy of anthropological knowledge regimes and imperial political agendas (see O'Doherty, 1986). In MoMA, for example, "the archetypical modern art museum," this apparent neutral mode served to negate the political potentials of avant-garde art insofar as it

enforces a strict "adherence to the separation of art and life" with display techniques of sterility derived from commercial practice.[1]

Today, digital archiving inherits much of display techniques of the modernist paradigm. Furthermore, the *technical* elements of display are also contingent upon a host of computational meta-layers and protocols that are modelled on a computational formal ontology that determines access to the collections of museums and galleries. The archivist/curator is required to enter the gritty materiality of the digital, but instead of durable objects or images, they organise and index digital facsimiles to appear and disappear at the click of a button, the swipe of a finger.

The current restrictions highlight questions concerning relationships of the (digital) archive to museal and other art institutions: How are we to account for the aesthetic experience primarily mediated through the digital? When access is reduced to the screen, as exemplified by the distancing imposed by the pandemic, the aesthetic experience of the material artwork is ever more *limited*, *static* and *partial*. The relationship between the 'physical artwork' and its adjacent digital counterpart dissolves in a sea of digital protocols such as hyperlinks, classes, functions and strings. This poses different challenges for curatorial and archival practices informed aesthetically by modernist tendencies as the archive is re-codified, re-presented and displayed.

The visitor's encounter with the digital display, via the web interface, can be considered in terms of performance. Encounters can be aesthetic, as much as educational and informational, and are co-constituted by each visitor's individual and idiosyncratic engagement, past experience and future expectations. The visitor explores, seeks, chooses, or accidentally encounters collections performed by the interface; constructing, intentionally and serendipitously, their own, unique, display. The performativity of each encounter renders the collection unstable in the meanings it generates and the activities it produces. This displacement can reposition past visits and orient future ones, rendering the collection

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[1] The paradigm of modernist aesthetics has penetrated not only the works of art but also their presentation-distance and autonomy is practised in art and in its installation. The simple stereometric spaces, the white walls and the lack of ornamentation present a conscious claim for the seriousness and relevance of modern art. (Grunenberg, 1994, 205)

available for new forms of interaction and various forms of re-performance. Perceived divisions between the informational resource and the material site become blurred, calling attention to the online site itself. What space is available to explore? Where are its boundaries, its no go zones, its corridors, open clearings and dead ends? Its quiet spaces for reflection?

Permanent displays and temporary exhibitions alike present occasions not simply of content delivery but formal articulation. The construction of the museum's digital archive or collection privileges enduring logics of proof tied to documentation that institutions claim to preserve. As such, the displays of online exhibitions and collections performatively reaffirm the social and economic functions of representation and reputation of the institution. The provenance of an artwork endures through the legacy of topologies and documentation that characterise not only an artwork's value but also its authenticity. This works to invoke a host of associative privileges of publication, dissemination, classification and order.

For example, the Irish Museum of Modern Art (IMMA) website generates a narrative for its collection through the allocation of key terms. The institution (See Fraser, 2005) seeks to be an international portal for Irish art practices. However, this dissemination is determined by what the museum/gallery owns. The crucial aesthetic *category* of display is, we note, absent from IMMA's website both in the collection and magazine search options. The collection can be browsed remotely and during the Covid-19 pandemic is being 'curated' on Facebook with staff members selecting and highlighting certain works. This allows the works to enter a social, albeit compromised space, to be 'Liked' and 'Shared'[2].

The museums web-based interface both intentionally and accidentally re-presents, and re-performs, the material and virtual space of the institution; its physical orientation, its histories, its collection, displays and exhibitions. The web interface provides a framing device for new forms of 'multi-valent' and 'unsettling' encounters (Lien and Nielssen, 2019). These encounters with the online display make visible the institution in new ways that can highlight some of the epistemologies, practices and cultural contexts that co-constitute the institutional site and the spaces of its collection.

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[2] Historically This entailed a low-res digital representation of material works which languish in an inaccessible space. (see Steyerl, 2015)

**Interrupting the Aesthetics of Display. (Connell Vaughan)**

The museum display, like its contents, behoves negotiation. Contemporary techniques of exhibition display contain signatures and layered traces of unsettling epistemologies, politics and aesthetics (Lien and Nielssen, 2019). Museums in their articulation of narratives (physical, temporal and ideological) serve to broker identity. National museums, for example, in articulating a distinctive trajectory trade on national identity. Traditionally, this is achieved through technologies of display such as text panels and display cases.

Museums are more than spaces of preservation[3]. They are sites where narratives of identity are constructed and reworked. To interrupt the "paraphernalia of institutionalised advice" (Macdonald, 2008, 48) is to breach these narratives. It requires consideration, as these displays themselves constitute a heritage of protocols and conventions. Interruption, *not* ignorance, interaction or re-appropriation, critically responds to the 'sense of unsettlement' produced by past signatures of display. To interact, after all, is to be guided by the display. The interactive beholder can be conceived as complicit, while an interruptive aesthetics sees beholders as challenging display norms, or "subvert[ing] conventional structures of signification by reconstructing the display or exhibition through their own interpretations" (Amy K. Levin, 2005, 79). A sensitivity to interruption can challenge the inheritance of multi-layered narratives present in museological display as it highlights the sticky tape poetics that connect the ruptures. In the age of Made-for-Instagram exhibitions this means asking why this object here? Why is it presented in this way? And how is it rendered online? The value of interruption is to allow us to unlock potentials and disrupt the way that archives and museums have "segmented populations into differentially governed groups" (Azoulay 2019).

The online mode of access allows for a particular interruption that breaks with the linear narratives of museological progress on aesthetic terms. Insofar as it permits navigation of the display on differently defined terms (such as search terms) it can be subject to different techniques of interruption. Tab to tab as opposed to room to room. We can experience the

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[3] Displays can never be neutral. Bennett, following Foucault, argues that in "the exhibitionary complex" decisions concerning contexts of display can be understood as decisions concerning the exertion of social control, "providing new instruments for the moral and cultural regulation of working classes" (1995, 73).

exhibition in an online rhizomatic form, albeit an institutionally framed form, unmoored from the physical site.

### The Digital Collection as Archive and vice versa? (Mick O'Hara)

An archive, a collection starts with a mark, a dot, a line, a letter, a word. The mark becomes a protocol, a record, organising and reorganising, a click, a swipe, sending and receiving, storing, indexing - including and excluding. The mark comes to identify, record, classify and store the work - it gathers, it places, it contains. The mark is a sign of other marks, an indexical that points beyond itself. The mark contains the traces and history of other marks. But such a history is also a history of a loss, of something excluded, an absence. The archive is an attempt to recover and recuperate something at its inception, its origin.

The online archive begets a further archive of digital traces that is a proxy for aesthetic engagement. The digital iteration of the collection on a website presents the institution as an archive built and mediated by a set of marks, filters and tags that act as gatekeepers and protocols determining a suite of digital access points. These regulated marks are visible in the html code that activate ████ and █████ers that organise yet leave spaces ██ and gaps.

Such a site presumes a topology and a protocol that includes and excludes. The digital *gramme* (mark, trace) functions as a means to gather and identify, to classify and assign. Jacques Derrida calls this process the power of 'consignation'. Consignation is the process of ratifying a system or "a single corpus" that gathers and privileges an ideal formation of knowledge and power (Derrida, 1998, 3).

Such spaces present what is hidden, what is chosen and what is left out and not authorised. They invoke the distinction between public and private raising questions of access, inclusion, documentation and interpretation. "[…] the documents, which are not always discursive writings, are only kept and classified under the title of the archive by virtue of a privileged topology" [4] (Derrida 1998, 3).

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[4] For Plato and Aristotle, the Greek word *archē* means beginning, origin or first principle. However, the Greek word *arkheion* translates as the place of public records, public office or government. The *arkheion* is the dwelling or house of the *archon*, the holder of public office, the guardian of documents and records. *Arkhō* is to rule, to govern, to control, to authorise. Derrida claims that *arkhē* has its meaning in both 'commencement' and

Derrida diagnoses the archive as a patient suffering a fever. This "archive fever" is, in his words, a Freudian pathology. The fever is the spectre or ghost of the past that haunts the archive and institute. But what if a new fever, a pathogen, strikes at the heart of the institute, a norovirus so contagious as to deny access to its staff and its visitors? A fever so virulent that the institute becomes a spectre to itself, without a physical audience, haunted by its past life, its previous incarnation…

While access to the physical institute is denied, access to the archive is granted solely via websites and social media. Collection and exhibitions are mediated by digital protocols that are a consignation as well as a supplement, an inoculator to social lockdown. Yet, the archive is "always already" a patient, a patient expressing a fever. This fever is induced by the myriad of absences and exclusions who lobby for recognition in the digital marks of text and image. But, as Derrida continually reminds us, it is absence that continually haunts presence. Text and images pull against each other in their un-degraded detail, with a chain of metaphors and footnotes, arranged by the punctuation marks of html code[5].

In the archival space of the collection, we are set the task of navigating these sets of digital marks of image, of medium, of dimension and description. Online the absence of a sense of scale, lighting and contextual presentation constitute a tangible loss, a deprivation of aesthetic experience. What gets omitted in this marking? Do the algorithms edit and repress? Do our minds censor and repress these marks as Freud suggests?

The archive is a negotiation between the marks made by institutions, authors, editors, curators, artists and the *arkheion* of the mind and machine. Archives are never fully faithful, but they play their part in the constitution of reality, offering and privileging a set of artworks, artefacts and objects while excluding others. Selection entails exclusion or absence, a set of differences to explore that sit outside, hidden between what is presented. The archive is not objective but a synthesis between the selector and the receiver that is always precarious and in play, waiting to be marked, iterated, included, collected, performed…

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'commandment'. Therefore, the commencement of *archē* as first principle becomes the means of commandment *arkhō*. The *arkheion* is the site where the archive takes place.

[5] What remains if…

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…only marks that signify absence.

## Encountering the collection via the website's digital interface in the mode of performance (Cathy O' Carroll)

In the physical space of the museum, through the presentation of works exhibited and displayed, through textual descriptors, signage and décor, the institution presents itself.

This self-presentation constitutes a performance that is encountered, navigated and engaged with by the visitor. What appears is not only the intentional self-presentation of the institution but necessarily accidental and contingent. The 'performance encounter' can reveal "unsettling layers of epistemologies".[6] The museum's web-based interface performs the institutional space in new ways, revealing "past epistemologies and practices" that co-produce the institution, rendering the site open to new forms of encounter.

The web-based 'performance encounter' with the collection is contextualised by the presence of the physical site and the somewhere, often hidden, material presence of the works. It is situated in relation to the individual memories and expectations of each visitor who encounters the collection via the digital interface. This produces a tripartite interaction between the visitor, the web-based interface and the physical site. Performance company Brith Gof propose a metaphor useful in considering this dynamic. They refer to site-specific work as an interaction between 'host' (the pre-existing site), 'ghost' (the performance), and 'witness' (the audience); where "the host and the ghost, of different origins, are co existent but crucially are not congruent" (Kaye, 1996, 220). The ghost's body is not solid, the host remains somewhat visible, whilst appearing more vividly through gaps in the performance. When the visitor encounters the museum via its web-based interface the ghost of performance reveals the host site in new ways.

The unique character of each performance is co-constituted by the intentional and pragmatic demands of the ghost. Particular to the online museum 'performance encounter' are the rhythms of click, search and scroll functions of the interface, the availability of macro

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[6] Exhibitions articulate meanings through qualities of which their makers do not have full control. They may carry unintended subtexts, appendages or depositions deriving from past epistemologies and practices. (Lien & Nielssen, 2019, 453)

and micro perspectives and the flattening effect of the digital screen. These functions serve to reduce and obscure texture, dimension and spatial context whilst producing performative gaps that illuminate structural and systemic aspects of the collection. Works displayed are rendered self-similar by the screen, whilst existing designations; categories, schools and movements are reproduced. The aesthetic relationship mobilised by this mode of display and its navigation framework brings the collection into view in a way that foregrounds, institutional conventions. The 'performance encounter' makes available, for critique and response, some of the meta-prescriptives that Jean-Francois Lyotard attributes the institution in terms of constraints that both "filter discursive potentials" and "privilege certain classes of statements" (Lyotard, 1984, 17). The online encounter provides a reframing of the display in which categories, systems, signatures and designations that perform institutional histories and epistemologies are re-inscribed. Lost, is the materiality of the work and the live encounter between artwork and beholder. Enhanced, is the possibility to discretize, interpret and analyse systems, signatures, categories and values.

The interface is performative; it positions and situates artist, work, visitor and institution, co-constituting the relationship between them. Judith Butler stresses the enacted and enacting nature of performativity, as "not a singular act (but a) reiteration of norms (or) regular schemas." It is only "act-like" because it "conceals or dissimulates the conventions of which it is a repetition" (Butler, 1990, 270-271). Performance both embeds past traces and produces new experiences and interpretations. This inherent duality allows the web-based encounter to reiterate and embed, whilst also providing for interruptions that might orient re-performances, and re-inscriptions of the institutional space.

The current crisis interrupts the everyday operation of the institution, shuts off the physical site, leaving only the digital representation for the visitor to engage with, without the contingency of future visits. The interruption raises a question of context. We view and experience within a context of past and future memories and expectations which are now suspended, leaving the online archival encounter to stand alone. The shape of the site is altered by a new temporal and spatial frame. The ghost operates within the coordinates of the domestic. Sited between professional and domestic chores, between expected and unexpected interruptions, the works rub up against surrounding objects; emails, Netflix, home

schooling, automatic updates. The display invades and is invaded by this everyday scene, providing an expanded contextual frame.

Concurrently, in this extended moment of suspense, the notional role of the web interface shifts from mediating tool to 'the museum' online, open to visits, explorations and future possibilities. Transformations appear in relationships, between artwork and copy, between producer and consumer. Terminologies of "engagement" tend to conflate the work with its digital image and reduce encounters to interactions whilst promoting this consumption as a vital therapeutics. This conception of the online visit limits the encounter to a singular performance. The networks of 're-performance' are further limited by the fact of lockdown and the mode of access.

Explorative encounters offer the possibility of both reiteration and displacement. They are co-constituted by our desire to re-member and to re-negotiate the past. The contextual shifts, produced by the present interruption, and the performance demands of the online display create new forms of encounter. What could we expect them to re-produce, or re-perform, at other times, in other spaces?

## The digital as exhibition. (Jeanette Doyle)

The categorical naming of works on museum websites adds a property to the works. For example, on www.imma.ie works are represented on the site in a number of nominated categories. Browsing is contingent on the alphabetization of artists' names in tandem with browsing through the category of 'Disciplines' which includes the sub-category of 'Miscellaneous'. Many of the works slip between categories.

An historical example of categorisation via a digital interface was *physically* situated within Lyotard's exhibition *Les Immatériaux* which he co-curated with Thierry Chabut at the Pompidou Centre, Paris in 1985. The exhibition represented the embodiment and display of philosophical practice. *Les Immatériaux* could be considered a book in the form of an exhibition. Whereas the display of IMMA's collection on the website and on social media manifests a slippage between disciplines and platforms. These multiple schemas include what can be considered the compromised manifestation of the artists' original intention and the

location or representation of these intentions independently of their reification within the physical site of the museum.

Les Immatériaux integrated digital platforms *within* the site of the material exhibition. It was staged in 1985 when the World Wide Web had not yet appeared, however it was an exhibition in which digital technology was an integral component. *Les Immatériaux*'s anticipation of digital technologies, was deployed a decade before digital tools became available to and utilized by the net.art generation emerging in 1994. The early web often entailed the delivery of artworks specifically designed *for* the Internet rather than the representation of artworks *on* the internet. *Les Immatériaux* is "widely cited as being a precursor to current exhibitions of new media art as well as to the development of the field of media-based art." (Cook, Graham, 2010, 21) A crucial element of the exhibition were early Minitel systems. The visitor was also mandated to wear Phillips headsets, the audio track emitted from the headsets changed in response to movement through the multiple pathways of *Les Immatériaux.* The exhibition was labyrinthine in structure reflecting the labyrinth of connectivity. *Les Immatériaux* placed an emphasis on new technology as a 'guiding thread'. It did so by utilizing digital strategies while the internet itself was burgeoning and many years before it was widely available. New modes of communication allowed experimental and interactive digital components of the exhibition to be produced.

*Epreuves d'écriture*s, was an interactive writing project, produced collaboratively and a central focus of the "*Labyrinthe du language*" pathway of the exhibition. This was a digitally networked project and involved twenty-six writers and philosophers. Each writer's contribution was a response to fifty keywords determined by Lyotard which were then commented on by the other contributors. The reflection on prescribed key words facilitated a discourse around the exhibition which was sited *within* the space of the exhibition itself, moderated through technical apparatuses. There were problems because of the nascent stage of the technologies involved; for example, finding a server with sufficient computational power and storage capacity. This led to the frustration of the contemporaneous viewer whose experience of *Les Immatériaux* was mediated by technology which often failed to function.

IMMA's website's display of the collection's catalogue is also represented by a set of key words determined by the institution. However, while access to the digital content of *Les Immatériaux* was predicated on the visitor's physical presence, IMMA's collection can only be

viewed currently online. Engagement with selected keywords is expected to take place offsite within the confines of the individual's browser often in a domestic context. Thus, there are resonances and disparities between the presence of the digital in *Les Immatériaux* and the representation of works from IMMA's collection on the digital interface of IMMA's website and in the realm of social media. Since the 'lockdown' IMMA has been displaying curated individual works on platforms such as Facebook where low-res representations of works can be responded to on an individual basis through the methodology of a click or a swipe. This is a different engagement to the experience of digital works within the context of a museum or a gallery or the engagement with projects specially designed to be viewed online, including 'surf clubs' which emerged in the mid-2000s. An example being *Nasty Nets*, (2007) where friends and colleagues posted and shared images, small video clips and animations. These projects were made possible by the development of the web's interface. *Nasty Nets* is now archived in www.rhizome.org in a non-interactive state.

Since 1985 and the experimental display of *Les Immatériaux* digital works have been increasingly displayed in the gallery and museum. Early digital works exhibited in a museological contexts were also often mediated by flawed technological apparatuses and what during the mid-90s was described as the "bleeding edge" of technology. Exhibitions in which digital content was central include *BitStreams* (Whitney 2001), *Automatic Update* (MoMA 2007), and *YouTube Play* (Guggenheim 2010).

Increasingly there has been a greater sophistication in the form of display of works concerned with digital technology, for example *Art Post-Internet* (2014) and *209 Search Engine* (2021), the latter at MoMA. However, in these exhibitions digital interactivity has become increasingly limited. In the context of the pandemic there is a new opportunity to counter this trend. This includes live online performance and exchange, works made with the Internet as a native format alongside the associated possibility of expanded distribution through digital platforms.

The difficulty of the current crisis also allows for the un-harried experience of an image which is not disturbed by the presence of other bodies within the context of the institution itself. The image is mediated by a digital platform but entails the attention of one viewer remotely as a single instance. However, it could be argued that the images displayed in this modality *representing* a collection are informative rather than aesthetic.

## Conclusion

In summary, we have considered key distinctions between online display and material exhibition. A different aesthetic experience is at stake in the *recently enforced* drive to online exhibition. In comparison to the exhibition of the digital within the site of museum and works made specifically for delivery online, the fresh terms of access of the current crises have created a different register of 'performance encounter' and possibilities of interruption. Nonetheless, these terms continue the logic of the art institution and the politics of the presentable, through the technical elements and ordering of the digital exhibition and archive.

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