

Expo-facto: into the algorithm of exhibition

M. Wilson (2021)

Report published in Henk Slager with Annette W. Balkema (eds.) *The Postresearch Condition*, Utrecht: Metropolis M Books. pp. 40-42.

Reacting to the COVID19 pandemic shutdowns, many arts institutions have transferred existing programmes or created new programmes online. This has given rise to a vast digital publishing drive in the contemporary art field. Indeed, the realisation of *The Postresearch Condition* conference online via zoom and webinar streaming may be seen to be an instance in itself of this process. There has also been a widespread adoption of the exhibition-online as the immediate solution to the demands of physical distancing, lock-down and travel restriction in the context of the global pandemic. However, this recent intensification of online presence orchestration by exhibiting institutions in the contemporary art field would seem at first blush to be just that: *an intensification* of an already pervasive drive to manifest institutional programmes via digital distribution platforms such as e-flux announcements, social media posting, art-blogging, website mediation of exhibition and jpeg-enabled art sales.¹ Indeed, the production of new digital property instruments as contemporary art investment vehicles seems to be a logical extension of the digitization of the contemporary art field's infrastructures.

The curatorial studies workshop (a working group within the European Artistic Research Network) convened a panel discussion –under the heading “expo-facto: into the algorithm of exhibition?” – on the question of the relays between exhibition protocols and the culture of digital networks, and the specific question of online exhibition mediations, extensions, alternates and substitutions as part of the January 2021 EARN online conference *The Postresearch Condition*. The panel was proposed as a forum through which to formulate the preliminary terms for an enquiry into the conditions, affordances and horizons of artistic operations and labour that are emergent in the transfer and relay of exhibitionary protocols online. This was conceived as a very tentative and modest first step in response to what seems to be (again at first blush and not something to be necessarily taken at face value) a global institutional convergence – similar in ways to the pervasive distribution of the white cube as a primary exhibition paradigm, though seeming to occur at a much more accelerated rate.

The panel comprised contributions from Prof. Noel Fitzpatrick (TU Dublin), The Aesthetics Group, and Prof. Carolina Rito (Coventry University). Under the heading “Attention|Screen|Attention” Prof. Fitzpatrick outlined some of the ways in which the sociotechnical paradigms of digital networks and screen attention economies could be framed drawing on a diverse range of philosophical, STS and social theory sources that included Jacques Derrida, Bernard Stiegler, Catherine Hayles, and Naomi Klein. Rather than address head-on the specific question of exhibition online, he provided an important groundwork for constructing this question by proposing some of the frameworks within which the questions of screen attention, both phenomenologically and politically, might be articulated. Among the ideas brought into play, Stieglers' negentropy was key. Prof. Fitzpatrick articulated Stiegler's critique of cultures of the algorithmic and of automation, without dismissing new technologies, but rather by augmenting the question of care and the stewardship of technics with respect to questions of the techniques of living and the development of collective intelligence or what might be termed the “general intellect” in the Marxian formula.

The Aesthetic Group (comprising Jeanette Doyle, Cathy O'Carroll, Mick O'Hara, and Dr. Connell Vaughan researchers who are each connected with the Graduate School of Creative Arts and Media, GradCAM Ireland) presented a co-authored paper on “The Aesthetics of [dis]play” which they voiced differently in several parts.² The paper focussed 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. The group proposed that at stake in the recent drive to online exhibition are the aesthetics of display and the politics of the presentable. In the course of their presentation, it was asserted that: “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?” This leads them, citing Ariella Azoulay, to argue, that “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.’”

Prof. Carolina Rito provided the third contribution to the panel, and opened up the question of the exhibition as a non-transparent or self-disclosing category. By challenging the presumption that the nature of exhibition in general is already known and that it is only the question of the mobilisation of exhibitionary protocols online that requires careful scrutiny and consideration, Prof. Rito provided a valuable counter-point to the positivist tendency to construe exhibition as a matter of self-evidence. Prof. Rito’s contribution also rebounded upon the terms of the conference itself, and sought to problematize what were seen as the predominantly modernist ways in which artistic research was been framed in terms of artistic autonomy and artistic intention.

In response to the three presentations, seven break-out groups were formed that developed responses to the following questions: **(i)** What are the questions and themes that might frame an initial consideration of ‘the exhibition’ and ‘the online’? What might be at stake here? Why might any of this warrant consideration? **(ii)** What are the resources and reference points that might facilitate the framing of the enquiry into these changing practices of the exhibitionary and digital networks? What work has already been accomplished or initiated in this space? What are the terms that might help elaborate study and enquiry in this space? **(iii)** What are the potential pitfalls or mis-steps that might be generated in approaching these themes and questions? The volunteer rapporteurs from each break out group, Victoria Jones, Claire Booth-Kurpnieks, Connell Vaughan, Marloeke Vandervlugt, Catalin Gheorghe, Lorena Marciuc and Naomi Siderfin, generously provided short summaries of the break out discussions which are available online.³

Among the ideas discussed in the break-out groups, Prof. Catalin Gheorghe (George Enescu University, Iasi) proposed a consideration of the dynamics of mobility and stasis in a way that, among other things, implied an important caution about the universalising tendency of the discussion and a tendency to erase the geopolitical specificities of location that are not reduced but further complicated and intensified by digitally networked screen economies. He also pointed to the possibility of a post-pandemy moment when the question of the materiality and co-location of cultural actions might be re-imagined and reconstructed with renewed meaningfulness but not through nostalgia.

¹ For a brief introduction to these themes see the blog associated with the in June 2020 workshop ‘Handfuls thrown into air and scattered over earth’ realised as part of the Bucharest Biennale: <https://exhibition.school/exhibitions-online-what-for/>

² See https://exhibitionschool.files.wordpress.com/2021/01/the-aesthetics-of-display_earn2021.pdf

³ See <https://exhibition.school/expo-facto/>