

DOCUMENTING MEDIA ART AND BEYOND: POSSIBILITIES AND CHALLENGES OF ONLINE EXHIBITIONS

Janina Hoth, Oliver Grau

Department of Image Science, Danube University, Austria, Janina.hoth@donau-uni.ac.at, oliver.grau@donau-uni.ac.at

ABSTRACT: The article explores both the challenges and possibilities for art online exhibitions. Based on an analysis of the relationship between born-digital art works and traditional art works, their differential mediality, and the interpretations of the physical exhibition space with current methods of internet presentation forms, we investigate how digitised objects can profit from the possibilities of their online presentation in comparison to physical exhibitions. As a case study, the first online exhibition of the Archive of Digital Art CODEDOC REMEDIATED is presented and analysed. Keywords: Digital curation, Media Art, Digital Art, Exhibition, Digital Humanities.

1. Introduction

Online exhibitions have become an active part of research for archive and museum practices as they offer a unique opportunity for art dissemination and distribution. As such, they cannot simply be understood as the digital mediation of a physical exhibition. Concepts and methods, which are essential to the digital environment and are also investigated by media art, such as interconnectivity and interactivity, need to be examined and integrated into the principal guidelines of exhibition practice. This is necessary in order to fully understand and explore the possibilities of the digital exhibition space.

The Archive of Digital Art (ADA, <http://www.digitalartarchive.at>, founded in 2000) is not only the most extensive, but also long-running archive for media art. Based on a social Web 2.0 strategy, the archive works as a community where both artists and scholars share their material by uploading images, videos, descriptions of the works, as well as information on technology, collaborations with scientists and technicians, festivals and events. While creating an archive for long-time documentation (file formats, website archiving, video uploads, etc.), the goal is also to present media art in all of its aspects and complexity for a wide audience, as well as to support its research.

Part of this process includes the development of an exhibition feature, documenting historic media art exhibitions, and new curatorial concepts and methods such as the ‘open exhibition’ format. With our Light Box tool, ADA community members have the possibility to present, narrate and disseminate archive material within a ‘Grid of Analysis’, where several documentation media (image, metadata, text, and video,) are simultaneously arranged in one slide. As an expanded method of documentation, video-based narratives help express the diverse forms in media art. These new exhibition methods will allow archive experts, curators and future researchers to dynamically arrange both digital born and digitised art works as a documentation of visual media, curatorial concepts and research texts.

2. The idea of exhibiting art

In their mediality, exhibition spaces have had a strong impact on our understanding of art and aesthetics today. Even though exhibitions are most often defined in connection with (art) museums or similar cultural institutions such as archives and libraries, they can take place in any public space. Their development goes together with that of the free art market in the Eighteenth century [Kemp: 159]. The initial idea was to display art works for distribution. This had a significant effect on

art production in the Nineteenth century because of the competitive situation between artists and their ability to make visible their many art works in an exhibition. In order to be seen, many artists turned to large scales and other affective elements to attract attention and sell their high-priced art. The Internet has revived this idea, and media art especially is very often presented and sold online [Waelder 2013].

But in the course of the Twentieth century, the exhibition has begun to be thought of as an abstract and detached space. This culminates in the concept of the ‘white cube’, where an art work is to be seen in its aesthetic, deprived from any context and becomes visible as the medium of an idea [O’Doherty: 336-339]. Even though art exhibition theories differ in application, the aesthetic value is consistently put in the very centre of attention, over even an information or societal value. The general ideal is to experience the art work in its original materiality, with visitors disengaging from the perception of everyday life. Although we often enter an exhibition by reading a text- a curatorial statement, an artist’s quote or a general introduction- the focus is on the art works themselves. Or, to put in other words, the “properties of the ‘Ding an sich’” [Ippolito/Rinehart: 94]. Nevertheless, an exhibition is always principally mediated by its narrativity. For archivists, curators and artists, exhibitions are a possibility to present either selected objects or entire collections. Nowadays, they are also a medium for conducting research and disseminating ideas, as well as understanding and reflecting upon developments not only in art history but also related fields. By assembling cross-cultural, interdisciplinary and transhistorical media and cultural objects, art historical research is broadened with concepts of visual perception and knowledge among others. An art exhibition is an open format – free for (re)interpretation. But although there are all kinds of presentation methods for

narrativity, defining principal guidelines have evolved in its historical development: (1) The **aesthetic value** as experienced in the original materiality of an artwork is in the centre of focus both in the exhibition space and narrativity. (2) An exhibition is **curated** either by one or more persons, but the degree of curation is highly variable [Siegelau 1999]. (3) It is pre-defined in an **enclosed space** with a limited and selected number of art works. (4) Exhibit **narrative** focuses on a specific subject, issue, time era or another theme, which guides the creation of an interpretation system other than that of the objects singularly. (5) Although this, too, varies, there is an **ordering system** that can be followed, but in general an exhibition always has to be viewed object by object.

2.1 Exhibiting online

Online exhibitions have developed several functions: They are a possibility to show a collection’s variety, its focuses and the research thereof. Rarely known objects and subjects can be made visible for a wide audience. In the way of a digital extension, they introduce or highlight a physical exhibition or its aspects. Since museums cannot display ‘real objects’ online, and therefore not show them in their original materiality, the focus for art online exhibitions shifts into one of documentation and creating context. The accompanying text for an exhibition can be equally or more important online than its visual media and the viewing thereof. Such digital exhibition methods are today more part of the documentation process and are therefore closer to an exhibition catalogue than the ‘actual’ exhibition.

The online exhibition’s different mediality also leads to a new understanding of the relationship between a physical object and its digital reproduction. Every documentation medium in an online exhibition is either a digital born or digitised object. This digitisation process can be considered a new kind of reproducibility for art works. The idea of the abstract exhibition space and the

experience of an art work's aesthetic are not or only partially comprehensible in the digital space because the art work does not exist there in its originality, but as a digitised reproduction. Digital documentation relies on other kinds of authenticity, which are positioned alongside original materiality such as social, ecological and artistic function, and therefore require different curation methods [Ippolito/Rinehart: 96]. The mediality of digitised and digital born objects possesses new and differentiated possibilities of analysis and dissemination as it is constructed by context, clouds of code, instructions and other fragments [Ibd.]. Even with high resolution quality, a painting, sculpture and even photography and film (before going digital) is online always mediated through its digitality. Therefore, digitised art works also challenge new modes of display for online exhibitions.

The methods and forms, which have so far evolved, vary highly and differ also from the principal exhibition guidelines, which hinder a general definition for online exhibitions. There is no standardized ordering system. But historical archives sometimes use a timeline, and art museums a floor map identical to the ones handed out in the museum. In general, exhibitions can be presented in any kind of interface with various degrees of interactivity.

Most often, a curator is not mentioned, and there is no prominent curatorial statement accompanying the exhibition. This is largely because online exhibitions are viewed upon as digital extension to an 'offline' exhibition or collection rather than as individual format.

Even though a narrative exists, the displays are sometimes not diversified from the general website, but maintain this basic display with an image and a text arranged next to each other, resulting in an absence of differentiation in the graphic design between pages. The connection is fluent between the online exhibition, and the

institution's homepage and links to other websites. Consequently, users can easily click in and out of the exhibition. This interconnectivity can interrupt and suspend the narrative. These aspects show the difference between the traditional exhibition and its guidelines to the digital format. Consequently, the term 'online exhibition' is only vaguely connected to our understanding of exhibition in a museum space, and generally applied to many different web projects and web sites.

But while online exhibitions hardly follow the principle exhibition-guidelines mentioned above, other functions and concepts have been put into focus: (1) Online exhibitions generally utilise the idea of the Internet as an open space. Rather than having their movements authoritatively directed, a user can navigate individually. Instead of letting users 'click through' slide by slide, they can choose independently by their own interests and research aims (see e.g. <http://memento.muttermuseum.org/>). (2) By creating possibilities for linkages, online exhibitions make connections visible and offer further information both from the institute's homepage as well as other net sources. (3) With functions such as comment sections, Facebook and Twitter APIs, users can openly discuss content and connect with curators within the framework of an interactive knowledge exchange.

Online exhibition formats are, in conclusion, radically more open and free in their execution, their accessibility, interconnectivity and interactivity. These characteristics distinguish it from the general exhibition guidelines, which are, in consequence, often neglected or invalidated. On the hand, this opens up new possibilities of presenting and disseminating art and the research thereof. On the other hand, the exhibition as a specific narrative format can become indistinguishable from other digital archive and museum tools such as search or browse interfaces.

The open digital exhibition space minimizes the idea of an overarching narrative and the idea of creating an interpretation system with the specific assemblage of art works. The interconnectivity, while being a main characteristic of the Internet in comparison to other knowledge spaces, can also indirectly discourage an in-depth research. The constant redirecting of a link system shows the width of an exhibition's contextuality, but can also be a hindrance when the aim is to focus on key aspects in more detail. Therefore, limiting the references and links can support the mediation of knowledge [Cubitt 2016].

In reference to the principal exhibition guidelines, the digital space should be constructed and curated as referential *and* coherent space to make the exhibit narrative visible along with its interconnectivity and interactivity.

2.2 ADA Media Art online exhibition

This summer, the Archive of Digital Art published its first online exhibition CODEDOC REMEDIATED, which was constructed with the digital research tool Light Box. This tool is based on the physical light table or box for slides, which are used in graphic design, photography and film studios.

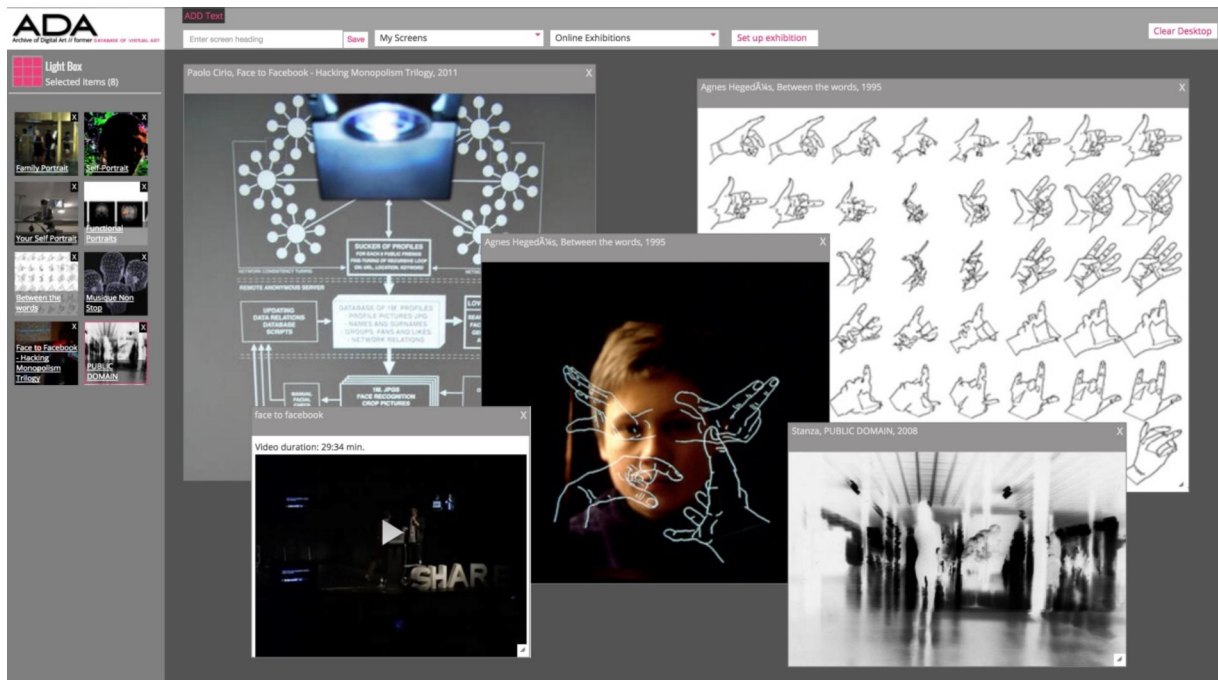


Figure 1: Light Box tool. © ADA

In order to compare and contextualise art works by their aesthetics, subjects and technologies, ADA's Light Box allows users to view images, videos and text from the archive simultaneously. Currently, this tool is open for the ADA community (which consists of around 500 artists and scholars) for their own research and teaching, but they are also able to publish their research

results in the form of an exhibition. In the future, the plan is to make it accessible to any user of the archive. ADA hereby becomes visible not only as database, but research platform as well. Via the front page, the viewer enters the exhibition in full screen and, at the moment, can go through the exhibition slide by slide in an order prearranged by the curator, or navigate to each slide individually by choosing from the summary page.

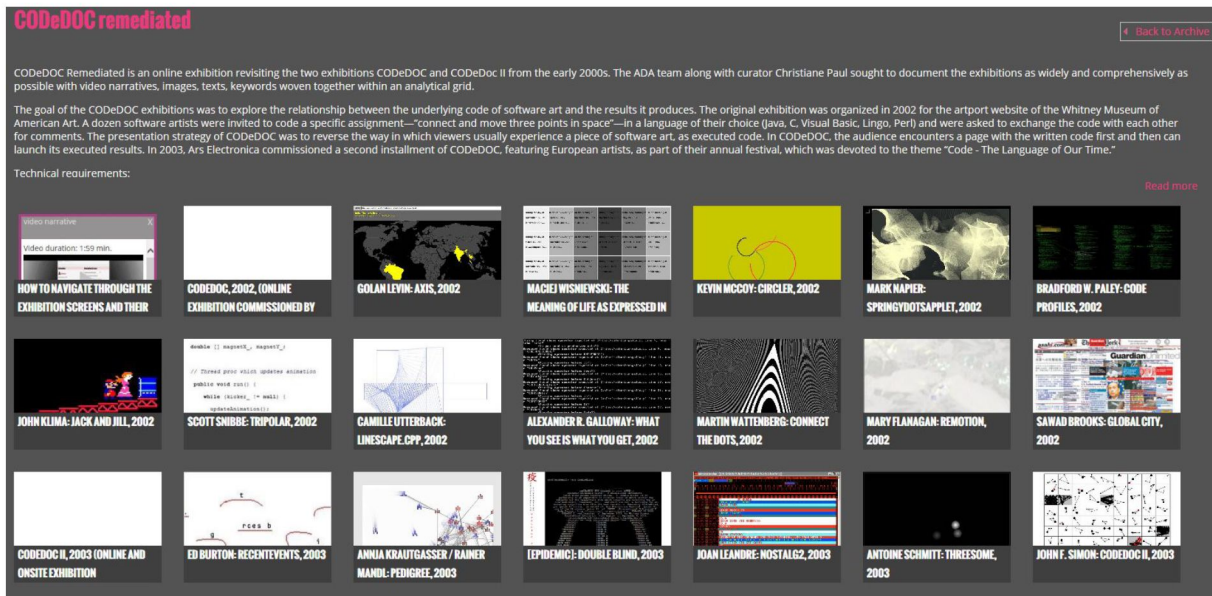


Figure 2: Summary page of the exhibition CODeDOC Remediated. © ADA

The darkened background, which relates to the physical light box and is a contrast to the archive's general layout, allows the viewer to enter the exhibition as an enclosed and individual cyberspace. Even though the exhibition interconnects to the archive and artist's homepages via links, the exhibition is organized in its own visual design to enable a distinct spatial perception. For the first publication, two exceptional exhibitions from the early 2000s were chosen – CODeDOC from the Whitney

Museum's Artport in 2002 and CODeDOC II at Ars Electronica in 2003, which were both curated by Christiane Paul, an ADA community member. Paul also agreed to curate ADA's online remediation of these exhibitions. The two installations explored the relationship between frontend – interface, display, etc. - of a digital art work and its backend -the coding. Artists such as Golan Levin, Camille Utterback, Ed Burton and Mary Flanagan were asked to write a small programme based on either Java, Perl or Lingo.

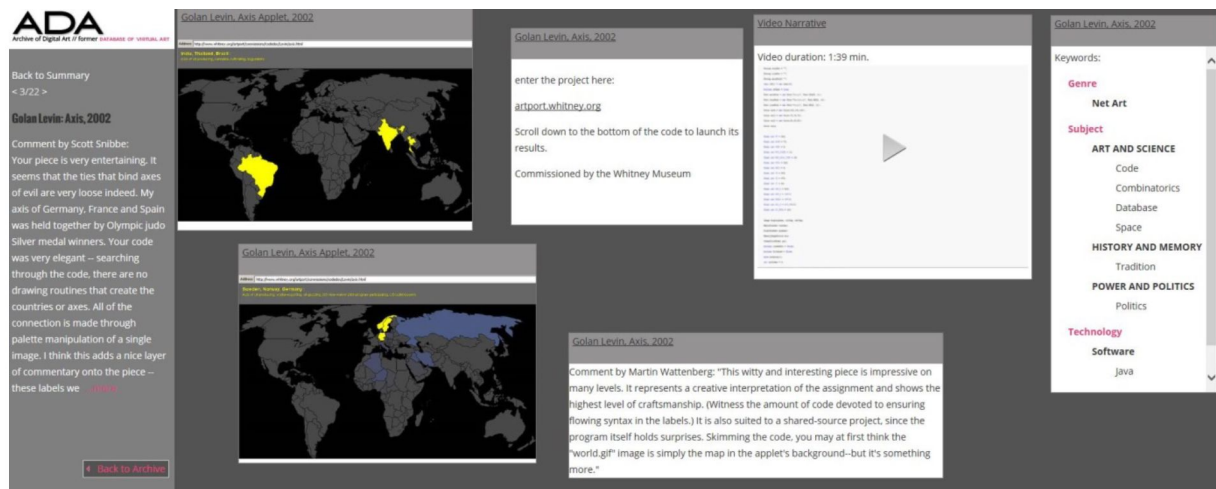


Figure 3: Single exhibition slide view with grid of analysis and video narrative. © ADA

Documenting these exhibitions around 13 years later does not seem like a significantly long interval, but in the Digital Age, this can

be an enormous span of time in regard to the technological developments. Many media art works and projects are in a constant state of change and are by nature processual, ephemeral or sequential; they incorporate elements such as user participation, technological developments and scientific inventions. A documentation method cannot rely on a single image to represent a media art work in all of its complexity. Rather, several images, videos and texts are needed to mediate the art work's idea and aesthetic to viewers. In CODEDOC REMEDIATED, we also wanted to create a possibility, where the frontend and backend of the art works could be aligned in a single presentation to represent the curatorial concept of the two projects. Since part of the original assignment was to comment on each other's work, this was to be put into the same exhibition space, too. Within a 'Grid of Analysis', several visual and textual media are assembled on a single slide. This offers a dynamic display, which shows an art work's interconnectivity and contextuality within the enclosed space and narrative framing of an exhibition.

Since many art works were based on Java applet, they could no longer be properly displayed due to system updates and security settings. Additionally, many browsers such as Google chrome have begun to block Java. Even though it is possible to change your settings individually and thereby view the art works again, this is a tedious process, which should not interfere with the exhibition experience. As a solution, we added 'video narratives', which function similarly to video tutorials: The team documented its interacting and experimenting with the art works via screen recordings, which were then uploaded to the archive as mp4 video files. Apart from their straightforward usability, the videos are easily integrated into the Light Box' display and do not require the viewers to leave the exhibition in comparison to the links to the original art

works. This enables a coherent experience within a referential space.

The concept of interactivity was still only alluded to in ADA's first online exhibition. The interactivity should not be limited to the final exhibition, but can become part of the research process. In a next step, ADA aims at developing an open exhibition, where community members are able to participate in the curation process as part of a peer-review-method for digital curation, which will be made visible in the exhibition as well. User test phases and other feedback methods can be incorporated already in the tool development to support interactive knowledge exchange.

3. Conclusion

While the physical exhibition space nowadays is thought of as an abstract background for the aesthetic experience of art, the digital environment is constructed of interconnectivity and interactivity, which creates new possibilities as well as challenges for exhibition formats. Interconnectivity should not only be considered as linkages for further information, but also as the connections made between image and text. By using artist's quotes and commentaries, showing genealogies of research, historicity, literary connections, indexing and other methods, they can display a differential (hi)stories of an art work, which in this form is not possible outside of the digital space. Interactivity refers not only to user participation with the final exhibition, but can be part of the whole curatorial process with user test phases, novel peer-review-systems and other open science methods.

Even though online exhibitions offer novel and welcome opportunities for the dissemination and distribution of art, they cannot simply be considered as the digital version of their 'live' role models. In regard to the aesthetic perception between the physical object in an exhibition and the digital object in an online exhibition, which change fundamentally due to their mediality, the display and dissemination methods also need to be reconsidered for

the digital exhibition space. In general, the principle exhibition guidelines, which evolved in the Twentieth Century, should be applied for online exhibitions in their methodology of narrative and curation as they support the dissemination of art and the research thereof. However, these methods need to be integrated into their new medium. Therefore, the online environment can be considered as a coherent exhibition space with referentiality to its original digital artworks.

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