

Exhibiting the Networked Image

1. Introduction

Recent developments in technologies and the invention of the Internet have led to a drastic shift from analogue to digital and therefore, have heavily influenced western cultures. This shift and its groundbreaking effect can be directly compared to that of the industrial revolution (Paul, 2008). Affecting every aspect of people's lives from socializing and working to experiencing cultural activities, the digital has become ubiquitous. It has changed the very way the world communicates and distributes information; culture is now dependent on these new technologies, such as the Internet and World Wide Web and is characterized by "computer-mediated forms of production, distribution and communication" (Manovich, as cited in Deuze, 2006, p.2). Everything one may want, can now be easily accessed and all it takes is a few simple mouse clicks. Internet users can access all the information they may need online, and with technologies getting more advanced and devices, such as mobile phones, becoming more affordable than ever, information can now be accessed on the go. Furthermore, with the advent of web 2.0, every user is also able to form and contribute to the network, which is the Internet. It has become a two-way communication tool, open for everyone to use and manipulate. For McHale it is clear, that,

our emergent world society, with its particular qualities of speed, mobility, mass production and consumption, rapidity to change and innovation, is the latest phase of an ongoing cultural context. Industrial technologies, now approaching global scale, linked to an attendant multiplicity of new communication channels, are producing a planetary culture (cited in Gere, 2006, p.119).

Traditional or old media, such as newspapers, TV and Radio now all have digital equivalents, which are commonly referred to as new media. This is also the case for artistic media including Film and Photography, which benefit from this shift from analogue to digital in terms of cost, speed and greater reach. This on-going

digitalization is not only impacting how art is created, but also more importantly the ways in which it is seen and engaged with, as well as the modes of exhibiting art.

This short essay explores these issues of exhibiting these new art forms, with special focus on photography and the networked image. Furthermore, the Photographers' Gallery will be used as case study, to further discuss the impacts of the digital on galleries and museums.

2. Digital Culture, New Media Art and the Networked Image

Besides noticing the impact of the 'digital' on culture and people's everyday life, it has also had a great effect on the art world. Directly responding to this digital culture, New Media Art can be seen as a result of the previously mentioned 'new', computerized media. The newly found connectivity, provided by the Internet, as well as the facilitated and more affordable production are among the key factors that determine this art form. However, it is important to note that it is not entirely new for artists to use technologies when creating their work. As McLuhan points out,

art at its most significant is a distant early warning system that can always be relied on to tell the old culture what is beginning to happen to it. Artists have always used every possible kind of support, every possible kind of material, every possible kind of tool (cited in Gere, 2006, p.9).

Nevertheless, what is new is the increased convergence of mediums, such as Film, Photography and Sound, as well as the inclusion of interactive and performative features. New Media Art can be defined as "process oriented, time-based, dynamic and real-time; participatory, collaborative and performative; modular, variable, generative, and customizable" (Paul, 2008, p.4). A lot of this collaboration and performance takes place online, where art works are disseminated with ease and intangible speed and can be viewed by millions of people worldwide. The Internet user, whether it is the artist himself or a random person views and interacts with the information given to him on the same screens used for working and socializing. As a result a convergence of work and social life takes place through the ubiquity and constant use of screens in every day life. General information and personal data is

mixed, making the Internet a mingle-mangle of random knowledge, to which the common user adds continuously.

For art this leads to the existence of “a utopian vision for art on the Internet based on sharing: a world where intellectual property is part of a commons, where authorship is synonymous with viewership, and where distinctions between art and everyday life are fluid” (Troemel, 2013, para 1).

For photography in particular, the shift from analogue to digital not only changed the way we take photos but also the modes of showing it and it has even resulted in the questioning of the very nature of photography. There are various issues that have arisen around the merging of the digital and photography, from questions regarding the manipulation of the ‘real’, the death of the analogue and therefore, photography, to photography as part of the canon art. However, too many to discuss in this short essay.

Looking at the actual final photograph, as opposed to the processes of photography, the term ‘networked image’ comes to mind. Photos are the most uploaded data to the Internet, with “350million” (wishpond, 2015) images uploaded on a daily basis to Facebook only. This number can be multiplied exponentially when taking into account other photo sharing platforms, such as Instagram, Tumblr and Twitter, to name a few.

Uploading photos has been crucially facilitated by new technologies, as well as built-in cameras on portable devices and can now be done from anywhere and by anyone with an Internet connection. With screens becoming ubiquitous, so has photography, due to new media “virtually [extending] our physical environment, providing a constant stream of moving, fleeting images of the world to our appraisal” (McHale, cited in Gere, 2006, p.119).

However, the over-saturation of the Internet with images, as well as the sharing of images both by professional and amateur photographers, makes it difficult to distinguish between art and non-art. Moreover, this omnipresence of the networked image poses questions about “photography’s authorship and cultural authority for those to whom its singularity remains a central principle” (Dewdney, 2013, p.95).

Through experiencing and engaging with professional and amateur photography on the same screens “new relationships are established—spatial, institutional and conceptual—that may blur the boundaries between ‘amateur’ and ‘professional’, artist and audience” (McKay et al., 2013, p.143).

For art institutions this shift from analogue to digital, as well as its influences on art in general and photography in particular, throws up existential challenges in regards to exhibiting and including New Media Art and the networked image into their collections.

3. Exhibiting the Networked Image

Regarding the networked image, it is important that art institutions include these digital forms of photography into their collections, in order to stay “representational through collection, exhibition, education and curation” (Dewdney, 2013, p.97). However, there is a common struggle for galleries to incorporate the networked image into their gallery spaces, due to its nature of being based on processes, interaction and real-time. These factors challenge “the very notion of history, heritage, and time upon which museums and galleries are based” (Paul, 2008, p.7).

Moreover, by no longer putting heavy emphasis on a final ‘art object’, e.g. the photograph on the wall, the networked image calls for new modes of representation, such as screens and other forms of projection and installation-based display, a way to “interface the digital” (Paul, 2008, p.53) has to be found.

The networked image is often produced in and for online dispersal. This online dispersal makes the networked image hard to grasp and exhibit, as printing it out or putting it into a static form would go against the very nature of it, stripping it from its concept and meaning. Art institutions therefore, have to be aware that exhibiting these forms of artworks always leads to a recontextualization and reconfiguration of the piece shown (Paul, 2008).

An example of a gallery looking at integrating the networked image into their space is the Photographers’ Gallery in London. Devoted to only showing photography since 1971, the gallery re-opened its doors to the public in May 2012 after a move within central London. The new gallery space boasts a 2.7m x 3m Media Wall, in the entrance area, as well as several exhibition rooms on the upper floors, which focus on the traditional photographic image. The Media Wall is curated by a separate digital curator, Katrina Sluis, and showcases an alternating programme of specially commissioned and acquired artwork, revolving around a variety of topics focusing on new technologies and digital culture. As Sluis (2016) explains, including the Media

Wall tackled the “need to find ways of beginning to engage [the gallery’s] audiences in different ways, [as well as the] need to be bringing different kinds of practices into the institution”. Past exhibition have included the opening exhibition ‘Born in 1987: the Animated GIF’ (2012), which focused on the gif as a “uniquely screen-based image format” (Sluis, as cited on furtherfield.org, 2012); as well as ‘For the LOL of cats’ (2012), which looked at the online curation of cat photography; and works around CGI renderings, as well as social networking.

However, four years later, the Media Wall seems to be obsolete, in terms of what it is displaying, the mode of representation and its location within the gallery. Screens are ubiquitous, just as photography is and the Media Wall is just one more screen. People have become used to ignoring screens due to the constant stimulus satiation, and therefore, tend to blend them out. It is nothing new and fascinating anymore.

Within the Photographers’ Gallery, the Media Wall has been placed in an awkward position in the entrance hall. It can be clearly seen from outside, however the location resembles more of a passing area than a gallery space, which leads to the ghettoization of the digital within the gallery. The artwork shown on the screen is not put into direct context with the predominately traditional photography shown on the upper levels and cannot be engaged and interacted with. It seems, that the networked image and the digital culture it represents has not yet been fully integrated into the gallery space and is still seen as something separate.

Furthermore, what is shown is very specific due to the specifications of the Media Wall itself. As Sluis (2016) explains, “it is such a bespoke screen, you cannot just take anything and stick it on. It is a 4k screen, it has got a very specific aspect ratio and it has a very specific form of spectatorship and it has no sound”. This leads to only a few handpicked artists being represented, giving the Photographers’ Gallery full control over what is included and, therefore, what is classed as art. This goes back to the idea of limiting the “interest in network photography to the project of a selective canon in which a historical lineage is validated in order to continue the tradition of selecting only what is considered high quality artist/photographer’s work” (Dewdney, 2013, p.103).

However, the network image is quite different to the traditional forms of photography and therefore it should not be forced into the same canon. Art

institutions will have to rethink the canon, in order to do the networked image and the digital culture justice and represent them correctly.

4. Conclusion

Thus, it can be summarized that the shift from analogue to digital has had a great impact on western cultures, making the 'digital' ubiquitous and leading to a digital culture. As artists have always commented on social, economic and political changes, it is now wonder they embraced the digital and started expressing their thoughts and statements through New Media Art, working with the very media that brought around the change. For photography this shift has led to the ubiquity of the image and its dispersal within the network. Grasping this networked form of photography is difficult, as is the representation and curation of it in art galleries and museums. The Photographers' Gallery has tried to integrate the networked image into their space, however through the fast-paced changes that have occurred over the past few years their mode of representation has become outdated and will have to be re-thought. The networked image and therefore, the Media Wall has to move into the actual gallery space, representing contemporary trends, as well as digital culture and giving the visitors the chance to engage with this new form of photography.

5. References

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