Digital Curating In Contemporary Art Practice

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Abstract

Digital curating has become a vital aspect of contemporary art practice, reforming how art is created, displayed, and experienced. This paper explores the emergence of digital curating as an innovative response to technological advancement and global challenges such as the COVID-19 pandemic. It examines how curators have adapted from traditional gallery-based practices to virtual exhibitions, online platforms, and interactive digital media. The paper also highlights the advantages of digital curating, including global accessibility, cost-effectiveness, easy documentation, interactivity, and inclusivity. Through this discussion, it becomes clear that digital curating not only transforms curatorial roles and audience engagement but also democratises art by making it more accessible and participatory in the digital age.

Keywords: Digital, Art, Curating, Practice

Introduction

The art world has witnessed an unprecedented transformation in the ways it is produced and disseminated, largely due to rapid technological advancements. The integration of digital technologies has not only changed artistic practice but has also redefined the role of curators. Traditional curating, once confined to the physical space of the gallery or museum, is now being challenged and expanded by virtual platforms, online exhibitions, and interactive digital media. These developments compel curators to rethink their responsibilities, methodologies, and strategies for engaging audiences in an increasingly networked world. Consequently, digital curating involves more than the presentation of artworks in digital form; it encompasses the entire ecosystem of contemporary art practice, archiving, interpretation, accessibility, and audience interaction.

Curators today must grapple with the complexities of digital preservation, intellectual property, and the ethics of online display, while also harnessing opportunities for global visibility and inclusivity. In this sense, digital curating not only broadens the reach of contemporary art but also democratises access, enabling diverse communities to engage with artworks beyond geographical and institutional boundaries. This paper therefore looked at digital curating in contemporary art practice, the advantages of digital curating, and a conclusion was drawn. Therefore, the paper proceeds as follows:

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The 2020 COVID-19 pandemic had a profound influence on the art world generally, as the consequent limitations and protective protocols disrupted the traditional practices of art curation

and exhibitions. Government-imposed lockdowns and social distancing protocols resulted in the closure of physical spaces of art installations like galleries, museums, and exhibitions, rendering physical collections and gallery spaces inaccessible to the public and creating digital spaces as the only means to stay present. The suspension of museums and art galleries during the pandemic prompted art curators to adapt to the changing dynamics, by shifting to virtual spaces like online exhibitions and virtual galleries, and establishing a presence in digital platforms. For instance, the Art X Lagos 5th Edition exhibition was held virtually in 2020. In line with the forgoing, UNESCO (2020) notes that, "by the month of April 2020, approximately 90 per cent of institutions were shut down during COVID-19, resulting in socio-economic distress, and making art curators leverage digital technologies to mark their presence in the cyber-sphere for the continuation of their museum and gallery operations". In furtherance, UNESCO (2020) notes, "in fact, the already emerging process of digitalisation, with art galleries experimenting with advanced digital tools with an aim to reach out to art enthusiasts, clients, and the general public". The 2020 COVID-19 lockdown was a new dawn for curators as they utilised the online platforms for exhibitions.

Habelsberger & Bhansing (2021) note that, "besides developing digital infrastructure, art curators and gallerists initiated online interactive activities like live streams, virtual tours, 3D exhibition views, and online talks, for engaging and entertaining prospective clients and art." According to Nur (2024), "the rise of digital technologies has profoundly transformed the landscape of the art world, challenging traditional curatorial practices and redefining the role of curators. As the art world increasingly embraces digital platforms, online exhibitions, and interactive digital experiences, curators must adapt their skills and approaches to effectively curate and present digital artworks." The author further states that, historically, the curatorial profession has been rooted in the physical curation of art exhibitions, drawing on expertise in areas such as art history, collections management, and spatial design. However, the digital era has introduced new complexities, as curators must now grapple with the ephemeral, interactive, and often technology-dependent nature of digital art. This shift has necessitated the development of new curatorial competencies, including digital literacy, user experience design, and data analysis. Therefore, Nur's submission captures the transformative impact of digital technologies on the contemporary art practice and the evolving role of curators within it. In her argument, digitalisation has not only challenged traditional curatorial practices but also redefined them, making it both timely and compelling. Indeed, as museums, galleries, and independent curators increasingly turn to digital platforms, the art world has expanded beyond its physical confines into dynamic virtual spaces that demand new curatorial strategies and sensibilities.

Therefore, this author agrees with Nur's perspective that the curator's role today transcends the conventional boundaries of exhibition design and collection management. The emergence of digital art, often interactive, temporal, and technology-driven, has made it imperative for curators to acquire new forms of literacy that bridge art and technology. Hence, digital curators now act not only as mediators between the artwork and the audience but also as designers of experiences, navigators of online platforms, and custodians of virtual archives. This expanded curatorial role underscores the need for interdisciplinary collaboration and continuous learning in the digital age. In essence, there is a paradigm shift in curatorial practice, which compels curators to evolve from caretakers of objects to architects of digital experiences. Embracing this change is not merely an

adaptation to technological advancement but a redefinition of curatorial identity itself in the twenty-first century.

As the global art scene continues to evolve, it has become important to understand how curatorial practice is transforming within the digital art era. Both curators and art institutions must adapt to these changes in order to remain relevant, innovative, and impactful in a rapidly growing era. The growing prominence of digital art forms, ranging from interactive installations and virtual reality (VR) environments to generative and algorithmic art, has profoundly reshaped the curatorial field. Unlike traditional static artworks, these new media forms are inherently fluid, participatory, and technologically dependent, requiring curators to engage with concepts of interactivity, temporality, and digital infrastructure. Most importantly, this transformation has expanded the curator's responsibilities beyond conventional exhibition planning and object display.

Curators are now expected to navigate the complex interplay between art, technology, and audience experience. Consequently, new curatorial methodologies have emerged, including the application of user-centred design principles, the use of real-time data analytics to enhance audience engagement, and the development of collaborative curation frameworks that blur the boundaries between the curator, the artist, and the viewer.

Advantages of Digital Curating

Digital curating offers several advantages in contemporary art practice, and these benefits cannot be overstated. As the art world continues to evolve within a technologically driven society, curators are increasingly adopting digital tools and platforms to create, organise, and present artistic experiences. Digital curating not only expands the boundaries of traditional exhibition but also transforms how art is accessed, interpreted, and preserved. It has redefined the curator's role from merely managing physical objects to facilitating interactive and global cultural dialogues. Thus, the following are some advantages of digital curating:

Global accessibility and wider audience reach: one of the major advantages of digital curating is its ability to reach a global audience without the limitations of geographical location. Unlike traditional exhibitions that are confined to physical gallery spaces, digital exhibitions can be accessed from anywhere in the world with an internet connection. Hence, this has allowed curators and artists to share their works with a broader and more diverse audience. It also encourages cultural exchange and dialogue among people from different backgrounds. Through online platforms, viewers can explore art from their homes, classrooms, or offices, as the case may be, which increases public engagement and awareness of contemporary art.

Cost-effectiveness and resource efficiency: digital curating significantly reduces the cost of organising exhibitions. Traditional curating often requires large budgets for transporting artworks, renting gallery spaces, insurance, security, and exhibition materials such as frames and printed catalogues. In contrast, digital exhibitions can be produced and displayed with minimal expenses using online tools and platforms. This makes curating more accessible to emerging curators and institutions with limited financial resources.

Easy documentation and preservation: another advantage of digital curating is the ease of documenting and preserving artworks and exhibitions. Digital formats allow curators to store images, videos, and descriptions of artworks in organised databases or archives. This makes it easier for future art historians, critics, researchers, educators, and artists to access past exhibitions for study or inspiration. Digital records also help protect artworks from physical deterioration that may occur over time. By preserving curatorial projects in digital form, institutions can maintain a lasting record of artistic creativity and curatorial innovation for future generations.

Interactivity and audience engagement; digital curating enhances audience participation through interactive features such as virtual tours, augmented reality (AR) experiences, 3D models, videos, and live chats. These elements create a more immersive experience for viewers, allowing them to engage with artworks beyond simple observation. For instance, a viewer can rotate a 3D sculpture, zoom into details, or listen to an artist's commentary. This level of interaction helps bridge the gap between artists, curators, and audiences, making the experience more personal and educational. In this way, digital curating transforms the passive viewer into an active participant in the artistic experience.

Flexibility, accessibility, and inclusivity; digital curating offers flexibility in both the creation and presentation of exhibitions. Online shows can be updated, edited, or expanded easily without the physical constraints of time and space. Audiences can also visit exhibitions at their own convenience, making art more accessible to people with busy schedules or mobility challenges. Furthermore, digital platforms can integrate accessibility features such as text-to-speech, subtitles, or translation tools, enabling people with disabilities or language barriers to enjoy and understand the exhibition. This inclusivity broadens participation and ensures that art becomes a shared experience open to everyone.

Conclusion

Digital curating has revolutionised contemporary art practice by integrating technology, creativity, and audience engagement. It has expanded the curator's role from managing tangible collections to designing dynamic digital encounters that connect global audiences. The adoption of digital tools has enhanced accessibility, interactivity, and inclusivity, promoting broader cultural exchange.

As technology continues to advance, curators must remain adaptable and innovative, exploring new digital possibilities. Ultimately, digital curating stands as a powerful mechanism for sustaining artistic expression, preserving cultural heritage, and fostering global dialogue in an ever-changing art ecosystem.

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