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Arts and International Affairs

LONGFORM

Curating Public Art 2.0: The Case of “Autopoiesis”

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Abstract

This article examines the intersections between public art, curation and Web 2.0 technology. Building on the case study of Autopoiesis, a digital art project focusing on the curation and online exhibition of artworks received from members of the public in the United Arab Emirates, the article explores the ways and extent to which a Web platform can enable participatory culture and novel forms of audience engagement. While major cultural institutions in the region tend to promote brand-like activities and prestige cultural projects, Autopoiesis seeks to offer a more inclusive platform to facilitate autonomous creative self-expressions and enable greater public participation in culture. By providing a critical reflection on the “material” contexts of this digital project, the article also demonstrates the related tensions between the virtual and the physical, and the wider “local” realities enframing this

project.

Introduction

The domain of art and culture has always been a site of contention and power struggle. From issues of representation and preservation to issues of access and democratization, the cultural field remains the subject of sustained debates regarding its meaning and function in society and its role in maintaining or challenging existing structures of hierarchy and power. Questions as to whose narratives and memories are being represented in museums, who has access to cultural spaces, and who decides on what counts and qualifies as art and culture, are some of the many recurring concerns often found in debates about cultural production, preservation, and transmission. Crucial to these debates is also the concept of curating which has long been an important and fundamental feature in cultural and museum processes, given the curator's active and performative role in the overall production of meaning, memory, and knowledge, and in animating the encounter between past, present, and future.

Over the last few years, the function and practice of curating both inside and outside museums have undergone a number of transformations due to a host of factors, some of which have to do with the challenges and opportunities brought about by globalization, while others are directly related to the advent of digital and Web 2.0 technologies and their growing deployment within cultural institutions. As Cairns and Birchall (2013) argue, museums are increasingly required to share “the authority of meaning-making” with their audiences and other communities. Finding new methods of curating objects (material and digital) and communicating meaning has thus become a necessary task for cultural institutions.

The aim of this article is to explore the curatorial potential (and limitations) of Web 2.0 in light of its networked affordances and the user-driven participatory culture it claims to enable. By networked affordances we mean the possibilities of interaction and creation that are facilitated through the intersection of technologies, practices, and different publics. Or to borrow a definition from Cabiddu et al. (2014:176), the concept of affordance, in the context of digital media forms, designates the “symbiotic relationship between human activities and technological capabilities”, providing a language for examining the impact of technological tools and platforms on various social and creative practices. As such, and by examining the affordances of Web 2.0 in relation to public art and curatorial practice, this article contributes to the body of literature engaging with affordance theory and to the fields of curatorial studies, media studies, and digital culture. The value of this work lies primarily in its multidisciplinary and exploratory approach to the issue of curating as well its empirical and reflective engagement with a specific site of inquiry, namely the example of the digital platform, *Autopoiesis* (www.autopoiesis.io).

Autopoiesis is a public art project supported by the Cultural Institute at King's College London and led by the author of this article. It focuses on the interplay between curation, participation and ethics, especially with regard to the role of digital platforms in facilitating more participatory and democratic forms of cultural and audience engagement. Taking the United Arab Emirates (UAE) as the background of its inquiry, the project seeks to collect, curate, and display an online selection of art-work received from members of the public who are from, living in or transiting through the UAE.

The project considers the idea of curating as a “digital activity” (Cairns and Birchall 2013) whose task is/ought to be primarily about the normative act of *enabling*; enabling wider representations and more diverse voices within the process of cultural praxis, “prosumption” and exhibition, through the use of Web 2.0 technologies as a tool to “decentralize authority” (Shahani et al. 2008:4). Traditionally, curation has been partly about the act of selection which is linked to what Cairns and Birchall (2013) refers to as “the core requirement of deciding what of a culture to keep, and how best to do so”.

However, selection and exclusion often go hand in hand insofar as selection inevitably involves demarcating the lines between what is deemed worthy of preservation and transmission and what is not, and acting as a filter of “cultural abundance” (ibid.). It is through selection that curators and institutions derive their authority and power, and with it the ability to include and exclude.

In his discussion on emergent curatorial models and the role of electronic technology, the media artist and theorist Patrick Lichty (2003:1) argues that “the legitimization of the work or the institution itself does not [traditionally] come from populist or democratic impulses, but from oligarchic materialist practices originated with the birth of the museum”. Therefore, traditional models of curation that rest on mainstream museum practices are often monopolistic and hierarchal. But with the advent of the Internet, Lichty argues, the top-down approach to cultural production and the centrality of museum practices are increasingly being challenged through alternative curatorial efforts and Web-based cultural and artistic practices.

Correlatively, *Autopoiesis* project represents an attempt to explore alternatives to the power-driven and institutionally embedded processes of traditional curation by engaging with the notion of curating as a participatory digital activity, not only theoretically but also from a practice-based perspective. The aim of the project has been to test the extent to which digital curation can offer, potentially at least, “new spaces for autonomous producers and DIY culture”, as Paul (quoted in Krysa 2006:17) suggests, and allow a greater public engagement with cultural production and curatorial processes. Underlying the project is also the related issue of ethics, an issue that remains inextricably linked to processes of curation and cultural production and representation. In fact and at its very basic etymological level, the very meaning of the word “curating” goes back to the Latin term “cura”, meaning “care” and “cure”, which is evocative of the ethical and normative dimension of the curatorial role (see also Martinon 2013). In the context of *Autopoiesis*, the ethical aspect of this project lies in its ambition to create a public platform that is participatory, inclusive and engaging beyond the constraining walls of official institutions.

In what follows, I shall begin with a more detailed discussion on the background and objectives of the project followed by an examination of the ethnographic landscape of the UAE, which represents the backdrop for *Autopoiesis*. I will then move on to discuss at some length some aspects, advantages, and limitations of digitally mediated art platforms, particularly in relation to issues of public participation and access. In addition, the article also provides a reflection on the “materiality” of the digital and the related tensions between the virtual and the physical, which prompt the need to attend to the local realities and material contexts of digital projects and platforms.

Autopoiesis

“Autopoiesis”, which literally means the act of “self-creation and self-production”, is an evocative metaphor for what this art project aims to achieve, that is, to provide people from all walks of life, who are living in or visiting the UAE, with the opportunity to create and exhibit their own artwork that is expressive of their diverse identities, cultures, and life experiences in the region. The project invites the submission of multimedia work from artists and non-artists, with a focus on personal narrative and perspectives.

The overarching objective of the project is to offer a platform for autonomous self-expression beyond official institutions and their dominant “branding” activities manifested, for instance, in the new Abu Dhabi’s Cultural District on the Saadiyat Island and its mega satellite museums. At the heart of *Autopoiesis* is the motivation to express the daily realities and complexities of the UAE culture and society and provide the viewer with a window into the personal and communal aspects of the region as experienced by its own residents and visitors regardless of their citizenship status and socio-economic background. *Autopoiesis* is therefore an experiment that seeks to reveal how different people from the UAE society think and feel about the culture and identity of the region. If they were given

the chance to express and curate these themselves based on their experiences, narratives and memories, what would the picture look like? How different would it be from an “officially” curated version? As such, the project is less concerned with representing or solidifying a monolithic singular (meta-)narrative about the UAE culture and more interested in reclaiming the multiple fragments of memory and identity in all of their contradictions, complexities, pluralities, and diversities. To accomplish this, *Autopoiesis* harnesses the potential of Web 2.0 technology. To understand why this is important in the context of the UAE, it is crucial to understand first and foremost the ethnographic aspect of the UAE and the make-up of its population.

Ethnographic landscape of the UAE

The first thing that might strike any visitor to the UAE is the diverse, immigrant-rich nature of its population, something that is not always reflected in the “official” identity discourses. In fact, foreign nationals make up almost 90% of the population with South-Asian groups being the majority (almost 60%). In addressing the issue of citizenship in the UAE, the anthropologist Neha Vora describes “a triptych of identities” underpinning the population of the UAE: the “local” (native Emarati “citizens”), the “expatriate” (mainly Anglo-European nationals) and the “migrant” (primarily South Asians) (2013:31). Each of these identification categories subsumes further transnational identities adding to the complexity of the ethnographic landscape of the UAE. Importantly, these categories are by no means neutral or equal. They are highly value-laden and mobilized according to parameters of hierarchies, power, and distinctions that are set by various entities including the state and non-state institutions and groups. Questions of inclusion and exclusion are therefore inextricably linked to this triptych of identities. They are, as Vora (2013:21) explains, defined according to a dichotomy of citizen and non-citizen wherein the juridico-legal category of “Emarati” dictates the criteria for belonging, mobility, and access to state resources.

In addition, citizenship in the UAE is patrilineal, and there is not much room for naturalization (ibid.). So, those born to Emarati mothers do not become Emarati citizens. Citizenship is, as such, defined not only by ethnic origins but also by sex and gender in a way that restricts access to full civic and cultural participation and representation. At the same time, the UAE state produces “neoliberal” subjects who, through their entrepreneurial activities, can benefit from privatized rights, consumer and business-based models of quasi-citizenship. In doing so, the UAE deploys “multiple logics of citizenship”, as Vora (2012:790) puts it, whereby different groups are given differential treatments, privileges, and forms of belonging according to neoliberal ethos of productivity and economic participation, in which a particular kind of foreigner is favored: the Western-educated, English speaking, middle-class expatriate.

The hierarchical structure of UAE identities and citizenship often carries over into the realm of cultural production and representation. Recently, the UAE has been receiving much international attention following the massive expansion in its museum and cultural projects. Examples include the construction of the Louvre Abu Dhabi and Guggenheim Abu Dhabi as part of the Saadiyat Island master plan whose total cost exceeds \$27 billion (Davidson 2013). These emerging developments are indeed representative of the country’s ambition to become a cultural hub in the Gulf region and brand itself as a progressive and open Arab country. Museums are after all “identity machines”, as McClellan (2012:278) argues, and often play a significant role in cementing the notion of nationhood and staking a claim of civilization and progress.

However, this vision of promoting national identity and constructing a so-called civilized image through culture does not seem to always sit comfortably with a context where censorship exists and the class structure is heavily demarcated and racialized. Abu Dhabi has already been criticized repeatedly for the working conditions of migrant labourers building its cultural institutions. In March 2011, for instance, a petition has been launched by Gulf Labor, which more than 2,000 artists signed, calling for the boycott of Guggenheim over the treatment of migrant workers in the Saadiyat Island

(see gulflabor.org). In October 2013, a coalition of international artists has launched a “52 weeks” campaign to protest against the labour conditions on the Saadiyat Island. Artists and members of the Gulf Labor have been exhibiting, on a weekly basis, artwork that highlights the living and working conditions of workers building cultural institutions in Abu Dhabi (Batty 2013; Gulf Labor n.d.). One of the active members of Gulf Labor is New York University professor Andrew Ross who has been barred from traveling to the United Arab Emirates following his criticism of the labor conditions there (*New York Times* 2015). In May 2015, the UAE also blocked the entry of two Gulf Labor artists, Walid Raad and Ashok Sukumaran, into the country.

In addition to censorship and human labor concerns, questions are also being raised as to whether the current museum and cultural developments in the UAE are capable of fully representing the diverse identities and cultures of both the local and migrant populations in the country, and allow different individuals and groups the opportunity and space for meaningful cultural expression and engagement. One criticism that is often levelled at these developments involves their presumed bias toward Western endorsed approaches and categories over other forms of artistic expression as well as the fetishization of prestige through the globalization and use of established museum brands. Hans Ulrich Obrist (quoted in Batty 2012) captured some of these concerns when he argued that there is the danger of the “homogenizing force” of globalization, which can threaten local voices and diminish hybridity and difference if culture becomes merely an import. A similar concern is expressed by the art historian and curator Maymanah Farhat who argues that “the Emirates have poured millions of dollars into initiatives that seek to replicate the market-driven, politically influenced arts scenes found in New York and London” (quoted in McClellan 2012:287). Homogeneity and cultural replication remain indeed recurring concerns in many current commentaries on the UAE’s developing art and cultural scene.

an art project inspired by people in the UAE

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FILTER ▼

Figure 1. *Autopoiesis display*

At the heart of these concerns lies also the issue of audience access and participation. For whom are these cultural initiatives envisaged, after all? This is an important question no doubt given the interesting population structure of the UAE and its highly heterogeneous and hierarchical demographic context. For instance, one could wonder how relevant to the cultural worldview of the Indian construction worker is a branch of the Louvre managed by a well-paid French agency? To what extent museums' architectural spaces, designed to make an impact and gain prestige, might actually feel condescending and excluding for large groups of the population? How can these cultural developments reach out to wider audiences when the different segments of society, be they citizen members, wealthy diasporic elite or Bangladeshi workers, do not necessarily share same cultural points of reference? As Pierre Bourdieu (1968 [1984]) remarks, audience engagement with and appreciation of art and culture is a “trained” capacity, access to which is not always equally distributed among social strata. The cultural field is indeed by no means a flat, neutral, or equal space but one that is inextricably linked to hierarchies, distinctions, and power struggles (Ajana 2015:329).

These questions are but some of the challenging issues that lurk beneath the nascent cultural and art scene in the UAE and the wider Gulf region. At the same time, these challenges are also an opportunity to rethink the nature and function of culture and curating, and reflect on their ethical and political dimensions. It is against such a backdrop that *Autopoiesis* was conceived, in the spirit of offering a space for more open and diverse participation in culture, and allowing multiple voices and perspectives to emerge, through the affordances of Web 2.0 technologies.

Figure 2. Sean Blake (2014): “The Untitled Chair Project” is a photography portrait series that aims to help “raise awareness for the need for registered bone marrow donors. The red chair serves as a consistent visual element that helps to tie the photos together and attract attention”.

Figure 3. Hamad Al Falasi (2014): “Desert Bejewelled”, a photography series capturing “the essence of hospitality in the Arabian culture by means of Arabic Coffee. The desert has always been a place of wonder. This has been further highlighted with Arabic coffee as a symbol that links the desert inhabitant with her environment”.

Digital participation and multivocality

Central to *Autopoiesis* is the notion of the “digital” and the belief that the online environment enables opportunities of access and participation beyond material borders and the constraints of citizenship conditions in the region. Particularly, and given its dynamic and user-driven characteristics, Web 2.0 is highly relevant to the functioning and objectives of *Autopoiesis*. The technology of Web 2.0 was initially popularized by Tim O’Reilly (2005) who defined it as the second generation of the World Wide Web. Compared with Web 1.0, Web 2.0 is marked by the transition from static HTML web pages to more dynamic web applications that enable users to participate, interact, share information online as well as produce user-generated content. O’Reilly explains that whereas Web 1.0 is about “publica-

tion”, Web 2.0 is about “participation”. Therefore, Web 2.0 technologies are often considered as highly participatory in nature and regarded as an enabling tool for grassroots and open-sourced involvement of web users.

In their study of digital museums and the role of technology, Ramesh Srinivasan and his colleagues argue that “Web 2.0 technologies have introduced increasingly participatory practices to creating content [...] reaching and engaging with new audiences” (Srinivasan et al. 2008:1). They suggest that a “growing schism is developing between grassroots ICT [Information and Communications Technology] efforts devoted to activism, participation, and cultural mobilization versus the top-down bureaucratic approaches toward digitizing cultural heritage objects” (ibid.: 1, 9). While not attempting to necessarily reinforce such schism, *Autopoiesis* is indeed an example of such ICT-based activities, which seek to encourage greater inclusion and mobilize the participation of diverse groups in the process of cultural production and representation. The hope is that through a dynamic, open, and collaborative digital platform, that is led by the people and managed by highly reflexive curators, the project could offer an alternative outlet for expression that is not tied to official UAE institutions or circumscribed by their branding activities. There is always a need for alternative spaces to official institutions to develop greater nuance and metaphorical complexity beyond traditional modes of representation, and to challenge the supposed coherence/singularity of narratives presented by institutions. Digital projects and the networked affordances of Web 2.0 platforms may provide a means of breaking pre-existing institutional fences.

Web 2.0 has become, indeed, a prevalent feature of online activities in recent years. From social media to “mashupable” web-applications, digital platforms are increasingly user-driven and user-dependent. Interactions designer, Kathrin Vent, refers to Web 2.0 as “an evolutionary process of medial differentiation [which] allows multiple ways of communication across physical or cultural boundaries [enabling] already existing communication patterns to appear in a new form” (2009:135–136). In the context of curating and museum activities, the adoption and appropriation of Web 2.0 techniques and technologies often promise to enhance interactivity and engagement with cultural content, encourage user agency, and add a polysemic dimension to collections through new approaches and models of representation and archiving. Another ostensible advantage relates to the ability to transcend the limitations of physical space, enabling the creation of so-called “museums without walls” where users can generate their own material and narratives. That is not to say that all these aspects or qualities are always amenable to realization, but they too remain subject to various constraints, some of which will be reflected upon in the remainder of this article together with the advantages of a digitally mediated art platform.

Digital engagement and participation

As an art platform, *Autopoiesis* allows for a mobile aesthetic and digital forms of participation that are not attached to a particular pre-given meaning or pre-defined perspective. Instead, meaning is created through the multiplicity of users’ materials themselves and audience interpretations in a bottom-up fashion. The project responds to the tension between two cultural tropes: an institutionally guided culture based on particular understandings of art and Emarati heritage, and the reality of a highly diverse culture and a large migrant population. Rather than focusing on specific events or particular moments in history, as is often the case with traditional styles of curating and exhibiting, *Autopoiesis* is more interested in the fluidity and the humble layer of the everyday (*Autopiesis* 2014) by way of presenting a more hybrid image of the UAE and allowing for different ontological perspectives. The project encourages people from all backgrounds to submit any form of art—poetry, video/audio materials, photographs, prose, paintings, drawings, etc., offering the opportunity for participation and engagement (Figure 1).

Engagement is indeed a term that is often used in discussions on museum strategies and cultural processes. Stephen Bitgood defines engagement as “deep sensory-perceptual, mental and/or affective in-

volvement [requiring] some type of exertion or concentration as well as a sufficient amount of time to engage” (quoted in Ridge 2013). More than a quick “like” on Facebook or a retweet on Twitter, engagement demands meaningful participation and involvement (Ridge 2013). As a digital and public-driven project, *Autopoiesis* relies heavily on members of the UAE public (locals, residents, and visitors) to populate the platform with their own content as an exercise of self-creation and self-expression. Without users’ content, *Autopoiesis* would be merely an empty container. The project is therefore inherently participatory and engaging in at least three fundamental ways: firstly, through its contributory character and reliance on user-generated content; secondly, in the sense that it acts as a platform for hosting contributions and giving people the freedom to choose the medium, form, and context of their contributions; and, thirdly, it is in the way the project incites people to pause and think reflexively and critically about issues of identity, culture, and belonging. By asking “What does the UAE identity, culture and life represent and mean to you?”, *Autopoiesis* opens up a space for engaging with one of the most important, timely and, at times, contentious questions concerning the UAE.

How people respond to such a question is something the project has left open to contributors both in terms of format and themes. Some have responded through the medium of photography, while others have chosen drawings or videos, prose or painting. Some engaged directly with social issues such as migration, labor, climate, and unity. Others chose a more metaphorical approach through illustrations of ideas, such as, “the sand castle”, “the chair”, “desert”, “forgotten streets”, the duality of “tradition and innovation”, etc. (see the artworks display on <http://www.autopoiesis.io> (<http://www.autopoiesis.io>)) (Figures 2 and 3).

The above two artworks are examples of the diverse contributions submitted to *Autopoiesis*. Each represents a singular way of relating to the question of the UAE identity and culture. Together they reveal the eclectic nature of the UAE, creating a mosaic of images and a cacophony of voices. Importantly, as a digital platform that is open to people from different backgrounds and social strata, and to artists and amateurs alike, *Autopoiesis* aims to flatten the hierarchy often defining art and culture and dissolve the boundaries between contributors and experts. In her discussion on public memory in the digital age, Ekaterina Haskins argues that the digital space can level the traditional hierarchy between author, text, and audience by decentering authorial agency and “preventing any one agent from imposing narrative and ideological closure upon the data” (2007:406). This is the case insofar as the digital space and Web 2.0 technologies allow users to supply their own content and actively choose their own paths through the platform instead of rigidly following a museum audio-tour format, for instance. In this sense and instead of acting as mere consumers of a linear story, audiences become active participants in creating meaning and choosing how to engage with images and narratives.

Admittedly, however, the extent of *Autopoiesis*’ participatory and engagement efforts have been limited by a number of factors. First, as a digital platform, *Autopoiesis* might unwittingly privilege those who are “connected”, that is, those who have access to the Internet and the ability/desire to participate to an online platform. Although the UAE is one of the most Internet enabled and digitally connected countries in the Gulf and the Middle East region, access to online spaces and technologies remains unequal across social strata and along the familiar uneven socio-economic conditions of the population. Vora (2012:791–792) argues that Internet access, for individual users, depends on where one lives in the UAE: “Expatriate neighbourhoods (usually in newer apartment buildings) in city centres are more wired, meaning that many middle- and upper-class foreign residents have Internet access at home”. Parenthetically and as Vora goes on to explain, although the category of “expatriate” implies the foreign population of a country, in the case of the UAE the term carries classed and raced connotations that privilege Western and white people. As for the scores of South Asian “migrants”, they are often the subject of governmental as well as privatized efforts to “clean up” neighbourhoods and the cities’ shopping malls (Vora 2012:790, 801) (Figures 4 and 5).

As such, expatriates tend to experience a level of inclusion, belonging and access that is not afforded

to migrant workers whose socio-economic situations may inhibit their ownership of or access to communication and Internet technologies, thereby limiting their ability to participate in online and digitally mediated civic activities. After all and as Astra Taylor (2014) reminds us, the Internet often reflects real-world inequalities.

Issues of belonging and citizenship are what Al Naiar’s contribution to *Autopoiesis, UAE Autopsy* (2014), directly focuses on. This raw and roughly edited documentary video features a series of interviews with migrant workers (mainly South Asian shopkeepers) and a local citizen, asking politically charged questions about citizenship, rights, belonging and inclusion in the context of the UAE. The documentary maker, who is a UAE-born non-citizen, seeks to address the problematic nature of citizenry issues and civic participation in the country, and include the faces and opinions of those who are largely excluded from the dominant narrative and official cultural spaces (Figure 6).¹

Contributions to *Autopoiesis* by migrant laborers *themselves* were, nonetheless, few as the project initially faced the challenge of outreach, especially that most of its work and activities have been conducted virtually. The fact that the project curator is not physically based in the UAE and mostly reliant on virtual and online networks for publicity and outreach limits the extent to which *Autopoiesis*, as a digital endeavor with limited funds, can reach many people on the ground and engage a greater number of unrepresented and unprivileged groups who might not necessarily have an online presence.

The project has relied largely on social media platforms, its existing networks in the UAE and on relevant cultural organizations to publicize its activities and increase its outreach. However, relying on certain networks, organizations and methods of outreach remains unavoidably linked to the problem of preferentialism and bias (see Barabasi and Albert 1999), which, while not being necessarily the intention of digital projects, is nonetheless a potential byproduct of uneven connectivity and unequal online exposure and access. For instance, artists, organizations, and networks with an already established (online) presence and cultural capital are of course the easiest to discover and reach. Focusing mainly on these carries the risk of obscuring other potential participants who might not have a digital presence or be identified as professional artists. Ultimately, this issue of unintentional preferentialism can also limit the potential of digital projects, such as *Autopoiesis*, to offer a platform for diverse voices and eclectic expressions. As such, one of the important tasks for *Autopoiesis* was to find ways to overcome the material and local limitations and reach out to individuals and groups who lack access to Internet technologies and online spaces. This task necessitated looking beyond the project’s own networks and associations and recognizing the bias (even unintentional) inherent in the act of overlying on certain digital platforms and privileging those already connected. Finding collaborators *on the ground* who are able to directly access groups and communities, who would otherwise be hard to reach digitally, was key to achieving a greater level of diverse contributions and to the fulfillment (partially at least) of *Autopoiesis*’ objectives.²

Figure 4. Jan Lemitz (2014 [2010]): “Dubai Habitat”, a series of photographs capturing the transient constellations that are the shacks and shelters next to the construction site of Jumeirah marina.

Figure 5. Reem Saeed (2014): “Mandir: Life Between Alleys” provides a glimpse of “the fading beauty of old alleys” within the Emirates. The series of photographs is “a documentation of a particular hidden tiny alley where a small Hindu Temple is situated. An aggressive, colorful contrast between the modern and the traditional.”

AUTOPOIESIS

SUBMISSIONS THE ART PROJECT

UAE AUTOPSY BY: ISTABRAQ EMAD AL NAIAR

ARTWORK INFORMATION

This video is a short documentary about the lives of people living in the UAE. I asked four people living in the UAE about these subjects:

Citizenship
Family
Home
Identity
Expo 2020
Expats
Human rights

Figure 6. Istabraq Emad Al Naiar (2014): “Autoposy”.

What the above reflections indicate is that any digital space or project, regardless of how global and networked it is, remains subject to similar local considerations and material constraints as is the case with physical spaces and projects. The virtual is by no means disembodied and digital media are “material objects in their own right”, as Witcomb (2007) puts it. In other words, digitally enabled cultural processes and Web 2.0 platforms cannot be understood without considering the spatial settings and material realities of their contexts.

In their article on the relationship between digitization, materiality, and cultural artefacts, Peteri and her colleagues (2013) argue that the popularization of the Internet and computer technologies in general has managed to reveal “how ‘virtual’ practices don’t exist apart from the everyday material practices”. In the case of *Autopoiesis*, this relates to how the online platform provided by the website represents a space that is still reliant on a server, a data center and physical media artifacts (computers, mobile devices, cameras, etc.) for its own functioning and its ability to be populated by content and material. This also relates, as discussed earlier, to issues regarding digital access and equity, the kind of governance systems and policies in place that either allow or restrict the material conditions under which participants are enabled (or not) to have access and contribute to the project. As such, *Autopoiesis*, like many other digital initiatives, is a project that is continually oscillating between the global and the local, the virtual and the physical, the digital and the material.

The Virtual Physical: Autopoiesis 2.0 exhibition

In October 2014, a related live exhibition under the name *Autopoiesis 2.0* was held as part of the Arts and Humanities Festival at King’s College London. While the online exhibition space of *Autopoiesis* aimed to capture and create a multivocal environment for cultural expression, the physical space of the exhibition sought to provide the viewer with a “window” into this space through the display of artworks that have been submitted to *Autopoiesis*. Instead of exhibiting the “physical” prints or embodiments of these artworks, *Autopoiesis 2.0* carried over the notion and practice of the digital into the physical space of the exhibition by opting for the digital projection of artworks through multiple large screens, invoking a similar experience to the web-browsing environment of *Autopoiesis*. On a practical level, this enabled the display of a greater number of contributions than what would have been possible through physical prints, given the limited exhibition space. This is another instance of how the digital is able to provide more exposure to a variety of works by overcoming some of the spatial limitations. On a conceptual level, this was also intended as a playful reminder of the “materiality” of the digital and an opportunity to engage with the interplays and tensions between the virtual and the physical (Figure 7).

In her review of the *Autopoiesis 2.0* exhibition, McAuliffe (2014) argued that translating the digital nature of the project into analog content (canvases, printed photographs, films on separate screens, etc.) within the exhibition space could have potentially reinstated the very territorial limitations of official UAE cultural institutions that *Autopoiesis 2.0* attempted to challenge. McAuliffe goes on to suggest that in showcasing artworks by a variety of UAE residents and visitors through the open topology of digital networks, “*Autopoiesis 2.0* offers counternarratives not only to the dominant cultural narrative supported by UAE institutions, but also to the very conceptual and spatial framework through which they offer these narratives” (ibid.). The digital has thus allowed *Autopoiesis* to reimagine the cultural

space and heritage of the UAE and provide a more inclusive platform for its multi-ethnic and multi-national contemporary population.

The exhibition used both audio and visual elements (photographic and film material) to create an immersive ambiance, which stimulated free thinking and interpretation, and incited visitors' assimilation into the cultural milieu of the UAE as represented by the exhibited material. This was further encouraged by the minimal information provided to visitors about the various artworks. Apart from supplying an informative leaflet about the contributions featured in the exhibition, visitors were left to freely bring their own interpretations, meanings, and narratives to these artworks reinforcing the “autopoietic” nature of the exhibition and the project as a whole.

The spatial arrangement of the exhibition space consisted of two screens that faced each other and showed photographic artworks in the format of slide-shows, which moved at different paces. This intended to provide the viewer with the possibility to interact simultaneously with images linked to distinct themes and narratives. A third screen, facing the entrance to the exhibition, was used to project the film contributions (Figure 8).

The various sounds emanating from these films created an ambient background noise, puncturing the stillness and blank interior of the exhibition space. The interactions between image and sound offered a unique audio-visual environment while maintaining an empty space, which evoked at once a sense of place (the UAE) as well as placelessness through the cacophony of sounds and mosaic of images. As succinctly described by McAuliffe (2014), “[p]rojecting films not only deterritorialized the artwork from any single UAE institution or locality, but also deterritorialized the physical space in which the art was seemingly reterritorialized: the exhibition room”. This deterritorialization is indeed what enables the exploration of more creative and nomadic responses based on digital and networked Web 2.0 topologies and affordances as opposed to the spatially restrictive and somewhat sedentary arrangements of dominant cultural institutions (for instance, cultural artifacts housed in official exhibition spaces and discrete archives). Moreover, through its spatial arrangement and by projecting artworks on various screens, *Autopoiesis 2.0* created, at once, a degree of spatial fluidity and free movement as well as a sense of territorial awareness among visitors. McAuliffe (2014) described the spatial experience of the exhibition in the following way:

Visitors exhibited a hyper-awareness of the space they, and others, took up—perhaps more attuned to the territory they occupy with the absence of any material elements or masses of people automatically enforcing boundaries at the exhibition. This behavior revealed the way in which visitors explored the space relationally rather than through externally carved-out, designated areas—and reflected the way in which, lacking enforced institutional boundaries, a collection of various individuals can relationally explore, shape, and legitimize a cultural space.

In addition to this spatial dimension of the project, the “temporal” aspect is also another important dimension that often plays out in the discussions regarding issues of sustainability and preservation vis-à-vis digital art projects in general. Given the transitory nature of temporary exhibitions and the virtual aspect of web-enabled art platforms, it is often argued that this type of art project inevitably contains an element of ephemerality that contrasts with the more permanent nature of physical museums and collections. There is to be sure a general uneasiness over the issue of ephemerality in relation to digital art platforms, which often, as pointed out by Marvin Lin (2015), manifests in anxieties about the future of these platforms and what might become of their content. The challenge of constantly changing technologies and software together with the persisting bias toward physical artifacts within the traditional curatorial imaginary have contributed to such anxieties and sense of unease. In a way, the temporal argument around the supposed ephemerality of digital platforms is also based in the spatial argument around the supposed immateriality of these platforms. As Kaminska (2009:43) postulates, “[i]mmateriality is primarily a question of space, and ephemerality one of time [...]”. Ephemerality is often suggested as a consequence of the immaterial nature of software”. But as dis-

cussed earlier, the digital is by no means immaterial, be it in terms of technicality or in terms of context. And even the most material of objects is still bound to degenerate eventually. Correlatively and from an audience's perspective, Lin (2015) suggests that “art has never been a solely tangible experience anyway; we're not meant to ‘touch’ paintings in order to experience them, and any materials used to create so-called tangible art won't last forever—thus, making all art inherently time-based.” Temporariness is therefore an inevitable feature of artworks.

As such, rather than judging the future sustainability, and by extension the “legitimacy”, of digital art projects against that of physical museums and analog collections, one needs to rethink the idea and practice of preservation itself in light of the dynamic materiality and fluid temporality of digital objects and platforms. For this, new modes of conservation and different strategies of documentation and preservation need to be explored and encouraged in order to tap into and harness the potential of interactivity, adaptability, performativity, and reproducibility that are characteristic of the digital ecosystem. In their interview on the use of new media for the collection and preservation of digital art, Rinehart and Ippolito (2014) argue that:

We should be looking at paradigms that are more contingent than static [...]. Casting a wider net can help preservationists jettison our culture's implicit metaphor of stony durability in favor of one of fluid adaptability [...] Digital preservationists can learn from media that thrive by reinterpretation and reuse [...] Change will happen. Don't resist it; use it, guide it. Let art breathe; it will tell you what it needs.

In a concrete sense, a new media-driven paradigm of art preservation would entail a number of strategies and steps that are at once technical as well as conceptual, and which need to be integrated into the overall plan of digital collection management. These include keeping abreast with the technological developments in new media forms and digital infrastructures in order to establish the optimal ways of storing and displaying digital material, and overcoming potential incompatibility of software; periodic migration of materials onto new formats or platforms to ensure continuous functionality; regular system maintenance and backups; sustaining the interactive features of Web 2.0-based platforms; and, on a more epistemological level, re-evaluating and challenging traditional perceptions around the value and meaning of digital art, and even embracing the ephemeral qualities of some forms of art rather than seeing them as delegitimizing factors. The point is that, just as physical art objects need a level of care and conservation, so too do digital materials. This, however, does not mean that digital or virtual art projects need to emulate the traditional preservation strategies of physical museums nor should every cultural or art initiative and output be subjected to permanent archiving. It might be that it is museums themselves that need to learn from the fluidity, adaptability, openness, and experimental nature of digital projects and their preservation approaches. This need not be a question of hierarchy or competition, but that of lesson learning, collaboration, and cross-pollination of strategies.

In terms of *Autopoiesis*, the project's preservation strategy is primarily around ensuring a long term support for web hosting and server management for the project's website, as it is the main platform for receiving, hosting, and exhibiting public art submissions. A periodic backup process is conducted for all material residing on *Autopoiesis* platform. As the project keeps growing, the project curator will continue to collaborate with the platform designers to explore optimal approaches for the project's sustainability.

Figure 7. Autopoiesis 2.0 exhibition

Figure 8. Autopoiesis 2.0 exhibition

Conclusion: Toward an autopoietic public art 2.0

Issues of participation, engagement, and access remain important concerns in processes of cultural production, curation, representation, and dissemination. This article examined the curatorial role of Web 2.0 platforms, especially in enabling forms of participatory culture beyond the frameworks and

criteria of dominant institutions and their traditional curatorial practices. This examination has led to the conclusion that while digital platforms herald a potential for greater public participation in culture and the possibility of wider and more democratized forms of access and inclusion, they also remain subject to some familiar limitations and inextricably tied to local constraints and material contexts. The example of *Autopoiesis* is a case in point. By reflecting on the aims, advantages, and limitations of this Web 2.0-mediated public art project, we were able to unravel the complex socio-political and practical issues which directly and indirectly affect the functioning, outreach, and success of the project.

Currently, the majority of mainstream UAE cultural institutions are mainly preoccupied with investing in the building of grand eye-catching projects such as the new Cultural District of the Saadiyat Island, which will be home to some of the most ambitious and extravagant museum projects in the region, including the Louvre Abu Dhabi and Guggenheim Abu Dhabi. Underlying these projects is the desire to gain instant recognition and prestige on the international stage of arts and culture by heavily investing in branding activities in the form of a rather costly association with already established Western cultural brands (e.g. Louvre) and the commissioning of celebrity architects to design these colossal “signature” museum buildings (e.g. Norman Foster, Frank Gehry, Zaha Hadid, and Jean Nouvel) (see McClellan 2012). While these cultural branding activities help “spectacularize” the urban environment of the Emirates and promote the country as a progressive and civilised place, as Ponzini (2011:258) argues, they also risk obscuring the more diverse cultural forms and expressions of the ethnically varied groups that represent the region. Finding ways to account for, represent, and communicate this diversity and multiplicity of cultures and identities is a necessary curatorial task. One of the aims of *Autopoiesis*, as a curatorial project, was indeed to contribute to this process by stimulating further engagement with the wider socio-political and cultural issues and contexts surrounding artistic production and dissemination in the UAE and beyond.

At the same time and in constituting an experimental exploration into the curatorial potential of Web 2.0, *Autopoiesis* has been able to critically shed some light on the value and limitations of a user-centred and digitally mediated curatorial practice, including the conceptual and practical tensions between the virtual and the physical dimensions of Web 2.0 which, as mentioned earlier, prompt the need to consider the wider local realities and material contexts of digital projects and their platforms instead of regarding them in a purely technological sense. Overall, what *Autopoiesis* raises as an overarching question is also the changing role of curator in light of the advent of digital communication environments and the exigencies of a globalized, postcolonial, and networked world, whereby curating is no longer merely about the behind-the-scenes activities of collating artworks and finding a meaningful thread to bind them, but also about actively facilitating and motivating audience/user engagement, input and collaboration through various means, including Web 2.0. It is therefore crucial to continue to observe, analyze, and empirically explore this growing interplay between the practices of curating and the technologies of Web 2.0, especially in terms of how, and the extent to which, their combination can critically contribute to a more inclusive and ethical representation of the diversity and hybridity of contemporary societies within processes of cultural production, mediation, and exhibition.

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Endnotes

1. See <http://www.autopoiesis.io/submissions/1000035/> (<http://www.autopoiesis.io/submissions/1000035/>).
2. For instance, Autopoiesis connected with the Gulf Labor organization in the hope of soliciting submissions of artworks that address issues of migrant workers. As mentioned earlier, the organization is a coalition of activist artists and has been successful in attracting international attention to the human rights issues concerning the construction of the Saadiyat Island. It has the advantage of direct contact on the ground with workers themselves and, as such, is able to document creatively their everyday experiences. One of the primary aims of Gulf Labor (2014) is indeed to make “visible” that which has been removed from public view and from local policies. This is mainly the case of construction workers who have been instrumental to the building of the UAE and yet remained excluded from its citizenry. As such, connecting with Gulf Labor and its activist work opens up a further channel of outreach for Autopoiesis, facilitating forms of cultural participation and expression that are not reliant solely on online and digital platforms but also on physical and face-to-face communication with laborers and other relevant groups.

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