

# Curating Digital Life and Culture: Art and information

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The space between digital life and real life continues to fade and nowhere is this more apparent than in arts and cultural contexts. Facilitated by digital capture and curation, social media, the network, Internet, and the web, these forces combine to empower artists to be digital curators of their own work, giving voice and narration to their artistic expression. In the paper entitled *Digitalism: the New Realism*, the authors focus on how digital tools and technology have changed ways of doing, knowing, and being, while here we look at how today's digital landscape is changing ways of artistic expression, narration, communication, and human interaction. The growing use of digital tools and technology in the arts and culture is dramatically transforming traditional curatorial practice and by extension archival practice, so that we are moving from a gatekeeping model to an open model steeped in digital relationships across global networks and the Internet. As we immerse ourselves in the digital world, where anyone with a smartphone can be a digital curator and marshal a range of Internet services, such as Instagram, Pinterest, Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, and more specifically for example Behance (for online portfolios), artists are enabled to freely engage and interact with their audience using to their advantage crowdsourcing, "likes", chat, blogs, games and email. Emerging artists are particularly expert digitally and are able to curate their life and work directly, living naturally between physical and digital states. To demonstrate this, our study presents specific examples of how artists and GLAM (Galleries, Libraries, Archives, and Museum) institutions are adapting to new digital ways of curating collections and conveying meaning. Additionally, we show how notions of what constitutes artistic expression are evolving as art traverses digital media boundaries, especially in terms of visual and textual media. Importantly, as life in the 21st century plays out on the digital stage of the Internet, artists and GLAM institutions find themselves more than ever working at the intersection of art and information which is leading to new and innovative ways of curating contemporary art that are expressive of artistic vision and digital aesthetics, while conveying social and political meaning capable of influencing and impacting our lives.

*Curation. Digitalism. Digital art. Digital culture. GLAM. Social media.*

## 1. BACKGROUND

Over the past two decades, the Internet and Web have developed from a niche resource to a ubiquitous phenomenon, especially with the advent of mobile devices (Filippini-Fantoni and Bowen 2008). This has had a significant effect in the field of arts and culture (Bowen et al. 2013). Museums have increasingly provided an online presence to augment their physical spaces since the 1990s (Bowen et al. 1998, Bowen 2000) and later collaborative projects have enabled synergistic relationships to provide improved online resources (Giannini and Bowen 2014, 2015). The rapid technological development has meant that it is progressively easier for tech-savvy individuals with

artistic talent to curate their own work online directly to a potential audience.

## 2. INTRODUCTION

In this paper, we explore new ways in which digital technology and computing increasingly become part everyday life through a myriad of digital devices (Bowen and Giannini 2014). These empower users to capture not only their experiences but also their reactions and behaviours, allowing them to create both personal and visual narratives, communicated across global networks. For example, a story in *The Huffington Post* (Tongco 2015), shows work by the artist Audrey Wollen, described in the title as, "The

Feminist Art Star Staging a Revolution on Instagram”, for which, “*the photosharing platform is Wollen’s primary medium for her digital artwork.*” As artists adopt new digital ways of creating art, they challenge the very definition of what constitutes art, as their work populates an expanding universe of artistic expression.

*A Paradigm Shift – Narrating Digital Life – Art as Information – Information as Art (by T. Giannini)*

Curating my digital life  
Looking through my cell  
phone in hand  
Capturing digital days  
senseless arrays  
of image displays  
a cacophony of faces and places

My digital museum  
through a virtual prism  
Life floating on a cloud  
I’m a star  
in my digital museum  
A chaotic exhibition  
just intuition  
no submission

Life in digits – focus, click  
no code  
à la mode –  
stories untold  
still to unfold

Art for art’s sake seems to have faded, as artists take up digital tools to make art that is imbued with political and social messages, often using the Internet as a platform to connect with their audience. The journey of creative expression from *Silence* by John Cage, and *White on White* canvases of Clifford Still. The crowded visual landscape of the Internet extends the artist’s reach beyond the walls of museums and galleries to multiple digital displays that dominate our vision and waking hours. We are witness to an expanding world of art in which the number of artists and their works grow exponentially, especially on the Web where gatekeepers no longer hold sway, and where videos broadcast information of life in motion. Digital life and culture now flow through human activity via networks, platforms and digital devices as laptops, tablets, phones and wrist-watches, to devices embedded in our daily activities and environment from the home, to cars, trains, planes, streets, subways, elevators, escalators, sometimes called the “Internet of Things”, become part of daily experience and extend to museum and educational spaces.

These trends are exemplified in recent gallery and museum shows, where we experienced art and life at intersection of physical and digital expression and information as art narrating life.

### Late at Tate Britain – Young artists curate notions of “power” with digital expression

Art and digital life were on display at the Tate Britain for the Late at Tate Britain: [Power Tate Britain, Friday 2 October 2015](#), curated by 15 to 25 year olds from [Tate Collective London](#) who were asked to “*tackle ideas of power through music, art and talks, with The Age of L.U.N.A, Skinny Girl Diet and Native Sun.*”

Not unexpectedly, the museum was taken over by digital installations, displays, sounds and images conveying the somewhat wild expressions of London’s youth culture, which were simultaneously communicated through tweets and Instagram, as well as being mirrored in cyberspace on various websites with virtual participants. “Power” became in essence that of digital tools and technology empowering youth to challenge ideas of gender, race, and class, through their art as a performance of self.

### 3. EXAMPLES

#### New York City Street Art makes Internet connections – [The Chalkit Show](#)

From December 2015 to 24 February 2016, the exterior cement walls of the massive stone building housing the Fashion Institute of Technology (FIT) on 7th Avenue in New York became a street gallery displaying original works by students in FIT’s fine arts program. Works were chalked onto the walls so that passers-by could watch art being created. This was an act of group curation for which artists chalked Internet addresses on their works as if part of its artistic expression, connecting the street to the digital world.

Following these links, which could be done via a smartphone while viewing the show, led viewers to the artists’ curation of their lives and art. When the show closed, on the Chalkit Facebook page (<https://www.facebook.com/ChalkFITNYC/>) we see a photograph of the show being washed off the cement walls of the FIT building, which links to an Instagram by Kevin Nadal. He writes:

“What goes up must come down. They’re erasing the [#ChalkFIT](#) display this morning. The whole erasure process is hauntingly beautiful. The fact that you can erase parts of your life – leaving a few traces at first – symbolizes how life goes on and how we always need to move forward and create new art.”

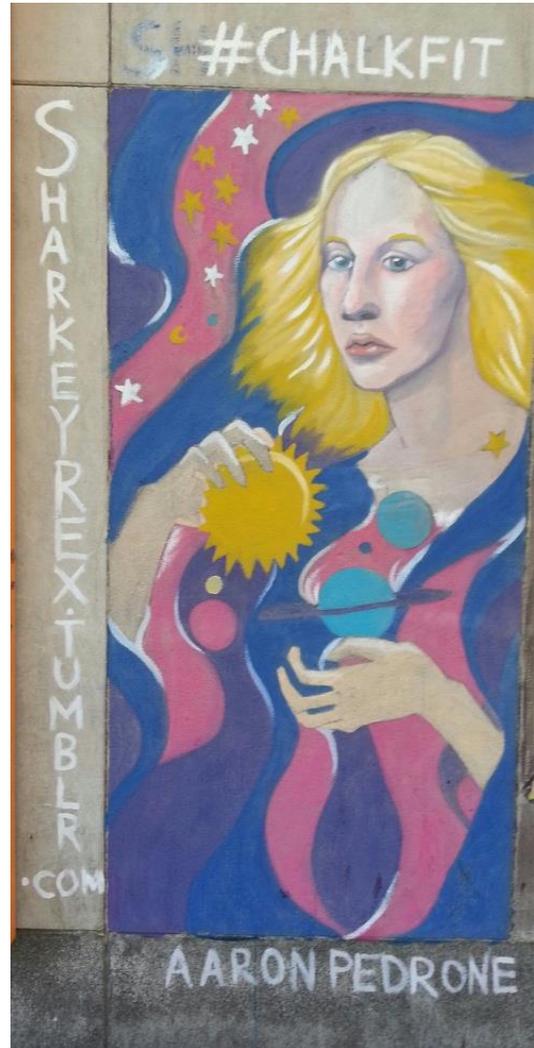


**Figure 1:** Chaulkit wall art (mural), December 2015 Fashion Institute of Technology, New York. Jess Riess, artist (age 21), FIT student ([Jessriess.tumblr.com](http://Jessriess.tumblr.com)) [Photograph by T. Giannini, reproduced with permission.]



**Figure 2:** On view – cement walls of the FIT building on 7th Avenue in NYC displaying student art from the Chaulkit show 2015. [Photograph by T. Giannini taken on her daily walk down 7th Avenue. from Penn Station to Pratt on 14th Street, New York.]

And yet, because Internet links were a feature of the Chaulkit experience, the ephemeral nature of the show takes another turn because its works were digitally captured and curated not only by the artists, but as well by passers-by who tweeted and posted to blogs. This impressive show, viewed by thousands of people, brought the artistic vision of young artists to New York City streets, the blogosphere and beyond, giving them voice to narrate their art and lives.



**Figure 3:** A Chaulkit work by Aaron Pedrone [Photograph by T. Giannini, December 2015, FIT, 7th Avenue. <https://www.behance.net/sharkeyrex>]

### Curating digital life through Fashion – Coded Couture

Fashion, computing and digital technology merged when the much anticipated *Coded Couture* show opened on 11 February 2016 at Pratt Institute's Manhattan Gallery, located 14<sup>th</sup> Street off 7<sup>th</sup> Avenue in New York. The interactive clothing was as much an artistic statement as a reflection of a new and emerging fashion and design trend. These were indeed wearable works of art set in motion by the human body, while enhancing the wearers' physical

abilities to communicate and express feelings and emotions while digitally capturing the resulting data.



**Figure 4:** *Holy Dress*, 2012 by Melissa Coleman, Leonie Smelt and Joachim Rotteveel. Gold-plated metal dress, lie detector, shock training dog collar, custom electronics, video LED lights. [Photograph by T. Giannini, Pratt Manhattan Gallery, 2 November 2015 – 16 March 2016.]



**Figure 5:** *iMimiSkirt*, 2015, LED Lights. Collection Pratt Institute. [Photograph by T. Giannini, Pratt Manhattan Gallery, 2 November 2015 – 16 March 2016.]

The show, curated by Ginger Gregg Duggan and Judith Hoos, opened on 11 February 2016 and captured the imagination of viewers, who eagerly interacted with fashion turned digital *objets d'art*.

### Digital capture and curation of political and social history in the making

Increasingly, we use our smartphones and other digital devices to capture and curate day to day life experiences. As a cacophony of digital activity moves to the centre of human life overwhelmed by digital interactions, digital space is the place where people spend the lion's share of their time, curating their digitally mediated life. Although, many archivists are still thinking in terms of digital curation as a simulation of existing systems derived from physical archival practice such as the life-cycle of documents, in the digital realm, judging which material is valuable is moving from the institutional domain to that of the individual curating in cyberspace where issues of physical storage become less and less relevant, so that everything captured gets saved. Often digital works are self-curating taking on a life of their own once on the Internet, where they can migrate via emails, tweets and Facebook posts, and be remixed and re-used to form new art.

The social impacts of individual curation are great as we all are at once, audience, participants and creators of content. We have moved our banking, shopping (Pin It with Pinterest), communicating, storytelling, and the curation of our lives to the Internet.

Born digital news is important because it shifts the nature and use of primary source materials from the back room, to centre stage through the daily content production on the web involving millions of participants. This combined with big and small data analytics create new types of narratives that subsequently trickle down to the scholarly world of publishing on topics and issues of broad national interest to those of niche communities.

Today, much of the content of news is user generated from twitter, blogs, websites, YouTube and Facebook. Narratives drawn from these sources and from archival material, physical and digital, are being transformed into compelling original art works. Digital art has moved from simulating traditional art to inventing new art forms that are time-based narrations with political and social messaging.

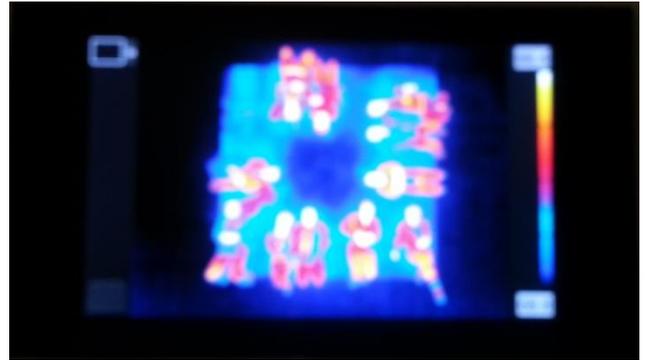
### Information as Art – Digital expressions of the archive. *Astro Noise* by Lauren Poitras at the Whitney Museum, Spring 2016

Lauren Poitras, noted film maker/journalist, and now artist with a large-scale show at the Whitney called *Astro Noise*, makes art from the digital archive of her

life's experiences of government surveillance and war. Using this digital realism together with symbolism of documents and documentary video, she curates this show in ways that reveal the unseen world of national surveillance and its effects. Visitors' interactions with her installation work across four interconnected galleries expose digital objects and messages that seem to evoke deep-felt emotions such as fear of the unknown, anxiety over the loss of privacy and a sense of uncertainty about the future.

A postcard on the show reads, "Dear Visitor, your attendance at *Astro Noise* has been permanently recorded – think privacy." Juxtaposing the show with visitor reactions brings together artist and audience participation as intrinsic to the exhibition experience and meaning of Poitras' book, *Astro Noise: A Survival Guide for Living under Total Surveillance* (Poitras 2016), provides vivid narrations to her life's experiences curated as art and acts as an information backdrop to the show.

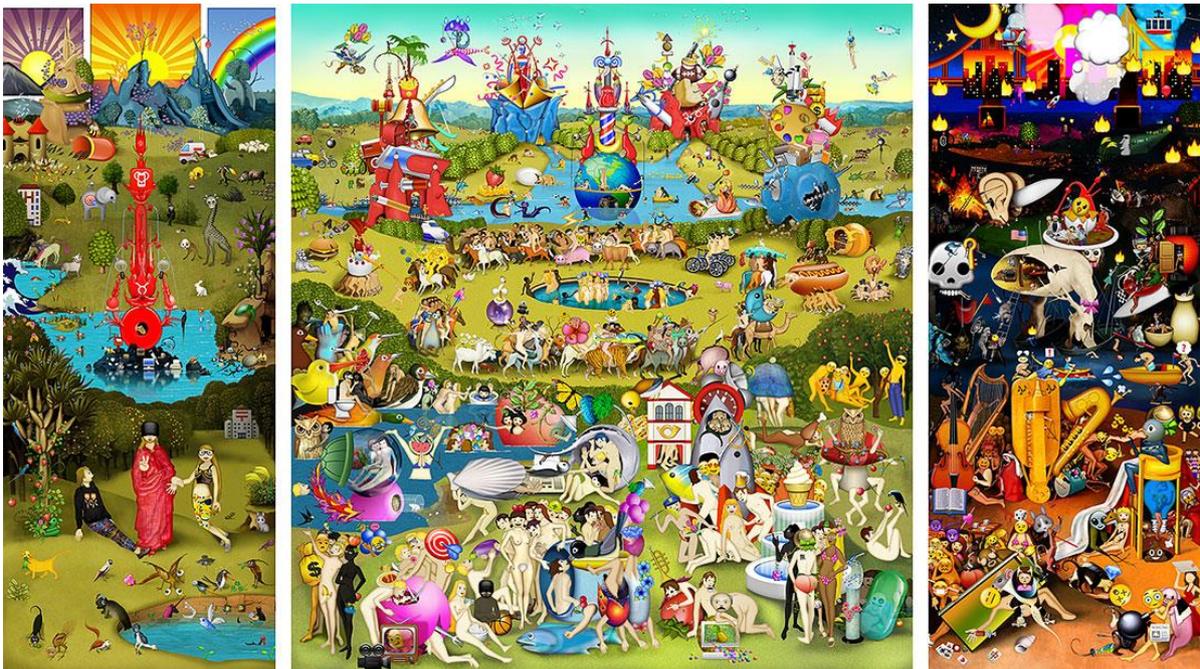
An article in *The Guardian*, Jason Fargo (2016) compares the films and textual narratives of Poitras to the installation art of *Astro Noise* finding the former more effective. He quotes Poitras as questioning her reasons for "making long-form documentaries when other ways of working are so much more energizing". Although Fargo finds *Astro Noise* lacking, he loses sight of the materiality of this politically charged installation that allows the visitor to be a participant physically inside the show's content.



**Figure 6:** Visitors lying on a carpeted platform in a pitch-black room, view overhead projections of images of night skies over Yemen, Pakistan and Somalia, making reference to drone strikes. [Photograph by T. Giannini.]

### An iconographic/symbolic language of a new digital aesthetic – emoji art

As we celebrate the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary since the death of the great 17<sup>th</sup> century Netherlands painter, Hieronymus Bosch, and contemplate his well-known triptych, *The Garden of Earthly Delights*, we can revel in a remix of this iconic work recreated for the 21<sup>st</sup> century by the digital artist, Carla Gannis (<http://carlagannis.com>), Assistant Chair of the Digital Arts Department at Pratt Institute in Brooklyn, New York. She has cleverly reinterpreted Bosch's work into *The Garden of Emoji Delights*, matching each Bosch image to an emoji of remarkable likeness.



**Figure 7:** "The Garden of Emoji Delights" by Carla Gannis (animated version, 2014, <https://vimeo.com/158156834>). [Shown with artist's permission.]



**Figure 8:** Detail from centre panel of  
“The Garden of Emoji Delights” by Carla Gannis.  
[Shown with artist’s permission.]

Today, the use of emojis is inextricably tied to digital communication with smart phones and other digital devices functioning as a new symbolic language universally understood, conveying gesture, feelings and emotions in ways that enhance textual meaning. The emoji animations of Gannis take the notion of emoji art to new digital heights of sensual delight within the realm of digital aesthetics about which she notes that, “to think about the 21<sup>st</sup> century and the time we exist in today, which is very dynamic, hyper-mediated – we’re used to seeing moving images all the time.”

Gannis’ work also expresses a social and political thesis about consumerism and environmental degradation, as seen in the image of “the isle of lost tech.” The right panel centre, shows a pile of discarded obsolete computer devices. Gannis’ innovative use of emojis as a new shared symbolic digital language for making art, demonstrates that new modes of digital expression are transforming how we define art, and how art and information are inextricably linked to today’s ocean of digital creativity.

### Blurring the lines between art and information

According to the Society for New Design lead by academics, a big trend today is data visualisation using specialised software – but is it information or is it art? John Grimwade (2010), information graphics director at Condé Nast Traveler and a long-time supporter, teacher, mentor for SND infographics, writes that:

“Dreary spreadsheets can be transformed into beautiful artwork. Spirals, circles, piles of dots and other assorted shapes. Lots of overlapping info in brilliant colours. Population trends turned into a wheel of interconnecting dots. I love it, but to be honest, I often have no idea what’s going on.”

This work seems to reside at the intersection of art and information, where the design elements are being generated through computer software as a creative tool and where the boundaries between information and art are blurred. Yes, visualisations need text to convey meaning, while text uses visualisation to enhance meaning and user engagement. This speaks to a broader trend in which artists intertwine digital and physical media for

installation and performance art framed by social meaning conveyed by a documentary archive digitally captured by the artist.

New software applications for curating digital life on the Internet now abound online including Snagit (<http://discover.techsmith.com/screen-recorder>) by TechSmith, Camtasia also provided by TechSmith (<https://www.techsmith.com/camtasia.html>), Movavi (<http://www.movavi.com/mac-screen-capture>), used for creating video capture of screen devices (computer, smartphone, tablet) so that capturing digital life on the Internet now becomes easy and automatic. The Chaulkit artist, Aaron Pedrone notes, “As an artist in this day and age it’s near impossible not to be considering technology when you’re making art thought.”

### Curating Knowledge: (Europeana – DPLA – Archive-it – linked open data projects)

The Internet Archive (<https://archive.org>), through its Archive-it service (<https://archive-it.org>), is curating collections on significant events that they call:

“Spontaneous Event collections are created by the Archive-It team in collaboration with other organisations and individuals with the purpose of establishing a corpus of web content related to a specific event, capturing at risk content during times of crisis, and providing open access to the archived content for research and general browsing.”

For example, there are curated collections on Black Lives Matter, and the Boston Bombing.

The 1998 Exhibition, *Tous les saviors du Monde* (all the knowledge in the world) was mounted for the opening of the then new Bibliothèque Nationale de France (<http://classes.bnf.fr/dossism>) (Giannini 1998b).

At the heart of the exhibit are encyclopaedias and libraries from Sumer to the 21<sup>st</sup> century highlighted by the Encyclopédie of Diderot and d’Almbert, a monumental work symbolizing the Age of Enlightenment. Being at once scientific, political, and philosophical, it makes a strong argument in support of the rising tide of democratic ideas and equality, while its challenge to the social and religious order of the aristocracy that in 1749 landed Diderot in prison in Vincennes for a year, was causal to the French Revolution.

Fast forward to today’s Wikipedia, we move from a multi-volume work written over 20 years by the great minds of the 18<sup>th</sup> century to the 21<sup>st</sup> century digital age of global knowledge and participation, and from the world of print and privilege to one of global sharing. We ask, how much of all the knowledge in the world can be found on the Web and Internet – between the formal and informal, the individual and corporate, the commercial and scholarly. The

answer seems to lie more in the framework and structure of the Internet than in the information itself. The Web being more a vehicle of expression and interaction of digitally curated lives on a global stage. The technology enabling this altered state of digital being seems to transcend the value of specific information and knowledge to the higher value of open and free access, information creation and use. Most importantly, the gatekeepers have lost control and cannot contain the exuberance and power of individual expression.

In 1998, Giannini took up the notion of the information process as having three modes: seeking, receiving, and using (Giannini 1998a). This is illustrative of the paradigm shift of the information process which now extends to information creation, interaction and curation which dramatically redefines these modes. It was relatively recently, the 1980s, that archives were still just dusty documents of a distant past. Today, a digital photograph, video or document is captured on a smartphone and instantly becomes a saved document waiting to be curated and tell a story that can be shared with friends or everyone on the Internet.

This seismic shift away from the centrality of published information to that of individual curation of content continues to gain ground and importance. Often, digital capture by smartphones as photographs and video become pivotal to findings for truth and justice and are increasingly a part of judicial evidence. In the past, it was reporters, journalists, writers and communication corporations that controlled the capture and curation of such information. With digital tools empowering individuals, this ability to narrate the story is shared with the public in ways that can be instantaneous.

An image from the Black Lives Matter demonstration at the Mall of America shows a police line with guns drawn, while they faced a crowd of demonstrators with digital cameras drawn – ready to shoot and capture the moment. Information as art, a new digital aesthetic and mode of expression emerges as art drawn from experience, documentary narratives, social critique, and of course the digital self.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

Digital curation is an issue for museums and professional curators (Cairns and Birchall 2013). Museums have provided facilities for curation of their collections for individual use, e.g., for didactic purposes (Filippini-Fantoni and Bowen 2007). However increasingly user-friendly software and easy cheap access to the Internet ubiquitously through smartphones, tablets, and other devices, means that online curation is now easily possible by the motivated individual.

This paper has explored a number of successful examples of digital self-curation. The authors believe that this paradigm is set to increase in novel ways yet to be explored fully. Further developments such as the Internet of Things means that objects in the real world will be even more interconnected digitally as human life becomes increasingly mediated in digital realms. While many applications will be practical, it is natural that those that spark artistic inclination will inspire new uses of technologies not originally conceived by their inventors. This in turn situates art and information, now curated across digital platforms, where digital life and culture converge and transform.

#### 5. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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