

# Social Material: Curatorial Practice and the Virtual Museum

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Over a decade ago, I publicly introduced my concept of the virtual museum at a symposium on the future of art at Cooper Union in New York. While I had not written extensively on this topic at the time, I had alluded to it on several occasions, primarily in relation to works by conceptual artists. Whatever my intentions may have been to discuss this topic, the panelists moved quickly in other directions, never focusing on any one thing in particular. Instead, the focus on the future dissipated. It became less about where art was going than on presenting other unrelated areas of research in which mostly academic participants were engaged. For example, I was struck that no one addressed the enormous influence financial institutions, including global galleries and auctions, were having on the kinds of artwork being promoted. No one dared mention the fastidiously designed investment strategies that were contributing to this effect. These factors already showed signs of determining the future of contemporary art. Given this scenario, my only choice was to relinquish my hold on the virtual museum, and postpone any serious forum on the topic for another occasion. At that time, I did not realize it would take another decade for this to happen.

While the concerns of predetermined promotion and investment in art are still important, and very much at work in the global art network today, I

have chosen not to make these concerns the focus of this paper, at least, not in a direct sense. Rather I would like to return to the concept of the virtual museum and its role in the future, which is not altogether removed from the kind of marketing concerns stated above. Here I will focus my attention on more abstract concerns, such as how the tension between the virtual and tactile dimensions of art are being manifested in global society today and how this tension is defining itself indirectly through advanced art. I have chosen to designate this tension as a phenomenon called “social material” or the conceptual acquisition of art as it applies to storage, re-installation, and curatorial practice.

When I initially introduced the concept of a virtual museum, I was specifically interested in works by conceptual and “installation” artists who employed the use of materials or objects that were secondary to the important of the idea or concept. In such cases, artists in the late 1960s, such as Lawrence Weiner, Robert Barry, and Douglas Huebler, would foreground their concepts in terms of language, often stating that any material or visual components were ancillary. Later, in the 1980s, artists influenced by the language premises employed by conceptual artists became involved with a relatively new genre (at the time), called “installation art.” In this genre, which exists in contrast to a specific medium, the use of diverse materials and objects became increasingly more relevant to the work. Artists who worked in this hybrid genre between conceptual (virtual) and material (tactile) realities, gave more attention to finding a synchronicity between their intentions and the use of materials, images, and objects. At this point, by the mid-1970s, the term “conceptual artist” was rejected in favor of installation, performance, or multimedia artist.

For example, the British artist Damien Hirst, who is considered by some art critics fits all three categories, recently threw a party and decided to label it a work of art. Given Hirst's immense attraction among art collectors, the artist determined during the course of this event that he would sell the party as if it were an object. The detritus left behind, such as empty beer bottles, plastic wine glasses, cigarette butts, and crumpled paper napkins, would constitute the supporting evidence that the party was, indeed, an artwork. Thus, the collector who purchased the party would be entitled to the ownership of the refuse. Everything seemed in order until the custodian arrived at work the following morning. Upon seeing the accumulation of trash, the custodian went to work. He cleaned the room thoroughly, collecting the refuse in plastic bags, and dumping them in the trash bin outside the building. When the director of the gallery arrived later, he was dismayed to learn that the party refuse was no longer on the premises and therefore inquired as to where it might be. Upon discovering that the remains were in the dumpster, they were immediately retrieved and re-distributed in the gallery, thus simulating the appearance of how the space appeared at the conclusion of the party the previous night.

Decades prior to the Hirst party, there was an earlier precedent in 1979 instigated by the German artist, Joseph Beuys. His point of departure was less about convincing collectors to buy detritus than offering a more layered conceptual point of view to his installation. Upon discovering that Beuys' gallery in Berlin would be closing in Berlin, he asked to have the rubble from the dismantled wallboards in Berlin sent in wooden crates to Ronald Feldman Fine Arts in New York. At the Feldman gallery, the piles

of rumble were placed in an elongated heap from one wall to another with broken tree branches holding small a series of lanterns. Between the rumble and tree branches, there was an alcove, where properties from a previous performance in New York, titled “I Like America; America likes Me” (1974), were collected and placed on the floor. Some of the objects included a shepherd’s crook, a stack of old copies of the Wall Street Journal, a pile of hay, a pair of gloves, and torn pieces of grey felt. Strewn on top of these objects was a thin layer of yellow sulfur; a substance used in alchemy during medieval times to transform common metals into gold. Finally, an arc light was placed in the center of the broken particles of wallboard focused on the rear wall of the alcove.

Titled *Aus Berlin*, Beuys’ work was shown twice by Feldman, once at the original 74<sup>th</sup> Street gallery uptown off Madison Avenue (1979-80) where it coincided with the major Beuys retrospective at the Guggenheim Museum, and, on a second occasion, at the gallery’s downtown location on 31 Mercer Street. The latter showing was, in fact, a memorial tribute to the artist shortly after his death in 1987. Eventually the work entered the collection of the Dia Art Center in Beacon, New York where it is permanently installed. Having seen *Aus Berlin* on several occasions over the past decade, I have become aware of the dilapidated condition of the work and the rapid aging of the various objects and materials. This is to say that *Aus Berlin* has lost its aura. It no longer appears to carry the vitality of the concept that in the late 1970s seemed on the cutting edge of art. Entropy has taken its toll.

As a result of my experience with the history of *Aus Berlin* over the past three and a half decades, I began to consider the possibility of creating

the concept of a virtual museum in which entropy would cease to play a determinant role in how future audiences might receive such important, albeit provisional works of art. Within the context of the virtual museum, works could be programmed not only according to the artist's intention, but according to methods of layout and construction, including the nature of the materials necessary to reconstruct the work over time and thus to perpetuate its potential as a living and vital reality. A similar point was made in the early twentieth century by the philosopher Heidegger in his analysis of the restaging of early Greek tragedies and comedies. For Heidegger, these plays should carry not only the original concept of the author but should be recontextualized from the perspective of the present, the historical moment in which the characters were being re-produced and seen by new audiences.

Before moving ahead with more general speculations on the concept of the virtual museum, I will cite a third artist, Sol LeWitt, also known as a conceptual artist (by his own choosing). I am specifically interested in what LeWitt calls "wall drawings," which began in 1969. The general idea behind these drawings is two fold: one, they would be provisional (not permanent) and two, would be determined by an instructional phrase (language), which would also serve as a title. Examples include: STRAIGHT LINES IN FOUR DIRECTIONS, SUPERIMPOSED (1969), or STRAIGHT LINES, 24 CM LONG, NOT TOUCHING (1970), or ALL COMBINATIONS OF ARCS FROM CORNERS, STRAIGHT, NOT=STRAIGHT, AND BROKEN LINES (1973). One might also add that it was not necessary for the artist himself to do the drawing, once the instructional phrase or, in some cases, a preliminary drawing left the studio. Most often a hired contractor would oversee the execution of the drawings on site.

Literary hundreds of wall drawings evolved and were executed over the course of the artist's prolific career, some of which were monumental in scale, literally taking days or even weeks for a team of artisans to complete the installation. If executed in a public space, such as a museum, gallery, or temporary exhibition facility – for example, used during a biennial – the drawing would be destroyed after an agreed duration of time. If a collector or institution should purchase the drawing, then the duration of the work would depend on the discretion of the owner, as stipulated in accordance with the artist or artist's representative as part of a contractual arrangement. Here it is important to distinguish between the concept of the drawing and its actual manifestation. While the concept is never destroyed, but exists in the form of instructions and documentation. In contrast, the manifestation of the drawing in an exhibition space may be considered temporal.

At the outset, before computers and laptops were made accessible to artists, there was no software available to store the specifications and documentation of the various works. Therefore, this information had to be sent by postal mail or delivered first-hand by the artist or an assistant. By the end of the 1990s, this changed completely as extensive files became available, which included an extensive classification of the various drawings, including instructions and a history of the work's documentation, both in terms of the making of the work and the exhibitions where the drawing has been shown. Thus, LeWitt's concept indicates a kind of social material in terms of ones and zeros. The wall drawings are social material to the extent that they are perpetually available to be executed and shown within the realm of the social. Mass MoCA's 25 year retrospective of LeWitt's wall

drawing constitute the model of this function as year by year newer drawings replace older ones on the three floors of the building allocated for their on-going display. In the meantime, LeWitt's wall drawings are safely stored within a significant digital archive administered by a curatorial staff. The curatorial function is complex on many levels as it involves the interaction of both conceptual and material counterparts. In any case, the LeWitt archive of wall drawings is a useful prototype in determining the future of the virtual museum and its function as social, in contrast to an exclusively aesthetic regard for the function of material in art.

However, granting permission for the loan and exhibition of such conceptually based works, including works by other artists that depend on installation, performance, and projective imagery, will need to remain active in order to sustain their currency and their importance as works of art. This is to suggest a committed and progression augmentation in the study of the history of art on all continents and of all persuasions, essentially in relation to a revitalized sense of connoisseurship that permits intuitive evaluations. By intuitive, we cannot assume subjectivity as the final word. Rather we are caught in a profound dilemma. To intuit a response to a work of art no matter what degree of dematerialization requires that we examine more closely the objective parameters found in recent works of art that hold a closer relationship with the past, By observing and analyzing the often invisible connections between the past and present, we might discover the point where they coincide and thus enter into the present as being significant. Such an examination may provide a substantial basis for clarity and further support methods of intuition grounded on sensing distinctly qualitative

findings, both past and present, regardless of the cultural origins from which the works may come into the world and the future, as we know it today.

With an increased number of such works being generated by artists where the materials are ancillary to the primary intention (concept), I am interested in the problem of storage and retrieval. It would appear that the criterion in how these works are digitally stored is quite different from the problems involved in storing physical art objects. Therefore, I am interested in defining the criteria by which some works can exist within a digital file and be easily transmitted to various locations and installed. This would not apply to all works of art, because not all works of art exist as a concept in a dematerialized or a prior materialized context. This offers further challenges to both curators and collectors as it suggests the necessity of a new set of criteria by which to curate works appropriate to a virtual museum. This is to say that not all work of art belong in a virtual museum, because not all works of art are conceptual. Works of art that exists or are conceived physically through the use of material already have and will continue to have their place in the annals of art history.

The criteria that separate the virtual from a more traditional Museum of Fine Arts admit a delicate and complex boundary. The advance of conceptual art from language into materiality as a condition of support implies a theoretical construct whereby objects, whether cultural or natural, take a secondary role in relation to the artist's idea. The stones and mud walls by the artist Richard Long and the textual notations by his colleague, Hamish Fulton, offer clear examples. From the beginning, Long has emphasized the concept of a journey by walking through wilderness terrains,



often traversing national boundaries. In the beginning he would pile mounds of rock, distribute pieces of driftwood in circular patterns, or clear linear paths on the steep of a mountain. Initially these were photographed and shown in relation to a text. Eventually the photographs became the actual stones and mud that the artist would apply directly to museum walls. Some would argue that when the natural effects came into the museum, it confused the basic premise of the journey. So the question becomes: Do we still view the stones and mud as a secondary components in support of an idea or have they taken on a more direct presence in relation to the viewer? Does this somehow bridge the gap between what can be digitally and later reconstructed as in the case of LeWitt? For example, if Long's handprints or footprints covered in mud and applied to the wall or floor constitute a direct documentation within the space of the museum, what will happen in a century's time? Will the digital file offer the necessary substance to give the work its original meaning? Whereas presumably nothing is lost in the digital files of LeWitt, with Long we have the problem of the expressionist mark, the actual trace of the artist's body leaving an imprint?

Given such circumstances, fine art museums in the future may be expected to comply with the complexities that Long's recent work appears to provoke. The separation of material from the conceptual aspects of art that Long challenges will need to determine another possibility for storage, or, alternatively, confront the fetish impulse as a obsolescent premise by which museum curators are still expected to operate. Through a renewed attempt to bring critical inquiry back into the curatorial profession, which further suggests an inductive internalization of critical theory, one might determine whether the bodily mark employed in a distinctly conceptual project is still a

necessary criterion by which to acquire works of art that could otherwise communicate the artist's idea, feeling, historical event, ethnic trace, or heuristic intention without a perfunctory imprint of the instigator's hand or foot. Whether emanating from the position of a material fetish (Marx) or a psychological one (Freud), these seemingly untimely concerns ultimately merge as they become aesthetically tied to the economic and cultural importance of the object – or, in the case of the virtual museum, the concept.

Rather than discounting theory in this context, the role of theory would shift away from ideological concerns back into the homestead of art itself, quite plainly: What makes a work of art significant? This question will not be alleviated by theory in our infinitely extensive relationship to time, but will only be further synergized as virtual technology us moves into the reconfiguration of time and place in the on-going struggle to adapt to the inexorability of speed and excess.

What makes a virtual museum different from a traditional fine arts museum? As mentioned earlier, the concept of a fine arts museum began in the mid-eighteenth century during the Age of Enlightenment. Emphasis at the time was given to the study and acquisition of finely wrought material objects, including painting and sculpture, lithography and etching. In addition there were archeological artifacts and the decorative arts. Each of these disciplines was given attention by scholars chosen to work with objects as they simultaneously evolved a methodology of curatorial expertise. At the outset, the practice of the curator was limited to acquiring and maintaining the works of art in the collection. This continued for more than two hundred years until the late twentieth century when analogic forms of appraisal and

communication were replaced by the dematerialized practice of digital information exchange. Even in the early stages, the potential capability of zeros and ones was already in advance of the disorganized time lag of data in relation to objects, a lag that encumbered traditional curatorial practices. The role of “social material” in bringing the virtual and tactile dimensions of art together within the realm curatorial practice was not yet realized, and in most case today is still not realized. Yet this synthetic between how we deal with the virtual storages of art within the digital archive and how we makes choices based on a revival of connoisseurship so as to operate using them within the virtual domain is beyond the apprehension of most “curators” entering the profession today. To get to this point, a more comprehensive understanding of aesthetic theory in terms of where art resides in relation to objects, and conversely where objects reside in relation to art needs greater comprehension. This is the essential problem (or problematic) in coming to terms with the acquisition of contemporary art today.

Clearly not all art belongs in the virtual museum. Some is better served in a traditional fine arts museum. Such decisions are finally the professional responsibility of the curator or curatorial team. They should not be made according to fetishistic desire or in the wake of predetermined hierarchical impulses. Rather the role of the curator is to ensure the work is given an appropriate storage facility, whether virtual or tactile. Therefore, the curator needs a clear and incisive understanding of the art’s formal objecthood or idea-based structure to determine the manner in which the work will be exhibited, stored, transported or later re-installed. The crux of the matter provokes the following questions: Are the original object(s), material(s) or imprint(s) necessary to carry the meaning of the art? If the

work is contingent on the originality of the object or imprint, then it not likely belongs in a traditional fine arts museum. However, if the point of the work is less the originality of the object or imprint than the originality of the idea, one should consider the advantages of virtual storage. Also one might inquire: Can the work of art communicate without laying claim to originality as an object, material, or imprint? Is it possible to reconsider the meaning of the work of art as social material, that is, a syntactical composite that both aesthetically and conceptually determines the originality of the idea? In this context, the idea-based structure of the work is its essential point. Therefore, updating the availability of supporting objects and materials is necessary to install the work in a manner that most adequately communicates the idea. The tactile engagement of these supportive agents will be used to reconstruct the artist's original idea and to give it validity as a form of conceptual currency. This gives the work the status to function as social material.

Again, the role of the virtual museum is two-fold: 1) It will offer the possibility to store an idea as a work of art transformed into immaterial data as a virtual file, and 2) to perpetually reinvent its form according to the matrix of the relative present. Such forms reside perpetually in the virtual realm of the future until they are brought back into the present. This is instigated through a curatorial decision, whereupon the form is given the necessary agents of material support to engage the existence of the work, and thus, visually (re)present and objectify its (re)formation in time/space. This cycle of production becomes a readymade enterprise in which the form is reconstructed through whatever version of rapid processing becomes available. In each case, the work finds its full potential to communicate at the moment it engages itself as social material and is finally revealed as art.

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*The preceding text is currently being translated into Korean, and will be delivered in English (with translation) at the Yeongwol Yonsei Forum at the invitation of Park, Seon-Yu, Governor of Yeongwol, Republic of Korea. The symposium (October 21 – 24) will include the participation of 150 Museum Directors and Curators from 20 countries.*