



QUEER CRITICALITIES, INSTAGRAM, AND THE ETHICS OF MUSEUM DISPLAY

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ABSTRACT | This essay explores the ways in which queer critical theory might be productively applied to digital art history and curatorial practice. Reflecting on a recent critically-acclaimed exhibition at the Williams College Museum of Art (WCMA), the author creates a theoretical framework of digital and aesthetic futurity that accords well with a curatorial exercise in visualizing queer affective networks on social media.

KEYWORDS | collections, contemporary art, data visualization, GLAM institutions, curatorial practice, phenomenology, queer theory, social media content

Introduction¹

Digital art history is a field and discourse rife with crossings, interjections, and transitions. In the exchanges between past and present, knowledge and narratives, re-imagined aesthetic relationships and rendered environments, there seems to be missing a queer criticality of the digital repertoire. In *Second Skins: The Body Narratives of Transsexuality* (1998) Jay Prosser posits exchanges between truth, archives, and bodies that are plotted and networked in ways akin to coding. Queer identity forms, Prosser suggests, at the extraordinary conjunctions of bodies and narratives. The transsexual draws on the semiotic and semantic signs of the past to form, encode, and then transition into their future selves. In coding language, the queer-identified person draws from the database of seen and experienced forms to build and deploy a personal algorithm which allows for the possibility of an open sourced approach to gender norms. What Prosser stops just shy of proposing is a trans metaphysics: a kind of aesthetic metadata that encompasses how we see, how we navigate systems, how we value. How can one not be intrigued?

As a curator at an academic museum, I wonder if there is space in digital art history for experiential data to engage with critical queer theory. If we can conceive of a museum collection's metadata, i.e. loans, acquisitions, how many times requested for scholarship, etc., as a kind of haptic repertoire or epistemology through which we know the museum's brand, vision, and mission, might we also build toward a rhetoric of networked relationality and digital rendering that accords with the language of queer subjectivity in order to look toward the future of art history and the museum? I think we can. I think, in the case study of the Williams College Museum of Art and a recent exhibition, we have.

For the past four years, the Williams College Museum of Art (WCMA) has been a leader among academic museums in integrating experience data into our collections information to provide open source visualizations of our metadata to the world (Fig. 1). Funded by the Mellon Foundation with a multi-year grant, the past four years have been busy in Williamstown. Through the efforts of our Jim Allison and Rachel Tassone, our Registrar team; Elizabeth Gallerani, our Associate Curator for Academic Programs; and Chad Weinard, our Manager of Digital Initiatives, we've overhauled our website, digitized the entire collection and made images and object information available to the world via GitHub and our new API. We've gone through fifty years of paper files, emails, and memories to track every loan, every internal exhibition, and every thematic tour or request from a scholar or professor to view a work of art or design for the sole purpose of sharing this metadata with students and scholars. We have input all our accession data into a visualization module that allows our curatorial and engagement teams immediate access to which areas of our collection have been growing and by what rates. Based overwhelmingly in network analysis and image analysis, the abundant relational matrix of our collection objects is a large, complex data set accessible and intelligible to a large number of humans all around the world in unprecedented ways.

Recently, we've been thinking about the difference between curatorial practice and AI learning and taxonomy. For example, a computer does not recognize the color "pink." What is pink? What is the right combination of red pigments and white pigments to produce pink? Are there purple or yellow pigments also involved and what happens when those base pigments are composite colors themselves? In our 2017

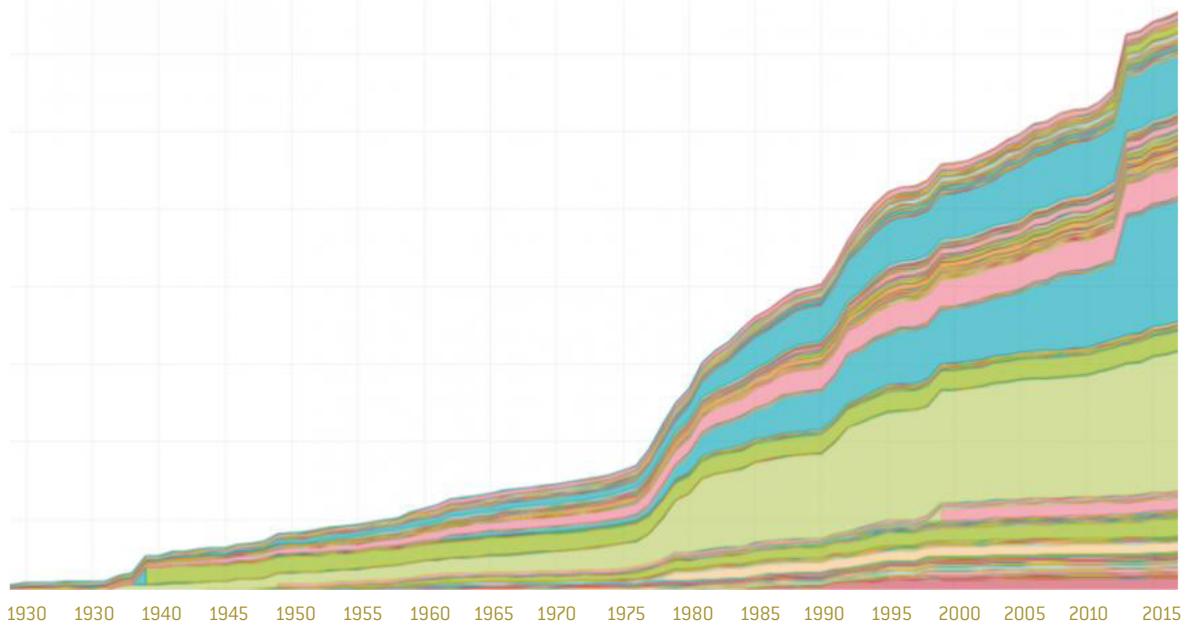


Figure 1. Visualization of Accessions into the WCMA Collection by Medium, 1930-2015



Figure 2. Entire WCMA Collection arranged by quantitative of "pink"

exhibition, Pink Art, we partnered with faculty and students in Computer Science to build algorithms, apps, and modules that crowdsourced both a visual and linguistic definition of the color “pink” from our 2000 students. We then ‘taught’ those definitions to five different computers, created five algorithms for defining pink, and then ran those algorithms individually through digitized images of all 15,000 works in our collection —garnering five different rankings of our collection by their respective percentage of pink-ness [Fig. 2]. The exhibition provided examples of each algorithm, and members of the curatorial team selected the twenty-five most pink works and displayed them, with wall text that honestly discussed the complicated feelings human curators have about the curatorial abilities of algorithms. The exhibi-

tion was visually-arresting and raised interesting questions about the exhibition as a form of data visualization and digital tools as aids but neither replicas nor replacements for human experience.

The phrase “digital art history” has become a shorthand reference for the potentially transformative effects digital technologies hold for art historical understanding and the visualization of metadata. At WCMA, we have chosen to chosen to invest in visualizations-as-network strategies, though we realize there are many more ways to employ digital tools. Advanced technologies are making research materials more widely accessible and allowing scholars to refine longtime questions and to ask new ones.



Figure 3. WCMA installation view. *possible selves: queer foto vernaculars*. Brad Wakoff for Berkshirian Images. December 2018

Proto-Digital Criticalities of Queer Temporality

As art historians and makers, critics, curators, and scholars we know we are ever hungry for data. We never have all the archival materials we want and need at hand all the time. Digital languages and tools that aggregate resources to make fact checking and cross-referencing efficient is a short-term investment with practical and efficacious long-term benefits. But at some point, we cannot continue to celebrate the use of contemporary technologies primarily to rediscover and reconstruct the past in order to re-situate ourselves to archival materials or to lost data in the present. At some point, digital technologies must be employed to broaden and complexify the quantitative and qualitative positionings of human artistic practice in future time: not just make past or present networks legible, but construct completely new spatialities as future sites of potentiality.

The nuances of queer, and specifically, trans representation as it relates to futurity and capaciousness of human experience seems pertinent. In *Black on Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity* (2017), C. Riley Snorton, draws on an “eclectic archive” to map transgender histories of race, gender, and sexuality in the United States. In this extended rumination which is both poetic and techie, Snorton is invested in acknowledging how neither of the identity evolutions we have come to term “blackness” or “trans” followed a linear trajectory. Instead, they are wiley, shifting, and absorbed, sometimes surgical, sometimes hormonal, but always, a set of “political propositions” one is acculturated to in personal networks and visual culture.²

I am interested in the ways queer critical theory might be effectively applied to digital art history and curatorial practice. With this essay-as-case study, I aim to articulate a theoretical framework of queer digital futurity that accords with curatorial ethics and best practice regarding an art museum’s display of digital content posted to social media networks. Queer theorists and existential philosophers have been thinking about network futurity for decades, for centuries. This is where I see the efficacy of critical theory amid the ideals of digital art history. Critical theory insists that we collaborate across disciplines to find methodologies and pedagogies that make the history of art and design more inclusive and equitable, and ultimately, able to reward curiosity and achievement without the strong reliance on knowing a canon, or the sense of sight. The field of digital art history must intervene in vernacular, everyday conversations and data analytics around image-making, orientation of the self, and the ethics of capturing and displaying digital content on the museum wall.

Sara Ahmed's 2006 article, entitled, “Orientations: Toward a Queer Phenomenology,” in GLQ proves helpful in this regard. Ahmed constructs the concept of queer orientation based on Aristoleian principles of spatial temporality, orientation as not sexual but how the body positions itself in time, and in relationship to key moments, or milestones in time. Thus, as Ahmed points out, the “queer orientation” is one for whom traditional heteronormative milestones of say, prom, wedding, childbirth and parenthood, first house, are not significant. To be queer, Ahmed suggests, is to uncover and make visible the litany of experiential alternatives to these milestones and to use digital technologies to prototype new frameworks for subject positioning.³ Karen Barad and



Figure 4. "A Prose by Nature," 2017. Photographed by Elizabeth Wirija @elizabethwirija. Art Direction & Floral Design by Jamie Shin. Make up by Kara Yancey. Modeled by Aliyah Monet. Posted to Instagram 2017.

Dorothea Olkowski take up Ahmed's call for queer potentiality and new frameworks in their respective explorations. In "Transmaterialities: Trans/Matter/Realities and Queer Political Imaginings," Barad reminds us that the electrons of one person or object never touch the electrons of another person or object. It is the larger electromagnetic force of your and my electrons repelling each other that gives us the sensation of being touched. Calling this "the generative dynamic indeterminacy of touch," Barad ruminates on what might be rhetorically possible for queer, and specifically, trans identities if the touch that is not a touch becomes "an infinite alterity, so that touching the other is touching all others and no one, including the "self".⁴

For Dorothea Olkowski, indeterminacy, or the organic, molecular state of flux of all living things is an impetus for queer vulnerability transmogrifying into queer power. In her work on Deleuze, post-deconstruction, and queer theory, Olkowski imagines a queer human subject unfettered by temporal milestones and thus always shifting, its territory stretching out into networks: bringing in, or expelling the sensations that assembled it. Queerness is equated to a "[d]esire for the world, a vulnerability in which we [...] intuit images."⁵ The speculative nature of queer subjectivity leads to a new, surprising connection between the self and a visual signification of the self that is communal. If every interaction is provisional, it is also significant. If every interaction is individually-felt, it is also shared. The queer subject is vulnerable in the encounter with other subjects who are a collection of metanarratives and meta-prospects, and that vulnerability comes from imagining how one visibly signifies, or looks, in the midst of interaction. It is this vulnerable visibility that allows queer-ness to function as a spatial matrix of relations between the individual and the collective. The willingness to be vulnerable, to have one's self as sign and referent read correctly or misinterpreted, presupposes one's participation in a communal, powerful, strong, collectivist force for change.

A metaphysics of digital interaction and queer vernacular experience link all three theorists. In taking on the rhetoric and phenomena of queer experience, Ahmed, Barad, and Olkowski ask where the ontological node of queer experience resides, if, the individual in the twenty first century is always-already the referent (or data set) for an innumerable series of interactions. Additionally, all three look to a kind of network futurity, or matrix of possibility that link queer experience across space and time. In so doing, Ahmed, Barad, and Olkowski all reference the work of cultural theorist and critic, José Esteban Muñoz. Muñoz's seminal works, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (2009) and *Disidentifications* (1999) seem to anticipate the virtual potentiality of digital art history. On the very first page of *Cruising Utopia*, Muñoz calls for "a structuring and educated mode of desiring that allows us to see and feel beyond the quagmire of the

present," the open-source network of affect, what Muñoz terms the aesthetic, contains "blueprints and schemata for a forward-dawning futurity."⁶ For me and my colleagues at WCMA, José Esteban Muñoz's call proved the next step in our integration of digital tools visualization into our exhibition planning and public engagement. I began to conceptualize a project with these questions: What do "queer identifications" and "queer visual vernaculars" look like? How am I as a queer art historian of color implicated and invested in such a mining and dissemination of queer portraiture at a time of its global evolution? Is it even ethical to talk of pattern recognition or computational analysis as it applies to living bodies?

Possible Selves: Queer Foto Vernaculars, a Case Study

In the spring 2019 semester, I organized the exhibition, *Possible Selves: Queer Foto Vernaculars* as a way of engaging with queer theory through an exploration of Instagram as a data set of vernacular portrait photography [Fig. 3]. I wanted to explore the ways social media platforms provide a natural, or perhaps, intentional site of multiperspectival collaboration around two important cultural evolutions in our time: the evolution of what constitutes a photo portrait, especially of the self, and the evolution of queer identities as a mode of communal political activism, removed from expressions of sexual desire. The exhibition installs nearly 300 vernacular portraits sourced from Instagram accounts from 22 countries alongside works from our collection. Drawn to definitions of queerness as a postmodern cognitive relation to temporality, the form of an exhibition seemed to offer fruitful tensions. How does one map queerness—an individual positionality or referentiality to the present that helps one link to global communities of futurity—in an academic gallery next to works by John Singleton Copley, Edward Hopper, Kehinde Wiley, Anicka Yi, and James Van Der Zee?

In addition to the Instagram images, works by Andy Warhol, Zanele Muholi, Andres Serrano, Nan Goldin, Wang Qinsong, Blythe Bohnen, Florence Henri, Robert Mapplethorpe, Lorna Simpson, Tina Barney, and others are represented to flesh out the networks of queer lineages across eras of making. Upon hearing about the show, the Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation were generous enough to be in touch and to offer to arrange a loan of one of Gonzalez-Torres' iconic Stack works, as they felt if Gonzalez-Torres were alive, he would wish to be included.

At WCMA, we've been using our collection as a discrete data set that, with the help of various digital tools, we could mobilize, quantify, and visualize into a digital infrastructure to share with our students and with the world. With Pink Art, we crowdsourced a definition of a color and then sorted our collection according to that computational pattern. It

seemed to make sense, that the next step for an academic museum was to mobilize the exhibition as a means for human construction and strategy around a vernacular dataset available to us but out of our control. This was the impetus for constructing approaches for sourcing an equally broad and ambitious qualitative constituency, like “pink,” but in this case, “queerness,” across the global digital database of Instagram.

Over the summer, I had two incredible undergraduate interns and we decided we would all begin combing through Instagram images in different ways. One of us conducted a search of gay, lesbian, trans blogs and YouTube videos and came up with a list of over one hundred different hashtags

“How many of you would have taken on this show?”

that seemed to correspond to queer vernacular processes of self-fashioning and self-identifications, especially among trans, non binary, and agender individuals and collectives who made implicit a future imaginary resulting from surgical or hormonal transitioning and meditated on how the resultant physical form might look or mediate space. We then input those to Instagram’s search feature and noted what images came up. A simultaneous process was established to reach out to people in our networks and ask a specific question. “Provide me the screenname of one or two Instagram feeds that you find either radically-inclusive or queer.” We did not define what “radical inclusion” or “queer” meant at this stage. Once names were provided, one of us began following that feed, and after a few days, reached out to that person, with the same ask. Three months later, our entire network of follows and followers had changed and the images and conversations Instagram presumed we liked had also changed. This particular feed became the “community hub”: the site of grounding attentions and discourse.

When we began reaching out to image-makers and image posters about loaning their images for the show, we were open about our interest in Muñoz’s sense of queer as being “an ideality not yet realized” and of the evolution of vernacular photo portraiture coexisting and influencing the evolution of global queer identities as a political orientation of those interested in building inclusive communities. While no one that we approached responded with “no,” many had questions—not surprisingly, about how we were defining queer or seeing queerness in their work. What was surprising were questions about why we considered the work “art-ful” or strong enough to elicit, if not demand, a prolonged gaze (Fig. 4). One particular conversation involved a trans artist and freelance curator, who, in my seeking the loan rights for

a pre-operation image, asked through tears, “Where were you and others, before my decision to transition? Where were you and others in the world when my life depended on someone, anyone saying I was beautiful just as I was? Where were you? Where was this project?”

And so we decided on the necessity of a third digital approach—one solely-reliant on Instagram’s tailored algorithms to find queer images that visually-referenced un/consciously other works in the queer photo canon. In 2016, Instagram changed its algorithm from a chronological system of displaying images in a feed, to a projected algorithm which took into account images you liked and images others most liked from you, and prioritized your feed based upon a complicated projection of what you might best like to see. The more of something you like, the more of that thing you see. In some ways, we theorized that Instagram had queered its own algorithm a la Ahmed and Munoz by moving from chronology to anticipatory future visualization and we wanted to see what images we might be treated to if we made a new Instagram account and only liked two kinds of images: ones we had already agreed would be in the show, and those with the aesthetic sensibility of citation as critical referentiality is a mode of queer aesthetics. This allowed us to articulate to image-makers and image-posters the historic matrix of queer visibilities in western culture and why certain images on their feeds (and not others) attracted our eye.

We never set out to display a “best of queer Instagram” or even a representative sample. We were merely, and I think, strategically, interested in the human labor vs. digital approach of it all—what differences in sorting and culling of Instagram-as-data set would result from relying on algorithms, hashtags, and friends? These three approaches are not revelatory, but they engendered three different visual strategies for mapping for queer photo portraiture on Instagram from which I as the curator, could then examine through the lens of critical theory and select the images from which to pursue loan agreements and the translation of content from digital .jpeg to museum-quality print. Digital tools allowed us to share curatorial control at the initial stages with computational systems and humans from around the world.

There is much this curatorial exploration does not attend to. For example, we did not interrogate the tyranny of faciality in portraiture. And when I made the decision to display the images in grids—referencing both Instagram’s design and the iconic though flawed project of Edward Steichen’s *Family of Man* exhibition—I also made the decisions that the culled portraits would be anonymous. In so doing, I decided not to print many of the incredible images of persons displaying implements of their physical or mental disabilities, as I thought these images necessitated narratives that the grid as

a form could not allow. And so the ethics of translating digital content into prints, and then the ethics around the display of images sans the referent of a feed that can be scrolled and text that provides context remain. For all the exhibition attends to, there is much it cannot attend to, except but to be honest about its gaps and my hope for more and more and more curatorial interventions into similar subject matter.

Queer critical theory contoured our thinking around the deinstallation of the exhibition. In J. Halberstam's *The Queer Art of Failure* (2011), Halberstam looks for alternatives to heteronormative or age-appropriate markers of success. In their chapter, "Animating Failure: Ending, Fleeing, Surviving," Halberstam treats the art of animation as a "rich, technological field for rethinking collectives, transformation identity, animality and post humanity."⁷ The failure to live up to normative standards of success, Halberstam argues, opens up new and innovative possibilities. While many salient points can be mined from such rich, rigorous ground, my interns and I fixated on the idea of the collective. We discussed the fact that all of the translated images into prints must be treated equally in their presentation in the galleries as well as in the deinstallation. Everything the same size, everything subject to the same lighting. We believed rigor would come from a consummate effort at radical equality. And then, something happened.

In close, I'd like to offer an imaginary exercise, first articulated by Saint Ignatius of Loyola, and used by Ignatius and his followers whenever it seemed the realm of ideals and the realm of reality were at odds. I posit this exercise to suggest

the important stakes of queer critical theory being in concert with one's digital and museological priorities. Imagine, just three months before install of the show I've been describing, that the European Union puts in the place the General Data Protection Regulation (or GDPR).

Though less than one-fifth of the images on display come from feeds directly subject to these laws and practices, you endeavor to treat every image equitably, meaning all 200+ of your sourced digital images after the terms of their loan agreements would 1) have no physical record in museum files or website of ever being on view, and 2) after the exhibition, every printed image, if not mailed back to 265 persons in 22 countries, would be destroyed. Neither the images, the screen names nor the given names of those who gave consent, none of the information museums usually keep for exhibitions, none of the loan contracts, could legally, ethically, be kept, without annual written acknowledgement, in 15 languages, to every image-maker and image-poster, for the remainder of their natural, or digital lives. Imagine as a curator, explaining all this to your registrars and your exhibition manager! Imagine having to explain that by "failing" to keep the usual records museums keep on collection and loan objects, you were actually being ethical?

How many of you would have taken on this show? All of us in the field of digital art history are primed for its promises of connectivity and its possibilities for interdisciplinary collaboration. How many of us are ready to have the conversation about what the tools of digital art history can allow us, and also prepare us, to forget?

NOTES

¹A version of this essay was delivered at the 2019 CAA Conference for the panel, "Constructing Criticality in Digital Art History".

²C. Riley Snorton, *Black on Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 8; 6.

³Sarah Ahmed, "Orientations: Toward a Queer Phenomenology," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, 12:November (Durham: Duke UP, 2006), pp. 543-570.

⁴Karan Barad, "Transmaterialities: Trans/Matter/Realities and Queer Political Imaginings," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, 21 February: March (Durham: Duke UP, 2015), pp. 387-422.

⁵Dorothea Olkowski, *The Universal (in the Realm of the Sensible): Beyond Continental Philosophy* (NY: Columbia UP, 2007), 120.

⁶José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2009), 1.

⁷Jack Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2011), 174.

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