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The way we navigate through complexity

"Human life can be described as a prolonged dialogue with the world. Man interrogates the world and is interrogated by the world."[1] Boris Groys.

The way we search for knowledge and navigate through complex streams of information has shifted in a post-modernist tradition from approaching knowledge through the meaning of a full text that is embedded in religious belief or moral philosophy to a quantitative Google Search approach, or as Boris Groys names it, precisely to *words beyond grammar*. Terms such as *contemporary art* are typed into the Google search tab and the '*word's symbolic capital'*[2], the links, images, videos that are connected to the search word, are instantly available. The word's symbolic capital is changing constantly in time, due to the algorithmic nature of a Google search. The 274,000,000 search results that are a possibility for us to follow when searching for an understanding of the term *contemporary art* are multiplied by any word, link, or image that we can follow. Once we make a decision to open a link, the possibilities of other nodes in this web are infinite. We do nevertheless make affirmative (yes) and critical (no) decisions, and also set a beginning (for example, the Wikipedia article instead of the advertisement of an art framing company) and an end (to the second search link page and not further)*,* The literal meaning of *con-temporary* […] is 'with time,'[3] a time concept that is moving and in constant change. The search term by itself becomes part of the ever-changing nature of the word's symbolic capital.

The question asked here is therefore, how do collectors move through the complexity of a global, constantly changing art world, and how do they make affirmative and critical decisions in their collecting processes?

In the contemporary art world today, collecting processes are built towards the aim to make an affirmative or critical decision about choices of acquisition, interest in and support of an artist among others. Aesthetic and formal decisions are not interpreted with a Bourdieusian *habitus* concept and as a result of an alien that lives inside us and was born in early childhood experiences.[4] The argument doesn't follow a strict Marxist tradition of bringing structures of class and economy as a solution for decision-making processes. Rather, it follows the logic that actors in contemporary culture access certain complex networks and learn how to navigate (yes/no) through this complexity through to a learning process of knowledgeable terms, filtered evidence, and unstructured sources or realities.[5] The Google algorithm is used here as an illustrative example to answer the question of how to write and comprehend shifting complexity and knowledge acquisition in the context of contemporary art collecting.

A Google search has a certain linearity we follow: single words (contemporary art), filtered evidence (link, image, video) and the possibility to get to the unstructured source of the evidence (the complete website). This linearity leads to the knowledge the user wants to gain: what is contemporary art? The user types 'contemporary art' into the Google search tab, and the next page that opens shows headlines and the website where the word is found with a brief quotation from the website. In this search the first website shows an ad for a Frame Company, the Wikipedia entry for contemporary art, three museum websites, an online gallery-shop and a few in-depth articles. The user can open this 'web search' as an 'image search' and various visual answers to a search of the word *contemporary art* can be seen on the following page. The same possibility opens for other media like books and videos. The next choice is whether to click through the 274,000,000 search result pages or to de-

cide to click on a link which presents the word or images in the context of a website (unstructured source).

The collection of answers is what Boris Groys refers to as a *word's symbolic capital*.[6] In a Peircian tradition this concept can be compared to the semiotic object: it can be factual or fictual (partial object) and entail the entire *universe of discourses* (total object).[7] The comparable linearity of a Google search has a long tradition (from Peirce to Derrida), but now we have a visual, tangible analogy of the signifier and signified.[8]

The argument that an object or word has a structural truth embedded is obviously false in this instant. A Google search is not an infinite differentiation to other terms, such as 'contemporary art is this, because modern art is that.' At the same time, chronological differences are flattened and shown without any chronological order on screen. The multiplicity of choices, links and semiotic contexts of the search term constructs the gained knowledge and the knowledge the user constructively feeds back to the algorithmic nature of a Google search. The user believes the quantitative nature of any possible combination that they can find in the vastness of the Internet. The more the user sees, the clearer the picture gets. This process is an exchange of one word for many keywords until one decides to open the search word in the context of the website: the unstructuredness of a text.

Unstructuredness in this context refers to the approach of computer sciences to deal with text as data. It refers to the 'information that either does not have a pre-defined data model or is not organized in a pre-defined manner.'[9] One of the factors that manipulates the decision to open a certain link is based on search engine *optimization* of the website. The appearance as a search result depends on both the algorithmic quality of the Google filter and the optimization of the website for these filters. The only measurable qualitative attribute is originality of the content, although this filter already vanishes in appropriations of content and form.

The qualitative attributes to the question 'what is contemporary art,' – attributes like chronological logic, history and context, materiality, critical theoretical discourses and impact of contemporary art in society and academia – can only be understood by studying the context on the unstructured level of a *text,* in a website or an image in the context of other *images* and texts, or by watching *videos*, such as documentation of artists, art history and institutions. Time is the main difference on a qualitative level to the instantly available answer on a quantitative level. It takes time to read, watch, listen and compare, to understand the context of the search word and its qualitative attributes. Knowledge generated through Google's algorithms – which detect where we search from, in which language we search, how other people have searched for that word, which context or 'answer' received the most clicks, and so on – determines the word's *symbolic capital*. The construction of that algorithmic development grows into both ends of its multiplicity: the user feeds the algorithm by making choices (clicks), and the algorithm feeds the user by the choices it gives us. The linearity of a simple Google search seems obvious and trivial, but the analogy for the linearity of the search for knowledge and understanding goes beyond a Google search. The Google search can exemplify the navigation through the complex unstructured nature of 'real world' environments.

The global art market

Today, the global art market seems infinite, with a growing number of new MFA programs, ever-younger 'emerging' artists, endless possibilities of art production in the real and digital, more private museums, more private funding sources, endless art spaces and a generation of artists that is constantly in flux in professional and living environments.[10] Information about practices, works and the personal life of artists is exchanged in endless channels including social media, blogs, gossip, social events, magazines, online journals, previews, press kits and documentation. The network of unstructured information expands the real, digital and mythical communication in a constantly-changing manner. Nevertheless, it is possible for people who work in this art-related network to navigate through these worlds and to make affirmative and critical decisions.

The contemporary art collector constantly makes affirmative (yes) and critical (no) decisions when buying (yes), selling (no), passing on (no) or observing (yes) works of art. The process that leads to these decisions works on a similar level as the mentioned Google search linearity: word – filtered evidence – empirical reality - filtered evidence – new word – empirical reality – filtered evidence – empirical reality – new word.

The first encounter with a work of art can be a digital image in a preview to an exhibition or art fair, a recommendation of a friend, the cover or index of a favourite art magazine or an image on a blog such as contemporaryartdaily.com. The Google algorithm here is everything that happened before the work even became a digital image in a specific context, or before a friend recommended it. These filters that a collector might have in their empirical experiences are determined by factors of physical location (in which local art scene do they 'search'), what they have searched for before (a friend says, 'What you talked about the other day reminded me of the show I saw last week'), the language they use (feminist, performative, Marxist interest) or simply the filter of a quantitative mass that MoMA invited to their last opening.

These first 'words' that get to a collector through these various filters are usually accompanied by further filtered evidence, such as a CV that comes with the preview, the collection/gallery context, the brief review in a magazine or a press review on the blog. The evidence is filtered because, for example, the information provided has almost always the same form - the artist's CV lists name, b. year, works and lives in, education, solo exhibitions, group exhibitions, collections, publications; the digital image shows the white gallery wall and grey floor. The standardization of an artist's CV or the digital image that represents a work on a website or preview PDF is comparable with the 'filter bubble'[11] created through the optimization of websites. The choices that follow for the collector are either to stay on the level these filters provide on first glance, or to engage in the unstructured, empirical reality of the art world, namely viewing the work itself in a gallery space, contextualizing the images in critical reviews, listening to private opinions about the personal and institutional affiliations of the artist and observing how the work changes in time and spatial contexts. The information that the second stage of engagement delivers seems to have infinite possibilities of contexts connected to the individual evidence: on the CV, the educational institutions contain a year of graduation, which means one can detect the influences of peer artists that graduated in the same year, the teacher's and lecturer's academic profiles (Marxist, liberal, structural, crafty, free cultured), the galleries that represent the lecturers, prestige, location, and politics of the institution. The collector can follow any detail of evidence in infinite directions. The way the network of information develops is undetermined – some topic and interests might grow, some might vanish, some connect to other interests and information. The process of making a decision has in that sense no end and no beginning. It is a moving, constantly newly-distributed network of emerging and vanishing nodes and links: individuals as their own filter bubbles.[12]

Only by being in the social or literary unstructured level of the art world does the collector come to understand why a solo-exhibition at MoMA is more prestigious than a solo-exhibition in a local gallery. The term/name MoMA might not contain any *symbolic capital* for anyone who has no interest in the arts or does not live in New York. The obvious assumptions about audience numbers, curatorial power structures and publications MoMA can provide are not necessarily the truth a collector is searching for. The capital a single word provides on the CV of an artist is, in this instant, not only quantitative (how often I read about Cooper Union doesn't make it a better or worse art school than Columbia or the Städelschule). The qualitative knowledge about the institution, knowing who the curator of the exhibition is, why the material of the works changed for this exhibition, is the empirical evidence a collector gains by participating in their art world network. This participation brings the collector to a level of understanding words without the syntax on an analytical level that leads her to affirmative or critical decisions: 'I am interested in the way the artist works with the question about artistic labour. She graduated at Cooper Union.'

The Google search linearity is an analogy to understand the way words without syntax can lead to decision-making processes. It explains the way we approach knowledge, taste and prestige – mentioning single words in conversations as filtered evidence. "He is in the 89plus generation, graduated from SVA and works with Dis Magazine" carries a capital with it that explains the social and material network, and even form and content, of an artist.

The complexity of global art worlds becomes local on the qualitative level – understanding the *word's capital* of terms that determine the understanding depends on every individual's decisions of the 'links' they open. Real life filters that lead to this decision – which magazine to read, which opening to go to or whether to understand the persona that gives a strong opinion about a university or an artist – are connected to other complex networks and links.

Decision-making processes are interpreted in this argument by comparing the navigation through complexity in cultural environments to a Google Search. Here, decisions are the result of the ability to navigate through complexity on the level of understanding terms that carry a certain qualitative capital with them. The understanding of this capital is constructed on an individual level by experiences on a participatory (gossip, exhibition visits, social events, etc.) and private research (newspapers, magazine, blogs etc.) level. The question is what the pattern or the structure is that leads the collector to the result to make an affirmative or critical decision. The example of contemporary art collectors is just one example for a complex cultural environment and tangible affirmative and critical decision making processes.

An earlier version of this article appears in the PhD thesis of the author: Anne-Katrin Luther (2016), *Collecting Contemporary Art: a visual analysis of a qualitative investigation into patterns of collecting and production*. PhD thesis, University of the Arts London.

Endnoten

1. Boris Groys, Google: *Words beyond Grammar.* Berlin: dOCU-MENTA (13): 100 Notizen - 100 Gedanken; (Hatje Cantz, 2011), p 1.
2. Boris Groys, *Google: Words beyond Grammar.* Berlin: dOCU-MENTA (13): 100 Notizen - 100 Gedanken; (Hatje Cantz, 2011), p 1.
3. David Joselit, *On Aggregators.* October - (October 01, 2013), p 3–18. doi:10.1162/OCTO_a_00154.
4. Evan Kindley, *Creature of habitus: Latour on Bourdieu* Pt. 1" *We Have Never Been Blogging* January 12, 2010. Accessed March 23, 2013, http://wehaveneverbeenblogging.blogspot.com/2009/12/creature-of-habitus-latour-on-bourdieu.html.
5. See Latour's description of learning processes with the metaphor of plug-ins in cyberspace as an example in Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory.* (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), p 207.
6. Boris Groys, *Google: Words beyond Grammar.* Berlin: dOCU-MENTA (13): 100 Notizen - 100 Gedanken; (Hatje Cantz, 2011), p 1.
7. Charles S. Peirce, *The Essential Peirce, Volume 2: Selected Philosophical Writings, 1893-1913.* Edited by Project Peirce Edition. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), pp 492-498.
8. „The sign that refers to other signs is struck with a strange impotence and uncertainty, but mighty is the signifier that constitutes the chain. The paranoiac shares this impotence of the deterritorialized sign assailing him from every direction in the gliding atmosphere, but that only gives him better access to the superpower of the signifier, through the royal feeling of wrath, as master of the network spreading through the atmosphere." Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia.* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), pp 112.
9. DataRPN, *Big Data and Content Analytics: AIIM Survey Report.* Accessed September 09, 2015, http://datarpm.com/blog/big-data-and-content-analytics-aiim-survey-report/632.
10. See a description of the new generation of international young artists in: Hannes Grassegger, *Tobias Madison. Das Magazin*, no. 24 (June 2013), pp 1-13.
11. Eli Pariser, *The Filter Bubble: What the Internet Is Hiding from You.* London: Penguin Press, 2011, pp 7-9.
12. Evgeny Morozov, *Your Own Facts." Book Review of The Filter Bubble What The Internet Is Hiding From You.* By Elise Pariser, *York Times.* June 11, 2011. Accessed September 22, 2013, http://www.nytimes.com/2011/06/12/books/review/book-review-the-filter-bubble-by-eli-pariser.html?_r=0&pagewanted=print.

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Abstract

The paper presents the question how we navigate through complex environments in contemporary culture, make decisions in times when knowledge, concepts and meaning are constantly "updated". The underlying concept contemporary, with the literal translation "with time" underlines the argument that environments (abstract and concrete) are changing and constantly moving. The argument about knowledge acquisition in a contemporary flow is presented in comparison between a Google Search and how collectors of contemporary art make decisions about the inscriptions of art objects into collections. The linearity of a Google Search from words without syntax to the decision of entering the complex universe of discourses is applied in this paper to describe how actors navigate a complex network of knowledge and information in contemporary culture.

Author

Dr. Anne Luther is a researcher, arts manager and software developer whose work examines the contemporary art market and data visualization in qualitative research. She received her PhD from Central Saint Martins College of Art and Design, London and is currently a researcher at the Department for Modern Art History at the Institute of Art Studies and Historical Urban Studies at TU Berlin and at The Center for Data Arts at The New School in New York. She assisted Professor Boris Groys at NYU in 2014-2017. Her research is grounded in cultural studies and art theory bridging an interdisciplinary approach to computer sciences, IT and design. Anne worked in several arts institutions internationally including MoMA PS1 and the art advisory Front Desk Apparatus in New York. She is the co-founder of The International Art Market Association Sub-Committee in Berlin.

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