

# Tracing the Cultural Value of Photographic Documentation in, and beyond, the Museum

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From the Google Art Project to the screenshot, from the jpeg to the gigapixel image, imaging technologies continue to mediate twenty-first century art and culture. In museums and galleries, the emergence of photography in the nineteenth century radically transformed documentation practices; with the contemporary fusion of camera, phone and internet such practices continue to be destabilized. The migration of networked digital media into the museum has created new challenges, with curators and conservators tasked with harnessing unstable media as both *mediator of art* and *art object*. At a time where art selfies mix with installation shots on Instagram, control of art's reproduction has become diffused, with a range of distributed agents contributing to art's global hyper-circulation. There is a growing recognition that despite the camera's central role in museum practices, the place of visual documentation within an increasingly computational and networked ecosystem for the preservation and circulation of art has largely been ignored. How can institutions engage with this expanded field of visual documentation, and what are the implications for art history and cultural memory?

In response to these issues, from 2021 to 2023, The Photographers' Gallery, London (TPG) hosted a series of workshops that brought together artists, museum professionals, media theorists, photographers, educators and technologists into a productive dialogue concerning the present and future of digital art and its documentation. Funded by the UK's Arts and Humanities Research Council, the workshops formed part of *Documenting Digital Art* (2019–2024), a collaborative research project undertaken by University of Exeter, London South Bank University, The Australian National University, LIMA in Amsterdam and TPG. Reflecting on documentation as a site of socio-technical change, the workshops at TPG shaped the project findings and the publication *Documentation as Art. Expanded Digital Practices* (Dekker and Giannachi 2023) by highlighting the limits of the museum's conceptualization of visual documentation, and the ways in which various corporations, audiences and artists have stepped in to occupy this void. In order to trace the shifting cultural value(s) of photographic documentation, in this paper we present selected outcomes of the workshops, and consider the ways in which documentation is diffused, operationalized and valorized by different agents in contemporary visual culture.

## Epistemologies of photographic reproduction in the art museum

The inaugural workshop in March 2021 explored the historical and contemporary precedents of photographic reproduction in the art museum, placing art historian and media theorist Michelle Henning in dialogue with Ben St John, a software engineer working in Google Arts & Culture's digitization team. Drawing on her 2015 article *With and Without Walls: Photographic Reproduction and the Art Museum*, Henning's talk sought to complicate the historical relations between the museum, art object and photomechanical reproduction, from the facsimile debates of the 1920s and 1930s<sup>[1]</sup> to contemporary social media. Henning described how photomechanical reproduction in the art museum provoked debates between museum directors and curators in the early twentieth century concerning "the difference between the experience of the original work of art and the experience of a reproduction or facsimile", drawing on nascent concepts of the privileged aura of the original. And yet, the idea of the museum as a site of contemplation of an 'original' work 'frozen in time' has always been something of a fiction, Henning argued, as artworks – including painting – are always subject to "subtle, slow transformation" [Henning 2015: 583].

Complicating the relationship between original and facsimile, Henning described the restoration of Hans Holbein's painting *Ambassadors* (1533) at London's National Gallery, where each attempt to restore the painting to its original condition in the 18<sup>th</sup>, 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries paradoxically generated new 'versions' of the painting. Positioning Holbein's painting as an unstable object in a state of flux, Henning described how x-rays and digital imaging were used to reconstruct Holbein's anamorphic skull, creating a situation where 'old' and 'new' media collide and become reference points for preservation of objects. From this perspective, the original painting might already function as a 'reproduction' that is entangled in a meshwork of cameras, books, scanners, screens and tagging systems. When images circulate and 'infect' the restoration process, they produce new kinds of facsimiles, whilst the 'original' becomes the event.

If networked media ushers in a new materiality of reproduction, subject to glitches, dropouts and noise, it also promotes new forms of spectatorship and generates new forms of value. Henning emphasized this does not mean that the reflexive aesthetic experience promoted by the museum is no longer relevant. For her, it still has a political function in opposition to the productivity-oriented online world: a world that is driven by multitasking, glancing attention, short form communication, constant interruptibility; where the stress of always having to be 'on' and performing is the norm. From this perspective contemporary social media does not necessarily open up or enhance the publicness of museums and archives, given the role image circulation has in driving traffic, attention and ultimately sales. The result is that the 'free' flow of online documentation is caught up in new relationships of power and ownership; one that moves away from the museum towards the property regimes of corporate platforms. Such shifts point to the wider issue of the privatization, and hence ownership, of culture, which now moves from public into privatized spheres; here, documentation becomes integrated into 'walled gardens' in which ownership is often diffused and where value is assessed differently.

The significant role of corporations producing and circulating art documentation was addressed by Ben St John, whose talk, *Digitizing Everything\* at Scale with Google Arts & Culture* drew on his experiences as a lead software engineer on Google's Art Camera team. Citing Google's mission to "democratise access to culture", St John detailed the complex technical processes required to digitize museum collections at scale. Guided by the demands of gigapixel photorealism, St John explained the complex studio set-ups required to capture ultra-high resolution images unsullied by poor lighting and other glitches that might interrupt an audience's seamless zooming into painterly details. St John showed how the creation of a gigapixel reproduction involves the capture of around five hundred images that are stitched together into a seamless surface, that will later be decomposed into pieces and delivered to viewers dynamically to conserve viewer bandwidth. Through this process, analogue cultural value is re-encoded into Google's museum simulation-spectacle.

Although digitization can complement the original, St John's talk emphasized how labour intensive and technically demanding this process is at scale, creating financial and technical barriers for museums. Here, the value of 'open access' versus 'restricted access' creates a paradoxical tension, in which the high-end ecosystem of Google appears to clash with the circulation of 'poor' images on social media platforms. Furthermore, Google Arts & Culture's mission to digitize and 'democratize' access to art needs to be contextualized under the conditions of digital capitalism, terms of service agreements and data sovereignty: who owns these documentations? And what is the cultural value of the metadata generated through public engagement with these documentations? As St John argued, there is a greater convergence between different entities, as people like to see things online *and* have the real experience, which they can document and distribute again – creating a documentation vortex in which the notion of ownership transfers between creators and various users, thereby becoming increasingly diffuse.



Figure 1. Google Arts & Culture, Virtual Street View tour of National Museum of Brazil (2016). Screenshot, accessed 2 August 2023.

Artist and researcher Ofri Cnaani took up this tension as part of her presentation in a subsequent TPG workshop titled *Documenting the Ruins of the Web*. Through an analysis of the digital remains of the National Museum of Brazil that was destroyed by fire in 2018, Cnaani asserted the cultural value of visitors' documentation, describing how different stakeholders become important agents in the rebuilding of a museum collection. Cnaani described how on 13 December 2018, a few months after the fire, Google Arts & Culture sent out a press release announcing their virtual recreation of the National Museum, which they had begun in 2016, but had not yet released (Fig. 1).[2] Thanks to Google's street view camera, visitors to Google's Arts & Culture platform could view several parts of the museum as it appeared prior to its destruction. Cnaani contrasted this virtual tour with another body of documentation that emerged around the same time. On 2 September – while the fire was still raging – members of the public responded to calls on social networks asking people to upload images of the museum and its collections, supported and amplified by Wikimedia (Fig. 2).[3] In just three days, several thousand images were uploaded to a generic category on Wikimedia Commons, where a group of experienced users curated the content and developed categorization strategies.

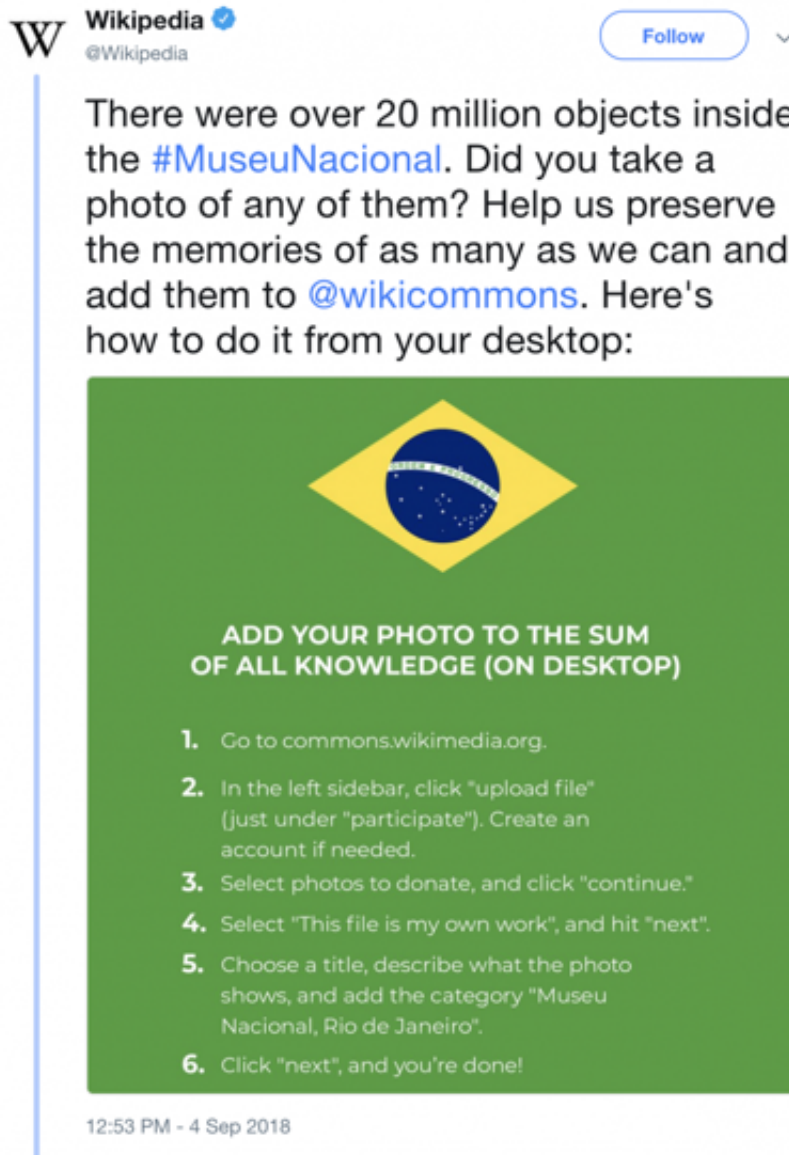


Figure 2. Wikimedia, post on Twitter, 4 September 2018. Screenshot, accessed 2 August 2023.

For Cnaani, this eclectic image collection provided new ways of seeing the museum, in which crowdsourced documentation “erases and highlights simultaneously, remembers and forgets at the same time, and offers its own logic as a site of collective witnessing”.<sup>[4]</sup> Embracing imperfection, she argued the collection’s ad hoc filing system “goes against any grand attempt at classification and joins a whole media archaeology of failed classification, whether the failure is acknowledged or not”.<sup>[5]</sup> Crucially for Cnaani, such documentation “encapsulates an emancipatory potential that refuses known indexing and offers an ‘uncivilised’ body of images” [Cnaani 2023: 92]. Ignoring photographic conventions, the crowdsourced collection emerged from a very different image ecology, reflecting different cultural values. Museum objects photographed under glass inadvertently contained reflections of their camera-wielding authors; sometimes objects were upstaged by other actors: a purple stuffed monkey adorning a child’s neck (categorized as “dino e sofia”), showed up in several images, and became a new protagonist of the museum (Fig. 3). In addition, the collected files used different formats that drifted far from institutional archival standards. While these images are broken and partial, they are also intimately connected – forming a network that is co-curated between humans and technologies.



Figure 3. Curso Aline Almeida 86, *sofia pela primeira vez no museu*, 14 August 2018, Wikimedia Commons, [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Dino\\_e\\_Sofia\\_2.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Dino_e_Sofia_2.jpg). Accessed 20 September 2023.

For Cnaani, the “digital residues” of the museum can be read as two modes of documentation marking a shift from an institutional *collection* to a form of a *digital recollection*. When the visitor becomes a user, the abstraction of the collection “no longer needs to be understood as a closed system that can be indexed, but rather as a set of interfaces between many collected artifacts that are forming new sets of relations, often activated by its users” [Cnaani 2023: 88]. This led Cnaani to speculate how a collection can be ‘recollected’ in the form of user-generated documentation. Whereas audience documentation could be said to be more subjective, embodying the perspective of the “eye-of-the-beholder”, platforms such as Google Arts & Culture provide a one-size-fits-all, “eye-of-the-corporate” viewpoint of the museum and its objects. In both examples the connection between original and copy is problematized, as the embodied encounter with the museum object is replaced by a “view from nowhere” in the form of a standardized panoramic tour, or becomes part of a networked commons in which each crowdsourced image has a different relation to the object and the institution. As Cnaani concluded, this orbit of multiple relations between these various cultural, social and technical systems creates a multiplicity, meaning a “document that is formed by circulation technologies and is distributed, not set in place. This form of ‘speculative documentation’ is relational and operates more like an environment than a system of categories, a political-aesthetic event of shared experience” [Cnaani 2023: 92].

### **The role of the artist in an age of networked documentation**

If the audience has become an important generator or conduit for documentation, what is the position of the artist? And what happens when the networked image – the paradigm or form in which art predominantly circulates – is inseparable from the art object? A further TPG workshop addressed the role of the artist in an ecology of documentation in which artworks are subjected to capturing, sharing, reblogging, commenting and trending. Cristina Garrido, David Horvitz, and the duo Eva & Franco Mattes described how they variously explore and exploit new forms of cultural value that arise from the endless re-circulation of ‘rich’ and ‘poor’ documentation in their practice.

Cristina Garrido's artwork investigates how documentation operates within the contemporary art system, particularly in relation to exhibition trends, a domain that is now heavily determined by network culture. Garrido's talk addressed the different actors who have been instrumental in establishing a visual canon for institutional art documentation: from the curator and the exhibition photographer, to commercial galleries and web platforms. To develop her 2015 project, *#JWIITMTESDSA?* (Just what is it that makes today's exhibitions so different, so appealing?), Garrido interviewed 36 stakeholders in the arts, asking them to speculate on the production and control of exhibition imagery, and the power it exerts on the aesthetics of global contemporary art. Having analyzed 2,500 documentary images of exhibitions taken from art magazines, blogs, galleries and social media websites, she identified twenty-one categories of display, such as "Canvases hanging directly on the wall", "Cardboard boxes", "Circles and spheres", "Fans", "Folded things on the floor", "Grids", "Monoliths", and "Plants". These categories formed the basis of a new installation by Garrido, a display of objects optimized to the dominant aesthetics, motifs and forms of presentation that had been legitimated through circulation (Fig. 4). In a subsequent artwork, *They are these or they may be others* (2014–2020), Garrido worked with art photographers Oak Taylor-Smith and Roberto Ruiz to turn these categories back into photographic documentation, to be realized as deadpan memes celebrating the hegemonic aesthetics of exhibition documentation for the gallery walls. In doing so, Garrido emphasized how documentation exerts pressure back on the art object, rather than being a neutral carrier disseminating the art object.

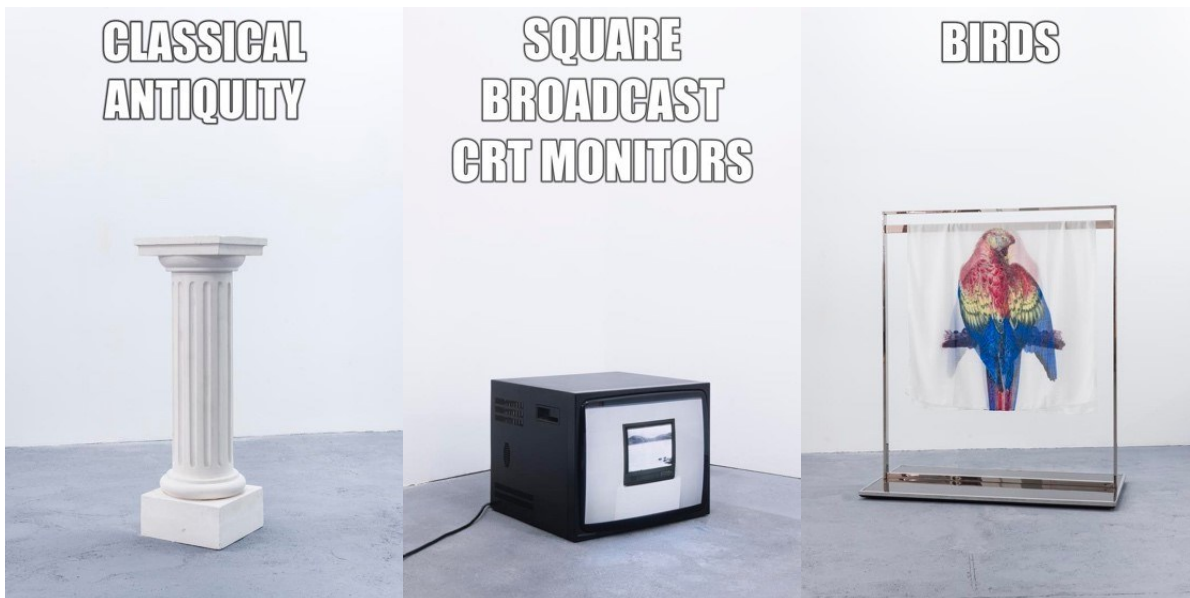


Figure 4. Cristina Garrido, *They are these or they may be others* (2014–2020).

Eva & Franco Mattes are an artist duo who also seek to harness the hyper-circulating art documentation and exploit it for artistic ends, inspired by the virality and aesthetic brilliance of meme culture. Arguing that the cultural value of images operates in a radically different economy outside the museum, they have actively coveted audience participation in the documentation of their works. In 2016 they conceived *Ceiling Cat*: an artwork that transformed a lolcat into a sculpture, resulting in the strange spectacle of a taxidermied cat peeking through a hole in the gallery ceiling (Fig. 5).[6]



Figure 5. Eva & Franco Mattes, *Ceiling Cat*, 2016. Collection of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (SFMOMA). Photo: Katherine Du Tiel.

In their talk at TPG the Matteses explained *Ceiling Cat*'s significance to lolcat culture, a form of internet folklore born on 4chan that surged in popularity from 2006 onwards, but declined in the wake of new meme cultures. When re-materialized in the gallery, *Ceiling Cat* operates as a form of audience clickbait, beckoning visitors with its subversive cuteness to take a snapshot and bring it back into circulation on social media. A quick Google Image Search (Fig. 6) revealed how the Matteses' cat is close to ousting the original meme in the top search results – a case of a copy of a copy usurping the original copy(cat). Here, the Matteses complicate the idea of a 'pure' original untainted by reproduction, echoing Michelle Henning's points concerning the false binary of original and surrogate.

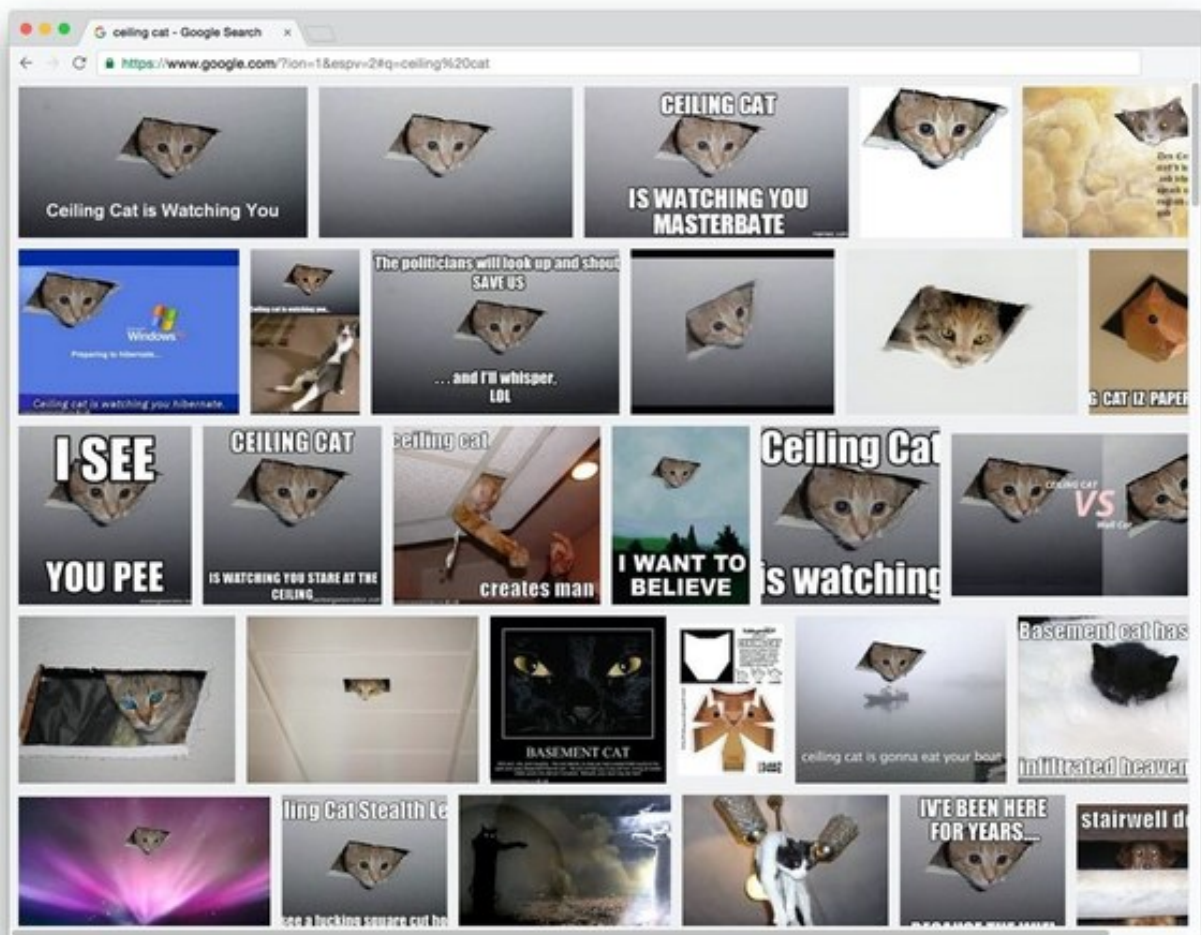


Figure 6. Google Image Search for “ceiling cat”, courtesy Eva & Franco Mattes. Original Photographer Unknown. Image source: <https://0100101110101101.org/blog/wp-content/uploads/ceiling-cat-meme-browser.jpg>

To secure their sculpture’s viral immortality, on the occasion of its 2020 exhibition at SFMOMA the artists released a copyright-free high resolution image of their *Ceiling Cat* on Wikimedia for anyone to use. From this perspective, the Matteses are equally attentive to the articulation of the work in situ and its parallel life as a jpeg colonizing unexpected corners of the Internet. To intensify this network effect, the Matteses also encourage the sharing and propagation of their work through online forums in non English-speaking countries. Without context and metadata to authenticate them, these orphan documentations may seem to lead marginal or invisible lives, however they become accessible to “accidental audiences” [Troemel 2013]. The artists happily disavow the historical status of the ‘original’ in favour of versioning, circulation and distribution, making the documentation and its numerous variations of equal importance to its referent. The artists are careful to not distinguish between the original and copy: each is valuable, even – and perhaps even more so – if it happens beyond their control. For the Matteses, a project is most successful if it can survive without the authorial frame, or for that matter, the rules or constraints of the artworld. They are open to extending the artwork’s authorship to the user, who may appropriate and re-distribute the work, potentially unaware of its cultural value in other spheres. Ultimately, *Ceiling Cat* embraces multiplicity and the dynamics of hyper-documentation: manifesting as jpeg through social media, or in gallery spaces as the ‘original’ copy of a viral meme, or perhaps printed and pinned onto a ceiling somewhere, before finding its way onto a mug or a dress or a Pokemon card.

For the artist David Horvitz, the possibility of resisting conventional approaches to art's presentation and documentation is also critically important. Frustrating the notion that artworks should be made intelligible or available through images, Horvitz tried to show fewer of them. Instead of providing a conventional image gallery on his website, Horvitz presents a list of works accompanied by full captions linked to short audio tracks, where a performer speaks about the creation of the artwork (Fig. 7).[7] In asking his audience to *listen* rather than *look*, Horvitz promotes a different temporal engagement with his practice, eschewing the downward scroll of image thumbnails usually grasped in a glance. In his talk Horvitz expressed his interest in alternative forms of circulation, embracing the potential for cultural memory to be passed on through stories, memories, rumours and anecdotes. Horvitz admitted that he provides a zip file with images of his artworks on his website, however visitors need to search for it.

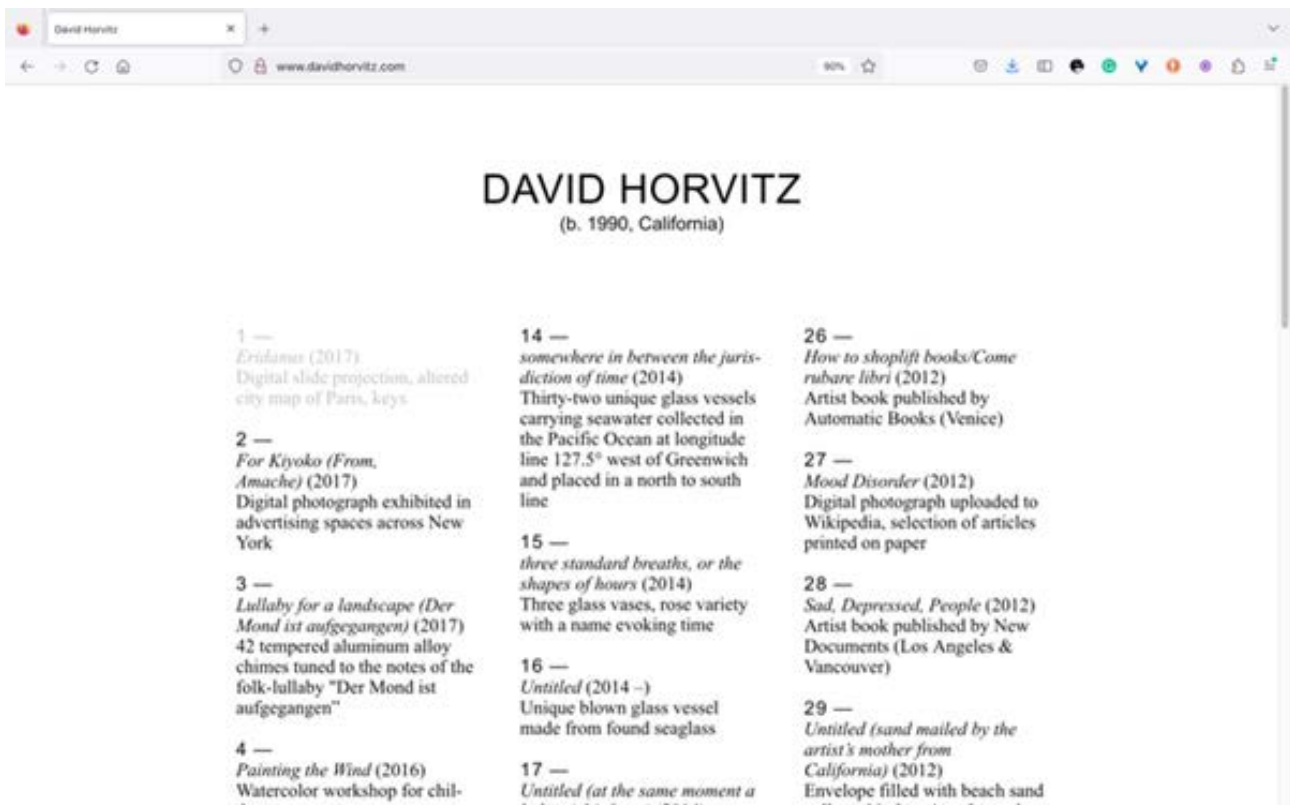


Figure 7. David Horvitz, <http://davidhorvitz.com/>. Screenshot, accessed 20 September 2023.

Like the Matteses, Horvitz is not afraid to lose control of his work. In response to the proliferation of digital images and eroded attention spans, Horvitz started to delete his personal digital photographs he made since 2000. The resulting work, *Nostalgia* (2018), consisted of a slide show whose duration is customized to the duration of the exhibition, where each image is displayed for one minute before it is permanently deleted. Horvitz provided the host gallery with a folder for each day of the show, with a small surplus to cover collateral events such as collectors' dinners. Although he felt conflicted about documenting the project, Horvitz made a booklet, *Nostalgia* (2019), which briefly described each image, its filename, date of creation and destruction. *Nostalgia* is not simply a gesture against documentation: on the contrary, although Horvitz wants to control his own image archive, he believes that the often clumsy or poor-quality documentation that is shared by visitors offers a valuable counter-narrative of formal and professional exhibition documentation.

## Between photographic documentation and documenting photography

One of the main challenges for contemporary art and design museums is how to collect and preserve the images that flourish on social media. As a complex digital assemblage that is materially and temporally in flux, Instagram – one of the main photography platforms shaping twenty-first century visual culture – presents significant practical and epistemological issues for curators and conservators. This was the focus of TPG's March 2021 workshop on *Collecting Social Media*, which contrasted the approaches taken by the UK's Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A) and the Finnish Museum of Photography to document, collect and accession online media. Having successfully acquired the Chinese social media platform WeChat for their collection, the V&A's Curator of Digital Design, Natalie Kane presented a series of speculative thought experiments undertaken with colleagues concerning the possible accession of Instagram. Given the technical and logistical complexity of this proposal, the team began by evaluating the possibility of collecting specific parts of the platform, such as Instagram filters, on the basis that Instagram signifies a "photo studio in your pocket". Others considered the possibility of an exhibition-friendly video demonstrating the app's interface and design features. However, such documentation would not necessarily show the development of Instagram nor the ways it is used in image making, or the interactions between users and/or the interface. In whatever form the V&A would try to collect it, the institution would always need some form of cooperation of Instagram itself, which brings with it numerous legal and technical hurdles. Kane proposed that cultural institutions should be exempted from companies' policies in order to receive access to specific types of content and APIs. For now, Kane suggested, they try to 'collect around it', for instance by focusing on a specific social phenomenon, such as the image feed of CGI model and influencer Lil Miquela[8], or through art projects which contextualize and stabilize technology into something collectible, giving the example of Kate Crawford and Vladan Joler's study of the Amazon Echo, *The Anatomy of AI* (2018).

In contrast, the Finnish Museum of Photography as part of their collecting endeavour prioritized the images themselves, and their social context revealed through associated geodata, texts, emojis, likes and shares. Their efforts centred the users of social media, who were involved in the selection criteria, determining the future value of the images and the development of ethical guidelines for collecting social media content. The museum staff saw themselves primarily as facilitators rather than authorities or experts; their focus was less on cultural value of Instagram than its content. The difference between these two cases was partly based on how the institution perceived itself, but also how they understand the 'object' of collection. As an example of a socially embedded piece of interactive design, platforms such as Instagram are modelled and used differently by museum departments and forms of curatorial expertise: as a tool for personal expression, a canonical example of design innovation or socio-technical assemblage. Both institutions agreed that collecting fewer images or objects is acceptable, in favour of providing more detailed contextual information. A challenge that remains was how to document and re-stage the experience of encountering – perhaps unexpectedly – a project such as Lil Miquela at a specific cultural moment, acknowledging the affordances and temporality specific to a particular configuration of software and hardware interface. In the discussion that followed, Michelle Henning (echoing the sentiments of the aforementioned artists) raised the question of how speech acts or performance are collected, since new imaging practices are also forms of (performative) communication. This was taken up by Anni Wallinus from the Finnish Museum of Photography, who made a comparison with archaeology, explaining:

[...] you can only collect small bits and pieces of something that used to exist. However, without those bits and pieces, precious information about these old societies would not exist. In a similar vein, one can only partially capture the complexity of the platforms, the digital objects they host and their amount, but the process is urgent and worth the task.[9]

## Concluding remarks

Increasingly, cultural institutions are aware that documentation has a life of its own. A twenty-first century digital culture that collapses the distance between camera and network, art object and audience, challenges those institutions wedded to an earlier conception of analogue photographic

reproduction and the art object. Here, documentation is not a secondary institutional ‘shadow’ of a static or authentic original but an active agent that exerts its own pressure back on the museum, an imperfect echo of an imagined origin. Therefore, as this paper has argued through its multiple examples and practices, the question of how to document a work can become central to the praxis of making art and curating art, supporting the articulation of different values oriented towards the reception and afterlife of artworks. The role of audience members as creators, custodians and end-users of documentation has become increasingly significant as institutional documentation efforts fail. What results is an epistemological shift in focus from *ontologies of reproduction* to *ecologies of networked documentation* in which the dynamics between digital surrogate and audience are privileged over the relations between art object and photographic reproduction. This impacts conventional standards and protocols of documentation and reframes documentation as a multiple and networked practice. The transit of visual documentation between audiences, corporations, museums and the web generates new aesthetic values and forms, counter-documentations and ways of thinking about spectatorship. In contrast, conventional gallery and museum documentation of exhibitions and artworks have the capacity to contribute to the idealization and purification of the art object. For artists concerned with cultural value and cultural memory, the ambiguous space between artwork and documentation, or documentation and audience, has become a fertile ground to explore and exploit.

[1] As Henning notes, these debates played out in European journals including *Der Kreis*, *De Stijl* and *internationale revue*; and focused on the role of photomechanical reproduction inside the museum, which threatened to efface “the labor of the photographer so effectively that it was difficult to tell the difference between a copy and an original art object” [Henning 2015: 581].

[2] <https://blog.google/outreach-initiatives/arts-culture/inside-brazils-national-museum-google-arts-culture/>. 20 September 2023.

[3] <https://wikimediafoundation.org/news/2018/09/10/national-museum-brazil-fire/>. 20 September 2023.

[4] Ofri Cnaani, quote from *Documenting the Ruins of the Web*, 18 March 2021, The Photographers’ Gallery, <https://thephotographersgallery.org.uk/whats-on/documenting-ruins-web>. 20 September 2023.

[5] Ibid.

[6] For an elaborate account of Eva & Franco Mattes’s projects in relation to documentation, see Sluis 2023.

[7] <http://www.davidhorvitz.com>. 27 September 2023.

[8] The Instagram identity Lil Miquela, <https://www.instagram.com/lilmiquela/>, accessed 27 September 2023, was created in 2016 by Trevor McFedries and Sara DeCou, representing a post-racial perfect woman. As a render, it represents a problematic object to collect, which emerges out of the saturated model of Instagram-like influencers and has given rise to the development of networks of other kinds of online identities.

[9] Anni Wallenius, quote from *Collecting Social Media*, 11 March 2021, The Photographers’ Gallery, <https://thephotographersgallery.org.uk/whats-on/and-without-walls-photographic-reproduction-and-art-museum/>. 20 September 2023.

[10] For more information, see sasha arden’s article in this issue – LINK

[11] sasha arden, quote from *Seeing Double. Documenting mixed reality in the museum and beyond*, 28 February 2023, The Photographers’ Gallery, <https://thephotographersgallery.org.uk/whats-on/seeing-double-documenting-mixed-reality-museum-and-beyond>. 20 September 2023.

[12] sasha arden, quote from *Seeing Double. Documenting mixed reality in the museum and beyond*, 28 February 2023, The Photographers’ Gallery, <https://thephotographersgallery.org.uk/whats-on/seeing-double-documenting-mixed-reality-museum-and-beyond>. 20 September 2023.

[13] sasha arden, quote from *Seeing Double. Documenting mixed reality in the museum and beyond*, 28 February 2023, The Photographers’ Gallery, <https://thephotographersgallery.org.uk/whats-on/seeing-double-documenting-mixed-reality-museum-and-beyond>. 20 September 2023.

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