

DH2023 - Full Stack Feminism panel: Intersectional Feminist Revolutions in Digital Humanities – approaches, histories, and methods

Paper: Curating an Unsettling: non-human assemblages and future heritages

I'm a freelance curator and doctoral researcher at the University of Sussex – a curator for many years and a doctoral researcher for one

My role in the FSFDH project is a curatorial one and this paper reflects on that role and its elisions with my ongoing practice-led doctoral research on curatorial activism

First - a short history of a milestone in my work because it positions me and my practice in respect of this project and my research

In 2017 as Director of Brighton Digital Festival I developed and curated a flagship conference

I'd never curated a conference before and I decided on two things – firstly, unlike every digital culture conference I'd been to, it wouldn't be dominated by cisgender straight white men - secondly, I wanted to use Donna Haraway's *Staying with the Trouble*, which I had just read, as a generative source for curation – challenging technosolutionist narratives

From this starting point, the conference I titled the Messy Edge was conjured. I'd like to quote myself from the opening remarks I made at the first edition of in October 2017

'The messy edge is the antithesis of the cutting edge, it's not clinical, or shiny, or binary it's interested in technology and what it can do but it doesn't celebrate technology for its own sake — it is human, sometimes confusing, often challenging and a bit awkward but it is vital'

To understand what follows please understand that the messy edge is where I situate my practice and my research

The art world is inherently and historically undiverse – a 2019 study of the collections of museums and galleries across the USA showed that 85% of the artists represented were white and 87% were men. I recently read that the National Gallery in London has a collection that is 97% by male artists

I don't have stats for digital art in particular, but anecdotal suggests it's a field even less diverse and the intersection of digital art and tech companies, whose platforms, and tools we are dependent on and that are equally dominated by cis het white men, no doubt reinforces that lack of diversity

Recent and high-profile exhibitions such as the Hayward Gallery's *In the Black Fantastic*, whilst valuable and excellent in their own right, represent a history of highlighting a particular protected characteristic under the aegis of EDI (Equality, Diversity, Inclusion) thinking. Critically, this focus on one characteristic, such as race, serves to create silos, which can be hard to escape for artists. It also allows organisations, in my experience, to indulge in a kind of 'tick box' thinking by which they can cross off their 'diversity' show and return to regular programming for a few years - this is a state of affairs that has been in place for a long time - it is the orthodoxy, the state of the art

Given that changes can't be made overnight to institutional or capitalist modes of operation how can we start to effect change in this environment?

As we'll discuss, I'm interested in a different kind of diversity, a different kind of inclusion

The role of the curator has a long, much debated and somewhat contested history but is largely viewed as passive or instrumental serving either the artist or the needs of the institution, or both

The role of the curator is to take care of 'something', the word comes from the latin *curare* meaning to take care of. Historically, this might have been museum objects or art collections, but I propose redefining what that 'something' is in order to change the framework within which curatorial practice functions

I'm increasingly thinking of curation as an act of care, of caring (connecting to the broader project and feminist ethics of care through curation). This is not care for objects however, it's a different form of stewardship. I'm thinking about this curation/caring in two ways, one is tangible, it's about care/support for artists from groups who are less represented in the arts and the second is caring for/securing something more abstract but critical, which is the need for digital art and the wider art world to be better, to represent more perspectives and to be less siloed in its diversity which would make it richer and more valuable to more people

My research and my contribution to this project centres the curation of work by POC, Queer, Disabled and Neurodiverse digital artists. In centring groups whose identities are or have been historically pathologised and categorised as less than or non-human, this research work unsettles and undoes notions of the 'universal human' (Preciado 2021) a figuration defined by Paul B Preciado as straight, white, middle-class men in their book 'Can the Monster Speak' a figuration against whom all others are measured

I have coined the term 'the non-human assemblage' to position this collective as agents of curatorial activism and a place within which to site my own practice and relation to the universal human, the figuration and centring of which are the cause of social injustices. My practice, my curation, my support, my care is for this group of which I am a part

Far from its historically passive or instrumental role, I see a need for the role of the curator as agential, making something happen, making deliberate choices and carrying out deliberate actions. Through this process of agential thought and action, curation is framed as activism. And here we can entwine activism and curation as things that bring people together in a space or place of concentrated meaning (Smith 2021)

In centring the non-human assemblage in order to decentre, to unsettle, the universal human, I am thinking of curation as a generative act creating fertile ground on which to create or in fact curate an unsettling - this is making change, and this is rewriting future heritages

Katherine McKittrick's writing on Sylvia Wynter has been foundational to my framing of curatorial practice as activism. McKittrick theorises undoing and unsettling 'Western conceptions of what it means to be human'. She valorises 'undoing and unsettling' as opposed to 'replacing or occupying' (McKittrick 2015) as a provocation and I'm applying this provocation to the role of the non-human assemblage in my research and practice in making a change to the structural orthodoxies of digital art and the wider art world

Returning to the intersection of digital art and tech, this activism can equally be applied to decentring the structural orthodoxies of cisgendered, white, ableist masculinity generated by the global corporations on whose platforms and with whose tools digital artists are making and sharing their work. Overthrowing those global corporation that shape our digital world is unlikely if not impossible, but unsettling them in their own spaces is not only possible but crucial to remaking the

future - everything that I am saying about the role of the non-human assemblage in making change in digital art practice is equally applicable in those online spaces

This curation of the non-human assemblage is generative, care is generative. The artists selected for the FSF exhibition are making work drawing on their identities, their intersectionalities, their lived experiences – supporting these artists, working with them, and curating their work to manifest the unsettling of the universal human is the focus of my practice. It is about bringing something new into being

I've been thinking a lot about manifestations recently - it's the name of the group exhibition that I am currently curating for this project. Manifestations are of the mind, of the imagination, of the identity - they are definitionally, the embodiment of abstract ideas. Manifestations are also corporeal as physical presences tied to activism - manifestation is the French word for demonstration after all. These dual, entwined definitions summon the unsettling, the undoing that I have envisioned and theorised in my research as the role of the non-human assemblage

I'm interested in how this plays out in the dynamics of a group show, the slightly out-of-favour Gesamtkunstwerk or total artwork. This is an exhibition of work and artists in dialogue, going beyond the impacts of individual identities, though they are very much present, or individual works I am interested in the power of the work in its totality. This is the power of the non-human assemblage in all of its messy and intersectional joy, its capacity to make change lies in its exponentially accumulated power

Future heritages are designed, written, and fabricated today and these acts of agency, of activism of undoing and unsettling will rewrite that future heritage. This work of redoing, remaking, and revisioning makes future heritages that will be revolutionarily different. It is urgent work and it's taking place at the messy edge

McKittrick, Katherine (2015): *Sylvia Wynter: On Being Human as Praxis*. Durham: Duke University Press

Preciado, Paul (2020): *Can the Monster Speak?* London: Fitzcarraldo Editions

Smith, Terry (2021): *Curating the Complex & The Open Strike*. London: Sternberg Press