

Technology and 'the death of Art History' CHArt ANNUAL CONFERENCE

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Performing Curatorial Practices in a Social Network Site: The Curators of DeviantArt

Introduction:

This research focuses on an online Social Network Site (oSNS) called DeviantArt, a site that is created for sharing user generated artworks. Launched in 2000, today this initiative has about 15 million members coming from over 190 countries. The website offers various web-based services to its members enabling and enforcing a strong social interaction. With its collection of around 125 millions works, deviantArt (dA) is the biggest art market of the world, presenting a new mode of displaying, evaluating and consuming arts. In that sense, dA generated a platform free of institutional and governmental politics, democratizing the way arts are generated, shared and enjoyed. However, some aspects of dA are astonishingly reminiscent of the existing art market, and in this paper, I'd like to scrutinize one of these aspects, namely the birth of curatorial practices.

Various structures in dA create a new value-system. Within the dA community, page statistics are used as a means to judge the 'quality' of a work. These statistics indicate the number of comments a work receives, as well as how many times it is 'visited' or 'favoured'. However, with a fast growing archive of 125 million works, these statistics are not enough for evaluation. dA introduced a method to render some works more 'visible' than others. In order to promote a member's work (which in dA terminology is tagged as a 'deviation'), every day, a chosen collection of deviations are published as the 'daily deviations' on the homepage of the community. In this work, I'd like to name this activity as the 'official curatorial practice' of the website and analyze its effects by comparing it to the curatorial practices in the art market, as well as to other promotion methods inside dA that depend solely on members' initiative.

An Extremely Brief History of Curating

The history of first curatorial practices is entangled with the birth of modern museums and the great exhibitions of the 19th century. The precedents of the museums are traced back to the *Wunderkammers* of the 16th/17th century, as well as to the encyclopedic ambitions of their creators [1, 2]. Those early (and private) collections did not make a distinction between natural objects and artifacts. However, the way these collections were displayed reflected clearly their *raison d'être*: the collection frenzy. It was only until quite later, with the introduction of museums and exhibition spaces, when the display of a vast archive became a problem. Especially the state collections possessed an immense number of items, and it was clear that a prioritization process was needed to share these collections with the public, because the main reason of opening to public was in the idea of educating masses with the help of these artifacts [3]. The birth of curatorial practices can be traced back to this turning point in time when the question of 'what to collect' started to be combined with 'what/how to display'.

Today, museums, libraries and institutions are major job markets for a curator, whose job definition (though varying with position) stretches from "overseeing and expanding a collection, to preparing exhibitions, educational programs and experiences for the audience" [4]. Along with these 'classical' curators [5], or permanent staff of archival spaces, the art market witnesses the rise of a new type of curator, the so-called art (or independent) curator. After the success of the spectacular exhibition *When Attitudes Become Form* curated by Harold Szeeman, the trend to engage an expert's conceptual guidance in designing the show became more and more common [5]. Today, biennials, which are among the most important art events, are almost always lead by famous art curators. These curators have an immense impact on the contemporary art world, since such exhibitions became the driving force for the creation of new artworks. In this new sense, the art curator resembles the patrons of old, who by commissioning artworks were the funding agencies of art and shaping (albeit not directly) the production of art. In a similar vein, famous curators enjoy an enormous power in the art market, as well as among contemporary artists, as for many instances the curators have the final say in the decision making process.

To pinpoint the emergence of these "globally based" contemporary curators is hard, and much has been said about their practices and influence [6]. One thing is for sure: their history overlaps with the postcolonial critique that shaped the recent academic writing, especially in the domain of art history. Today, the 'death of the author', or the 'death of the subject' are more or less clichés, or even taken in the literal sense, i.e. that the author as such does not exist and is replaced by a multitude of voices, the meaning of collaborative creating can be seen in a different light as a result of the Internet revolution. Before going into the new ways of creating, evaluating and consuming art, let me first re-visit the term 'death of the subject' and its repercussions in the art world and the question of need of expertise in the field.

The Death of the “Artist, Art Historian, Art Critic,...” But the Curator Is Still Alive!

In 1999, Keith Moxey [7] opened his paper *History of Art After the Death of the Death of the Subject* with the following observation: “Poststructuralist authors as various as Roland Barthes, Jacques Lacan, Michel Foucault, and Jacques Derrida argued, not so long ago, that the autonomous subject of the humanist tradition, a subject capable of knowing both the world and itself, was a utopian dream of the European Enlightenment. This view of human subjectivity had to be abandoned in a period that recognized the existence of an unconscious mind, the opacity of language, and the role of discursive practices in the dissemination of social power.” The impact of this new understanding on historical research was clear: if we cannot talk of a transcendental entity as a repository of knowledge (i.e. the author, or in this case the researcher), it is impossible to talk about a fixed history of recorded events as such. Within this perspective, the idea of a ‘true history’ was forcibly replaced with a plethora of histories, written according to the point of view of the individual observers, co-existing together. Art history as a discipline had its own share of the resulting debates of this ambiguity, both in relation to how the practice should be applied, as well as how understanding, interpreting and building archives should be processed. The position of the art historian in this debate has been scrutinized by many, and the notion of the ‘death of the artist’ has received its share in various debates [8]. As the impact of the Internet enabled the cybernetic understanding of art as a process open to audience participation [9,10], many artists (especially the ones operating in art movements such as computer art, Internet art, happenings, flux, etc.) have welcomed the death of artistic subjectivity. In contrast to these changes, the recent past has seen the rise of the independent curator replacing the modern notion of genius artist, and becoming the one-man show of important art organizations:

“The birth of the curator has led to the death of the artist. Or, at least, that’s the impression one gets from a gloss of the current literature on exhibition practices. Concerns percolate that the expanded portfolio of the curator now encroaches on the artist’s autonomy. Yet it’s important to survey the situation from the opposite direction as well: changes in curatorial practice have long been preceded by those in artistic practice. Since at least the early 1960s, the very category of artist has come under considerable pressure. The famous texts on authorship by Barthes and Foucault were only the theorization of a multi-pronged attack well underway.”[11]

The death of the artist is enforced both by theoretical and practical challenges, where Ippolito, as curator and artist, offers a purely technological reason to kill the expert eyes of the art critic, connoisseur and (maybe) the art historian. He takes a different path to criticize the existing mechanism of art world in his work *Trusting Aesthetics to Prosthetics* [12] where he scrutinizes three programs (written by others) in order to establish a new way of defining aesthetic values. The first program is Firefly, which is an Internet-based program that works like a search engine. It learns the musical preferences of its users through a set of music albums that the user has to grade from best to worst. Then the program compares these preferences with the lists of other users, and notifies the user about musicians that are of potential interest, as well as about the new releases of his/her favorites. The preferences of the user are stored by the system, and represent the aesthetic taste of the user. Ippolito calls this set of preferences the ‘prosthetic ego’ of the user. What the program does is a simple comparison of all prosthetic egos. It does not have a set of pre-established aesthetic values, but nonetheless, it is able to make good suggestions. According to Ippolito, this is a process where the aesthetics is created on the fly, without any judgments or strict rules, where only the subject’s position is needed at the first step when the user trains the prosthetic ego: “No one is in charge, and theoretically, no one’s taste is more important than any others” [12:70].

The second program, Interactive Genetic Art, works on assumptions similar to those of the Firefly, but operates with visual input rather than audio. Interactive Genetic Art does not operate over the Internet, but runs on users’ computers in a way that resembles the genetic evolution of DNA. In the first ‘generation,’ the program displays a number of simple forms (e.g. circles, lines, and dots) to the user, and asks the user to evaluate these forms. The user preference acts as the fitness function, and exerts a selective pressure on the forms as the program explores the form space. According to the answers received from the users, the program eliminates the disliked forms from the next generation. In a few generations, the program moves on to much more complex shapes, and eventually to compositions and artworks.

The third program considered by Ippolito is Tierra, which was written by the evolutionary biologist Tom Ray [13]. It is one of the forerunners of artificial life (A-life) programs, and simulates artificial life forms, which are a collection of programs that reside in computers memory. These try to create copies of themselves, thereby competing with each other for a scarce resource, i.e. memory. Writing short programs that duplicate themselves has been an old challenge for computer programmers. Tierra is able to evolve programs that are shorter and more efficient in duplicating themselves than programs created by experienced programmers. Moreover, there appear virus-like programs that lack a replication mechanism, and consequently are very short.

These programs can harness the replication mechanisms of other programs in the memory. In some generations, these programs dominate the memory, but as the programs on which they rely for replication get scarcer, they fail to replicate themselves. Non-linear dynamics similar to actual evolution in a natural environment emerge, and niching behaviour (i.e. different organisms survive by specializing to fit different niches of the environment) is observed. For Ippolito, Tierra turns into an aesthetic-evolution machine. He proposes to apply Tierra to estimate aesthetic judgments by running it to evolve programs with prosthetic egos of their own, without any input from user's preferences. The idea is that small programs that have never been in touch with the aesthetic and social criteria of the academy, aestheticians and art historians stand a chance of creating an evaluation system that is not tainted by an object subjectivity.

The question of what happens, or what should happen to curators, artists, art critics and art historians in the aftermath of the postcolonial critique, or with the impact of new technologies can be further theorized. Here, instead of theorizing, I suggest to scrutinize the issue in a more hands-on fashion over a new platform, that is, the platform of online Social Network Sites.

A Different Realm: DeviantArt

DeviantArt is one of the most important online communities in the context of user-generated artworks. Unlike Flickr [14, 15], which hosts all kinds of photographs, DeviantArt is devoted to artistic creations, and covers a wide range of styles ranging from traditional arts to digital arts, photography, film and anime. The focus of the site is reflected in the dimensions of its archive as well: the website has a collection of more than 125 million images, neatly organized around a deliberately designed category tree of about 2000 categories. With its 15 million members, and around 35 million monthly visitors, dA offers a genuine virtual space for sharing, discussing and disseminating art.

In the naming conventions of deviantArt, members are called deviants, and uploaded images are deviations, which stresses the kind of image dA aims to create inside the art market. From this point of view, dA is the place to search for the effects of technology (enabling social interaction on a mass scale and creating a new value system based on the power of majority's choices) and for the challenges postcolonial theory has put on the table.

DeviantArt is one of the rare online social network sites with a single focus; its user community is primarily concerned with exchanging comments on uploaded images only. The structure of the site resembles that of a blog-sphere [16], as each member is given a homepage with a gallery and a journal space. Journals are self-contained articles written by artists. Each entry, be it a text or image, should be accomplished as a single action, just like adding a text to a blog. dA enforces a certain quality through this contribution process: bulk image uploads are not allowed, and the members are asked to provide information about the uploaded work, such as title, keywords, category name and a short explanation for each image. This process invites members to choose each image with care, and to ponder on its artistic nature.

The member homepages are like an overview of a portfolio, as well as a portal to each members' activities. The members are relatively free in designing their dA space, but certain links and static information fields are not to be changed. Each homepage has a navigation bar displaying basic statistics, as well as member information (age, country, membership status). The statistics list the number of people who have visited the member's page, how many comments are entered, and how many artworks the member has. The members do not have a say in the display of statistics; they can neither change, nor conceal this part of their homepage. Inevitably, these statistics build the foundation of a value system, and have an important role in generating a status for each member.

THE ROLE OF CURATORS IN dA:

Daily Deviations (DDs for short) were a feature of dA since its beginnings. Each day a certain number of deviations are chosen and promoted on the main website of dA. These deviations naturally receive many visitors due to this promotion. I define the choosing of the DDs as the official curatorial process of dA, and liken it to the position of a curator, responsible of managing the archive of a big museum, designing certain exhibitions and promoting only certain works at any given time.

The selection process of daily deviations is quite elaborate and is not under the direct control or supervision of the website owners. dA staff actively participates in the online community, and are members of the website. The main team is extended with the recruited volunteers from the community who take on roles from moderating galleries to working as part of the Creative Team or the Message Network Team. These volunteers play a major role in the decision process of DDs. Every member of dA has the right to suggest deviations for a DD. However, the voting process is not clearly defined and suggesting a work is not as easy as favouring a deviation, which can be accomplished by a single click. Instead, if a member thinks a deviation is worthy of DD, he/she can suggest that piece by getting in contact with the appropriate gallery moderator. Beside these

incoming suggestions, a group consisting of staff/volunteers are browsing deviations to select the DDs. The final selections of this group become a part of a list of deviations waiting to be published each day. Thus, the DD awards do not necessarily reflect a selection among the latest submissions to the site, and can include deviations that are already a few years old. Usually around 30 works are published on the main website of dA as DDs, and the previous DDs are stored on separate pages for each day, accessible to all visitors.

In order to see how well this system functions, and how much it affects the status of a member, I have picked a random day (05.07.2010) and followed the DDs announced that day for 5 consecutive days. The changes in the statistics, the overall distribution of DDs according to categories, and according to the background of their creators can be found in Figures 1, 2 and 3, respectively.

Member status	Years	Age	Nationality	Gender	Nr. Of Deviations	Nr. Of Comments	Nr. Of Pageviews
Model	3	64	USA	Female	293	3341	3151972
Photo manipulator	7		UK	Male	142	11548	975935
One who left dA and came back	3	17	Lithuania	Male	300	13395	713370
Illustrator	6	25	USA	Male	75	1574	532732
Procrastinator	3	88	Canada		37	4364	527996
Vector artist	7	29	UK	Male	68	1881	99000
Varied artist		25	US	Male	803	10878	68589
Antagonist	4		Spain	Male	71	6474	52669
Deviously deviant	5	24	Poland	Male	39	11	49854
Deviously deviant	3		France	Male	157	46	44062
Deviously deviant	2		UK	Male	608	786	35274
Traditional artist	1	18	Netherlands	Female	260	8390	27695
Art student	1	20	China		82	208	24332
Sculptor	1	26	Finland	Male	144	1104	19919
Traditional artist	5	19	UK	Female	174	4335	19881
Yellow alien	5		Germany	Male	115	3654	14729
Deviously deviant	3	38	Turkey	Female	166	9209	14234
Varied artist	1	27	Indonesia	Male	160	2970	12867
Digital painter	3	18	Poland	Male	108	646	12398
Fantasy artist	4		Netherlands	Female	233	440	11716
Busybody	3		Philippines	Male	54	1107	10097
Experimental photographer	6	22	Indonesia	Male	33	2430	8405
General writer	2	21	USA	Male	213	750	7776
One who left dA and came back	5	18	USA	Female	48	2332	7437
Antagonist	5		New Zealand	Male	60	301	5361
Deviously deviant	1	28	Netherlands	Male	8	27	4358
	3	27	Poland	Male	153	815	3110
Deviously deviant	1		Netherlands	Male	61	636	816

Figure 1: Demographic distribution among the sampled DD creators and the total number of pageviews, downloads and comments they have received. [The data is collected on 10.07.2010]

The average age of dA contributors is estimated to be at 20-35 range. When we take a look at the ‘years’ column in Figure 1, which shows since when the members are a part of dA website, we see that the selected DDs belong to both senior, as well as junior members. There are seven deviants who have been a member of dA since only a year, but also two members with a history of seven years. The majority of them have been around since at least two or three years.

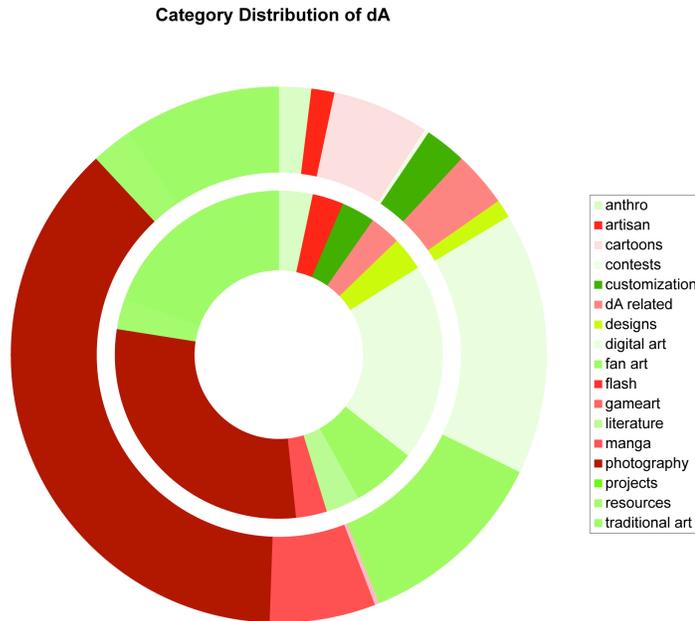


Figure 1: Category distribution of dA (the outer ring) and of the sample data of 30 DDs (the inner ring).

In another study [17] we have looked at the category distribution of dA. The website forces its members to choose from an existing (and ever expanding) index of a small category tree and to tag each new deviation with a category. Thus, each deviation belongs to precisely one category. We have generated the distribution of these categories according to the deviations of paying members only. At the time of that study, dA had around 100 million deviations, and about 13 million members. Out of these numbers about 100 000 were paying members, and the total number of their deviations amounted to 13 million works. Figure 2 shows the category distribution of paying members (the outer ring) and the sampled data of 30 DDs (inner ring) on the first level. dA has 17 top categories, photography being the most occupied. Our DD sample showed an even distribution, reflecting the existing structure. Out of 30 works, nine were in the category of photography. Six belonged to traditional art, two were from fan art, and the rest of the categories had one work each, except cartoons, contests, projects, flash and game art.

If we take into account all these basic demographics (age, time spent in dA, country of origin, pageview numbers), we can say that dA website does a good job selecting DDs, as the selection covers the differences in the background, interest, and experience level of its members. A new member has as much chance as a senior member in getting selected a DD, and that is an important factor for giving impetus to new members in getting involved more with the social network of dA.

THE LIFE-CYCLE OF AN AVERAGE DEVIATION:

As noted before, various structures in dA create a new value-system. So far, I have talked about the status of members, which are derived from their homepage statistics. On top of that, each deviation also has a site on its own, with similar statistics like the ones on the homepages. As in the case of homepages, these statistics cannot be meddled with. Thus, it is possible to judge the ‘quality’ of a work through its statistics (i.e. the number of pageviews & comments it receives and how many times it is favoured and downloaded).

There are direct ways of promoting a deviation, the most known and effective one being the DD, i.e. publishing the work as a daily deviation on the homepage of dA. This is the official promotion. The second type of promotion is performed by the members. They can publish ‘feature’ articles (called journals) on their own homepages, as well as news articles, accessible through the main dA page. Finally, a more covert way of promotion is adding the deviation to one’s own favourites or collections, or simply starting to ‘watch’ a deviant, which means getting automatically informed of each new deviation of the watched member.

These various ways of promotion can be seen as ways of improving the visibility of a deviation. It is also possible to liken this process to the idea of citation-networks, where each citation in a scientific paper is seen as

the building-block of a value system. If a paper receives many citations, it is thought to be an important (influential) paper. The number of pageviews and comments for a deviation can be seen as a similar indicator. Furthermore, it is possible to measure the life-cycle of a deviation. This needs to be measured against the average life-cycle for different styles/categories/genres, or according to the connectedness of the deviant itself.

Theoretically, the lifecycle of a deviation never ends (unless removed by the deviant), since it is accessible at all times. However, a short while after its first upload (when all the watchers are notified), the deviation gets its peak of pageviews. A similar burst is expected after each promotion (such as a DD, or being featured). In order to test this idea, I have followed the rise in the number of pageviews, comments and downloads for each deviation in our sample. Figure 4 shows these changes for each DD, and even in this small sample, it is possible to observe that neither the category of the deviation, nor the status of its deviant plays a role in the 'citation' cycle of deviations, when it comes to the impact of being chosen a DD. As I have noted before, my sample reflects the heterogeneity of dA, and includes works by newer members, much less known than senior members, as indicated by cumulative deviant statistics. Figure 1 indicates that the most visited member has a pageview of more than 3 millions, whereas the least visited member has only 816 pageviews. However, the peaks in the statistics for all members are more or less the same, regardless of a member's previous status in dA.

For a DD, the number of comments (the yellow line in Figure 3) shows an increase in the first day of DD's announcement, and then levels off. In contrast to this, the number of downloads (the pink line) generally follows the number of pageviews (the blue line), and even though these are usually different in their magnitude, they show the same trend.

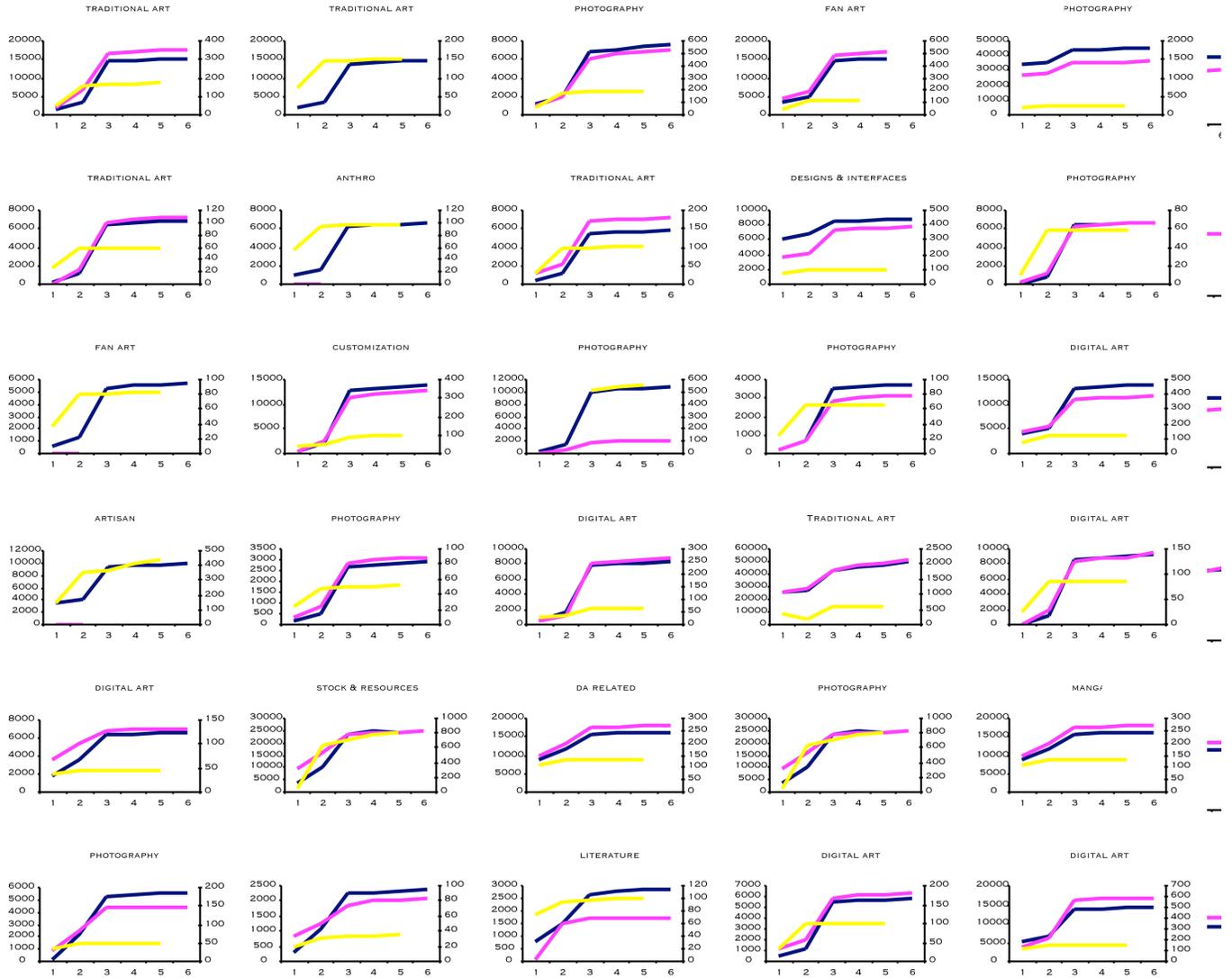


Figure 2: The rise in the number of pageviews (blue), downloads (pink) and comments (yellow) after being selected DD. (The data are collected between 05.07.2010-10.07.2010). The pageview numbers are indicated on the left vertical axis, whereas downloads and comments have smaller magnitudes, and are indicated on the right vertical axis. The horizontal axis denotes the days after the publication of the DD. In some instances, the artist has disabled comments, and this line is missing from the graph.

Conclusion:

In this paper I first summarized the implications of the 'death of the author' in art history as a discipline, and especially for its agents. Secondly, I touched upon the effects of technological developments such as wikis, blogs and online social networks, highlighting the fact that these 'collaborative' spaces for social interactions and knowledge/art creation bring with them a certain erasure of old agencies, replacing those with either a new understanding of these, or in some cases, rendering them totally useless. Curatorial practices on an oSNS like deviantArt is an excellent case to show this new understanding: a web-archive with more than 125 million works needs a filtering mechanism, and a suggestion system in order to locate the works that are 'more interesting' according to different criteria. dA offers a classification system for browsing the archive by genre and technique, however that on its own is not enough to locate 'better' works. Simple information of member interaction that quantifies activities such as visiting each other websites, leaving comments, favoring each others works turns into a value system, helping the visitors to locate more 'favoured' works. Still, curatorial practices inside the community are needed, and these have emerged automatically after the establishment of dA. Based on their individual practices, the dA team generated an elaborate selection mechanism (reflecting both the choices of the community, as well as the perspective of the administrators of the site), and promoted every day a certain number of works as Daily Deviations. This successful selection mechanism is more inline with the 'process art,' where the artwork is extended to include audience interaction, and is based on the participation of the whole community. Such a curatorial practice might become the leading formation in curation for the near future, especially for digital archives. However, as of now, the art market itself favours independent curators whose rise corresponds to the death of modern artist.

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