THE DISRUPTIVE LABOUR OF THE DESIGNED INTERACTIONS OF AN EXHIBITION ON THE WEB

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The digital realm has become a non-stop stream of data, consuming its users through its rapid and ever-growing ecology of websites often tailored to a commercial goal. Within this expansive realm, could a digital exhibition be a way to break the mould, to not *just* be another website to mindlessly browse? The question is: how can such an exhibition hold on to its users' attentiveness? Or, how could the experience change their minds? In this article, I will take a speculative approach to navigate this question and theorise ways in which digital exhibitions or more specifically 'exhibitions on the web' might be a disruptive force stimulating a lasting level of engagement. I will not be speculating wildly but rather through ideas applied from design to dissect a conceptual framework on its *designed* interactions: the located physical use, the web's technical features and the exhibition content. I will base my analysis of these three designed interactions on the properties of 'curating on the web' as defined by curator and researcher Marialaura Ghidini, meaning, that the curatorial process and outcome is "responding to the characteristics of the web medium, its tools and interfaces" rather than copying offline museum practices by creating, for example, a digital slideshow of images taken from a museum collection.[1] For this type of exhibition, the web is not merely a tool for presentation, but its technical nature informs all parts of the curatorial process.

The Everyday of the Designed World-wide-web

Developing a digital exhibition that is responding to the characteristics of the web medium would need to follow two processes in a continuous loop: a design process where the result is a digital curatorial phenomenon in the shape of, for example, a website, and a curatorial process informing the exhibition concept and content, which ultimately feeds back to the design process. Simply put, the exhibition would not exist if there was no curatorial idea, and the curatorial idea would not come to fruition if the digital features and the process to build them were not considered from the start. This differs from a typical offline exhibition where the physical structure, the walls, floors and ceiling and the physical artworks already exist. The digital exhibition still needs to write code as the outer structure and for the exhibited content, which can perhaps offer a wider pool of possibilities and is more adaptable to a technologically engaged society.[2] As communication scholar Nancy Baym describes, technology, and especially the use of phones, has moved from the fringe and is now deeply embedded in the practices of daily life.[3] Between 2021-2024, the average time spent online varied between six hours and thirty to fifty minutes per day, and the number of users is growing steadily each year.[4] We live in a "network society," as sociologist Manuel Castells Oliván calls it.[5]

While technology has become synonymous with contemporary daily life, what makes up daily life has been everchanging, as historian Leora Auslander explains: "the everyday is historical and contextual, its boundaries shifting with the changing landscape."[6] The shifting contextualisation of these boundaries can be retraced in a changing material culture. As design historian Judy Attfield argues: all habits, beliefs and ways of being are rooted in the everyday, while our material world is a result of these social processes which are then "negotiated in the context of space, time and the body."[7] Technology and its material outcomes such as the web become unmissable parts of these everyday social processes or the users' habitual flow of life. Moreover, these digital innovations are also designed interventions. Thus, while the everyday becomes increasingly fused with design, it also brings about a reworking of societal structures.[8] Design's ubiquity becomes apparent through the verb 'designing,' as mentioned by design academic Ezio Manzini, everybody designs every day, simply by making decisions to change to a preferred situation.[9] Throughout history, design has held onto its modernist practice of objectifying change and presented itself as a force for good; albeit, this 'goodness' can be contested. Or as design theorist Tony Fry has stated, every interaction can lead to a new design process based on an already existing design process and, depending on the aim, be a force for good — or not.[10]

Understanding the digital exhibition's continuous loop of the curatorial and design processes in relation to the everyday of the designed web, there are two sides to consider: the curatorial and the design processes are both informed by the everyday, and the exhibition, as part of the ecology of the web, could also be engulfed by the everyday habitual flow. Thus, the question is, how can an exhibition on the web draw in the viewer, capture their attention and possibly change their way of thinking while also being a part of the web's networked and designed everyday?

Tuned to our Digital Devices

To be able to theoretically speculate, I will map each design interaction's agency in order to understand how they are able to influence a habitual flow. Rhetoric and composition scholars Heather Bastian and Jennifer Nish define agency as "distributed across things and people and structures," highlighting that both human action and non-human matter hold agentic capabilities.[11] It is a series of actions that humans take part in, continuously developing towards potential — within the everyday flow or beyond it.[12] Based on this definition, I will first look into the located physical use, followed by the technical features and finally the exhibition content, before considering them as a whole in a hypothetical example. After the first analysis, I will add to this reasoning by questioning how these interactions perhaps could be able to change the users' thinking from within this habitual flow.

To analyse the located physical use, Attfield stated earlier that the social processes of our material world are negotiated in the context of space, time

and the body. Spatially, the exhibition is two-sided: it lives in the digital realm of the networked web and can only be accessed through a digital device like a laptop, desktop or mobile phone — connecting the digital and the physical world. While the desktop has a physical limitation of staying indoors, a laptop and smartphone do not. As long as the internet connection, the battery and the loading of the content work, the exhibition can be visited anywhere from a smartphone or laptop: in private and public spaces. This means there is no controlled environment and no cohesion between the physical space and the people who are 'visiting' the online exhibition. However, external environmental factors such as the light direction, background noise, distractions and other people's presence may still influence how the exhibition is experienced. The dynamics between the user, the device and their environment can also lead to emotional reactions which may not be caused by the exhibition.

In relation to time, it results in a different kind of agency in terms of time commitment for each type of device. The agency of smartphones is likely to be more fleeting, as it provides distractions with swift swipes to other apps whereas a desktop requires one to sit down and use a mouse to navigate the screen. This perhaps results in a longer attention span, but it requires more processes of decision-making to commit. A laptop floats somewhere between the other two, freely movable but not as fleeting as a smartphone. Visually, larger screens demand more attention and offer more of a visual overview whereas a smartphone can feel closed off and zoomed in. In any case, once the visitor has found or has decided to visit and experience an online exhibition, they are actively using the device, making it a deliberate interaction with the material and its agency.

Then in terms of the body, the digital exhibition is consumed through its material object, becoming a dialogue between object and human. According to Attfield, when objects are consumed, the user engages in a new level of meaning-making because of the use rather than ownership.[13] Using a device is a private and personal engagement wherever you use it, which will enforce personal considerations about which content can be viewed where and in what way. It is a dynamic relationship between the private engagement and the public sphere of the web. As Attfield explains, it contextualises "individuality in the material culture of everyday life since it literally makes a place for its cultivation while also considering its social relations beyond the personal."[14] As philosopher Hannah Arendt explains, the awareness and responsibility for social relations constitute the meaning of public life, which involves being seen and heard by others from a variety of perspectives, while private life is a "sphere of intimacy."[15] Private and public life are then brought together by relating "through the intermediary of a common world of things."[16] Bringing Arendt and Attfield's ideas to the analysis of what constitutes interaction with the exhibition, it is both a private and public encounter through a shared material interaction, but both domains have less clear distinctions because they are becoming more diffused through technology's ubiquity in everyday life. Both the web and the environment are public and private as they function in a two-sided spatial realm.

The located physical use is thus a personal and public interaction, and depends on the average time someone uses their digital devices, it can also be an interaction deeply enmeshed in the habitual flow. Within the habitual, philosophy scholar Imke von Maur states that knowledge is not tested or challenged and flows within the "internalized historically and socio-culturally specific values and norms that belong to a larger net of practices making up the everyday lives and identities of humans."[17] These norms — which depend on individuals and their particular contexts — help humans make sense of the world by being a frame of reference. Thus, if the digital exhibition aims to *challenge* its users, it needs to disrupt the habitual on a personal and public level through an interaction that confronts their normative assumptions.[18]

Time to Disrupt

Heather Bastian and Jennifer Nish propose that disruptions can provoke active engagement by the user by challenging their norms and expectations, potentially leading to new thinking, behaviours, and interactions.[19] They argue that neither agency nor disruption alone can ignite change, but together — through "disruptive agency" — they offer the highest potential.[20] Disruptive agency begins with an action that draws attention, creating a temporary openness for change. This opening requires labour and ethical responsibility by the user to "carry the disruption forward toward a different way of relating to others."[21] Von Maur suggests this disruption can prompt an epistemic shift, which allows one to figuratively "travel other worlds," enabling individuals to reflect and reconsider their norms and emotional responses.[22] In other words, the moment of disruption can temporarily make one think, interrogate and emotively feel outside of their norms, starting an epistemic exploration. Something that would have angered them before might become a moment of reflection because of the increased attention placed on the disruption.[23]

Bastian and Nish further contend that to turn this temporary openness into lasting change, the disruption and its broader relational context must be carefully considered.[24] Lasting transformation requires ongoing engagement, intellectual and emotional labour, and ethical responsibility by the user.[25] In terms of an online exhibition, the process starts with the curatorial interaction carrying disruptive agency, stimulated by an emotional openness, which can lead to an epistemic exploration that motivates engagement on an intellectual, relational and ethical level, and, ultimately, a shift in habits and norms. The labour that the user must undertake starts at the moment of the interaction. The goal is to cultivate a pluralistic emotional response, encouraging receptivity to the disruption rather than immediate rejection.
For the exhibition on the web to break this flow from the first interaction, the act of visiting the site, wherever the user is, might already take too much

part in the everyday habitual flow to disrupt this pattern. Thus, what can stimulate the interaction between the user and the device where the user is willing to commit some kind of labour?

Obsolescence and Permanence of the Web's Technicalities

The second designed interaction, the exhibition's technical features will lead the design process and the user's engagement from the moment the exhibition is accessed. Taking a website as an example, to build the digital walls and the interface requires the specialism of UX/UI designers to script HTML, CSS and JavaScript. While there are numerous ways to design a website — based on a template or not — in recent years, the 'gamification' of interactions has been a way to draw users in and hold on to short attention spans while being more and more incorporated into social life.[26] Gamification — when game design elements are used in other contexts — brings a sense of play that still requires a decision process, but when it takes place in the digital realm it is experienced as being free of societal constraints; one is free to choose whilst maintaining a non-committal stance.[27] This non-committal characteristic could have a flipside: it can be a way to explore freely but one might lose any sense of responsibility — even when taking part in public life. Nonetheless, it does provide a sense of agency and might even bring about some level of labour from its users because of this interactive decision process, which can be helpful to stimulate a moment of openness.

At the same time, we need to consider that the technology to build, design and support a website is ever-changing, requiring never ending updates or the website will cease to fully work. Due to technology's innovative character, there is only a short window of time where the technical features are not yet out of date. Its obsolescence is defining and precarious. While offline exhibitions have a predetermined lifespan, an exhibition on the web could stay online without an end date — outliving its technical structures and its content's timeliness. Even when the website is taken down, its content or the documentation thereof could have been shared to social media or any other website. The networked remnants of the digital exhibition become dated snapshots that are part of a tangled web that cannot easily be erased, which should also be taken into consideration during the curatorial and design processes. An online exhibition is an object that reflects its time not only by content, but by its designed medium. It is as fleeting as it is permanent, with its obsolescence and permanence being a direct result of design's relation to market capitalism where innovation is the driving source of consumerism. Considering continuous innovation demands labour from its users to keep interacting, it utilises an obsessive kind of agency, an eagerness for attention, which is unsurprising if it wants to stand out in the saturated crowd of the web.

Thus, for the second designed interaction perhaps the innovativeness of gamification can aid in the creation of disruptive agency because it falls outside of the norms and holds strong agentic capacities — perhaps even

disruptive. At the same time, the obsolescence and permanence of the web should not be overlooked. In any case, it can still help bring about a change in thinking, as philosopher Sally Haslanger has stated: "[P]eople don't change their beliefs, especially ones that serve their interests, by being lectured at."[28] By being actively involved through the act of using the device and engaging with the exhibition, a form of non-committal co-ownership comes about and is, according to art research scholar Anke Couman, the condition for experiencing new ideas and insights.[29] Artistic research scholars Michael Schwab and Henk Borgdorff provide the example of a digital exposition for artistic research, where practice is performed as research, which could be a more open-source experimental way in the creation of a gamified interaction. In an exposition, research is not *only* translated to written text but can take the shape of a visually and auditorily layered environment.[30] It stimulates its user in different ways, which can perhaps start to bring about a moment of disruption and openness because of a freed feeling.

An extended reflection might be that the gamified environment and the tangled web are also translated into (meta)data through the monitoring of the users' movements, often with commercial intent — a practice called dataveillance.[31] Thus, what does it signify if the content stays unchanged but is prolonged availability through its spreading or if the data lives on to produce advertisements? The web's networked design is not only tangible through its websites, but also intangible through its mysterious monitoring of (meta)data — again diffusing the borders of private and public life and disregarding the users' consent on the implementation of their labour.[32]

Designing Alternative Ideas

The first designed interaction, the located physical use, primarily stayed within the habitual flow without challenging the user to any labour. The second designed interaction, the web's technical features, held a stronger position to create some disruptive potential. It is in the third designed interaction, the exhibition content, where perhaps the most lasting disruptive agency lies. The exhibition narrative and its aesthetic translation are based on the curatorial approach which is informed by the previously mentioned design process. The curatorial approach is informed through 'the curatorial.' A theoretical concept philosopher Jean-Paul Martinon describes as a disruptor with the function "to invent knowledge. Its aim is to give the possibility for more lines of demarcation to be drawn, for the fullness of meaning to be achieved and for horizons of understanding to be set."[33] As the curatorial already aims to be disruptive in its narrative creation, design can play a crucial role as a discursive framework to pose critical questions and offer a different narrative to foster an openness from the user by employing design's everyday function in society as a lens to challenge reality.[34]

Speculative design researchers Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby describe this discursive framework as "the realm of the unreal, the fictional, or what we

prefer to think of as conceptual design — design about ideas."[35] Design about ideas describes research concerned with the relations between humans, the (material) world and the everyday in order to imagine a different future.[36] When design about ideas informs the curatorial, it can play around with the everyday habitual as a way of being critical because it stands simultaneously inside and outside this flow. This contrasting position might be able to conceptually offer an alternative reality or future that tests the limits of the user's normative assumptions and where an openness for change might be possible, while not shying too far away from what they know. In order to embrace difference and foster a temporary openness for change within the habitual through an online exhibition, perhaps the dataveillance tracking is a novel way to turn things upside down. Usually, the monitoring gathers online personal behaviour and feeds it to large corporations to monetise, but what if the tracking takes a human centred approach as described by scholars Catherine D'Ignazio and Lauren F. Klein in *Data Feminsim*.[37] Would it be possible to reappropriate the existing technical structures through the exhibition content to catalyse a different outcome?

To illustrate with an imagined scenario, the exhibition on the web addresses the disastrous development of the climate crisis showcasing all kinds of gamified environments illustrating the rapid decline of the natural environment in relation to human life now and in the future. The gamified elements are filled with knowledge from specialists, activists and Indigenous cultures about how they understand nature and what can be done to preserve what the Earth still has. The exhibition narrative and visualisation move away from the traditional sense of placing objects in a space, instead becoming an environment to embody through the (hopefully) disruptive interaction with a digital device. The environments could provide links to tips for personal action and literature, where to find interesting organisations on a local or global level, a monitored chat or video meetup for the visitors and a possibility to share or start a dialogue. The different levels of knowledge creation could be a way to keep the user stimulated. The exhibition curators should also consider which external platforms are most useful to interact with to maintain the integrity of the work.

It should detail how the exhibition offsets the CO2 to produce and upkeep this digital environment and how it uses ethical data centres as a way to illustrate the human and natural impact of the digital world. From the start, the exhibition should be transparent and ask for consent in how it tracks the user and perhaps use the data in real time to adjust its content to explain what data it is picking up. The data is not used as a capitalist tool for corporations, but rather as a means to explain to the user its behaviour and interests or to connect them with others visiting the site — merging private and public life without misusing the users' labour. The exhibition server could detect the user's IP address and adjust its language making the links personal to their local environment, highlighting smaller and local organisations, workshops

and people. The exhibition could become global and local at the same time, creating a reach far and wide because of its use of the tangible and intangible ecosystem of the web and its everyday culture.

Thus, as the curatorial aims to disrupt knowledge and foster epistemic openness, and design about ideas can be critical from inside and through the everyday, their union holds a potentially disruptive agentic that can lead to an epistemic exploration to embrace difference if the viewer is willing to engage in a reflective thinking process that requires labour. The dynamics between the exhibition and the user are a process of meaning-making by being disrupted — or not — and being challenged — or not — and it is the user's emotional openness for this new knowledge that can lead to epistemic exploration on an intellectual, emotional and ethical level. Because design is part of the everyday, it could be argued that it hits closer to home as it is not that far removed from the viewer's habitual norms. The viewer does not have to put in more labour to think too far outside of what they know, perhaps leading to a more pluralistic emotional response.

The Labour of an Exhibition on the Web

To conclude, when taking the online exhibition informed by design about ideas as a whole, the three designed interactions and their respective design cultures each require very different levels of agency and labour, but together might create a fine balance between asking to put in work but not too much to fatigue.

The act of visiting the website from a digital device falls within the expectations of a habitual flow, which requires minimal labour. The heavy lifting comes from the way the content is presented through, for example, gamification — which triggers recognition but with newness — and as a critical and discursive design narrative. It might be a way to create an openness to travel to other worlds, even temporarily. If the digital exhibition's designed interactions can foster epistemic explorations, the question remains how to persuade the user to put in sustained labour on an intellectual, relational and ethical level, maybe even as a way to embrace difference to fulfil its disruptive agentic potential.

Perhaps the answer to this does not solely lie in the digital realm as the portrayed disruption corresponds to a topic relating to the physical world, especially as both worlds are deeply integral to the everyday. The networked medium of the web can then be useful in this translation towards lasting labour on the part of the exhibition visitor. By reappropriating the (meta)data and installing gamified points of action throughout the curatorial visualisation, it brings the user to other organisations, projects or people that can further the user's labour on any level. The effort is small, but the outcome might be lasting. The exhibition design can then bring about a new design process where the user stays engaged while not shying too far away from the

habitual flow. The potential for online exhibitions informed through design about ideas goes beyond what is currently understood as in terms of facilitating change in an exhibition practice and can help stimulate everyday designing for almost everyone.

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VISUAL CONTRIBUTION

MY FAVORITE NEWS GOES NUCLEAR

Hsiang-Yun Huang