The popularization of contemporary art in the Silicon Age

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New technologies have transformed the way in which contemporary art is disseminated, bringing many benefits but also unprecedented problems. While the daily press attempts to bridge the digital gap and traditional magazines struggle to survive, new online editorial platforms of unimaginable reach and impact are emerging.

With information and reviews, analogue media and virtual platforms, contemporary art is seeking effective and attractive channels through which to retain its current audience and capture new ones.

The most significant of all the important changes new technologies have brought to the world of information is the prominence they have given to traditionally passive subjects, such as media users and the contemporary art audience.
Hypertext has created active and intrusive readers

While companies and institutions were still bogged down in the notion of portals, digital artists, or net.artists as they were then called, were the first to sense the participatory and democratic potential of new media, laying the conceptual foundations of what would become Web 2.0.

Facebook, Twitter and other social media learnt from artists, among other things, that the greatest potential of the world-wide web lies in its users and their contents, which is why they should be offered empty platforms and the tools to fill them.

In Web 2.0, all the creative energy and the desire to appropriate digital tools, embodied in a particularly interesting and innovative art scene and a generation eager to experiment with applications and software by learning and appropriating new languages, are redirected to social media, macro-interfaces which become essential platforms for the visibility of any project, but also filters.

More specifically, with regard to information management, the appearance in 1999 of Indymedia during the protests against the WTO summit in Seattle and, later on, other independent media outlets, showed the world that citizens with equipment made with Pringles containers could be much more effective than the large corporate media, despite all the economic and technological resources they could deploy.

Indymedia and others reached their peak in 2010. It is not difficult to imagine the problems posed by a structure without any centralized editorial office or monitoring offering anyone the chance to publish content anonymously and immediately. In any event, they were also gobbled up by social media.

While recognizing the effectiveness of the loudspeaker effect for different notifications and reminders, with respect to contemporary art, our area of interest, the Twitter

effect gives me some cause for concern, given that in most cases the aim is not to publicise concise but elaborate thoughts but to transmit the most trivial ordinariness or serve as a soundboard without any added reflection.

This seems a little worrying, because trivialization does not generate debate or plurality but rather uniformity and sterility.

Watching Facebook is like indulging in a kind of informative channel hopping, where everything is on the same plane: the article about the new Baroque installation at the National Museum of Art of Catalonia, the muesli someone has eaten, the glasses someone else has bought and the death of Philip Roth (and sometimes a distant death someone has shared without bothering to look at the date).

Perhaps never before has the abundance of information been so comparable to its superficiality.

We will have all seen how a personal photo obtains far more "likes" than a well-pondered text, which, while being positive for that person's self-esteem, does not precisely contribute to spreading thought.
The great "followers" fake

In this regard I would like to make a digression concerning the use many webmasters from cultural institutions make of social media. Their goal is to capture a huge number of followers without caring about their profiles, in other words, whether they are actually people who are interested or even robots. For these institutions, the main aim should be to bring together a high-quality, interested and curious audience. At the very least, even if the institutions don't care about their profiles, they should at least be human!

Take the example of MACBA, although the same could be said of practically all the Spanish art institutions.

It appears to have a large following on Facebook, more than 90,000 "likes" and another 90,000 "followers". However, a news item has at most 200 «likes» and receives the odd comment in the very best of cases. The discrepancy is evident. This might lead us to suspect that these figures are the result of Facebook's payment programmes to quickly obtain followers. For five euros you can obtain thousands of followers in an instant; the problem is that most of them are robots, so you're investing money and paying a community manager to have a non-human audience, which is obviously useless.

Something similar is happening on Twitter. MACBA has 84,000 followers but the news might have 2 "retweets" and 5 "likes" and no reactions or comments; that doesn't make sense! Although you can't directly buy followers on Twitter, there are strategies to enable you to increase their number quickly. The simplest way to rapidly obtain followers is by following thousands of them and de-registering most of them within a few days.

In the case of Instagram, as it contains images, there is a better response rate from the public. With 84,000 followers, MACBA manages to get a few hundred "likes" and a little more activity among its users.

Many Spanish museums are employing this strategy, which perhaps works for anonymous instagrammers and aspiring influencers but is disastrous for cultural institutions, as it doesn't lead to interested followers but random people, who create a knock-on effect when they see they are being followed. Museum directors often don't know what their social managers are doing and are just glad to see their followers are increasing in number every day. However, it is a fictitious audience; how else could the zero impact of the news items be explained?

Each contribution to the network of a museum such as MACBA should have at least a few thousand feedback items.

For social media to be useful, institutions must attract real audiences with publications to encourage their active participation and initiatives to involve them in critical debate and activities. It is vital to create a network of interested followers and agents from the sector who can serve as a nucleus to bring together students, enthusiasts and the simply inquisitive. Following only the main museums around the world, as occurs with MACBA's Instagram profile, is only the first in a long series of steps. The network of personalities from the art world, artists, opinion makers, curators, journalists, gallery owners, etc. from the place of belonging is essential for international expansion.

Having a "real and committed audience" is very important.

For example, on our blog entitled Art in the Silicon Age (http://blogs.elpais.com/arte-en-la-edad-silicio), posted on the platform of the El País newspaper, with about 4,000 followers on Facebook we were able to get feedback totalling up to 3,000 "likes" for each news item and the video embedded in the published news recorded as many as 60,000 views.

The colonization of real time

Of course, we must not forget that social media offer unprecedented opportunities for the real-time dissemination of content, so much so that we have reached a kind of colonization of real time: it's not a matter of reflecting and writing about an exhibition but about announcing that you're at the exhibition and explaining how you feel, what you think and who you're with.

It's undeniable: the change from analogue to digital has disrupted the entire way in which information and knowledge is broadcast, offering anyone anywhere in the world the chance to become a creator of opinion. This has many benefits and several

drawbacks, such as encouraging the appearance of unconfirmed information which is decontextualized or lacks historical memory.

In the current-day art world there are no examples of influencers as prominent as those in the world of fashion, as witnessed with ARCO Bloggers (https://arcobloggers.wordpress.com), an open participatory platform which was conceived as a case study and operated from September 2012 until the following ARCO contemporary art fair held in February 2013.

The traditional approach based on the classic media outlets no longer exists. The economic crisis, the prohibitive cost of paper and the inability to manage the change to digital, capitalizing on the infinite space, the interactivity, the benefits of hypertext, etc. have accelerated the decline of the traditional daily and monthly media.

Beyond the diminishing space devoted to contemporary art, what is really worrying is the homogenization of the contents, the sensationalist and anecdotal approach and the absence, with honourable exceptions, of research topics.

It is not just a matter of quantity, we have to fight for high-quality information offering the reader the tools for understanding and evaluating the topic in question. Reviews are important, but they should always be preceded or accompanied by information because, for all their rigour, they are still no more than opinions.

In my view, the most serious mistakes we are making are:

1. Not clearly diversifying information for print media from that for the web
2. Not using the web in an innovative way and taking advantage of only a fraction of its potential
3. Ultimately redirecting a new phenomenon towards an old model

This means the review or the information as it appears on the printed page should not just be transferred to the web.

On the web you have to offer another kind of information, much more dynamic and with hypertext elements enabling the reader to delve further without moving away from the topic.

It is not just about implementing multimedia resources, which are, of course, necessary, but about becoming social and cultural agglutinators enabling users to participate in the analysis and reflection process in the first person.

Seizing on the unique characteristics of the web can help to create a bridge between the theme (e.g. an exhibition) and the virtual audience, conveying sensations which go beyond the mere narrative; we simply have to adopt a specific language that transcends the traditional editorial model.

We are witnessing the emergence of new online publishing platforms of unimaginable reach and impact. The constant updating of data, the possibility of exchanging opinions between whoever produces and whoever receives the news and the level playing field that evens out local, national and international media give them extraordinary potential. It is essential, however, that they adopt the language of the web with this implies, if, after the initial surprise and curiosity, they don't want their readers to disappear even before they've shown a degree of loyalty.