

Navigating Online participation:  
individual journeys and communities

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# Introduction

The origins of this research last year were in my frustration with the exaggerated rush, with which cultural institutions turned to online platforms during the first lockdown with no particular understanding of the area or clear goal in mind. The idea was just to jump on the bandwagon of hyper-hyped notions and offer *something*. But that's the beauty of the contemporary world – every aspect develops very fast, and it wasn't too long before institutions actually started thinking their digital programs through and experimenting with formats less dependent on physical presence, which, of course, tremendously advanced digital curating in general.

So, while I've always been interested in digital spaces, these days there is much more theoretical and practical research as well as actual implementations. But – what's more important – because of such an obvious impact of online spaces on our general mode of perception of art, digital curating no longer needs to prove itself valid. The debates about the “secondary” nature of digital have been subdued, and the multiple aspects of digital are being thoroughly explored. Here's why for this paper I no longer had to pose certain basic questions, since they are derived from their problematic, and instead dive deeper into the questions I was actually interested in.

Participation as a topic for curatorial research has also always fascinated me, first of all, because curating participation does not mean combining or creating objects, but rather enabling systems. The art, the artists and the participants interact in a specific way, but the curator's role is to build the infrastructure and then let go of all the control, and I really like this idea. Second of all, I find it a beautiful challenge to curate the ephemerality of participation. This type of art exists only within the timeframe when someone is working on it, and disappears when this someone stops. Curatorially, the greatest goal, thus, would be to build the system in such a way that the participants don't want to stop before the goal of the artwork/project is realised.

Curating digital participation creates a double ephemerality, since the digital space possesses the same quality of fleetingness – it exists only when someone's watching. But, on the other hand, the benefits of the Internet as a means of connection and communication are undeniable and obvious. So, to me, the most interesting objective of research is how to follow the connecting nature of the online spaces and guide the individuals and the communities despite the ephemerality.

## 1 How does online participation function?

Over the past three decades digital participation has travelled a journey from modest attempts of networked communicative projects (a lot of which are well-documented in Net Art Anthology by Rhizome, an online collection of prominent

historical net.art works, offering perspectives on the rise of digital participation<sup>1</sup>), which were limited in time, space and technical capacity and were only trying out the possibilities of the technology and its promises for the audience involvement, to an area that is becoming more and more independent as a method of curating with a vast array of available tools and online-specific models of participation. This paper builds on my CAS thesis which focused on the question what is digital participation and what are its main elements and characteristics. My aim for this work is to dissect online participation and understand why it happened, i.e. what makes audiences participate online, and how it happens, i.e. what are the specific levels of engagement and mechanics that are available for curating participation.

This paper also specifically focuses on online participation as the main area of research, not drawing a line between digital and online, since by this time online has become arguably the main and sole space for digital participation and it is curating the web that offers the possibility of experimenting with audiences in various ways. But I am not making this distinction, following other researchers quoted in this paper (like Felix Stalder or Lev Manovich) who talk about digital cultures and digital spaces while often meaning the Internet and the online realm. But this research does not cover participatory digital art practices which are based on digital media in its traditional sense for their lack of capacity in enabling online communities.

The theoretical part of this paper will touch upon the topic of motivations behind the audience's engagement in artistic practices – in particular, in an online format; the two main theoretical approaches of this research work will offer an attempt at grading the level of digital participation depending on the goals of the artist/curator, the purposes of the work and the format capabilities.

## 1.1 What is the Mode of Participation?

One of the important questions I raised for myself before even beginning with the research was what makes audiences participate in online projects, what are the possibilities offered by the online realm that make these spaces engaging and collaborative and in which way?

The starting point for this research 1,5 years ago was the fact that the pandemic forced the cultural institutions to explore digital tools out of necessity and with little preparation or expertise in the field, which resulted in ubiquitous online initiatives which rather either offered limited copies and documentations of the physical spaces (online viewing rooms with installation views and curatorial statements, 3D tours of the physical spaces etc.) or saw their aim in re-actualising

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<sup>1</sup> Rhizome's Anthology presents "100 exemplary works in a field characterized by broad participation, diverse practices, promiscuous collaboration, and rapidly shifting formal and aesthetic standards, sketching a possible net art canon." Taken from the project statement on: <https://anthology.rhizome.org/> (last accessed on 1 May, 2022)

the institutions and almost simply reminding people of their existence for fear of losing funding, audiences, public interest. At the same time, few institutions launched proper digital programming since the online initiatives were treated as a temporary resort.

But as audiences are allowed to get back to physical experiences, and the critique of the zoom fatigue<sup>2</sup> rushes the participator to collaborate “in real life”, we still see a rather stable interest in online curating, with more institutions creating a position for a digital curator and art markets seeing consistent or even growing numbers in online sales and online events<sup>3</sup>.

So, perhaps the correct assumption is that the pandemic accelerated the processes that were happening in the art institutions before, and the discussion of whether online spaces will exist is no longer a valid premise. Rather we should focus on the specific ways in which the online spaces will develop.

When it comes to participation, there is also a lot of criticism as to whether the online participation is inferior to the physical experience<sup>4</sup>, which naturally mirrors the argument about participatory art being not aesthetic and thus inferior and might not be considered “art” at all. However, to me the rhetoric of comparing and building hierarchies between the online and the physical space is rather damaging, and it would be more productive to research and explore and define the independent logic of the online participation.

So, my argument is that online participation is an absolutely valid trajectory of participatory art, as much as digital spaces and digital curating are absolutely valid and independently developing terms. As Felix Stalder and Cornelia Sollfrank write in the introduction to the book “Aesthetics of the Commons”, suggesting to accept the digital cultures not as a question or as a promise, but as a reality, within which we as a society need to define proper ways of working, “...because our lives are, and will remain, shaped by the affordances of (digital) tools and infrastructures, and because the various practices of commons-oriented digital cultures have been a potent

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<sup>2</sup> A term that became colloquial during the pandemic, and since 2020 reached scientific use and medical journals and became an official term for “tiredness, worry or burnout associated with the overuse of virtual platforms of communication”, according to the Wikipedia article.

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zoom\\_fatigue](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zoom_fatigue) (last accessed on 1 May, 2022)

<sup>3</sup> As an example, the report by the most popular online art marketplace Artsy stated that “64% (of galleries) reported that their volume of online sales increased in 2021 compared to 2020, quelling doubts that online sales models would be temporary measures. While in-person events returned and physical spaces reopened in 2021, online selling methods continue to attract business, with 47% of the surveyed galleries reporting that their online buyers last year were mostly new customers, up from 39% in 2020.” Artsy Gallery Insights, 2022 Report, accessible online:

<https://partners.artsy.net/resource/2022-gallery-insights-report/>

<sup>4</sup> With the rise of online spaces of the cultural institutions, a lot of industry actors criticise digital experiences, which is quite representative of general industry-wide resentment. As quoted in an article “Will the increase of online exhibitions kill the physical gallery?” from the Guardian from 14 Oct 2021, “Dodji Gbedemah, founder of Kente Royal Gallery in Harlem, resents the “kazillions of online viewing rooms” he’s seen during the pandemic. “No matter what, it’s a different experience to come into a space. [Going digital] didn’t feel natural,” he said.” Available online:

<https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2021/oct/14/online-exhibitions-art-galleries> (last accessed on 1 May, 2022)

source for new imaginaries, in both online and offline practice”<sup>5</sup>. The same way, online participation is a demand, proven by pandemic times, and accelerated into being an industry default, and thus this research will treat online participation as the present and focus on understanding its laws and mechanisms.

It is also important to bring up the argument about online space as a medium being participatory just as is, per se. In his essay “Art after Web 2.0” for the catalogue of the exhibition *The Art of Participation: 1950 to now* at San Francisco Museum of Modern Art in 2008, Lev Manovich talks about the influence of the appearance of user-generated content on professional art practice and cultural production in general. He goes through phases which content platforms went through over the course of their development. Addressing the Web 2.0 as the ultimate online participatory space and using the terms “participatory media” and “user-generated content” in an interchangeable manner (“The explosion of user-created content (sometimes referred to as participatory or social media) on the web since 2005 has unleashed a new media universe.”<sup>6</sup>), Manovich suggests that every action within the context of online-residing art can be defined as participatory or collaborative.

While Manovich’s practical approach focuses more on politics of Web 2.0 and its influence on the art production, and despite the fact that the essay was written in 2008 and could not foresee the exact development of the online participation, however visionary Manovich is as a researcher, he does talk a lot about the strategies of the Web 2.0 as a participatory space and the new laws of communication: be it in the format itself or in the specific ways different actors interact. One example he brings is blogging: “Today we are seeing new kinds of communication in which content, opinion, and conversation often cannot be clearly separated. Blogging is a good example, since many stories are copied by blog writers from other sources and then commented upon.”<sup>7</sup> Or more importantly – the example of centering the online discussion on a specific piece of content: “Another novel communication situation involves conversations around a piece of media – for instance, comments added by users beneath a Flickr photo or a YouTube video that respond not only to the media object but also to one another. <...> web infrastructure and software allow these conversations to be distributed in space and time – people can respond to one another regardless of their respective locations, and the conversation can, in theory, go on forever.”<sup>8</sup>

In terms of online curating, this line of thought suggests that participatory may be the only mode generally available for the online spaces, since the methods of our production, perception and consumption of art have changed irrevocably and are permeating even the basic factual structure of the art in the digital realm. This

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<sup>5</sup> C.Sollfrank, F.Stalder, S.Niederberger (eds.), *Aesthetics of the Commons*, Diaphanes, 2021. P. 13

<sup>6</sup> Rudolf Frieling, ed., *The Art of Participation: 1950 to Now*, exh. cat. (San Francisco/ New York: SFMOMA/Thames & Hudson, 2008). P. 67

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. P. 75

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. P. 76

observation becomes practically important to be for both my theoretical research and my curatorial project, as I am looking into the participation not only as a concept and as a mobilising and community-building force, but also as a set of tools which quite simply stem from the technological development, but are effective in outlining online as an independent space and culture.

As for the new methods of communication and the participant's motivations, Manovich talks about the culture of encoded tokenization, with the token becoming an important participatory gesture: "I am thinking here of people posting pictures on one another's MySpace pages or exchanging gifts on Facebook. What kind of gift you get is less important than the act of getting a gift, or that of posting a comment or a picture."<sup>9</sup> Which translates well into the contemporary state of technology, having tokens multiplied in photo-tags, likes, algorithmically-suggested birthday wishes and contend re-shares. Quoting social media designer Adrian Chan, Manovich states: "All cultures practice the exchange of tokens that bear and carry meanings, communicate interest and count as personal and social transactions. Token gestures cue, signal, indicate users' interest in one another. While the use of tokens is not unique to social media, some of the features Chan points out do indeed appear to be new. For instance, he notes that the use of tokens is often accompanied by ambiguity of intent and motive (the token's meaning may be codified while the user's motive for using it may not)."<sup>10</sup>

This point becomes important to understand the mechanics and the motivations of the online participants which are ingrained in digital culture. The changed perception of space and temporality and the use of coded tokens define the basic premises of the online culture as well as outline the laws of how participation is built. For this curatorial research this means that these three elements structurally guide artistic/curatorial decision making, and my goal would be to build the depth between these outposts.

Thus, the assumption for this paper is that the online participation has certain levels. Depending on the audience's engagement, on the goals of the artist/curator, on selected formats, a solo participatory journey, a collaboration or a community are possible. Is it valid to assume that the participant has a role of an agent in this case at least in deciding which way to participate?

### 1.1.1 The emergence of emancipated spectator

Before taking a deep-dive into the online participant's actions, I want to draw a portrait of a participant in order to understand what drives participation. How did an "online participant" happen?

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid. P. 75

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. P. 75

To that, a case that always astonished me and made me curious about online mechanics is a famous subreddit called r/place<sup>11</sup> where an online community creates a collaborative artwork with no particular guidance, self-governing the efforts which resulted in a multi-layered digital canvas and an online archive of participants' communication. While the format is clear and the attributes are in place (placing a pixel as a token and holding a multi-thread conversation outside of time and space), the reasons for such a participation are more complicated. What was the premise on which people willingly spent 72 hours on a forum seemingly doing nothing practical other than contributing to a joint experience?

Jacques Rancière in his work "The Emancipated Spectator" starts his research from theatre, although his definitions could be easily applied to art in general: "...(theatre) is absolutely a bad thing: a scene of illusion and passivity that must be abolished in favour of what it prohibits: knowledge and action; the action of knowing and action guided by knowledge"<sup>12</sup> So, emancipation of the viewer and providing him/her with agency is the only possible approach, and a participator is in this sense the same as spectator, but the one who decided to interpret. "The spectator must be removed from the position of observer calmly examining the spectacle offered to her"<sup>13</sup>. Thus, participation starts with the desire to understand and to know. And while Rancière doesn't go that far as to connect emancipation with participation (for him, "viewing is also an action that confirms or transforms this distribution of positions;"<sup>14</sup>), I find this point important for understanding the premises of participation stemming from the spectatorship, and the direct literal act of participation is closely tied to the informed "act" of viewing.

This is an important conclusion for me as Rancière points out that the urge of participation is an internal motivation, a desire to create new meaning by joining the experience (in case of "The Emancipated Spectator" – any artistic experience is participatory, which I personally find an intriguing speculation, but not necessarily a productive one in the context of this research paper). But this highlights the individual drive of a viewer and the willingness to act, which later becomes the basis of one of my theoretical approaches and of the conceptual design of my practical project.

Additionally, since Rancière focuses his original research on theatre, starting with examples from ancient Greece, for him, emancipation is not something that "happened" with a spectator at a specific point in time or after a certain event, rather it coincides with the level of social organisation and the politics of inter-citizen relationships. "In the past, property owners who lived off their private income were referred to as active citizens, capable of electing and being elected, while those who worked for a living were passive citizens, unworthy of these duties". I.e. the

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<sup>11</sup> r/place is a communal pixel artwork hosted on reddit.com. The first experiment was held in 2017 and took 72 hours, and the community repeated the action in 2022 for a total of 4 days. The archive can be viewed here: <https://www.reddit.com/r/place/?cx=1281&cy=1133&px=199&ts=1649112460185> (last accessed on 2 May, 2022)

<sup>12</sup> J. Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, Verso, 2009. P. 2-3

<sup>13</sup> Ibid. P. 4

<sup>14</sup> Ibid. P. 13



possibility of the “active” spectator starts with the abolishment of this duality between active and passive, and for this research I would like to extend and interpret this argument, proposing that it is actually the role of the curator to offer such a platform that will not impose hierarchy and treat spectators as passive.

The reason why I am mentioning Rancière’s arguments here, despite the fact that his writing rather equalises all participation in general, as a phenomenon, while this paper is focused on defining typologies and extracting participatory stages – I believe the term “emancipation” on its own is a good find. “Emancipation begins when we challenge the opposition between viewing and acting; when we understand that the self-evident facts that structure the relationship between saying, seeing and doing themselves belong to the structure of domination and subjection”<sup>15</sup>. Thus, the use of the term itself speaks of different politics and different hierarchies within participation.

Moving on from individual presuppositions for participation (from both the curatorial and the audience’s side), I want to bring a historical perspective on participation of communities. And here, I want to borrow an observation from another researcher and practitioner from a specific field different from visual arts, musician, composer and theoretic of music John Cage. “...I try to bring about a situation in which there is no difference between the audience and the performers. And I’m not speaking of audience participation in something designed by the composer, but rather I’m speaking of the music which arises through the activity of both performers and so-called audience”.<sup>16</sup> Thus, Cage speaks about collaborative communal participation in a wider sense, “music by everyone” – and while his explanation sounds to be quite ephemeral and abstract – with music simply arising from experience – what to me is more important is the rather contemporary “networked” understanding of art and its production.

The exhibition “The Art of Participation: 1950 to Now”, the catalogue of which I quoted earlier, also included John Cage and his most famous collaborative piece “4:33” alongside works by Fluxus members Yoko Ono, Nam June Paik, Joseph Beuys, Lygia Clark, George Brecht, Allan Kaprow and an installation by Fluxus as a collective also brings Fluxus as a movement as a point in art history where participation was proposed as a method to propose a different hierarchy. Fluxus naturally never claimed to have invented audience participation as a mode of art production, but rather introduced it as a tool for societal, institutional and art critique.

Fluxus as a movement tried to minimise the mediation, which would also be interesting to me from the curatorial point of view for my practical part – where does the curatorial perspective start when speaking about participation, and how do artist and curator interact? If it is the artist who creates participatory conditions, what is the role of the curator and how it can be navigated? But what is more important to me at this stage is that Fluxus existed both individually and communally as a collective as

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid. P. 13

<sup>16</sup> Cage, John. “Reflections of a Progressive Composer on a Damaged Society.” *October* 82 (1997): 77–93. <https://doi.org/10.2307/779001>.

well as “consciously incorporated audience participation and life itself into their work”<sup>17</sup>, which added the element of chance, constituted “antibourgeois, antiart, and rebellious against Modernism”<sup>18</sup> critique, but also attempted to create a community around the movement and the artworks, which is still an important contemporary position and will be reflected in one of my main theoretical approaches.

I also believe that Fluxus art provides a lot of inspiration to practitioners with digital participatory projects due to its networked nature. There are undoubtedly strong parallels between the modes of art creation proposed by Fluxus members and the digital art production of today, influenced by networked cultures and Web 2.0 platforms.

In her essay “The Fluxus Virtual, Actually”, Natilee Harren quotes various scholar who would draw a direct historical line of succession between Fluxus art and modern digital participatory art: “New media historians and critics including Craig Saper, Christiane Paul, and Charlie Gere have highlighted the dispersed, network-like qualities of Fluxus, claiming that its international reach demonstrates an incipient “network mentality” in postwar art, or that its conceptually driven gestures and objects are fundamentally algorithmic or computational”<sup>19</sup>. Despite warning that this comparison might prove too straightforward and not reflecting the complexity and the overarching objectives of Fluxus movement (“Fluxus strategies, including those directly engaged with technology and emergent network aesthetics and social formations, were developed precisely to critically resist the dematerialization and virtualization of the artwork, the image, and the sign at the earliest moment of the cultural shift we now recognize as postmodernism, often pitting technology and computational processes against the human body and its intransigent fleshiness, excessiveness, vulnerability, ridiculousness, and sexuality. Fluxus was certainly innovative in developing alternative means of organizing creative activities and in distributing work outside the art world’s mainstreams, but this was not the collective’s singular defining characteristic.”<sup>20</sup>), the author still agrees on the influence of Fluxus on the development of networks as spaces for art, and their consecutive transition into online space. This observation is important for this research in order to highlight the community-building and community-maintaining power of participatory art and its historical premises.

Hence, my theoretical approaches are based on the assumption that there are two basic grades of curating participation, which are: creating the path for individual participation (providing conditions for emancipation of the spectator and inviting them

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<sup>17</sup> Rudolf Frieling, ed., *The Art of Participation: 1950 to Now*, exh. cat. (San Francisco/ New York: SFMOMA/Thames & Hudson, 2008). P. 94

<sup>18</sup> Ibid. P.94

<sup>19</sup> “The Fluxus Virtual, Actually”, Natilee Harren, “*Fluxus Perspectives*” *OnCurating Issue*, M. Patrick, D. Richter, ed., Issue 51/ September 2021, available on [https://www.on-curating.org/files/oc/dateverwaltung/Issue51/PDF\\_to\\_Download/OnCurating\\_51\\_WEB.pdf](https://www.on-curating.org/files/oc/dateverwaltung/Issue51/PDF_to_Download/OnCurating_51_WEB.pdf) (last accessed on 8 May 2022)

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

to interpret art through navigating an individual journey) and communal participation (distributed networked collaborative art production and engagement).

## 1.2 Individual Participator /// why-how do I participate?

Exploring the two different modes or strategies of participation, the first path I am taking is to understand what it means to participate on an individual level, and what are the cultural prerequisites for individual agency, and what are the curatorial methods to activate the individual participator.

Coming from the notion of emancipation, suggested by Rancière (as in – creating the setting for the viewer to exercise the intention to freely influence and interpret the meaning without specifically choosing a passive or an active strategy), I want to understand what makes up individual participation and if it can be navigated. It's important to note that the engagement presupposed by digital media in many cases and interactivity in general are treated rather as tools in this research, that help achieve more overarching goals (i.e. interaction does not equal participation, but can become one of its manifestations).

In her introduction to the collection of essays on participation, Claire Bishop briefly describes the cultural and social implications of “participatory impulse” and names the conditions surrounding it, borrowing the term “emancipated” and speaking of the desire to become an agent of one’s experience: “... calls for an art of participation tend to be allied to one or all of the following agendas. The first concerns the desire to create an active subject, one who will be empowered by the experience of physical or symbolic participation. The hope is that the newly-emancipated subjects of participation will find themselves able to determine their own social and political reality.”<sup>21</sup> Thus, talking about the relationship between the subject and a work of art, Bishop speaks of creating conditions in which individuals would be able to build their own meaning and their own experience or art.

I think this translates extremely well into digital curating, first of all, for reasons mentioned by Lev Manovich, arguing that the development of technology and Web 2.0 forced everyone to become a co-producer, and thus participate in creating meaning. So, art that exists online is very exposed to co-experiencing – from commenting, resharing, remixing to interpreting and contributing. In a way, Web 2.0 strengthened and normalised the participation as a mode of perception. Another important reason (which also distinguishes the digital realm) is the democratisation of process and access, which means that networked art and participatory work deals with completely different audiences.

Bishop also names another element that concerns individual agency in participatory art. “The second argument concerns authorship. The gesture of ceding

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<sup>21</sup> *Participation*, Collection of essays edited and with the foreword by C.Bishop, ed. 2006 Cambridge, The MIT Press. P.12

some or all authorial control is conventionally regarded as more egalitarian and democratic than the creation of a work of art by a single artist, while shared production is also seen to entail the the aesthetic benefits of greater risk and unpredictability. Collaborative creativity is therefore understood both to emerge from, and to produce, a more positive and non-hierarchical social model.”<sup>22</sup>

Hence, the participation can be directly linked to the individual intention of having more rights, more authorship, more impact. Although, authorship per se constitutes a problematic for participation, in particular – in online spaces, as Rudolf Frieeling writes in his essay “Towards Participation in Art” in the catalogue of the show “The Art of Participation: 1950 to Now”: “Despite the demise proclaimed by Roland Barthes, we cannot seem to get rid of the author; the harder we try the stronger the myth returns. Ultimately, if artists wish to operate within the art world, they will inevitably be perceived as the ones responsible for the work, even if they involve collaborators, let others take on actual production, utilize online networks, or <...> court unknown participants”<sup>23</sup>. While online participatory authorship is not the focus of this research, this is one of the challenging questions, alongside marketability of online participatory art, that curators have to carefully answer.

The more democratic production tactics provide the participant with the possibility of influence and an opportunity to alter hierarchies, according to Bishop. If we transfer this argument to the digital spaces, in my opinion, the logic and the motivation stay the same, however the execution becomes even more immediate and distributed, eliminating numerous barriers of participation in physical spaces, i.e. chains of communication, spatial limitations, and temporality.

Curator’s work with individual participants in online spaces entails creating and enabling what Rudolf Frieeling refers to as “open systems”<sup>24</sup>, the space designed to encourage interaction in its “true sense”: “an opening up to conditions, locations, and participants who contribute actively to the realization of a participatory work.”<sup>25</sup>

Frieeling also questions the term “interactivity” itself in reference to networked art, which might be euphemistic, mentioning a term “interpassivity” proposed by Robert Pfaller, which might be better suited to describe the works where interaction is understood as simple choosing from a list of prepared options, which is an observation I would like to extend in this research paper, and continue utilising the notion of “interactivity” in its literal sense, when touching upon individual participation in contrast to collaboration in communities.

So, the individual participant in an online space is a self-proclaimed interpreter, who exists within flat hierarchies of the networked open systems and has the power of the agency and, thus, a motivation to author, driven by social, technological, political developments, surpassing the temporal, spatial and

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid. P.12

<sup>23</sup> R.Frieeling, *Toward Participation in Art*. R.Frieeling, ed., *The Art of Participation: 1950 to Now*, exh. cat. (San Francisco/ New York: SFMOMA/Thames & Hudson, 2008). P. 35

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

communicational constraints, and operating within the structures of digital cultures. Motivation “to generate, to change, to contribute, to enact, to dialogue, to appropriate, to tag, etc.”<sup>26</sup>

What is also important to me in the context of analysing the individual implications of online participation is the conceptualising of online as a space-like construction, a geography. This is a helpful notion for this research as well as for the practical project since it concretizes the format of individual interaction, and defines the directions and the mechanics. Online cultures borrow a lot of vocabulary from spatial orientation, including *mapping, navigating, pinning, sites* etc. Following Manovich’s line of thought, online interaction is very encoded, and in that it also holds resemblance to cartography, with pictography, encoded titles, and the assumption that the “users” will possess the knowledge of the code.

Our interaction with online platforms does look like a spatial journey, in which our goal is to **find** a way by moving from one site to another, simultaneously tracking the touchpoints to be able to reproduce the journey and at the same time subjectifying our experience and creating our own personal map of data/interactions/perceptions.

Here I would like to borrow the understanding of subjectivity from another historical artistic movement – situationism, which, in a big part, existed as a societal critique, seeing its aim in questioning capitalistic systems and the notion of spectacle. In their practice, situationists rely on geography and cartography, in an attempt to promote a different relationship with urban spaces. Psychogeography was a term developed by situationists to reflect exactly that – a discovery of spaces through alternative subjective intimate mechanisms. “Situationists regarded the best urban activity as human, unmechanised, and non alienating.”<sup>27</sup>

Situationists maps show an infinite number of possibilities for navigating around. They appear without a proper geometry that organises the conventional elements, they are opposed to the modern vision of the space. They indeed offer a more personal view, an interpretation of the space. “Situationist maps declare an intimacy with the city alien to the average street map”<sup>28</sup>.

This concept becomes very useful for this research in terms of connecting subjective cartographies with the online participation, as both of the acts bear so much resemblance. The literal transposing of the situationists’ concept of maps onto online spaces helps define a clear idea of what the curatorial task might be in this relation – something of a road worker who paves the possibilities of choice for the navigation, but leaves the system open in terms of personal experience of the space.

The digital space can therefore be defined as an invisible territory, that comprehends a constellation of experiences and images that float freely, in a non-hierarchical way, exactly as it happens in the human mind. Art participation in this

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> S. Sadler, *The Situationist City*, The MIT Press Cambridge, 1998. Massachusetts, London, England. P. 92

<sup>28</sup> Ibid. P.82.

regard means to me a method of subjective mapping through online space, which includes interacting and interpreting, i.e. actively contributing on an individual level while participating in a way of creating a singular experience.

The co-authorship in a form of subjective navigation generally outlines the digital participation, and as a curatorial method, it will be the central line of the design of the practical project.

### 1.3 Communal Participator /// why-how do we participate?

Individual participation is a mode of interaction where “I” decide for myself whether to engage in the situation or not, depending on “my” level of comfort, interest in the theme, artist’s methods of activation, “my” own motivations to interpret the idea / the project. If we move this individual to a context with multiple individuals in the same situation, we can also speak about communal level of participation, the level of interaction where I decide to engage in a collaborative action to either jointly create one experience or simultaneously create multiple experiences, guided by the curated conditions.

Building on the research from the previous paper, I want to reuse some arguments, proposed by Sarah Cook and Beryl Graham, Felix Stalder and Legacy Russell and extend them into a more comprehensive and perhaps more pragmatic understanding of communality and bring these observations together to answer the question, why we participate as a community, and understand how a curator can work with communal participator.

In “Rethinking Curating” Sarah Cook and Beryl Graham offered good basic touchpoints, helpful to describe and build a typology of participation. Despite understanding interaction as any “acting upon each other” (“interactions might occur between people, between people and machines, between machines, or between artwork and audience”<sup>29</sup>), the authors do juxtapose interactive and collaborative art. Even though at this point I no longer think separating the notion of “interaction” is a productive strategy (I rather consider it an overarching aspect of all art that involves engagement of an emancipated spectator), I find their argumentation important and valuable in highlighting the peculiarities of collaboration.

However, same as Rudolf Frieling, while accepting “interaction” as a mode of engagement, Cook and Graham also admit that in a lot of cases it is more simply a “reaction – human presses keys or triggers sensors, and the machine or computer program reacts”<sup>30</sup>. Essentially, technology can provide highly complex, engaging reactions, while not being able to offer symmetrical communication with human, thus rather facilitating “a platform for kinds of interactions between human and human, <...>, as the artwork’s acting as a host”<sup>31</sup>.

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<sup>29</sup> B.Graham, S.Cook, *Rethinking Curating: Art after New Media*, MIT Press, 2015. P.112

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., P.112

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., P.113

Collaboration is the only process that assumes a certain level of equality of participants and is focused on the modes of art production rather than the relationship between the audience and the work of art.

Graham and Cook also share the view that digital participation and socially-engaged art share a lot in common: new media / digital art is more concerned with systems and processes than objects, so the choice of media itself plays a secondary role to facilitating a community, which lines up with the argument by Manovich – Web 2.0 becomes participatory per se, just in its social condition and communal promise, so that the exact medium is orthogonal to the objective.

Central to my research last year was the question if digital participation can exist independently and be treated as a support act to the physical space. Looking back, Covid has probably helped accelerate the process of accepting the digital space as a self-sustaining structure, and the question of vitality of digital participation has lost its problematic, but it's not only the pandemic that impacted the development: social promises, technological advance and political changes reflected in the expansion of community participation in the digital realm, same as it did for individual participation.

What Clare Bishop named “Social Turn” in her essay “The Social Turn: Collaboration And Its Discontents” for Artforum in 2006 (“the recent surge of artistic interest in collectivity, collaboration, and direct engagement with specific social constituencies”<sup>32</sup>), according to her, is conditioned by political and societal shifts. “It is tempting to date the rise in visibility of these practices to the early 1990s, when the fall of Communism deprived the Left of the last vestiges of the revolution that had once linked political and aesthetic radicalism.”<sup>33</sup> What started as an anti-capitalistic promise, took on a shape of full alternative movement: “...the creative energy of participatory practices rehumanizes—or at least de-alienates—a society rendered numb and fragmented by the repressive instrumentality of capitalism”<sup>34</sup>.

The desire to oppose capitalism while existing in the same structures, is a cultural motivation for the appearance of communities as a method of production: “artists are increasingly judged by their working process—the degree to which they supply good or bad models of collaboration—and criticized for any hint of potential exploitation that fails to “fully” represent their subjects, as if such a thing were possible. This emphasis on process over product (i.e., means over ends) is justified as oppositional to capitalism’s predilection for the contrary”<sup>35</sup>.

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<sup>32</sup> C.Bishop, *The Social Turn: Collaboration And Its Discontents*, Artforum, Feb. 2006, available online at: <https://www.artforum.com/print/200602/the-social-turn-collaboration-and-its-discontents-10274> (last accessed on 17 May 2022)

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

Speaking about cultural prerequisites for participation, Bishop also names the modernist condition, summing up the social place of the artist: “This mixed panorama of socially collaborative work arguably forms what avant-garde we have today: artists using social situations to produce dematerialized, antimarket, politically engaged projects that carry on the modernist call to blur art and life”<sup>36</sup>.

So, artistically and curatorially, collaborative art reflects the desire to activate the social side by demolishing capitalistic and political power structures.

Bishop dubs this line of thought in “Participation”, naming communality as the third cornerstone of participatory art, together with activation and authorship, as mentioned in the previous chapter: “The third issue involves a perceived crisis in community and collective responsibility. This concern has become more acute since the fall of Communism, although it takes its lead from a tradition of Marxist thought that indicts the alienating and isolating effects of capitalism. One of the main impetuses behind participatory art has therefore been a restoration of the social bond through a collective elaboration of meaning”<sup>37</sup>.

And if a restoration of social bond was much more of a laborious process with physical spaces, online participation has liberated the community from the limitations. As mentioned earlier, communication distribution, space, time are no longer obstacles, but rather new immediate dimensions that make participation more accessible, democratic and inclusive. Besides, online spaces make it easier to activate an undefined larger group of participants, and arguably create stronger connections by being easier to maintain and faster to develop internal codes.

Rudolf Frieing confirms this argument about social bond, connecting it to the contemporary role of the museum, while I want to add the online realm to this call, as a valid communal space. He writes, quoting Nicolas Bourriaud’s “Relational Aesthetics”, Chantal Mouffe’s “The Mistakes of the Moralistic Response” and Jean-Luc Nancy’s “The Imperative Community”: “To say that artists can “fill in the cracks in the social bond” may overemphasize their role, but many practitioners do understand their work as an articulation of social conditions, including “the participation of a multiplicity of voices in the democratic agon, thereby helping to mobilize passions towards democratic objectives.” Chantal Mouffe’s philosophical critique of conciliatory notions of community and Jean-Luc Nancy’s insistence on the community as an interruption of singularities (“Community is made of interruption of singularities ... community is not the work of singular beings”) make us aware of potential conflicts that may be addressed. These ideas might inspire administrative and curatorial anxiety, but they should also be understood as possibilities for shaping a more inclusive form of practice. The museum, from this perspective, is no longer a

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> *Participation*, Collection of essays edited and with the foreword by C.Bishop, ed. 2006 Cambridge, The MIT Press. P.12



container for art, nor does it manufacture consensual communities. If successful, it becomes a producer of and an arena for social and aesthetic experiences, temporarily interrupting singularities through the presentation of participatory art that actively generates a discursive public space.”<sup>38</sup>

I read this argument as a proof for the existence of an own logic of communal participation. Community is a proper element of participatory art, and “I” might choose to add a communal identity to my individual participation (interrupt the singularity) to access a network, to connect to other participants, to “be part of”.

Additionally, I want to highlight the “curatorial anxiety” brought up by Frieling, as it is a rather appropriate metaphor for curating communal participation – it is connected to the challenges a curator might face when activating the community, since many factors need to be accounted for in order to create an open communal system, but it also entails a certain level of risk, since the curator can focus on the process and plan the road, but the result is very much out of the hands of the curator.

But it also can be argued that communal participation is not just an element for an online space, but rather its essence. Felix Stalder in “Digital Condition” marks the focus on communities as the core of digital existence. Stalder names three decisive forms of the digital condition: referentiality, algorithmicity, and communality, which is a notion that he suggests as a compromise between (or out of dissatisfaction with) the notions of “community” and “society”.

While both the terms describe how people organise themselves in a group, both of them represent very polarised positions. On one side, the community benefits from close social connections and high level of trust, but is too fixed of a network, and too conservative to develop and invent (warm, but static); on the other side, the society is much more open to progress, but is too individualistic and separated (dynamic, but cold)<sup>39</sup>. Hence the term, relatively free from biases – communality. New types of communality “are formed in a field of practice, characterised by informal yet structured exchange, focused on the generation of new ways of knowing and acting, and maintained through the reflective interpretation of their own activity”<sup>40</sup>. This way Stadler’s notion of collaboration online becomes more fluid and more inclusive and highlights the ability of the digital as a space in and of itself.

He continues by touching upon online identities that form communalities and their ways of intersubjective interaction and self-organisation: “In the act of incessant communication <...> the personal desire for self-constitution and orientation becomes enmeshed with the outward pressure of having to be present and available

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<sup>38</sup> R.Frieling, *Toward Participation in Art*. R.Frieling, ed., *The Art of Participation: 1950 to Now*, exh. cat. (San Francisco/ New York: SFMOMA/Thames & Hudson, 2008). P. 48

<sup>39</sup> F.Stalder, *Digital Condition*, Polity Press, 2018. P. 82

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., P. 84

<...>. These communal and continuous accounts of learning, practising, and orientation – the exchange, that is, between “novices” and “experts” on the same field, be it concerned with internet politics, illegal street racing, extreme right-wing music, body modification, or a free encyclopaedia – serve to maintain the framework of shared meaning, expand the constituted field, recruit new members, and adapt the framework of interpretation and activity to changing conditions”<sup>41</sup>. Confirming the “spaceless ongoing present”<sup>42</sup> of the online communities, Stalder thus proposes the definition of roles and laws of the community in a very practical sense.

The attention of others becomes the most desired resource, and the provided feedback means mutual recognition. The participants are seen as authentic, as they engage voluntarily and do not represent any external authority other than themselves. But this authenticity is no longer static or final, which is different from traditional participatory forms – redefining oneself is not only accepted and trusted but also encouraged. Thus, communal participation allows me to once again abandon the singularity and manifest a different level of engagement.

“The self is no longer understood in essentialist terms but rather performatively. <...> the concern here is not to preserve authenticity but rather to create it in the moment”<sup>43</sup>. “Networked” Identities are born with the digital formation itself and they live on if confirmed with the formation’s feedback. Both stable for its scale and fragile for the need of constant presence, these digital formations of weakly-tied fluid identities expand to become sustainable and valuable methods of disintegrating institutions which can no longer be responsible for “forming identities and meaning”<sup>44</sup>, confirming that the communality becomes its own entity, an agent.

Building up on these arguments, another writing that outlines the communal participation in a very productive way is “Glitch Feminism, A Manifesto” by Legacy Russell. In the chapter “Glitch Mobilizes”, Russell points out that digital realm provides opportunities for propositions “for new modalities of being and newly proposed worlds”<sup>45</sup>. For her the Internet also adds a certain level of emotional freedom to how communities express themselves. “The Internet continues to be a place of immense intimacy, where an “opening up” of being can occur, and where one can dare to be vulnerable. The Internet’s virtual channels provide protection from physical injury, make room for an expression of ideas and politics in a fantastic forum, thus amplifying collectivity, coalition-building, and one’s courage to individuate”<sup>46</sup>.

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., P. 84-85

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., P. 91

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., P. 88-89

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., P. 89

<sup>45</sup> L.Russell, *Glitch Feminism, A Manifesto*, Verso Books, 2020. P. 123

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., P. 124-125

So, for Russell, online spaces also add a feeling of freedom and bravery in this enhanced ability to unite, individuate and (re)identify. Despite being quite declarative and hopeful, these ideas indicate another change in perception of the digital, which now seems to be able to respond to the promise of enabling and mobilizing meaningful communities. Even more so – the communities become more flexible, relevant and intense. “In mobilizing, we find others like us, and, in so doing, we find ourselves. In mobilizing, we remain fugitive: we stand on the outside, not to look in, but, stateless, to occupy and grow with intention. This mobility is gorgeous, slippery, keyed up, catastrophic. It is the thing that keeps us blurry and unbound, pushing back against hegemony”<sup>47</sup>.

Combining the thoughts of Stalder and Russell, online space becomes a more politically-enabled space, and if the individual participant was already an agent, the community of participants becomes a mobilised force. Which brings me to the last point about communal participation – its performative politics and its precarity.

Judith Butler in “Notes Toward A Performative Theory of Assembly” writes about the performative aspect of the public assembly and its precarity, which she rather builds around public bodily manifestations, making the examples of movements like “Black Lives Matter”, but in the current societal situation with the political importance of online action her arguments become valid for the online space as well.

Although Butler’s writing concerns a political act and the precarity she uses as the characteristic of public assembly, is defined as “politically induced condition of maximised vulnerability and exposure for populations exposed to arbitrary state violence, to street or domestic violence, or other forms not enacted by states but for which the judicial instruments of states fail to provide sufficient protection or redress”<sup>48</sup>, I believe that a more reduced notion of precarity is rather important to understand the dynamics of online communities. With online spaces capable of becoming political platforms, and with participants placing themselves exposed to unknown networks and uncontrolled agents and open up to judgement, bullying, harassment and threats, precarity becomes an important aspect for curatorial considerations.

Regarding the performative aspect of the communities – performative space and the performing body – Butler explains that “performativity characterizes first and foremost that characteristic of linguistic utterances that in the moment of making the utterance makes something happen or brings some phenomenon into being”<sup>49</sup>. That way Butler raises the question of the immediacy of bodily performative acts and explores the ways bodies are connected to one another in big open systems, thus,

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid., P.129

<sup>48</sup> J. Butler, *Notes Toward A Performative Theory of Assembly*. Harvard University Press. 2015. P. 33

<sup>49</sup> Ibid. P. 28

touching upon the ephemerality of performing community as a spaceless and timeless being.

“Freedom does not come from me or from you; it can and does happen as a relation between us, or indeed, among us. So this is not a matter of finding the human dignity within each person, but rather of understanding the human as a relational and social being, one whose action depends upon equality and articulates the principle of equality [...] The claim of equality is not only spoken or written, but is made precisely when bodies appear together, or rather, when through their action, they bring the space of appearance into being”<sup>50</sup>.

The performance of the community becomes important for the curatorial decisions, since the online community does exist in the third space between nowhere and right here and between now and never, so one of the questions I state with my curatorial project is how to activate this online ephemeral immediacy.

## 2 Examples

As case studies for this paper I wanted to bring the projects which I not only participated in myself but - for some of them – also worked on and took part in creation, so that I can not only analyse the audience side but also estimate the curatorial implications of these projects as participatory systems.

I have selected three case studies that quite clearly outline the different levels of participation I explored within my theoretical framework, as well as provide inspiration for my own curatorial intentions in the practical part of this research, where I will try to combine and intertwine these modes of interaction under an overarching concept of a networked navigation system.

### 2.1 Example one – Me

The project I want to bring in this part is not yet realised or published as it took many months in the making, but nonetheless it will most certainly be live within the upcoming weeks, so the curatorial premises can be confidently discussed.

*Screen Walks Folders* is an extension of the program of *Screen Walks*, a series of bi-weekly online events which “invite selected artists to perform guided explorations of specific online and digital spaces in which their core artistic research and practice takes place. Each video stream is conceived as a format blurring the boundaries between a guided tour and a workshop, offering a behind-the-scenes look at an artist’s practice as well as the chance to discover new, current and forgotten digital spaces”<sup>51</sup>. Not forced by the pandemic, but conceived as a response

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid. P. 88

<sup>51</sup> *Screen Walks*, curatorial statement, taken from <https://screenwalks.com/> (last accessed on 17 May, 2022)

to it, the project has existed for over two years now, with the events ranging from a YouTube performance to a Google Street View journey.

*Screen Walks* have been steadily able to bring in a consistent audience throughout the past months, despite the less relevant pandemic limitations and zoom fatigue. The programming includes participatory and performative events from the side of artistic content, but also due to the nature of the program, *Screen Walks* were able to create an active living supportive community.

So, the next step for the curatorial team was to offer a subjective individual interactive experience – and the project *Folders* was born.

From curatorial statement: “Folders is a shared space for friends and supporters of *Screen Walks* where you receive digital artworks, audio files, physical publications, collection of GIFs, video messages and much more, from the artists featured in *Screen Walks*. You will get a personal folder, with content curated based on your preferences and interests. We will constantly add files to your folder, filling it with exciting and inspiring materials created specifically for the *Screen Walks* community.”<sup>52</sup>

So, the idea is to offer one more point of connection – this time between the regular audience (the regular *Screen Walks* participants) and the artists. Two ideas are important here: first of all, this platform gives the audience a direct line of communication with the artists (albeit through the mediation of a curator, but this time acting rather instrumentally – as an administrator), which is a big factor of engagement. It brings the element of unexpectedness, a voyeuristic aspect and a feeling of exclusivity. But another important idea is that while personalising the interaction, the platform is also an extension of the community, where participants see each other (or each others’ folders) and realise the social bonds.

The next step in curating *Folders* will be to enable the participants to upload something back (it has always been the plan, but for the testing phase and due to technological complications, this has been postponed to stage 2 of the project). So, the aim is to create a participatory dialogue, so that eventually *Folders* will become a co-authored library.

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<sup>52</sup> Not available online, requested directly from the curatorial team.

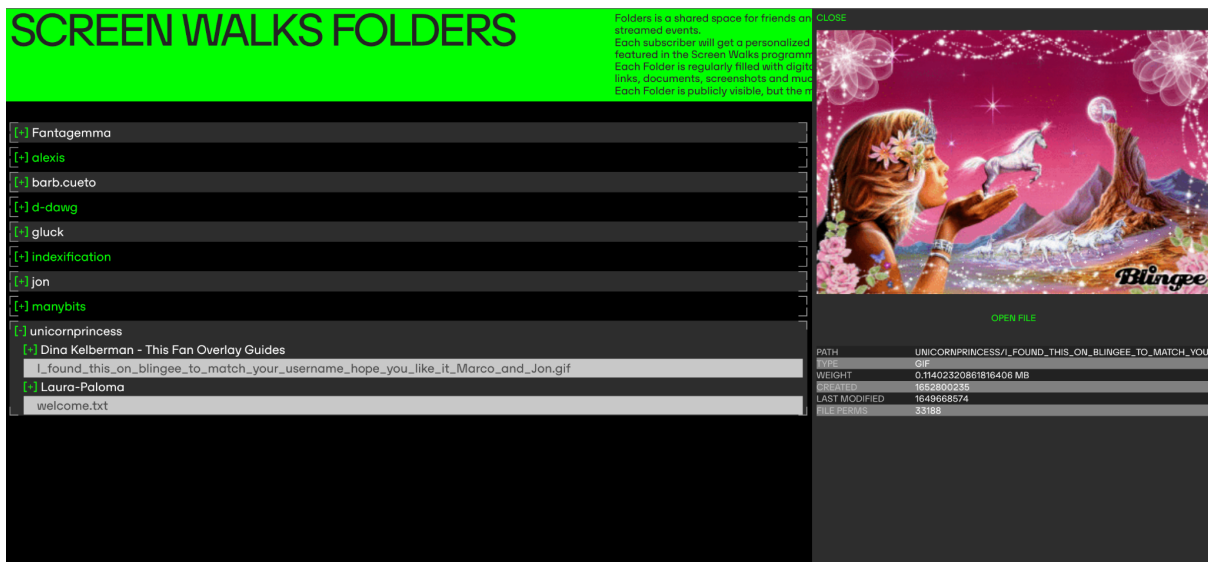


Image 1

## 2.2 Example two – Many to one (Crowdsourced art)

The type of participation which I did not particularly outline as a separate one in the previous chapters, but which constitutes an in-between space between individual and communal participation – participation that involves multiple authors of the same meaning.

*Are we all here? Exploring Embodied Virtuality Today* is a group show that was on view in November 2021 at the OnCurating Project Space. “It highlights the discourses around connectivity and intimacy through the use of digital tools, from the beginnings of the internet in the early 1990s to its development in the following decades. With the onset of the current circumstances set by the COVID-19 pandemic, societies are – more than ever – confronted with (self-)isolation, loss of physical contact and singularisation in an increasing shift of social interactions into digital space. Conceived in this situation, the project has taken early net artworks from the 1990s and 2000s as an opportunity to explore our today’s changed behavior of closeness, intimacy and other relations with humans and non-humans through digital means.”<sup>53</sup>

The exhibition explored multiple aspects of digital connectivity, and while being quite classical in terms of presentation, it included several projects that dealt with participation.

First example I want to make is the Essay on Digital Intimacy which was realised under the guidance of the choreographer Be van Vark. “A series of workshops on digital choreography with a group of people, most of whom have never

<sup>53</sup> From the exhibition’s curatorial statement available online: <https://www.arenweallhere.net/documentation> (last accessed on 17 May, 2022)

been in the same room together resulted in this video documentation of simultaneous discomfort and intimacy that digital means can enable and impose. A brief study on online connection, its challenges, and its beauty.”<sup>54</sup> This project was a collaborative online effort to collectively explore the notion of digital intimacy, and through its performative execution over several workshops it presented a clear instance of curating an online community (albeit, not an uncontrolled mass, but rather a limited group). While the resulting presentation is not participatory at all, the work itself speaks about curatorial challenges of online participation – equally from the side of the curator and the audience.



Image 2

The second project, that corresponds to the topic of this research not only in its concept but also in the final presentation, is *Teleporting an Unknown State* by Eduardo Kac. The on-site installation created “the experience of the Internet as a life-supporting system. In a dark room a pedestal with soil serves as a nursery for a plant. Webcams placed in several countries are activated remotely by individuals who want to transmit light to the plant to enable photosynthesis and insure its survival in total darkness. The installation takes the idea of teleportation of particles (and not of matter) out of its scientific context and transposes it to the domain of social interaction enabled by the networked environment. Through the collaborative action of anonymous individuals around the world, photons are teleported and used to sustain life of a vulnerable plant in the installation site. In the context of an ongoing pandemic the work highlights the value of acting together and the importance of a network of care; the care of the human body, of the human world but also the care of

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

non-human realities and thus reflecting on the multitude of organisms and relations that make possible the worlds we evolve with”<sup>55</sup>.

This project activated a community, and in a rather simple way conceptually, but it naturally played with the social bonds and the feeling of care, even though the idea itself didn’t involve authorship from the participants, but participation was an indispensable element of the artwork.



Images 3 and 4

### 2.3 Example three – Many to many (Participation by invitation)

Final example is the manifestation of the enabled open participatory system with uncontrolled participants, in which I personally did not take part in curating, but which serves as a big inspiration for the platform design of the practical part of this paper.

Small Projects for Coming Communities is a curatorial platform which collects scores and their responses. The project “wants to explore questions of how and where forms of communities can develop in unforeseeable ways and tries to shape communities exceeding boundaries of regionalism. We are interested in communities’ ephemeral structures and transversal framework conditions, in the changing desires but also reflect on the limits and the dangers of utilization of these fragile formations”<sup>56</sup>.

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> From the project’s curatorial statement available online: <https://www.comingcommunities.org/category/en/about/> (last accessed on 17 May, 2022)



While digital participation is not a deliberate focus of this project, its execution is mostly digital, in both curatorial and audience participation. What is important to me here is that the platform is designed rather simplistically and the scores themselves are not always overly complicated which is certainly a strength of the platform.

These invitations take on in many ways the traditions of the Fluxus movement and through the social-media-like or forum-like design unite the participants in their ways of expression, interpretation and collaboration.

**Itinerary poem**  
Ronald Kolb

**Dream Color**  
Eriko Miyata

**small steps in both directions**  
Sabrina Karl

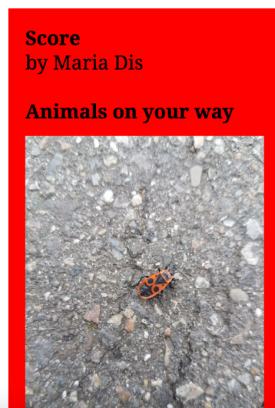
**A few words**  
Eva Dörr

**Score for Small Communities**  
Discoteca Flaming Star

**Diversity Dinner**  
Anastasia Chaguidouline



**Social Media Posts**



**Score**  
by Maria Dis

**Animals on your way**

**Score**  
by Bill Dietz  
**Lag Monument**

**Score**  
by Ronald Kolb  
**Pictures in our cell phone**

Image 5

### 3 Curatorial Proposal – *Navigating.love*

*Navigating.love* – an online map of love experiences, where a visitor goes through stages of the relationship, making decisions and navigating through artworks responding to the topic, selecting the level of participation, appropriate and accessible for the visitor. The project offers varying forms of participation on both the level of the artwork and the platform itself combining individual participatory project, performative variations and communal invitations, exploring the aspects of relationship, increasingly existing in digital space.

#### 3.1 Concept

Today, everything about love is digital, or at least moved to the digital space: dates are algorithmically calculated and filtered, social media is turned into a giant tool of expressing one's feelings and validate decisions, even the most intimate moments are screenshotted, reshared and saved for eternity. The internet as a whole provides comprehensive guidance on each step of the relationship. Love exists online. What does it mean – to have a love life in the digital era?

The exhibition *navigating.love* will start as an online platform presenting digital-based artworks which explore certain topics within the context of digitised relationships. The platform will invite the visitors to navigate the subjective narrative of a fictional relationship through the artistic positions, guiding invitations and curatorial interventions. The visitor will select a personal journey and choose an individual level of participation in each point.

The title of the project uses the *.love* domain which is typically reserved by dating sites, while *navigating* refers to the platform's design, presenting an online map which will allow for multiple interaction trajectories as well as a variety of participative strategies: from individual practices, realised privately by the viewer following an invitation; to participatory artworks, offering 1-to-1 interaction within the project; to collaborative community pieces, enabling visitor contributions that later become part of the exhibition.

The project will constitute 4 levels of participation, which will need to be designed separately:

1. Navigation

Subjective interaction with the platform itself – me creating a meaningful experience which will be strictly individual (although the narrative will, of course, be repeated, due to the limitations of the content, but the choices and the interpretations will be personal.) The resulting subjective map of the platform's experience is reflective of the individual participation analysis offered in the second chapter.

2. Individual participation

Artistic projects that will invite the participant to interpret and author the artwork itself, on a 1-to-1 basis.

3. Many participants creating one

Artistic systems inviting participants to create a single work with multiple authorship.

4. Many participants creating many

Artistic open invitations that outline the framework but do not limit the execution and do not demand a particular result.

This, of course, is a preliminary list of formats that I am aiming at, but not limited by, and some projects would also include performative or strictly aesthetic digital aspects.

The artworks will each correspond to a specific aspect of a relationship (first dates, being a couple, breakup etc.), which will be visually separated with the help of the platform's design, which will be presented through a map of objects and

locations. The participants will be invited to select a starting point and will then be guided through a variety of narratives with the help of intermissions, curatorial interventions and connectors.

Our work on this project will be divided into 4 segments:

#### 1. Research & map design

Our aim as curators will be to also build a participatory system for our own research, i.e. inventing strategies to crowdsource design elements and curatorial decisions, using existing online spaces and platforms to concretify the concept etc. The main goal of this stage is translating mechanisms of digital culture in general into a shared common ground (basic background for how the platform will work, with different starting points etc.).

#### 2. Journey planning & interventions/invitations

On the level of thematics, we aim at critiquing attention economy and providing an alternative for a “slow love”, a “slow online”, so this stage will be focused on strategising the narrative, so that it brings a mode of production totally different from the conventional.

#### 3. Artworks presentation

Bringing the artistic lens into the project will entail touching upon and critiquing different aspects of digital love through the multitude of artistic positions and their participatory formats. What is important to note here is that we as curators will work together with artists to translate artworks into the online participatory space, if originally the mode of presentation was much more straightforward. What we also notice during the research phase is that this part is not the most decisive or the most important when it comes to designing the platform.

#### 4. Artworks in the physical space

On the one hand, it is important to us to involve a physical space to juxtapose it with the online, and to outline the borders, the intersections and the places in between. On the other hand, we want to place the physical body - by slowing down love, we're bringing it back into the “body” and the bodily experience, and connecting it to the experience of physical love.

## 3.2 Where and when/Institutional cooperations

The project will be launched online with a reduced short-term presentation of artworks that can be translated into physical form. The launch event will coincide with the publication and launch of OnCurating Digital issue on digital curating in November, 2022.

The project will be realised in cooperation with Maria Elena Garzoni, a freelance curator and publishing manager, based in Zurich.

Possible cooperations include coproduction of one or several works and events with Fotomuseum Winterthur (through a co-hosted event and joint content

with the Screen Walks program), Haus der Elektronische Künste (HEK) Basel and supporting an event through theatre festival Theater Spektakel in Zurich.

### 3.3 Artists and featured artworks

The project will feature the following artists and their works:

1. Setting the scene of the experience

A score on collaborative soundscape “How does love sound?” with visitor contributions, who will be asked to submit a recording which would represent the sound of love for each visitor. The soundscape would be available online and regularly updated, accompanying the online experience, with a possibility of a live performance with the artist on a later date.

2. Step 1 – Meeting people

The viral project *Amazon Dating*<sup>57</sup> by **Ani Acopian** and **Suzy Shinn** will be featured in the exhibition in the same format as it was originally launched. It’s an online platform which combines the representation strategies of the dating sites with the aesthetics and the mechanics of the online marketplace Amazon, offering real people’s profiles in the form of products on sale. The slightly controversial project has its aim in touching upon the topics of attention economy, commodification of relationships and online self-representation in the era of digital capitalism.

**Simon Senn** will present the work *Be Arielle F* for which the artist “purchased the digital copy of a female body online, then embarked on a quest to meet the woman whose body he would go on to inhabit thanks to virtual reality. He takes to the stage to share his uncanny experience”<sup>58</sup>. The work will be featured in the form of video documentation of the research and the performance and potentially as a live performance on a later date.

As an intervention on the platform, viewers will also be invited to interact with *dSimon* – an AI-powered text generator, which was trained on the writing of Simon Senn (his documents, artistic statements, messages etc.), so it almost obtains the identity of Senn, and starts mastering its language, phrasing and contextual recognition.

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<sup>57</sup> *Amazon Dating*, project accessible at: <https://amazondating.co/> (last accessed on 18 April, 2022)

<sup>58</sup> *Be Arielle F* project description, taken from <http://www.simonsenn.com/be-arielle-f/> (last accessed on 18 April, 2022)

### 3. Step 2 – Dating / Keeping Contact

*critiquemydickpic* tumblr channel (aka **Madeleine Holden**) is an online archive where the author used to “review dick pics based on their photographic merits, taking into account factors like lighting, tone, and the relative merits of various angles and poses, but never the state of a sender’s body or size of their penis”<sup>59</sup>, creating an unusual online community, at the same time raising the question of self-representation in the context of contemporary image culture and giving a critical take on the unsolicited nudes as the modern relationship phenomenon. The project will be presented in the form of online documentation, which will also represent tumblr as an important platform for artistic collaborative spaces and an influential participatory medium of the early 2000s.

A digital score by **Sarah Oberrauch/Ronal Kolb & OnCurating Project Space**, based on *skinonskinonskin* by **Auriea Harvey** and **Michaël Samyn**. The original artwork *skinonskinonskin* (1999) was “a series of digital love letters sent between artists who met in 1999, and began a romance by exchanging interactive web pages, in Flash, audio, text, and images. Originally sharing their “letters” solely with one another, Harvey and Samyn later made them available to paid subscribers as an online artwork”<sup>60</sup>.

The score will invite the visitors of the online platform to share Digital Love Letters, free-form ways they expressed/could imagine expressing emotions online. The score wants to seek current interpretations of the use of digital means as a space of closeness and intimacy.

### 4. Step 3 – Being a couple

**Mikhail Bushkov** will present the work *Computer Nude* which is a series of online experiments he carried out on the basis of most widespread porn platforms. In his experiments, the artist explores how the porn-sites influence our self-representation, our notions of sexuality and attraction and in general, the understanding of our bodies.

The exhibition will also feature a set of AI generated Valentine’s day cards created by **Janelle Shane** as part of the blog *AI Weirdness*, which would refer to the vague line in the modern communication between our own agency and manipulative/suggestive strategies of contemporary media that create and guide our communication for us, from mobile auto-complete function to social media forcing us

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<sup>59</sup> “I critique dick pics” by Madeleine Holden, published on 13 December, 2017 on Medium, accessible at: <https://medium.com/s/strange-work/i-critique-dick-pics-39d386cc9288> (last accessed on 18 April, 2022)

<sup>60</sup> *skinonskinonskin* by Auriea Harvey and Michaël Samyn, from the project description published as a part of Net Art Anthology on Rhizome, accessible at <https://anthology.rhizome.org/skinonskinonskin> (last accessed on 19 April, 2022)

to start a conversation with a particular person and even suggesting what to send. AI weirdness is a playful intervention to question the omni-presence of an additional entity in any relationship existing digitally.

**Lauren McCarthy** will present the documentation of her performance called *Social Turkers*, in which she went on actual real dates with the people she met through the dating site, but she crowdsourced the decisions she made throughout the date to online workers who she paid through the platform Amazon Mechanical Turk<sup>61</sup>. McCarthy “paid remote workers <...> to watch, interpret what was happening, and direct me what to do or say next. These directions were communicated to me via text message and I had to perform them immediately.”<sup>62</sup> As much as adding on the topic of personal agency and responsibility in a relationship in general, the work tries to imagine the implications of deliberately adding a tech-enabled third party which might offer a more capable expertise. The project also touches upon the politics of digital labour.

#### 5. Step 4 – Family

**Olga Bushkova** has created a rather intimate therapeutic project called *How I tried to convince my husband to have children*, which presents a mix of images, diary entries, archive photos and snippets of personal conversations<sup>63</sup>, which altogether give a very messy insight into an obsessive mind, but also raise the questions of the importance of a couple's communication. On navigating.love the project will be presented in its text-based format – only through diary entries, driving the default mode of social media interaction to the extreme of almost oversharing, questioning the voyeuristic consequences of online spaces.

#### 6. Step 5 – Breakup

*Nothing is ever lost* by **Alexandra Pfammater** is “a project about the erasure of digital data as well as the emotional process of trying to deny, forget and letting go”<sup>64</sup>. The artist shows a series of images from her personal archive that she deleted

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<sup>61</sup> Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk) is a crowdsourcing marketplace that makes it easier for individuals and businesses to outsource their processes and jobs to a distributed workforce who can perform these tasks virtually. This could include anything from conducting simple data validation and research to more subjective tasks like survey participation, content moderation, and more. MTurk enables companies to harness the collective intelligence, skills, and insights from a global workforce to streamline business processes, augment data collection and analysis, and accelerate machine learning development. – from platform statement accessible at <https://www.mturk.com/> (last accessed on 19 April, 2022)

<sup>62</sup> *Social Turkers*, from the project description, taken here: <https://lauren-mccarthy.com/Social-Turkers> (last accessed on 19 April, 2022)

<sup>63</sup> Project description can be found on the artist's website: <https://www.olgabushkova.com/how-i-tried-to-convince-my-husband-to-have-children> (last accessed on 17 May, 2022)

<sup>64</sup> From artist's statement of the project, taken here: <https://www.nwfp.ch/alexandra-pfammater?itemId=tm8rdwt1tdomeuar5zxo27fcdg49w> (last accessed on 1 May, 2022)

from her phone at some point and later used the data recovering software. The work offers an emotional take on the fact that modern reality and relationships are by a large margin perceived and reflected upon through the screen – all the memories, the highlights, the milestones, the dark moments are documented through photos and screenshots, and the social act of either sharing or deleting images is our conventional way of dealing with life events. Pfammater's work gives a strong sense of anger and disappointment with the events and the relationships in the artist's life, and explores the blurred line between dealing a digital trace of a relationship and coping with one's own trauma. Besides, the project also opens the question of ephemerality and permanence of digital media, which can be very fleeting and momentarily, while at the same time very present, stable and perpetual, at least technically.

**Jenny Rova's** work *Letters I didn't send* plays with the same idea of objects existing in the third space, in the space between – objects that didn't serve their pragmatic purpose but were not discarded completely or, on the contrary, brought back into existence: letters/emails that did not reach the recipients, but nevertheless become visible and read through this artistic project. Mixing the private and public sides of the relationship, the artist adds a voyeuristic aspect to the exhibition, and on an emotional level explores the stage in which she relives the past experiences and tries to work through a relationship that has already ended.

## 7. Conclusion – a look inside one's self

**Eduardo Kac** has developed the project *Télescope intérieur* with quite a certain motivation of bringing his fascination with space and his poetry together. The project includes an instruction to create a paper shape that displays the word "MOI" ("me" in French) while turning, and sending it into space as a metaphor of an individual trajectory in comparison to the whole known world. Kac created a short video documentary for this project as well as a print which shows orbits that this shape follows while in space. But to me this work is also a symbol of ultimate slowing down and juxtaposition of the commodification of love with the introspective slow love to oneself. This project will be presented only in physical space as a print.

### 3.3.1 Biographies

Artist duo **Ani Acopian** and **Suzy Shinn**. **Ani Acopian**<sup>65</sup> is a queer Armenian director, photographer and conceptual artist living in Los Angeles, CA. Her work is

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<sup>65</sup> Ani Acopian artist biography, taken from <https://aniacopian.com/Info> (last accessed on 18 April, 2022)

playful and witty, and often embraces new technologies. **Suzy Shinn**<sup>66</sup> is a two time GRAMMY-nominated recording engineer, songwriter and producer, based in Los Angeles, CA. Together, the duo create both entertaining and disturbing parodies in the form of online projects which question the pains and the demands of today's digital society.

**Simon Senn** is a swiss performance artist, he lives and works in Geneva. He holds a BA in Fine Arts from Geneva School of Arts and Design and an MA at Goldsmiths College in London. At first glance, his work seems to suggest that he is a socially engaged artist, speaking out against a certain type of injustice. However, his work explores paradoxes rather than articulates directed criticism. Even if his videos or installations are normally based on a certain reality, a fiction is often mixed in<sup>67</sup>.

**Mikhail Bushkov** is a Zurich-based software developer and artist working with image-based media and photography.

*AI weirdness* is a platform with regularly published sets of experiments with AI networks performed by **Janelle Shane**, an US-based author and researcher, who "writes about artificial intelligence and the sometimes hilarious, sometimes unsettling ways that algorithms get things wrong"<sup>68</sup>.

**Lauren McCarthy** lives and works in the US and is "an artist examining social relationships in the midst of surveillance, automation, and algorithmic living"<sup>69</sup>. As an artist, McCarthy is interested in how technology shapes our lives and the way we interact with the world. Through a mix of performance and code, the artist questions the role of algorithms in society. As McCarthy writes about herself, "I create performances inviting viewers to engage. To remote control my dates. To be followed. To welcome me in as their human smart home. To attend a party hosted by artificial intelligence. In these interactions, there is a reciprocal risk taking and vulnerability, as performer and audience are both challenged to relinquish control, both implicated. We must formulate our own opinions about the systems that govern our lives. We begin to notice their effects play out on our identity, relationships, and society. Situated in everyday life, my projects have real life consequences. We're reminded of an urgent need to find a sense of agency"<sup>70</sup>.

**Alexandra Pfammatter** is a Swiss media artist, working with photography and image-based media, code and installation. After finishing the creative Propaedeutikum in Zurich, she attained a bachelor's degree in Camera Arts at the Lucerne University of Applied Sciences and Arts and is currently studying Computational Arts at Goldsmiths University of London.

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<sup>66</sup> Suzy Shinn artist biography, taken from <https://www.suzyshinn.com/about> (last accessed on 18 April, 2022)

<sup>67</sup> Simon Senn artist biography, taken from <https://vidy.ch/en/metteurs-en-scene-auteurs/simon-senn> (last accessed on 18 April, 2022; translated by Anna Konstantinova)

<sup>68</sup> Janelle Shane author biography, taken from <https://www.janelleshane.com/about> (last accessed on 18 April, 2022)

<sup>69</sup> Lauren McCarthy artist biography, taken from <https://lauren-mccarthy.com/Info> (last accessed on 18 April, 2022)

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.



**Jenny Rova** was born in Uppsala, Sweden 1972, she has lived in Zürich since 2001. Works between Sweden and Switzerland<sup>71</sup>. She works with image-based media and often uses appropriation and remixing as her methods, building powerful intimate stories, sometimes bordering with controversy.

**Olga Bushkova** is an artist who was born and grew up in Rostov-on-Don, Russia. She studied in Rostov State University and has a master's degree in Applied Mathematics. "Right after my graduation in 2011 I moved to Zürich, Switzerland, following my husband who got a job in Google. Since then I became interested in photography and have produced two photobooks: "A Google Wife" (published by Dalpine), and "How I tried to convince my husband to have children" (published by Witty Books)"<sup>72</sup>.

**Eduardo Kac** is internationally recognized for his groundbreaking work in contemporary art and poetry. In the early 1980s, Kac created digital, holographic and online works that anticipated the global culture we live in today, composed of ever-changing information in constant flux. In 1997 the artist coined the term "Bio Art," igniting the development of this new art form with works such as his transgenic rabbit GFP Bunny (2000) and Natural History of the Enigma (2009), which earned him the Golden Nica, the most prestigious award in the field of media art. GFP Bunny has become a global phenomenon, having been appropriated by major popular culture franchises such as Sherlock, Big Bang Theory and Simpsons, and by writers such as Margaret Atwood and Michael Crichton. In 2017, Kac created Inner Telescope, a work conceived for and realized in outer space with the cooperation of French astronaut Thomas Pesquet. Kac's singular and highly influential career spans poetry, performance, drawing, printmaking, photography, artist's books, early digital and online works, holography, telepresence, bio art, and space art. Kac has also authored or edited several books, including Telepresence and Bio Art -- Networking Humans, Rabbits and Robots (University of Michigan Press, 2005). Kac's work has been exhibited internationally at venues such as New Museum, New York; Pompidou Center, Paris; MAXXI-Museum of XXI Century Arts, Rome; Mori Art Museum, Tokyo; Reina Sofia Museum, Madrid; Power Station of Art, Shanghai; and Seoul Museum of Art, Korea. Kac's work has been showcased in biennials such as Venice Biennale, Italy; Yokohama Triennial, Japan; Gwangju Biennale, Korea; Bienal de Sao Paulo, Brazil; and Bienal de Habana, Cuba. His works are in major collections such as Museum of Modern Art-MoMA, New York; Tate Modern, London; Victoria & Albert Museum, London; Museum Les Abattoirs—Frac Occitanie Toulouse, France; Valencian Institute of Modern Art-IVAM, Spain; Museum ZKM, Karlsruhe, Germany; and Museum of Contemporary Art of São Paulo, among others. Kac was elected as full member to the IAF (International Astronautical Federation) Technical Activities Committee for the Cultural Utilisation of Space (ITACCUS).<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Taken from artist bio available online: <https://www.jennyrova.net/about/biography> (last accessed on 17 May, 2022)

<sup>72</sup> Taken from artist's CV available online: <https://www.olgabushkova.com/cv> (last accessed on 17 May, 2022)

<sup>73</sup> Artist bio is available online: <https://www.ekac.org/kacbio300.html> (

## 3.3.2 Images

### Amazon Dating

amazon dating All hot singles near me

Deliver to Los Angeles 90069

Deal of the Day Prime Video Your Last Relationship Don't See What You're Looking For? Help FAQ Legal Contact Sign Up

Hello what is this About? Set Up Your Friends Cart

1-50 of over 20,000 results for Hot Singles Near You

Name	Age	Reviews	Price	Delivery	Meet Today
Amy	29	4,941	\$59.99	prime FREE One-Hour Delivery	Meet Today
Will	33	1,338	\$17.99	prime FREE One-Hour Delivery	Meet Today
Phoebe	28	78,941	\$19.99	prime FREE One-Hour Delivery	Meet Today
Atiya	25	941	\$29.99	prime FREE One-Hour Delivery	Meet Today
Matan	37	19	\$9.99	prime FREE One-Hour Delivery	Meet Today

Image 6

Be Arielle F

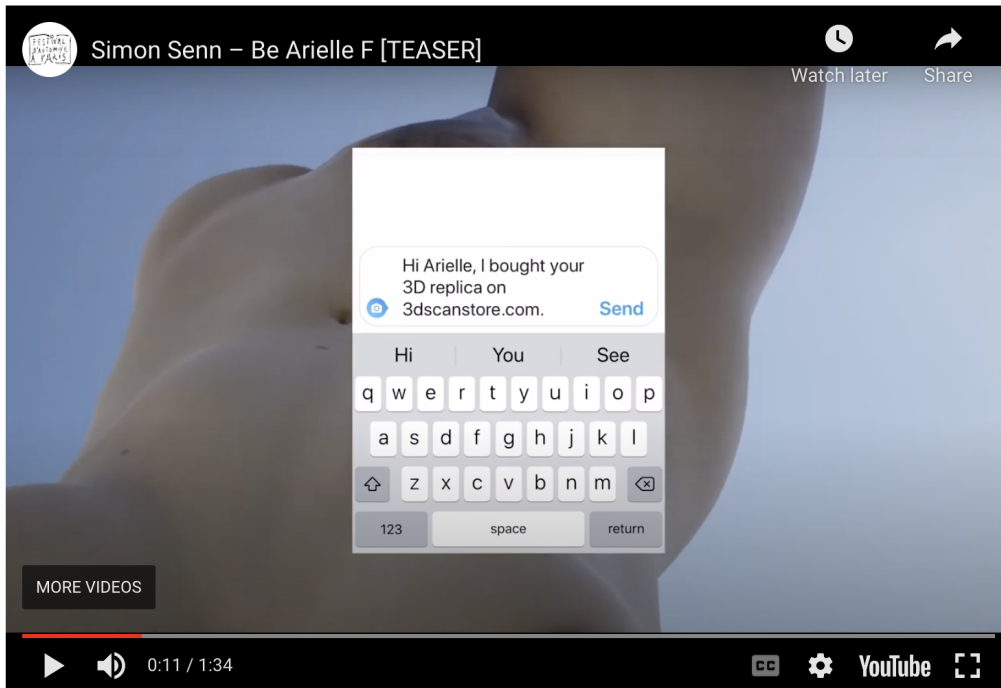


Image 7

### Nothing is ever lost

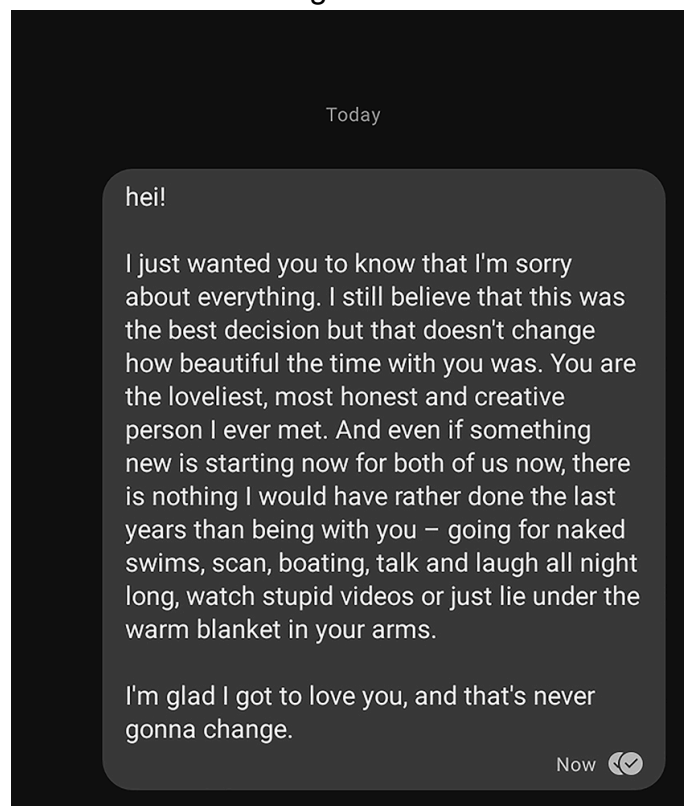


Image 8

### 3.4 Schedule

April 2022 – Complete list of confirmed artists

May 2022 – Final Concept and Outlined Platform design

June 2022 – Funding

July 2022 – Participatory Research

August 2022 – Search of collaborators (institutional and individual)

September 2022 – Production

October 2022 – Online launch

November 2022 – Physical limited presentation with an on-site performance

## 4 Discussion and Conclusion

This research paper turned out to be much more curatorial and practical than theoretical, and in conclusion I think I have a very pragmatical understanding of what the digital participation can encompass, and the multi-faceted nature of tools that a curator can employ. However, I half-deliberately avoided any futuristic speculation about Metaverse as a participatory platform or NFTs and their role for online communities, which are definitely valid topics for future research.

My other biggest conclusion is that digital space no longer entails scepticism from the industry or from the research peers, it is a confirmed theme, even though it was not clear a year ago. The doubt that was put in the digital curating has transformed into confidence, and exploration of digital cultures have never been as demanded as a theoretical and practical field.

Same as for the previous research paper, my mind is rather occupied with the future questions, which in the context of my research would likely be about the gap – I would like to explore the participation which occupies the gap between the spaces and transcends the physical and online condition.

## 5 Attachments

### 5.1 Appendix I – Bibliography

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## 5.2 Appendix II – Images

Image 1. Credit – Screenshot of the test page of Folders from Screen Walks

Image 2. Credit – Installation shot, Be Van Vark, Video essay on digital intimacy, 2021, Exhibition *Are we all here? Exploring Embodied Virtuality Today*, Image by Anna Prytkova

Image 3-4. Credit – Installation shot, Eduardo Kac, *Teleporting an Unknown State* (1994-96), 2021, Exhibition *Are we all here? Exploring Embodied Virtuality Today*, Image by Anna Prytkova

Image 5. Credit – Screenshot of the platform Coming Communities

Image 6. Credit – Screenshot of the platform Amazon Dating

Image 7. Credit – Simon Senn, Be Arielle F

Image 8. Credit – Alexandra Pfammater, Nothing is ever lost