The Everywhere Museum of Everything: The Curatorship Challenge, from Digital Urban Art to NFTs

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This article focuses on the overproduction of aestheticised digital content, a testament to social, cultural or recreational experiences, paradoxically short-lived and forgotten. These public aestheticised digital records of social interactions, intellectual engagement or consumerist indulgence are uploaded onto social networks and represent not only a real and abundant ethnographic portrait of contemporaneity, which could be searchable by geography, demography or subject, but also acquire remarkable potential as raw material for creative and artistic research, remixing, digital archaeology or exhibition. From this point of view, their curation is justified. The Everywhere Museum of Everything is the designation given by the author to the augmented urban spaces, populated by these layers of original and remixed digital audio-visual information, interconnected by hashtags and geo-tags, which can be rendered visible through augmented reality tools, thus transforming any urban space into a digital gallery of their recent social, aesthetic or ethnographic history.

Introduction

Ben Russell's *Headmap Manifesto* (1999) is a rather precocious and surprisingly anticipatory example of the discourse around location-aware technologies and their possible uses at the turn of the last century. Its influences in the fields of urban computing and locative media art are evident, even though it is not cited often enough in the current era of location-based social networks and smartphone applications, as well as smart city urban planning initiatives. Russell enumerates the social implications of location-aware devices, such as the ones we now use – two decades later – suggesting that computer games move outside and get subversive, sex and love are easier to find, traditional concepts of land, law, politics and ownership mutate, nature can be annotated and framed, real space can be invisibly marked and demarcated, because overlaying everything there is now a new invisible layer of annotation, enabling what was

previously recorded (even if invisible to human eyes, such as the migration and movement patterns of people, animals and things) to be rendered visible. This new overlay allows places to have histories attached to them, sorted by date or subject (Russell, 1999). Russell seemed to predict the relevance of present-day ubiquitous location-aware devices, such as smartphones, tablets and *phablets*, deeply and globally engaged in this process of annotation, but with particular relevance and incidence in urban areas.

Smart cities are now heralded as the primary sites of the materialisation of onlineness and ubiquitous computing, through the integration of computational systems with architectural design, turning these areas into penultimate value-extraction machines (Goodspeed, 2015).

Such initiatives have often employed the arts as a means (not an end) of development to gentrify neighbourhoods or attain international status (Zhong, 2016), mostly for the benefit of non-artists, relying on buzzword and market-driven individual pseudo-competences (Veiga, 2020a, pp. 118-121), based upon the widespread, yet naive belief that artistic creativity is universal and boundless.

In urban spaces, ordinary dwellers (and artists) thus interpret and encode their aestheticised perceptions of everyday life (Kalyan, 2017) through mobile devices and apps, leading to the increasing popularity of blackboxing, defined by Latour as:

> [...] the way scientific and technical work is made invisible by its own success. When a machine runs efficiently, when a matter of fact is settled, one need focus only on its inputs and outputs and not on its internal complexity. Thus, paradoxically, the more science and technology succeed, the more opaque and obscure they become. (Latour, 1999, p. 304)

Several of these black boxes are now hosted by smartphones as apps and share the concept of an ever-changing timeline. In social media networks, the timeline epitomises the current technology-induced need for continuous novelty, supported by an ongoing global aestheticisation process, mostly relying on the virtualisation of social experiences and interactions. Web 2.0 prosumers are being transformed into a combination of consumer, producer and product, stimulated into publicly sharing their habits, intimacy and data.

Social networks (and their blackboxed algorithms) have also contributed to the massification of (mostly haphazard) curatorship, and the paradigm introduced by Pinterest – the most popular social network focused on individual curation, whose timeline consists in a constantly novel mosaic of images – depicts the effective corporate assumption of both the ephemeral nature and the large scale of individual-generated, and often location-based, aestheticised digital media, casually exhibited worldwide.

Beyond *Nouvelle Muséologie*

Russell's digital overlay is thus consistently and continuously expanding due to the combined effects of ubiquitous location-aware devices, the blackboxed annotation and global aestheticisation phenomena. But how can this overlay then be rendered visible in a systematic, organised and curated way?

The emergence of *Nouvelle Muséologie* challenged the traditional museum model (Rodney, 2019) into transdisciplinarity, public and social-service orientation (Hein, 1998), accentuated by the adoption of digital strategies by most leading museums (Pagel and Donahue, 2013) with growing efforts being made to reach connected audiences. Google Arts & Culture alone offers over 1,000 virtual tours and online collections (Sood, 2016) and the Network of European Museum Organisations advises its members 'to acknowledge that the digital museum is not a distant promise' (NEMO, 2020).

A multi-dimensional model is essential in the development of the Digital Museum, based on its social and cultural nature, focused on the collection of objects and their display, and the knowledge that they can foster and communicate.

For Hooper-Greenhill (2020), these dimensions (society, culture, collection, knowledge) are intertwined, as any serious endeavour within one of the dimensions will likely trigger questions in the others, since several areas of study must be combined when addressing collections and their curation: culture and art studies, including their history; the social and cultural role of digital artefacts, involving cultural studies and sociology; the production of knowledge through exhibitions, involving museum studies and visual culture studies; digital literacy and the role of museums in education; and, more broadly, the experience of the visitor (psychology, sociology, and museum visitor studies), and these are just some examples.

Hooper-Greenhill posited the new museum model shifting from the modernist museum – as a site of authority – to the post-museum – as a site of mutuality, much in the same way as the Web 2.0 shifted consumers into prosumers, delegating to the consumer/visitor the ability (by choice) to become a prosumer. For her, under the scope of museum studies, it is not helpful just to analyse events and not address the real pragmatic, empirical worlds within which these events are shaped and (the events themselves) construct knowledge. It so happens that the digital medium grants us access to several artefacts intrinsically related to their authors, events, locations and other information, by means of tagging (hashtagging or geo-tagging). Consequently, Hooper-Greenhill also states that conducting research separately from practice is less useful than conducting research that will influence that same practice and promote its evolution. And this is exactly the stance that this article posits for The Everywhere Museum of Everything: to engage and contribute to dynamic collections in order to produce meaning and knowledge through arts-based and practice-based research, thus influencing those very collections.

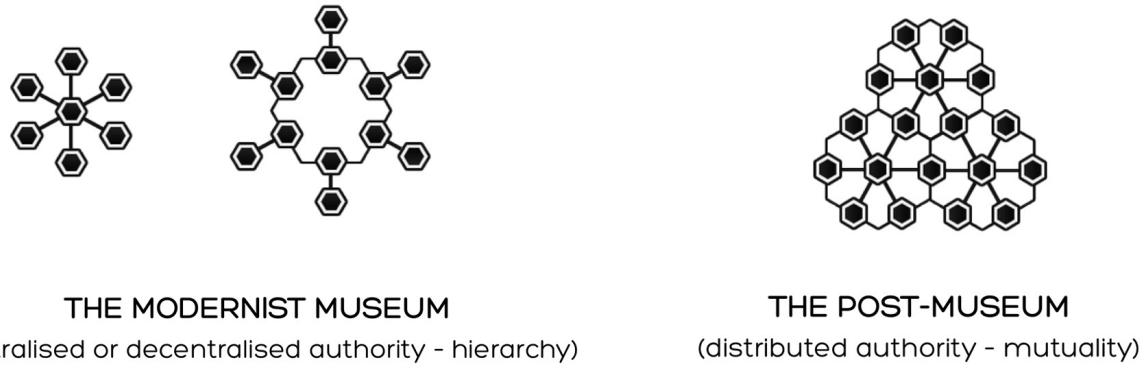

Fig. 1 → Pedro Alves da Veiga, *The Shift from the Modernist Museum to the Post-Museum*, 2021.

As museums seek new ways to incorporate audience research into their curatorial processes, increasingly diverse audiences – in terms of their ethnicity, and their cultural and social backgrounds – also seek closer relationships to exhibition narratives, as these may open (or close) different possibilities for individuals, groups or communities. The new digital museum must embrace its role as no longer merely a place of accumulation, but also as a place of education, socially engaged in contemporary challenges and culture. This is particularly meaningful through a constructivist view of culture, in that education and knowledge are best achieved through a process of reflection and active construction (Mascolo and Fischer, 2005), in which the visitor is invited to contribute and actively participate in the collection or its curation.

A Curated Augmented Vision of the Digital Art World

This generative and constructivist vision of culture is the core concept of The Everywhere Museum of Everything (TEME), a sobriquet for the global array of geo-tagged and geo-referenced layers of digital urban art, incessantly produced and uploaded worldwide, potentially transforming (peri-)urban spaces into the largest augmented reality (AR) exhibition ever to exist.

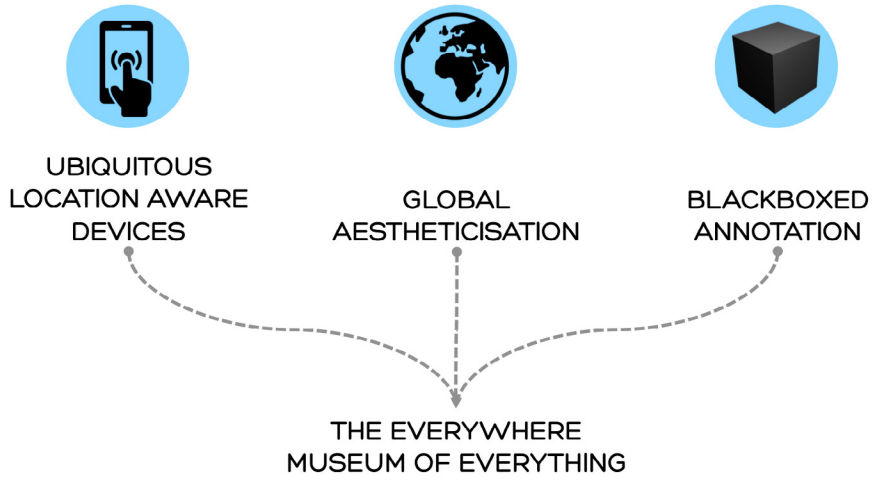

Fig. 2 → Pedro Alves da Veiga, *TEME's three vectors of development*, 2021.

TEME is a research and development project (Veiga, 2020a; Veiga, 2020b), proposed for financing by FCT, the Portuguese Foundation for Science and Technology, that aims at developing an online platform and augmented reality mobile applications destined to be used by creators and curators, where research, curation and creation coexist and collaborate. It will help to render visible spatial relations with public digital content, as well as to provide relevant insights into how urban space is being dynamically lived and transformed, the activities they foster and the changes they document, from the mundane (waiting spots of delivery drivers, underground parties, crew signs, or blocks of Airbnb apartments) to the experimental.

> To make locative media data usable, however, they need to be staged, that is cleaned, processed, explored and manipulated to render them fit for repurposing. Just as locative media users "domesticate" new technology, researchers have to domesticate locative data by relating their own research interests with the data and translating excitement and uncertainty around the data into actionable expectations. This mostly takes the form of exploratory data analysis, examining what the data reveal about human movement and social ties in particular places. (Perng, Kitchin and Evans, 2016)

These aestheticised records and their data can be found in most mainstream social networks. They can be manipulated into new creations through widespread practices, such as remixing, subvertising or mashup, and knowledge can be extracted from them through curatorial analysis. This content that populates the different digital layers – images, videos, sounds and texts – conveys a popular representation of culture, encoded through a set of material practices, which construct meanings, values and subjectivities, as a realised signifying system (Gallagher, 1992). These artefacts can be regarded as cultural symbols, able to influence cultural identities, emotions, perceptions and values at individual, group, community and wider social levels. Even if they lack systematisation and classification, some of them are solid examples of digital urban art, whereas others hold great potential as *prima-materia* for artists, curators and scholars in many areas.

Through curation, they can be linked to certain locations and spaces and see their relevance and meaning amplified. They can then create a meaningful territory of contemporary online culture, art and knowledge, transforming the perception of those locations from commonplace to haunted, by exploring interwoven social connections and implications. They can also contribute to the preservation of culture and crafts or to the memorialisation of lost habitats and heritage, contributing to true smart(er) cities.

Currently, the extent of the digital creation phenomenon on the social networks is paradoxical when contrasted with the increasingly shorter lifespan and relevance of each piece. Even though most content will have an average lifespan of only two days (Hauffa and Groh, 2019), these items can still be accessed through an augmented view of the world – enabled by their geo-location or hashtags – or through linking with physical markers.

All existing digital content may be classified in terms of two cumulative characteristics, with two variations each: location, distinguishing between geo-located[1] and non-geo-located content; and curation, distinguishing between curated and non-curated content.

1 For the remainder of this text, the expression *geo-located* will be used to refer to either *geo-tagged* or *geo-referenced* content.

- Curated content is to be understood as that which is the subject or result of curatorial practices: the large-scale folksonomy, curatorial remix or social curation phenomenon was fostered by websites such as Tumblr, Digg, Reddit and Scoop.it, and then epitomised by Pinterest. The expression *social curation* applies to websites that combine social features and collecting capabilities, focusing on content and providing tools for users to discover, collect, organise and annotate mostly visual content (images and videos). Curatorial decisions may be individual or crowd-sourced, resulting from the collection and annotation actions of everyday users who source their materialfrom other websites, where the original creator/owner curated them, and bring it to a new classification system completely beyond the control of the original creator/owner, giving rise to new user-created conceptualisations and categorisations (Hall and Zarro, 2012). These curatorial phenomena still lack a systematic approach to their study, and yet they have an interesting potential for scholars, curators and artists alike, since the collections offer personal (as well as corporate) views on an extensive and varied range of subjects, including curators and curation itself.[2]

- Geo-located content has been the subject of spatial and social practices of locative technologies, conducted by new media scholars over the last two decades, especially as locative media have become available to wider audiences with the increasing popularity and dissemination of smartphones and mobile devices. The interest in locative media is now shifting towards spatially-oriented analyses of geo-located content for use in media art or social studies. This new perspective on existing digital content no longer sees it as an end product but rather as *prima-materia,*[3] thus allowing even for non-geo-located content (including single items and curated collections alike) to be used in the creation of new geo-located content.

Through the analysis of meta-information (hashtags, comments by the authors or their followers, authors' profiles, EXIF information, etc.) it is possible to gain and incorporate new insights into TEME's augmented reality rendition of these (new) artworks and their curated exhibitions. And if this happens transversely

2 For example, on Pinterest Deb Lawrence, a self-described contemporary artist and art collector, curates a collection of curators: https://www.pinterest.pt/deblawrenceart/art-curators/, while Robin Good curates a collection of diagrams, charts and infographics on the subject of content curation: https://www.pinterest.pt/robingood/content-curation-visualized/

3 For example, Instagram user @insta_repeat creates collages of visually similar photos taken at the same locations by other Instagram users: https://www.instagram.com/insta_repeat/

on content produced anywhere in the world, it may still be possible and relevant that some of this content is anchored to a particular location, thus allowing for the whole practice to be explored from this starting point.

If the above-mentioned phenomenon of social curation appears to reinforce the immateriality, dispossession and free distribution of digital artworks, a more recent phenomenon is tending to counter it, by focusing on property and monetisation: digital natives are incorporating blockchain technologies into artworks, and non-fungible tokens (NFTs) are one of the formats to have recently gained notoriety due to the increasingly high values their sale has been reaching (Fisher, 2019). On their own, they are fostering a different online curatorial phenomenon.

NFTs, the Blockchain and Curatorship

With the massification of digital art and curation came the massification of online marketplaces, making it increasingly difficult for digital artists and creators, as well as for audiences, to find the best and most reliable platform that truly may add value, rather than indistinctly considering artistic creations as a streamed commodity, regardless of their originality and artistic value, both in terms of authorship and uniqueness.

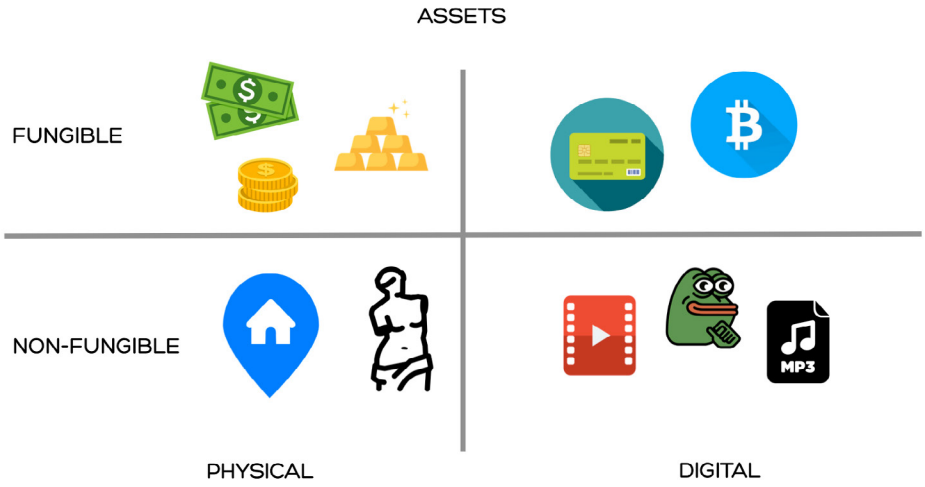

Fig. 3 → Pedro Alves da Veiga, *Identifying digital non-fungible assets*, 2021.

The advent of non-fungible tokens (NFTs) added new variables to what was already a complex scenario. The first NFTs may be traced back to 2012 when Rosenfeld (2012) wrote an article on Coloured Coins, possibly the earliest example

of a non-fungible asset based on the blockchain. Since then, the diversity, quantity and valuation of NFTs have been evolving at an exponential rate. An example of this evolution is the Rare Pepe crypto assets phenomenon (Lotti, 2019; Whitaker, 2019). The creation of a Rare Pepe NFT follows these four steps:

1. The image is created (mostly through remix, digital collage or mashup) and its author pays a pre-defined fee (200 Pepe Cash) in order to submit it to http://rarepepedirectory.com.
2. The website curators decide upon the rarity of the Pepe in order to feature it.
3. If accepted, the website will display the Rare Pepe image as being for sale, associated with a finite quantity of tokens.
4. Users can then buy these tokens and the proof of ownership (as well as authorship) is the token itself.

But if the process behind the creation and sale of Rare Pepes seems relatively simple – even though the original creator of the Pepe character is left out – other NFTs take this approach to extremes, such as marble.cards, a platform where 'every web page can only be marbled once and by one person only. Once a card is created, that URL is claimed' (Marble Cards, 2021), which means that anyone can potentially monetise any type of content with a URL, regardless of actual authorship, ownership, or any other connection to that particular content (Munster, 2021). As with all digital art supported by blockchain technologies, the actual media content is not stored on the blockchain but on the business supporting servers. The blockchain only acts as a claim of ownership and transmission.

From the initial days of Coloured Coins and Rare Pepes to the current hype surrounding NFTs, scaling has inflated the network transaction fees (and carbon print) associated with creating and registering on the blockchain, otherwise known as *minting an NFT artwork*. Metapurse, a NFT fund that bought Beeple's record-breaking artwork *Everydays: The First 5,000 Days* (Beeple, 2021) for 69.3 million USD at a Christie's auction, announced the intention to build a virtual museum to house and publicly display the work. In an interview to *The Art Newspaper*, a spokesperson for the buyer stated their intention to 'create a monument that this particular piece deserves, which can exist only in the metaverse' (Stoilas, 2021). This is aligned with a series of previous NFT purchases, supported by the less than original claim that 'The beauty of this piece is that it can be experienced wherever you are in the world', which not only holds true for any digital artwork already existing online, but also for Beeple's

work, which is already viewable through any Internet browser. Therefore, the added value of the new virtual space remains unclear since the public will also be able to visit the new virtual museum through an ordinary Internet browser. But Metapurse also claims it will be accessible using virtual reality headsets for a 'really immersive experience' (Stoilas, 2021). This approach hints at a technological and financial hype-based exhibition process, mostly focusing on the artist's significant follower base across social channels rather than other relevant characteristics of the work. Nevertheless, it is a probable reflection of future developments in the art market, though it brings arguable value to art scholarship.

If media-based artworks such as images – both static and moving – and music are very successfully finding their way into the blockchain (Cryptoart, 2021), it is far less clear how other art forms, such as the written word or performance arts, for example, may benefit from this market. Artists, such as Ben Grosser, have exposed the frailties and incongruences of the NFT phenomenon, and Grosser's project *Tokenize This* is a particularly successful (and humorous) example of this challenging attitude (Grosser, 2021).

The ongoing curation of the crypto space is a still rather opaque process. Even though there are curated digital art marketplaces such as superrare.co, foundation.app, zora.co and niftygateway.com, among others, artists are still expected to be tech-savvy and entrepreneurial-minded enough to risk making the first crypto-investment, as well as to handle a significant part of the promotion.

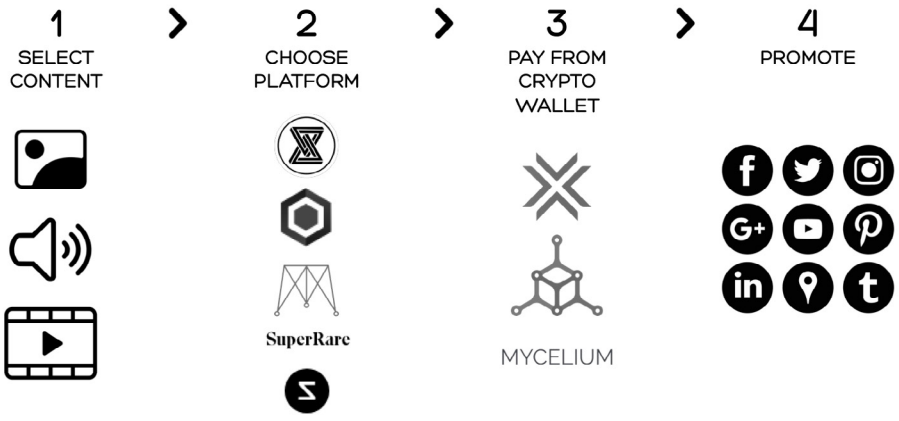

Fig. 4 → Pedro Alves da Veiga, *Steps to create and sell your own NFT*, 2021.

Felt Zine, an artist collective and net-art platform, advocates a different stance: holding the community values central to its curatorial efforts, the collective has

curated a series of NFT collections (FeltZine, 2021) and also promoted education on the subject for its members through a series of conversations. Another example is the company Dada, where blockchain represents shared ownership of collaborative work. Using a collaborative and artist-centric approach, artists use the dada.nyc website to make artworks called "conversations" that build on each other's drawings, appropriately inspired by the *cadavre exquis* model, which is conceptually (and speculatively) extended to a form of interwoven shared value creation and cooperative ownership.

To further complicate an already complex scenario, the adoption of blockchain technologies seeks to replace the existing records-keeping infrastructure, operated by centralised platforms such as governments, museums and rights management agencies, with 'the authority of the algorithm and the consensus of the crowd' (Whitaker, 2019, p. 38). The replacement of a centralised approach with a distributed one poses challenges, namely the guarantee of security and access to the information on the ownership and authorship of artworks, held by all these different companies. The recent digital artwork theft from Nifty Gateway (Peters, 2021) reinforces the fact that this is only an emerging concept, still surrounded by significant speculation and hype.

However, and whichever the outcome, the augmented view of the digital art space could benefit from the added layer of blockchain, not just by establishing and rendering visible the authorship and ownership of the artworks, but also by enabling new distributed curatorial models, as depicted in Figure 5.

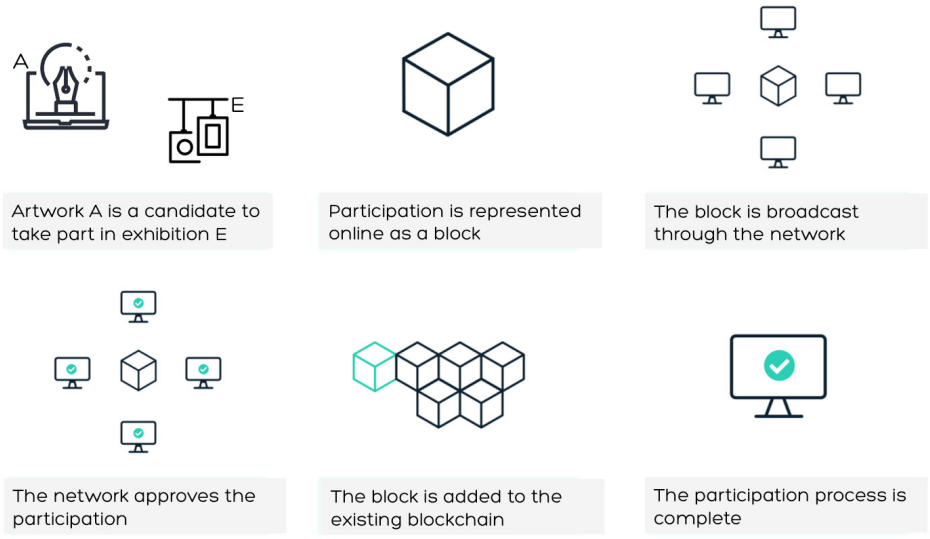

Fig. 5 → Pedro Alves da Veiga, *Using the blockchain as a curatorial tool*, 2021.

The blockchain could thus be used to authenticate exhibitions, artworks and their respective authors/participants, especially online exhibitions of digital artefacts – regardless of their existence as NFTs – much in the same way as it is being used to establish the artworks' authenticity.

Through this approach, TEME could then be regarded as a collaborative space; a consortium of sorts, gathering contributions from different agents, individual and institutional alike, some of which would enable the rendering of the artworks themselves (e.g.: Flickr, Instagram, YouTube), while others (e.g.: Artory, Verisart, Codex Protocol) would provide the complementary blockchained meta-information. TEME would then embody Hooper-Greenhill's Post-Museum paradigm, with mutuality and distribution at its operational core.

Conclusion

The Everywhere Museum of Everything is (conceptually, for the time being, but operationally in the future) an online museum which aims at delivering a theoretical and technological framework, articulating creative and curatorial practices, inspired by *artivism*, *hacktivism*, maker culture and tactical media (Veiga, 2020a, pp. 232-242). Diversification of creative, curatorial, theoretical and educational approaches is key for discovering the best contexts, collaborative environments and communication for TEME's collections and exhibitions.

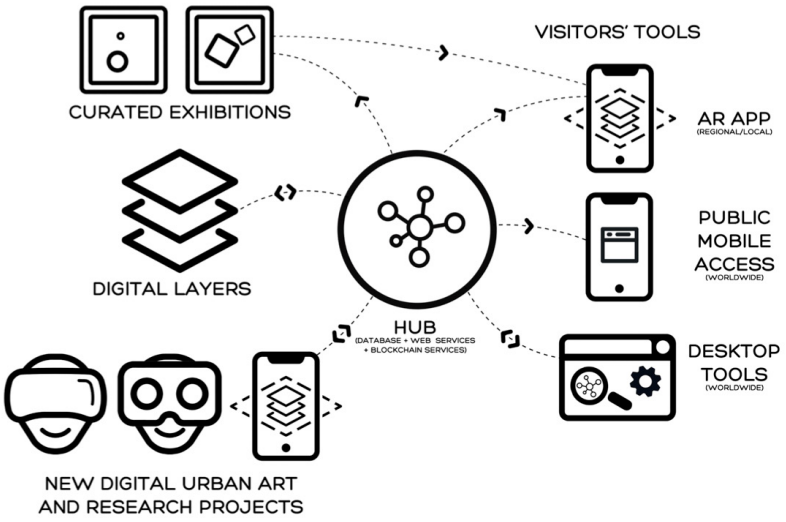

Fig. 6 → Pedro Alves da Veiga, *TEME's conceptual architecture*, 2021.

Its curation is a complex process derived from and influenced by several ongoing phenomena, from social media networks to the non-fungible tokens art market, only achievable through a collaborative and distributed practice, much like the blockchain itself, and its greatest challenge is to avoid the lure and dazzlement of technological and economistic pitfalls.

TEME can build upon the role of the (Post-)Museum as one of the best-placed institutions to reach diverse audiences, deliver innovative learning programmes and develop critical thinking to help steward humanity's journey toward a more sustainable future. Assuming a non-neutral role in shaping that journey towards sustainability and circular economies also implies developing strategies to counterpotential negative impacts, namely the heavy carbon-footprint that most NFT trading platforms based on the Ethereum blockchain imply. But, as greener alternatives are already available (Eco NFT, 2021), TEME may use the blockchain to its advantage, in establishing authorship and authenticity for original artworks, derivatives and exhibitions. As heralded by Russell two decades ago:

> New forms of collective, network organised dissent are emerging. Collectively constructive rather than oppositional. Now capable of augmenting, reorganising, and colonising real spaces without altering what is already there or notifying those being colonised. (Russell, 1999, p. 5)

The successful merging of augmented reality, blockchain and curatorship will hopefully deliver the first successful and tangible results, as TEME's working prototypes, in 2022.

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