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RESEARCH CONFERENCES

ESF-COST High-Level Research Conference

Networked Humanities: Art History in the Web

Hotel Villa del Mare, Acquafredda di Maratea • Italy
09-14 October 2010

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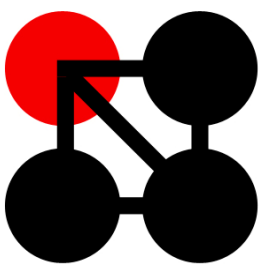
Highlights & Scientific Report



networked humanities

Conference Highlights

Please provide a brief summary of the conference and its highlights in non-specialist terms (especially for highly technical subjects) for communication and publicity purposes. (ca. 400-500 words)

Everyone is talking about the Web 2, an interactive Internet which allows for participation of the user. Once a simple receiver of information sent to her or him via the World Wide Web, she and he are now producers of content which they distribute to the audience. Facebook and Flickr are the most widely known applications in this field, some of them are used by 100s of millions of users.

But the Web 2 is not only rooted in every day culture, it might also profoundly transform the so called high culture and the humanities as a universitarian discipline. Museums are now eager - at least in case they listen to what is going on in the modern world - to include visitors not only as passive consumers but as active contributors. This has been the topic of one of the sections which constituted the core of the conference on "Networked Humanities". Another aspect was covered in those sections that treated the ideas of an active participant within the disciplines of the humanities themselves and especially in art history. A group of speakers examined new ways of online publications which also insist on an active reader who critically comments the texts presented to him or her. All this is made possible by the electronic medium, and it can be foreseen that this will definitely change current publication structures and also structures of knowledge building.

Looking more closely at art history itself, a whole group of speakers examined ways of publicly tagging art works, traditionally a field for professionals and experts. Lively discussions on the feasibility of such an approach that systematically favors the "wisdom of crowds" were following and had to confront the insistence of professional art historians who defended their prerogatives.

Strangely enough such cooperative methodologies were preformed in artistic approaches of the seventies et seq. Artists of this period discovered the electronic media and insisted on their socializing function. Actually they practiced something much ahead of their time and taken up again in the sciences and cultural life much later. Even social engagements today realized in places like Facebook once upon a time were preformed as artistic projects then often connected to utopian dreams of a universal reunification of mankind.

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Scientific Report

Executive Summary

(2 pages max)

Only at first sight the idea of "networked humanities" is nothing special. Those working in the humanities know that the common practice is not networked at all and that we normally work as independent researchers in our ivory tower. This is nothing to be criticized, though, because it corresponds to typical structures of the field. Cooperation though, mostly practiced only in the natural sciences, can also be achieved in the humanities, and as I far as I can see, this will be part of a "survival strategy". Not in the "real" world, though, where cooperation does not fit to basic procedures. But in the digital world, the perspectives are tremendous, and at the same time not even schematically imagined. The conference "Networked humanities" tried to describe this networked future at least in its outlines. This was done with regard to general aspects, relevant to all the humanities, but also to more specific aspects, related to the history of the arts more directly. With regard to the first field, we discussed the nature of networked publications in the internet, and specific achievements of databases. In the more specific sense topics in social image tagging, museums and the internet, and the development of a networked art from the 1970s on were picked out as central themes.

Scientific Content of the Conference

(1 page min.)
- *Summary of the conference sessions focusing on the scientific highlights*
- *Assessment of the results and their potential impact on future research or applications*

I have subdivided the conference in 6 fields which cover a good part of the relevant problems: Scientific Publishing/ Art History/ Social Tagging/ Museum- Archive/ Art/ Databases.
The presentations in the section "Scientific Publishing" showed perspectives of the cooperative approach which will be determining the field in the near future. Existing online publication structures on the other hand still reflect a lot of what has been done in the analogue age, and there was a general agreement that the new medium will have to be complemented by a new spirit of publishing activities.

The section "Art History" was of course in the center of the conference. Colleagues from Europe and overseas represented new ways of organizing the field which included game-based approaches, remixing attitudes, and collectively organized ways of working out specific art historical contents. Reports were mixed insofar as some gave overviews on different national practices and others discussed specific and innovative procedures.

"Social tagging" is a core approach in Web 2 methodologies. It relies on "the wisdom of crowds" and therefore poses a definite problem for expert cultures. In Art History it can be used for annotating huge image data bases, and there were reports from different projects in the field, including one from the Steve Museum in the US, the first which dared to include such a perspective in their program. Participants in the conference agreed that this is not only a way to collect data but also to form corporate identities for cultural institutions as museums.

Museums and archives were discussed as places less formalized and more open to the public in the sphere of a digitized future. It was a lot less clear and more open to debate in how far digital media should be used as an external complement or completely integrated in the structure of the institution.

The Arts themselves were considered in two different regards. First as a practice that decades ago prefigured what was done in social media of the present, and second as something deeply integrated in electronically based distributive infrastructures.

The section on databases presented two different approaches in their contrary structure. First the "flat", naturally speaking approach with its reliance on powerful software structures to organized the material, second semantic web approaches with their tendencies to prescructure the material. The advantages of the respective philosophies were open to debate.

Forward Look

(1 page min.)

- *Assessment of the results*
- *Contribution to the future direction of the field – identification of issues in the 5-10 years & timeframe*
- *Identification of emerging topics*

The speakers present were members of a forefront which in the very conservative field of art history is still quite isolated. One could say though, that this is the usual problem of an avantgarde sure of its insights in future developments but not yet recognized as such. To the conviction of the chair it is definitely sure that the problems discussed will be at the center of problems in the organizational field in the next years.

This is certainly true for academia which will have to deal with the tranferral of many of its contents in the internet. Even teaching will be mostly online, and some of these aspects have been presented in a series of talks during the conference. The existence of an online culture will be even more relevant for museums and other cultural institutions. Facing a generation which lives with Facebook and their social software, museums will definitely have to confront a situation where traditional ways of approaching their public - if they existed at all - become dysfunctional.

I would stress two topics widely discussed during the conference and serving as something like a general reference point to which we always returned. The one was the theory of the scale free network presented by Patrick Danowski and especially Martin Warnke. This theory analyzes the fundamentally uneven structure of the Internet and it proves the necessity for the humanities and its respective institutions in the university and museum world to unite their forces in order not to get lost in a power dominated world as the one of the Internet.

The other one was at the core of the section on social tagging, but somewhat present everywhere. The "wisdom of crowds" was underlined here and confronted to an expert culture which is not completely different from it but somewhat overlapping. Here the perspective arose to let the public take part in highly complicated procedures of the sciences contributing with this to transcending the enormous walls between the sciences and the public, a political problem of utmost importance.

- Is there a need for a foresight-type initiative?

Atmosphere and Infrastructure

- *The reaction of the participants to the location and the organization, including networking, and any other relevant comments*

As far as I understood the reaction of the participants was good. Most of them said they learned from the talks of the others, and all are ready to deliver a text for publication in "Kunstgeschichte. Open Peer Reviewed Journal" which is online under http://www.kunstgeschichte-ejournal.net/ and where I am one of the co-editors. The organization was especially praised and I want to underline that this praise was mostly directed to Zuzana Vercinska in Brussels.

The venue was located in a remote but beautiful position. I would admit though that the fact that it is difficult to reach might have prevented some of those who were interested from coming and especially some of the big heads.

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Date & Author:

20.11.2010, Hubertus Kohle