

The Synthetic Curatorium

Research Group

A Primer

The Synthetic Curatorium is a research group at Aalto University investigating how computation, with generative systems as its most visible instance today, is transforming curatorial knowledge and practice. Its research examines how computation reshapes the way cultural meaning, relation, and value are formed, and what this means for what curating is and does. A shared line of inquiry runs through curatorial thinking, practice, and education, attending throughout to the economies of cultural production under computation. This work is theoretical and practice-based, tested in curatorial and pedagogical settings. The research stays open to the possibility that curating is being reconstituted in forms very different from those it has inherited, and works toward a curatorial knowledge able to think these changes and to shape what they become.

THE COMPUTATIONAL CONDITION OF CURATING

For most of the last century, curating meant caring for collections and staging exhibitions. Over the last thirty years or more it widened into a broader apparatus of discourse and knowledge, the work the field came to call *the curatorial*. Computation is now recoding the rules that have organised all of it. It would be easy to take this for a minor adjustment, a new set of instruments for curators to adopt, or culture passing through screens and platforms on its way to an audience. But none of these readings capture what is under way. Computation has become the condition under which cultural meaning, relation, and value are now formed, and its operations enter into that formation, generating relations, objects, and forms of authorship that did not exist before it. This goes on whether or not any individual curator elects to work with these systems.

WHAT KIND OF OBJECT IS COMPUTATION FOR CURATING?

Much of the field has answered in a recognisable way. It approaches artificial intelligence as a subject for curatorial attention, a medium to exhibit, an ethics to debate, a set of tools to take up or to set aside. Computation becomes interesting, on this account, through its entanglement with the social, political, and economic world, and the question for the curator is how to accommodate it as a new medium. This is the *externality thesis*. It has been productive, but it tends to leave the conditions of curatorial knowledge themselves much as they were.

A second approach turns attention back to curatorial knowledge itself, and to the changes already under way in its conditions, whether or not any given undertaking involves AI, and it takes the generativity and indeterminacy of computational processes as a matter for curatorial research in their own right. This is the *internality thesis*.

The Synthetic Curatorium works across both. Its question is what becomes of curatorial work under computation, and that question is not answered from either side alone. The research moves between them, following computation outward into the economies of cultural production it now organises, and inward into the workings of computation that are reshaping curatorial knowledge from within.

There is, moreover, a deeper rationale at work in the approach. Curating has always worked by cutting a wider field into discrete elements and setting those elements in relation, a kinship with the way computation operates that has gone largely unrecognised. That kinship runs through selection and relation, the operations generative systems now perform in their own manner, which is where the change shows most sharply. What curating selects, how it builds relations,

how it divides labour between artist and curator, and what it counts as an object can no longer be taken as given, since each is being reconstituted as cultural meaning comes to be produced computationally. The group's research takes the form of a sustained articulation of what curatorial labour becomes once these are transformed.

WHERE IS THE CHANGE ALREADY VISIBLE?

An analysis of the transformation now under way in how curatorial labour is performed brings three shifts into view.

Constellation to embedding:

Curating has long worked through constellation, placing distinct, identifiable works alongside one another so that viewers can see the connections and follow why they have been brought together. Embedding is how generative systems handle relation, and it works very differently. To process an image or a text, such a system first turns each item into a long list of numbers, a set of coordinates that fixes its position in a vast mathematical space. Items whose meanings resemble one another sit close together in that space, and unrelated items sit far apart, so that relation becomes a distance the system calculates between positions, across hundreds of dimensions at once. Relation is no longer an arrangement that curators compose and viewers read. It has become a proximity computed in a space that cannot be pictured. The move from *constellation* to *embedding* changes what it means for things to be related at all.

Selection to synthesis:

To curate has meant, in large part, to choose from a wider field of existing works and to arrange that choice so that it can be understood, each chosen work remaining itself and able to be named. Working with generative systems does not eliminate choice altogether, since people select the data they are trained on, compose the prompts that steer them, and sift their outputs afterwards. What the system itself does, though, is closer to *synthesis* than to *selection*. It composes a new output from patterns learned across the whole of its training, and that output cannot be broken back down into the particular works that shaped it. Curatorial meaning has long been secured work by work and relation by relation, in the curator's ability to point to this work, that juxtaposition, and say what they mean. Once the output is synthesised and its sources can no longer be separated out, that pointing is no longer possible, and what grounds curatorial meaning becomes an open question.

The division of labour to prompted collectivity:

Over many decades the division of labour between artist and curator has organised the field, separating the artist from the curator who selects and frames. Under generative conditions it is reorganised into what we have elsewhere termed *prompted collectivity*, a mode in which creative agency is distributed among the people who prompt a system, the vast body of existing work on which it is trained, and the outputs it returns, and in which authorship becomes collective and largely untraceable. The art market, the museum, and the biennial carry on much as before, and the prevailing account of what artists and curators do carries on with them, maintaining a sense that nothing fundamental has changed. However, what is becoming apparent despite that semblance of continuity is that the individual author, and the curator who selects from a field of separate works, is no longer the unit the system runs on.

THE ECONOMIES OF CULTURAL PRODUCTION UNDER COMPUTATION

Under computation, the making of culture, its circulation, its valuation, and the knowledge formed around it are folded into a single process. The group calls this process, and the conditions it creates, the economies of cultural production under computation. Each of these activities was once the work of a distinct role and a distinct institution, the artist who created the work, the curator who selected and framed it, the critic who judged it, the researcher who studied it, the publisher who circulated it, and the market that priced it. Computation binds them together, so that to set something into circulation is now also to value it, and to value it is already to make a claim about what it means and what can be known through it. The term economies is used in plural form because more than one order of value runs through this single process, the cultural, the aesthetic, the intellectual, the attentional, the financial, and the material, which computation makes harder and harder to tell apart, so that a meme, a curatorial project, a research finding, and a market position increasingly take shape through the same kinds of operation.

Beneath this convergence lies a deeper change, in the very basis of cultural value. For most of its history that value rested on scarcity, on the rare and authored and certified object, and on the institutions that cared for it and maintained it. Under computation, scarcity is no longer what sets that value, since cultural material can now be generated on demand and recombined without end, in an abundance that outruns what attention can register. Where cultural material is generated by these systems, it is synthesised from a vast field of earlier work and cannot be traced back to particular sources, so that authorship spreads across the many whose work was drawn on and the systems that recombine it, and becomes collective and largely untraceable. Across networked culture more widely the same tendency appears in a softer form, as authorship is shared and remixed and as value comes to depend on how widely something circulates as much as on where it began. Either way, this is an economic matter as much as an aesthetic one, since it throws into question who made a thing, who is credited for it, and what can be owned at all.

This is already visible in a body of research, much of it the work of artists, writers, and researchers, into the cultural life of computation and its networked world. What marks this work is that it is carried out through the very channels it examines, published as newsletters, podcasts, feeds, and online communities, so that the study of online culture is itself a piece of online culture, subject to the same demands of attention and circulation. In it one can watch the older separations come apart. The researcher is also a producer and, increasingly, a product, and intellectual rigour, aesthetic style, and saleable content run together. This is the clearest available picture of cultural production once computation has fused the making, the knowing, the valuing, and the circulating, and it is drawn by people living the conditions they describe.

For curating, this convergence loosens what had set it apart, and three changes run together. The operations once particular to curating, selecting, framing, placing in relation, giving context, and directing attention, are now performed across networked communication and the digital economy as well, by platforms and neighbouring fields, and the boundary that set curatorial labour apart grows faint. The claim to a distinctive creative agency through the crossing of disciplines weakens, since the questions that now demand serious attention arrive already tangled across fields and refuse to sit within any one of them, so that bringing different kinds of knowledge into relation has become a common condition of research and of online communication alike. And these same techniques have passed into general use as everyday skills, practised by anyone who keeps a feed. Curating does not disappear in this, but it becomes harder to treat as a separate professional domain, and comes into view instead as a logic running through cultural and intellectual life under computation.

The account given here is largely diagnostic, and diagnosis is the groundwork, not the destination. The group's research is also propositional and speculative, and the longer effort is set on that propositional work. The speculative dimension of the group's work lies in proposing and prototyping new curatorial concepts, methods, forms of curatorial project, and educational programmes, and in putting them to work in curatorial and educational settings.

THE GROUP'S APPROACH TO RESEARCH

Beyond giving an account of how computation is reshaping curating, the Synthetic Curatorium works to build the concepts, methods, and forms that curatorial knowledge will need as these changes take effect, and it proceeds on the understanding that curatorial knowledge can, in turn, help shape what cultural production under computation becomes. Its concepts are developed close to the systems they concern, and made answerable to how those systems actually operate.

A shared inquiry runs through curatorial thinking, practice, and education, with the economies of cultural production under computation as its connecting thread. In its thinking, the group rebuilds the concepts curating works with once value, authorship, and the curatorial object have changed. In its practice, it uses curatorial projects of various kinds as a place to put these concepts and methods to the test, working out in the open what they make possible and where they reach their limits. In its education, the group works toward a reconstitution of how curating is taught, one in which computation is approached as the terrain the field now works on and not as a topic added to it, an effort pursued through postgraduate courses, workshops, and other sites of curatorial study. The same questions move at once through writing, through teaching, and through projects, so that each tests the others, and the group's account of curating under computation is revised as the work proceeds.

GET IN TOUCH

This Primer sets out the group's central questions and the thinking behind them, from how computation is reshaping curating to what this asks of curatorial knowledge. The Synthetic Curatorium is based at Aalto University, in the School of Arts, Design and Architecture. Current members and ongoing activities are listed on the group's webpage.

The group welcomes conversation with curators, researchers, and institutions working at the intersections of computation, culture, curating, and the political economy of all three, and would be pleased to hear from those interested in joining the inquiry as doctoral or postdoctoral researchers, and from potential partners and supporters of the work. Anyone who would like to know more, or to propose working together, is welcome to write to Associate Professor Bassam El Baroni at [bassam.elbaroni \[at\] aalto \[dot\] fi](mailto:bassam.elbaroni@aalto.fi).