
Negotiating Meaning and Value: Institutional Research Assistantships, Digital Projects, and Art History

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Introduction

Increasingly, art historians, curators, and other arts scholars in an array of institutions—from galleries, libraries, archives, and museums (GLAMs) to the academy—are turning to digital platforms to facilitate and disseminate new scholarship, promote and provide access to collections, and to engage audiences both within institutional spaces and across geographical networks. Our presentation seeks to use our personal experiences working on digital projects in and related to Digital Art History (DAH) as a mode of analyzing and assessing the current state of the field from the perspective of the paid contract worker. As graduate students with minimal formal training in the Digital Humanities (DH), but with an avid interest in developing our theoretical and methodological knowledge, we feel that our contribution to this emergent and continuously evolving conversation is of value to academic researchers planning and undertaking large-scale digital research projects, particularly those who might be hiring and training research assistants. Because we also seek to contextualize some of the issues we have encountered in the intersections (and interstices) between DAH and DH tools and methods, our study speaks to how these align (or resist aligning) within the conditions of academic institutional realities, where we, as graduate students in Art History, are negotiating the differences between traditional and digital approaches to the discipline.

Project Description

In this paper, we examine how these issues manifest in an on-the-ground institutional context: that of the university research assistantship. We seek to analyze our roles as contract researchers on digital projects, while extending the scope of our examination to include some of the wider-ranging issues that came to light during the course of our work. We then suggest a number of viable solutions and best practices in response to some of the problems we have each encountered, and offer observations about how these issues are systemic within the field of Digital Art History, digital collections, and archives in general—particularly those rich in visual materials.

While traditional Digital Humanities methods work in some instances (for text or data mining, the creation and dissemination of certain kinds of archival or library-based catalogues, GIS-related geographical applications, and so on), we note that DAH—particularly where it engages with a specifically material- or object-based approach—requires its own specialized methods, most of which are still emergent or have yet to be developed. Borrowing from Johanna Drucker's writings on the specific needs of art historians working in digital environments, Diane M. Zorich's studies of extant digital initiatives in cultural institutions in the United States, and bolstered by our own direct experience as graduate students and museum professionals, we perceive that much work needs to be done in the field of DAH.

Perhaps even more importantly, we observe that more effort needs to be directed toward making knowledge of effective DAH methods and platforms with DAH-specific affordances accessible within institutional environments that may not have the infrastructure or expertise in place to carry out DH methodologies, and where digital projects are known to have academic capital yet are not effectually supported. It is our hypothesis that these issues, while generally unintentional, are the result of a maladapted atomization of attitudes and methods that were never intended for the disciplinary particularities of projects dealing specifically with visual, aesthetic, and/or material culture; or for the specific needs of broad public-facing institutions such as GLAMs.

Furthermore despite the gradual emergence of highly visible projects concerning the digital study and dissemination of visual materials—projects such as Object:Photo at the Museum of Modern Art, and the Getty Foundation-funded Online Scholarly Catalogue Initiative—these projects are almost exclusively the purview of large, well-funded institutions. At the same time, we have seen some training opportunities for

new digital art historians, such as the 2015 Building a Digital Portfolio institute at George Mason University. As productive as these short-term training institutes are, however, scholars new to DAH require more intensive opportunities to develop these skills, something that many art history departments are currently unprepared to provide. Left out of the equation too are small and mid-sized GLAMs, even those affiliated with large universities, which lack the personnel, experience, and funding to pursue rigorous digital projects. As graduate students and researchers, we have seen first-hand how the absence of a robust network to share ideas and opportunities, teach new skills, and develop new approaches can hamstring the full potential of DAH projects. Although there is a clear interest in and need for platforms and methodologies for Digital Art History, in most instances there is not yet a thriving ecosystem to develop and share them.

Conclusions

Although we offer this as a personal, narratological account of our experiences working as research assistants on digital projects (at Brock University, Ontario; and the University of Arizona, respectively), we also analyze how the programming aspects of these projects may be handled in differing institutional contexts—whether researchers are trained in digital applications, out-of-the-box platforms are adopted, or programming and development are outsourced—and examine these practices in light of their compatibility with both the practical and more abstract aspects of our respective endeavors. We will look at how these decisions inform and shape project development trajectories, as well as how they delimit these projects' longer-term potential. Importantly, we will consider issues of accessibility as they concern research assistants, and examine our own limitations in relation to the usability of the tools and platforms at our disposal in our respective institutions. Additionally, we examine how our independent, unpaid projects allow for the extension of boundaries and exploration in the field, and consider the ethical implications of how unpaid work informs and supports our contributions to funded, institution-based projects.

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