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Art History has exhibited a reluctance to embrace and participate in the digital humanities and computational tools for analysis. The importance of the object and image for the study of art history presents both technical issues of digitization and legal issues of access. While art historians' complaints regarding images are valid, they may be inflated as an attempt to avoid addressing other systemic issues within the discipline. Some of these issues include reluctance to collaborate, interdisciplinary conflicts regarding shifting subject focuses and conservative biases that exclude experimental research methods. Despite the discipline-wide reluctance to embrace digital art history, the period of digital skepticism has passed and it is time for art history to assert its role in the digital humanities community. Though the greatest thrust for developing digital research tools appears to be coming from peripheral professions of libraries, museums, university presses and foundations,[1,2] without art historians' participation this has nowhere to go.

In Spring 2010 the Samuel H. Kress Foundation conducted a web-based survey that sought to determine what role digital humanities had at art research centers and assess the art history community's attitude towards digital art history research centers. This study was based on 54 interviews and 8 site visits with key individuals in the field

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[1] Diane M. Zorich, *Transitioning to a Digital World: Art History, Its Research Centers, and Digital Scholarship*. Report to the Samuel H. Kress Foundation and the Roy Rosenzweig Center for History and New Media, George Mason University, May 2012, http://www.kressfoundation.org/uploadedFiles/Sponsored_Research/Research/Zorich_TransitioningDigitalWorld.pdf

[2] I have chosen to use Chicago style for this paper based on the audience I have in mind, which is the art history community.

of art history and digital humanities, as well as funders in both these domains. Based on these interviews the Kress Foundation identified problem areas for art historians' participation with digital humanities and made a number of recommendations for the future.

The discipline-wide reluctance to participate in digital humanities projects or engage in digital research methods derives largely from art history's conservative nature. Participants characterized art history as unchanged in 100 years and perceived the emergence of digital art history as threatening to art history's operational paradigm. [3] Conservative biases against digital research and publishing exclude it as non-serious or "lightweight." The rapid pace of digital publishing that releases products in beta-form is not conducive to the methodical perfectionism of art historians. The thoroughly researched and polished product of a monograph still reigns among art historians and releasing rough research digitally is uncommon practice. Besides the disciplinary biases and conservative nature of art history, the Kress Foundation found that with a lack of examples and exemplars the benefits and possibilities of digital art history and digital humanities are lost on art historians. Because art historians do not find digital tools to be transformative to their research, merely shortcuts via digitization, there is not an imperative to learn or incorporate digital methodology into their research.

The most alarmingly conservative quality that interviewees used to describe art history was lacking introspection and a vision for the future. The reluctance to participate in collaborative projects, work in digital platforms and dismiss digital

[3] Ibid.

publishing reflects a larger problem of where art historians fit in the future. As digital tools such as image analysis, metadata enhancement and repository development become more sophisticated it will be harder for art historians to justify their refusal to adopt them into their work. The longer art historians take to identify areas of need for digital research tools the further they will have isolated themselves in the "bubble of academia" and will increasingly fail to justify their value in a world that favors digital platforms and visual literacy. [4]

Interviews revealed that art historians did not want their research centers transformed into digital research centers and preferred to seek out digital tools as needed instead of being pressured to do so. Within the art library community there is concern over what role librarians can play in the development of digital resources if art historians have made their indifference clear. Maureen Whalen questions the "if you build it, they will come," approach to digital research where librarians work to create digital resources and share them with researchers in anticipation that they will be won over.[5] Building a resource without a demand from library users could be a risky waste of funds but a librarian's trusted opinion may carry some sway with researchers. Jean Beaudoin's 2005 study of art historians' information needs verifies art historians' advanced research skills and understanding of library systems, which could lead to an open mind when offered a new tool at their research centers. [6]

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[4] Ibid.

[5] Maureen Whalen, "What's Wrong With This Picture? An Examination of Art Historians' Attitudes About Electronic Publishing Opportunities and the Consequences of Their Continuing Love Affair with Print," *Art Documentation* 28, no. 2 (2009): 16

[6] Joan Beaudoin, "Image and Text: A Review of the Literature Concerning the Information Needs and Research Behaviors of Art Historians, " *Art Documentation* 24, no. 2 (2005): 34

Beside disciplinary biases against digital art history, image access presents a number of complications for digital publishing. Permissions fees and reproductions costs account for the higher price of art history publishing and online publishing complicates this further. Because there is not an infrastructure in place for permanent online publishing, images require rights for a finite period of time that must then be renewed for another finite period of time. Instead of seeking fair use or learning when it is applicable to invoke, art historians tend to pay the fees for the peace of mind in publishing. Furthermore, even when fair use is applicable it does not require that what entity owns the images has to supply it. Therefore, museums or other estates and institutions may charge exorbitant amounts for images that should technically be free for publishing.

The final issue raised by the Kress Foundation's study was a disinterest in collaboration. Art historians described their work as solitary, which does not lend itself to the collaboration required for digital humanities efforts. Even within their discipline art historians tend not to collaborate with one another; monographs and articles are more often single authored. Reluctance to collaborate is not unique to art history, especially for digital humanities projects that require the cooperation of librarians, information technology staff and institutional faculty. Art historians expressed that in digital research centers they felt their methodologies and expertise were not valued and found this experience alienating. [7] In theory, art historians should be great collaborators

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[7] Diane M. Zorich, *Transitioning to a Digital World: Art History, Its Research Centers, and Digital Scholarship*. Report to the Samuel H. Kress Foundation and the Roy Rosenzweig Center for History and New Media, George Mason University, May 2012, http://www.kressfoundation.org/uploadedFiles/Sponsored_Research/Research/Zorich_TransitioningDigitalWorld.pdf

because they study the context of the creation and production of cultural objects. Researching cultural context often requires analysis through a particular lens; gender studies, religion, cultural theory, etc. In the process of research art historians must adapt some of the vocabulary and theories of the lens through which they have interpreted these cultural objects. This ability to adapt and shift interpretations could translate into a collaboration with other disciplines and an open-mind to their practices but sadly, it has not.

Art history has an unusual role in the humanities, in part for its unique dependence on an object, but also for the important role art plays in the global economy. Within academia there is tension between students pursuing art history for scholarship and those studying it with hopes to enter the contemporary market. In 2011, at the annual College Art Association Conference, Patricia Mainardi spoke on the "Crisis in Art History" and notes a connection between increased demand for contemporary art history concentrations at the undergraduate and graduate level and the importance of contemporary art in the global market.[8] Mainardi characterizes this as a crisis because it undermines the important scholarship art historians should be contributing to cultural discourse, instead placing uncomfortable emphasis on market trends. It is not a far leap from the disinterest and suspicion with which Mainardi regards contemporary art, and all things that change rapidly, to digital art history and digital humanities. While librarians, publishers and even students are attempting to speed up, art historians are experiencing a crisis.

[8] Patricia Mainardi, "The Crisis in Art History," *Visual Resources: An International Journal of Documentation* 27, no. 4 (2011): 305

Crises in the humanities is not unique to art history and this moment on the precipice of digital humanities is not the first crisis that art history has experienced. Johanna Drucker makes a revealing comparison to the crisis effect that critical theory had on the art history community in the 1980s.[9] The appearance of semiotics, structuralism, post-structuralism, psychoanalysis, feminism and others caused a major disruption to art historical methods. Critical theory challenged the traditional approaches of iconography, style, formal elements, compositional features and technique by reevaluating how one could study, analyze or even look at an object. Drucker argues that for digital technology to have the same transformative effect that critical theory did on art historical discourse it must "change the way [art historians] understand their objects of inquiry."[10] In order for this transformation to occur, art historians must move past digitized images to digital art history.

The exception to art historians' shun of digital tools is the mass image digitization that occurred in the collections of museums, libraries and galleries. For art historians the digitized image is a huge convenience. Instead of loading a carousel with slides for their lectures, art historians can now whip up a digital presentation. Digital images are easier to move, copy and reorganize within a presentation. Searching online for an image is more efficient than hunting down the analog copy and the selection of images is greater as well. Access to digital images has improved the opportunity for visual resources but "has not had a ripple effect on the intellectual foundations of art history."[11] This digital

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[9] Johanna Drucker, "Is There a 'Digital' Art History?" *Visual Resources: An International Journal of Documentation* 29, no.1 (2013): 5
[10] Ibid., 6
[11] Ibid., 7

tool is a shortcut that does little to alter art historians' methodologies. Although images can be found easily online it is difficult to manage quality. A Google search for *The Scream* by Edvard Munch returns hundreds of results of varying quality. Size, color and dimensions affect these digital images and evaluating which is the closest to the real object is a challenge.

Despite their convenience, there are inherent issues in creating a digitized images from an object. As Johanna Drucker notes, early digitization and digital humanities projects were "text-based, data-driven, or metadata focused" because the input devices for these files were alphanumeric keyboards.[12] Digital humanities remediated these text-based projects but the correlation between analog text and the digital copy was one-to-one. A digital image of an artwork shares little in common with the object it is supposed to represent. Using *The Scream* again, the digital image made up of pixels does not have a direct connection in medium to the oil, tempura, pastel and cardboard of the painting. Furthermore, digital images are most often scans of reproductions(slides, photographs), which removes the file another step from its source. The issues related to creating digital images of art has further solidified the ideas among art historians that digital humanities does not have the potential to change their methodology and is only about shortcuts.

It is certain that digitized images of artworks are an inadequate alternative for the real thing but even with these less-than-perfect representations there are possibilities for image analysis. An instance of image analysis that may have applications for art

[12] Ibid., 7

historians is a project by Lev Manovich. In his aptly named chapter, "How to Compare One Million Images," in *Understanding Digital Humanities*, Manovich explains how he gathered 1,074,790 pages of manga and performed analysis of the files.[13] Manovich collected the complete runs of 883 mangas that had been uploaded as JPEGs by fans on OneManga.com. In his explanation of the project, Manovich demystifies the traditional humanities approach to research, which closely reads a small sample of something to make broad generalizations. In the case of his manga analysis, Manovich argues that a couple dozen pages from any run of a series would be similar to selecting at random. Only when all of the pages of a series are compared can concrete patterns develop. Current image analysis is nowhere near as powerful as the human eye but Manovich was able to evaluate palette and basic shapes. With this he compared two different series, one popular with young girls and another more popular with young boys. Shapes and palette may seem rudimentary, and Manovich was obviously unable to determine narratives or character recognition, but patterns did emerge. Manovich found that the girls' manga series used strong diagonal lines to break up panels and that the boys' series used very little shading.

The image analysis performed by Manovich is unlike any that has been done in art history. The digitized images of artworks may not be suited to close study, because of their inability to accurately represent an artwork, but they would function excellently in a distant study where only colors and basic shapes are accounted for. For example, a massive amount of artworks from the Renaissance period could be analyzed by color. In

[13] Lev Manovich, "How to Compare One Million Images?" *Understanding Digital Humanities* , ed. David M. Berry (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 249-278

the Renaissance color use was often determined by location and market factors. Blues were most expensive because they were made from a *lapis lazuli*, a stone that comes from present-day Afghanistan. One could develop a theory based on a handful of Renaissance paintings about the use of the color blue but with distant reading of an entire corpus unusual outcomes may appear. Of course, determining the occurrences of blue in corpus of artwork is only one step in making a larger argument. Following this analysis, an art historian may select a handful of works to closely study but their selection will have a level of objectivity that is uncommon in art history.

The development of data for large-scale image analysis projects would require art historians not only to collaborate but also some training on new tools. But whose responsibility is this? Training in digital humanities tools can occur at research centers, classes may be offered or these skills could be learned as needed on the job. Each of these possibilities presents its own issues. For digital research centers to provide training that would require investment of time and money for their staff to be trained while there still is not a real demand for these tools. Offering classes that teach digital research methods seems unlikely when, as Mainardi points out, art history is experiencing a crisis over the present push for more contemporary art history courses. On-the-job training seems the most likely but it is risky to assume new professionals will even be given such opportunities without some experience. The Kress Foundation suggests that digital research will increasingly become a part of an undergraduate liberal arts education, therefore they may enter graduate school or the job market having acquired these skills

from other disciplines. [14]

For 'digital' art history to find a place within art history as a discipline there needs to be room for experimentation. Because art historians are not prone to releasing unfinished work or beta-versions, digital art history should start by entering the beginning stages of research. As with the example of distant-reading images, art historians can use such a tool as a preliminary research method but publish their final outcomes in the traditional print journals. Over emphasis of the finished product is overwhelming and impossible to conceive at this time for art history. As the Kress Foundation noted, without successful examples it is unlikely art historians will be able to imagine how this affects their work.

Johanna Drucker's comparison to the emergence of critical theory, as mentioned above, not only adds some useful perspective to this moment but reminds us that change is possible within art history. Like digital humanities, critical theory was met with resistance by conservative art historians but its ability to transform the study of art prevailed. Transforming a conservative discipline, especially one that is battling an identity crisis, may not occur at the same pace as the other humanities, but art history has remade itself before and it can again.

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[14] Diane M. Zorich, *Transitioning to a Digital World: Art History, Its Research Centers, and Digital Scholarship*. Report to the Samuel H. Kress Foundation and the Roy Rosenzweig Center for History and New Media, George Mason University, May 2012, http://www.kressfoundation.org/uploadedFiles/Sponsored_Research/Research/Zorich_TransitioningDigitalWorld.pdf