

## Curating Digital Spaces, Making Visual Arguments: A Case Study in New Media Presentations of Ancient Objects

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### Abstract

Curating is often seen as a mediation between artist, work, and audience, with the curator firmly at the center. The central role of the curator has been further emphasized with the rise of the curator as artist and the institutional and physical limitations of museum spaces. We argue that there are important alternative spaces of meaning to be developed between object and audience. Digital curating, in particular, allows for greater audience participation, both by expanding the potential audience and by allowing visitors to navigate through the virtual galleries under their own direction. We contend that by facilitating the site visitors' creation of their own visual arguments, a new level of audience participation in visual analysis — indeed, in a fundamental intellectual and intuitive aspect of curating — is made possible. We explore how digital resources can be modified to allow for that contextual sense of making a visual argument through arrangement. An installation at the University of Houston debuted a new tool for digital content management and allows us to make some preliminary observations about the process of visual analysis, its role in curatorial practice, and explore future directions for work.

## The Problem of Discernment and Digital Curation

The active role the viewer plays in navigating a digital installation forces us to engage in the broader question of curatorial function. The act of curating has gained attention in art history in response to the evolving role of the viewer, but also with the rise of museum culture and the act of curating considered as its own art form.<sup>[1]</sup> Even when viewed as an art form, curating is often couched as a mediating experience: the curator negotiates the relationship of artist, work, and audience [Levi Strauss 2007]. Allowing for a moment that we should see the curator as a mediator, how can we best think about that process? Popular conceptions of celebrity curators would have us look for trailblazers, for those who have a certain “eye” and are willing to take risks to find the exemplary artist or object. We believe that the more basic curatorial function may be best captured in the term “discernment,” by which we wish to evoke a certain expert engagement with visual material that is distinct from — and in fact explains — more common ways of talking about curatorial expertise, like “having a perspective,” “making a judgment,” or even simply “having a story to tell.”<sup>[2]</sup> The common language that expresses engagement with the objects, in other words, depends on a process of arranging and understanding objects in relation to each other and to some expert's vista. This latter sense of curating — old and often fraught with elitist connotations — is the initial critical judgment that includes the expert's larger reasons for selecting the particular field of interest and its exemplary objects, defining some objects as important and others not, so that we may initially define a corpus for our consideration.

Once that initial selection is done, however, curating then takes on the task of arranging and interpreting the objects at hand for particular viewing audiences. Judgments like “this piece shows what I mean,” or “this will bring the people in,” or “this really conveys the force of the artists' gesture,” all depend on that earlier engagement that defines the corpus for consideration, but the communicative and experiential functions of an exhibit are not simple reifications of that initial process. Instead, as the exhibit takes shape the objects take on relationships and meaning that exceed the original

culling.<sup>[3]</sup> The basic assumption that installations matter implies that the discursive power of the objects in relation to one another can and often does outstrip the limits and categories of the original criteria that brought the corpus together. Meaning emerges because of the discursive avenues created by the objects in an emergent conversation via the exhibit. We would like to point at this entire ensemble of processes — culling, arranging, and nurturing meaning — with the word “discernment,” insofar as it conveys an attentive and concentrated “living with” the objects and “getting to know the pieces on their own terms,” and is not simply the act of making judgments of preference or categorizing objects.<sup>[4]</sup> Discerning activity precedes an agreement on descriptive vocabulary, but does not rely on an immediacy of intuition that would be in principle unavailable to others, or indeed, that would be private in any sense.

Discernment as we see it emerges from a deep attentiveness to objects — with all their various interior, exterior, formal and material relations — and the constitution of various communities of meaning centered on the exhibit. The celebration of the curator-agent tends to locate these activities within the individual cognitive powers of the curator and thus is open to various criticisms of Cartesian models of subjectivity, as well as related criticisms of capitalist models of production. These criticisms had already forced the community to engage with alternate models for relating to objects, both in understanding their original context and in displaying them to wider audiences.<sup>[5]</sup> The language of “discernment” is meant to capture the active sense of engaging with objects without the reifying sense of a subject making judgments about things. Our particular interest, however, is in charting the sense in which the processes of discernment are transported into the digital realm, with its still dominant but recently challenged technological paradigms, and whether certain approaches can better accentuate and convey the active and complex process of discernment.

A collaboration involving the present authors had begun a year earlier and resulted in an NEH Digital Humanities Start-up Grant for a tool called Vwire (Visual Web Interface for Researchers). We had begun with a large collection of images of putative Teotihuacan masks collected by Matt Robb of the St. Louis Museum of Art and had suggested the development of a tool using this collection as a pilot.<sup>[6]</sup> Lauren Lovings, working as a student collaborator, initiated comparative installations on omeka.net and Vwire and then developed the present case study.

The subsequent exhibition needed to explore and unveil the features and qualities of each displayed mask, with special attention to their purely formal characteristics. There were eight specific masks of interest to the exhibition, all of which were available for viewing on the omeka.net (see Figure 1) and Vwire sites (see Figures 2 and 3). Six of those mask images were printed for display in the physical space. The other two mask images (Brooklyn Museum and Princeton University Art Museum masks) were not printed due to the absence of sufficiently high-resolution images.

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## Masks of Teotihuacán: A Collaborative Spaces Exhibition

[Enter Virtual Exhibition](#)[The Masks and Their Stories](#)

### The Masks and Their Stories



The Template Mask

This mask is made of a green serpentine stone, which gives off a speckled light and darker green appearance. The area around the eyes is a brown and rusted color, which is most likely from the decay of iron pyrite. The forehead is large, wide, and pushed forward. The eyes are relatively open, creating an almond-shape, with empty cavities. The nose is wide, and the nostrils are carved to a certain extent. The mouth is open and does not have any inlaid stone or shell. Both lips are well defined, but the upper lip is more sinuous. The ears are rectangular, with a small perforation on each towards the lower part of the ear. There is no sense of an expression on this mask.

This mask is currently at Dumbarton Oaks in the Robert Woods Bliss Collection in Washington, D.C. The mask was purchased from Joseph Brummer in 1937 when it joined the Robert Woods Bliss Collection. Since its purchase, this mask has been exhibited in 1942 at the Santa Barbara Museum of Art, M.H. de Young Memorial Museum, and Museum of Art, Portland, at the National Gallery of Art from 1947 to 1962, and once again at the M.H de Young Memorial Museum in 1993. There is no archaeological evidence or further provenance information that definitively concludes that this mask is from Teotihuacan.

This mask can be considered the template stone mask, because it exemplifies all of the qualities and standard forms seen in masks from Teotihuacan. These standard forms include a tranquil face without an expression, but with symmetrical features. Scholars Pasztory and Evans have drawn the same conclusions about standard forms, and both have drawn these conclusions while specifically relating to this mask.



There is a line that has been carved across the length of the forehead of this mask, not far from the actual edge. The eyes, mouth, and ears each have small-perforated holes, most likely for adding decoration or for attachments in those specific areas. The eyes are almond-shaped, with a minor carving to demonstrate an eyelid, and an extended distance to the raised, but not curved, brow line. The nose is quite wide, with curved nostrils that are deeply carved. The rectangular ears are somewhat less angular due to erosion overtime.

This mask is currently at Dumbarton Oaks in the Robert Woods Bliss Collection in Washington, D.C. The mask was acquired in this collection after its purchase from William Spratling in 1940. This mask has been exhibited in 1942 at the Santa Barbara Museum of Art, M.H. de Young Memorial Museum, and Museum of Art, Portland, at the National Gallery of Art from 1947 to 1949, and once again from 1954 to 1962.

The features in this mask in comparison to the template mask seem almost identically similar. It may even be plausible to say that the same artist carved both of these masks, or perhaps even the artist's apprentice did.

Figure 1.

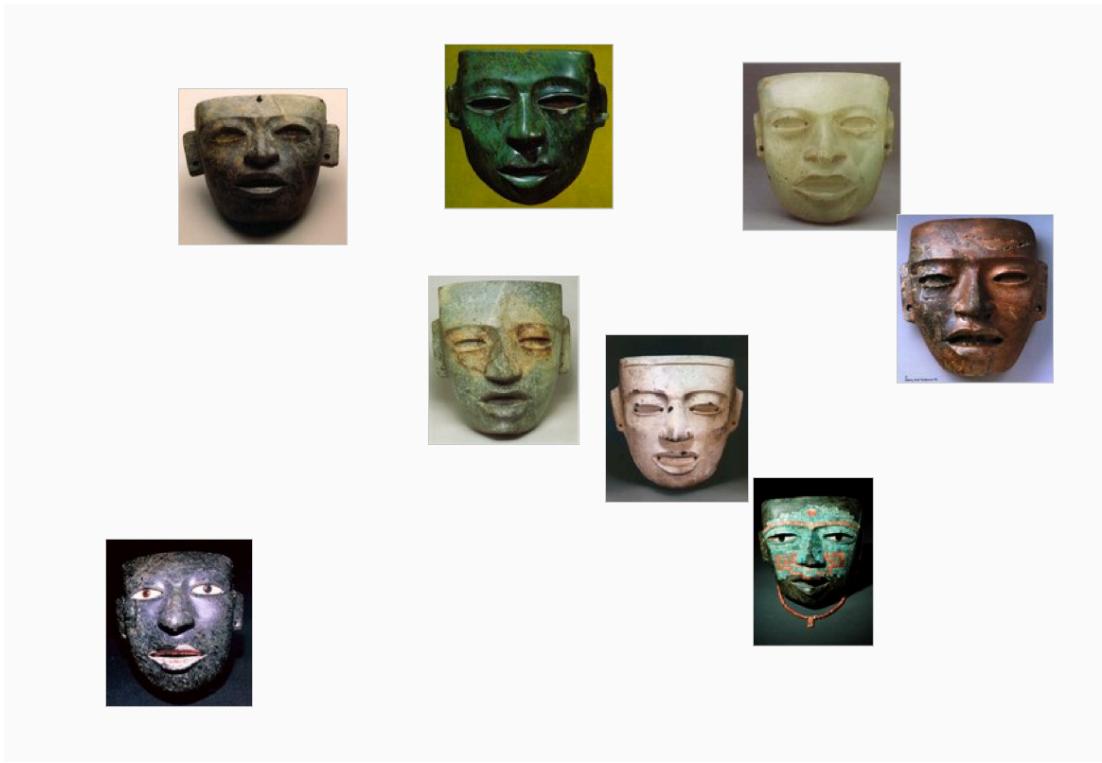


Figure 2.

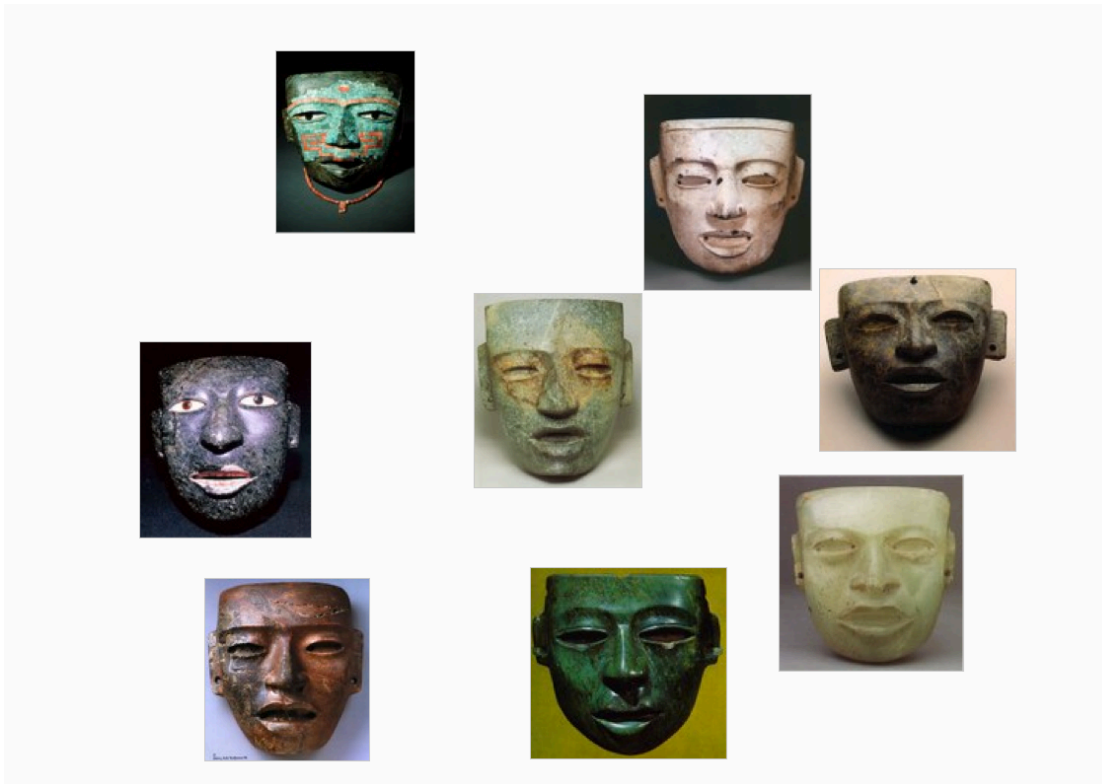


Figure 3.

The exhibition was set up in the Visual Resources Library within the School of Art building at the University of Houston and was the first art history exhibition curated by an undergraduate student. The opening night of the exhibition was on December 2, 2011, along with the Studio Art Open House. Students in studio art classes presented their art projects on the upper floors of the School of Art building, and the Teotihuacan Mask exhibition was on the ground floor and attracted considerable foot traffic.

There were eight images of Teotihuacan masks chosen for presentation on the omeka.net site, and six of those images were made into large prints and placed into simple frames. All six framed images were hung on a single lengthy wall. The wall was treated as though it were a Vwire space by not hanging the pictures at the same height or width apart, but by moving some closer to others, having some higher than others, and generally suggesting a visual argument through the arrangement. As the student curator, Lauren made her own visual argument on the wall space, and then allowed room for two computers to display the same objects in independent Vwire spaces, where the viewing audience could more fully interact with the images. During opening night, Lauren was able to point to the wall and explain how the visual argument using Vwire lead to “this conclusion” (Figure 3), and then asked the audience to show how they saw these masks and how they would visually organize them. Those arrangements were also saved, and can be made part of a developing history of the changing experience of the works.

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In the omeka.net presentation, as with the presentation of images on the wall of a traditional gallery space, there is a strong tendency toward seriality. The audience members “read” the objects from first to last and interpret the visual argument as a development, either in terms of a primary image from which differences are marked (as in the development of mannerism, or the “falling off” of derivative artists who follow a great master) or as a series culminating in a masterpiece (see Figure 2).

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On the Vwire site, the argument began with a central “template” mask, and variation was discerned in terms of radial distance from that central mask (Figures 3 and 4). In other words, the distinctions between the masks were allowed to emerge in two dimensions at once and to be cast against a gradient of discernible changes within the whole grouping. Some audience members still imposed linearity on their arrangements, creating visual arguments that began in one corner and then moved like written words either down columns or across rows. The “template” mask (center of Figure 4) is Dumbarton Oaks B, by common nomenclature, and it is one of the most reproduced of the masks in the secondary literature, showing up on the cover of several important volumes. It does not, for all that, have archaeological provenance placing it in Teotihuacan, or providing definitive interpretation concerning its use or symbolic functions. Double-clicking on any of the masks brings you to a page dedicated to that single object.

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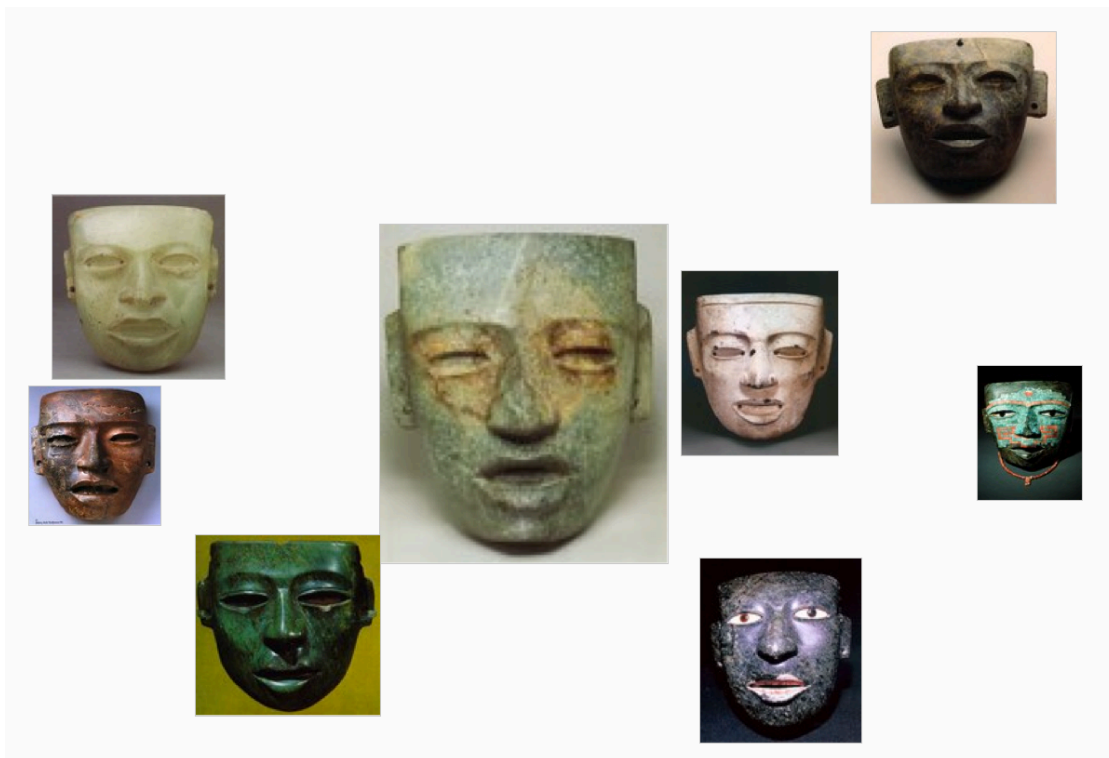


Figure 4.

## Discernment, Visual Argumentation and the Philosophical Context

We begin with the broad assumption, relevant for digital and traditional installations, that curating and displaying art historical objects may promote mutual understanding and convey meaning by allowing the audience to participate in the practice of discernment. The viewer should see why the objects are grouped in a collection and see both similarity and difference emerge from the “conversation” between the objects. The display of objects is, consequently, no longer a process of exemplifying the sense of belonging to a group, or adding illustrative cases to render accessible an underlying scientific typology — both remnants of basic typological thinking about how subjects who manipulate objects tend to have arranged them conceptually. Recently, our understanding of the dynamic production (and reception) of objects has expanded to include the sense that the objects themselves participate in the creative process, both in their original context and in the display [Pasztory 2005] [Bennett 2010]. The “visual argument” that a curator makes in arranging an installation emerges broadly as a mutual engagement with material objects, where the typological and encyclopedic approaches are only two of several possible modes of display. Each arrangement has a determinate shape, but should be seen as part of an active engagement by the viewer. The curatorial eye, however, should not be seen as on an equal footing with every possible perspective. The “discerning eye” of curatorial practice is the one that locates and explores the dynamic tensions between the objects — it takes time and it requires careful attention to the material and its forms. Here curatorial practice does not have to be limited to the initiating curator, but can be any participant in the exhibition, as we shall see. We propose to explore this sense of “discernment” in order to capture the dynamics of creative installations of conceptually challenging work, where the dependence of the typology on the more dynamic movement of mutual engagement can emerge in terms of its own “visual argument,” and where this installation provided a basic example for exemplifying the two approaches.

Although philosophical defenses continue to be offered for realism of various sorts, the dominant strands of thought in both English language and Continental philosophy over the last fifty years have all turned away from the model of language (and in our case, “expert judgment”) as the proper application of names to objects. Quine effectively mocked the “museum myth” of “uncritical semantics,” where objects were assumed to be waiting patiently for their viewers, who then knew what the object was by reading the label [Quine 1969, 27].<sup>[7]</sup> Foucault was even less patient with the taxonomic and encyclopedic projects, and initiated a turn to genealogical explanation that situates the process of meaningful engagement within a purely immanent development of language [Foucault 1970]. Under the name of naturalized epistemology, following Quine, or the turn to new models of subjectivity, following Foucault, novel explanations for the production of objects emerged that no longer depended on the ideal of assigning the correct name to an object [Hacking 2002]. For the inheritors of each of these traditions, the next step was to go past the “Linguistic Turn” of the late 1960s and recast the development of concepts in the world as a process of mutual engagements and interactions, resolutely without privileging the moment of naming or categorizing, but still allowing for the efficacy and legitimacy of discernment as a practice.

Within this historical context, the promise of the digital museum emerged as multiplying individual acts of interpretation and decentralizing the authority of the curator and expert. It is difficult, but necessary, to separate this promise of semantic multiplication from the celebration of the anarchist’s impulse, where one celebrated the end of totalitarian mechanisms of control and the “death of the museum.” We would suggest that the understanding of the underlying phenomena, and the roles that objects play in our lives, was lost in the rush to contest all forms of authority, including those that emerge from the practice of attentive discernment. Where the production of the whole of the discernment is made available to the viewer, and thus engaged with as discernment and not categorization, the anti-authoritarian promise is met and the active role of real engagement is accentuated.<sup>[8]</sup>

## The Embodied Experience

The final piece of context we wish to add in comparison to the digital installation is in terms of the sense of embodiment one has in a physical museum. Obviously, many aspects of that experience cannot be replicated in a digital installation, but the encompassing idea of discernment allows us to understand the ways in which the “whole” of a physical installation is presented in concert with the linear display. Even in encyclopedic installations, where the flow of the audience is tightly controlled, the visitor will catch glimpses of the rest of the installation and gather a sense of how the whole hangs together meaningfully. Although much can be learned from looking at the objects in the order they are

displayed and thinking through the serial development of the visual argument, the curatorial experience suggests that the blank spaces between objects — both on the wall and the floor — control the experience of scale and context in non-linear modes and still constitute essential elements within the installation of a good show. Discerning engagement, although it can happen at many levels, is the process of relating back and forth to the encompassing whole as one experiences and engages with the individual pieces. In that way, the viewers are on the same level as the objects, as they all engage with each other in mutual determinations of what can be understood, in a full and embodied sense, and not only in terms of what can be truly and definitively said about the objects in isolation.

There are two ways of understanding how series relate to this whole, however. In one, the series precede the whole and the construction of the display counts as an imposition of an interpretation, or a way of arranging the parts to convey some sense of how the curator “sees the whole.” In the second, the process of creating the display is like the original process of creating the objects — the individual objects emerge from the engaged process of discernment, where formal qualities are brought out, functions are enhanced, aesthetics are developed, and the display is equally its own engaged process of discernment. One may still criticize the interpretation, or bemoan the violence of an aggregation of unrelated objects, but because they are not discerning reflections of what the objects can do, not because they reflect a misnaming of what the objects are.

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The privilege of the serial in traditional museum displays, by this account, reflects the deeper ontological commitments to objectivity as individuated and isolated objects brought into relation only through the interpretive activity of interpreters.<sup>[9]</sup> When an object is seen, instead, as emerging into its separate existence through a process of discernment, then the ontological model is one of interdependent relation and developing possibilities, and the wholeness is in constant conversation with the articulated elements or parts. In that case, however, one must allow the viewer to feel the tension of the curator’s position — the audience is being asked to share in an open project of discernment and not to accede to a finished argument or claim about the objects on display. If the promise of digital installations is simply that they allow us to multiply interpretations or shed the authoritarian voice of the expert curator, then digital installations cannot allow us to engage with the objects as themselves agents in the world, creating an emergent meaning as the individual pieces engage in conversation with each other. Instead, to better approximate the force of the objects, the digital installation should allow for the relatedness to emerge as primary, as the discerning awareness of individual objects occupying place in relation to a broader context of meaningful activity.

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## Returning to the Digital

We do not wish to suggest that the audience left the installation with a determinate interpretation of the eight masks on view. Instead, we wanted to focus on the active arranging of the objects by curator and audience over and above the creation of a single interpretation of the masks. Further, we wanted to emphasize that all such interpretations are very difficult, given the dearth of verifiable archaeological context with which to “anchor” an interpretation and privilege a particular arrangement. Where success was achieved, more simply, was in the conveyance of a formal beauty belonging to the objects and a sense of their production as encompassing a range of possible engagements with the broader work. This could be had from any installation, including the omeka.net project as well as simple wall hangings, but in the traditional displays it requires an act of imagination as the viewer takes in each piece, holds it in mind, and then constructs a sense of the overall relation. With Vwire, the overall view was presented first and then the variations were presented as distance from the central image, and one participated in the discernment of the space into regions, from within the experience of that space as both communally meaningful and malleable to new ways of arranging the masks and discerning engaging differences.

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## Notes

[1] Cf. the articles collected in [O'Neill 2007] and [Marincola 2007].

[2] By “discernment” we mean an analytic process of visually engaging in understanding an object. An interesting approach to creating collaborative digital tools for capturing discernments without presupposing categorical judgments can be found in [Nauta 2008], along with relevant background on the computational and cognitive sciences.

[3] Although we mean this claim to be untroubling, it is difficult to justify. The philosophical history surrounding the priority of a contextualizing world, with Heidegger, or explanatory forms of life, with Wittgenstein, led to quite distinct responses to the Cartesian and technological models that had explicitly begun from categorization and judgments of meaning. That these models still dominate in the natural sciences and popular understanding of technology further complicate the situation, as do strong dissenting voices, like Derrida's insistence on the necessity of linguistic determinations. Worthwhile overviews of the arguments can be found in many places, including [Hacking 2002] and [Casey 2007]. A number of attempts to imagine a more "vibrant" and less human-centered production of the world have emerged recently, among those of note we recommend [Bennett 2010].

[4] In the specific terms of the digital humanities, cf. [Drucker 2011] and [Zöllner-Weber 2009]. For museum studies, [Sherman 1994], [Maleuvre 1999], [Starn 2005].

[5] There is an ongoing discussion of how to make digital display capable of embodying the criticisms of Cartesian models of subjectivity cf., among many others, [Simanowski 2011], [Paul 2011], [Corby 2006], which we would like to join with the modest insistence that a small change in how we represent the wholeness of the activity of discernment can carry large weight in the philosophical and aesthetic regimes.

[6] The Teotihuacan masks are important art historical objects, and have been involved in a number of arguments that have to do with formal characteristics discerned in the masks as a group. [Pasztor 1997] and [Pasztor 2005].

[7] Quine's arguments at the time were that the dispositions to behavior explained the semantic content, as opposed to having the mental construct determine the activity.

[8] We do not wish to overstate the polemical nature of our argument, but underscore that we are not convinced that multiplication of interpretations preserves the fundamental experience of discernment, as embodied in visiting a curated display (traditional or digital).

[9] Cf. [Sherman 1994] for an overview of the critical arguments against museum aesthetics. That one has moved to a post-critical stance, in our instance, means that we are not comparing grounds for the validity of judgments (as the original formulation of the critical enterprise with Kant would have it), but displaying the whole process of engaged discernment, with the judgments — and their grounds — contained within that larger world of engaged discerning activity.

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