MUSEUMS^{ETC}

CODE | WORDS

Technology and Theory in the Museum

Edited by Ed Rodley, Robert Stein and Suse Cairns

MuseumsEtc

Praise for CODE | WORDS

Some of the most exciting, important and wide-ranging thinking about museums and their global role that has happened this century.
Sree Sreenivasan, Chief Digital Officer, Metropolitan Museum of Art

Daring, intelligent and provocative, an absolute must for all forward-thinking museums.
Jane Finnis, Chief Executive, Culture24

Anchored in case studies around the world, linking strategy, technology, and psychology. Like the future, it is experimental, uncertain, and brilliant.
Nina Simon, Executive Director, Santa Cruz Museum of Art and History, author of The Participatory Museum

Brings together exciting new ideas and challenging thought leadership from some of the most interesting museum innovators of our time.
Jim Richardson, Founder, MuseumNext

An engaging and timely exploration of contemporary issues that face museums around the globe; how to engage with digital technologies and the changes they make possible.
Laurent Gaveau, Director, The Lab, Google Cultural Institute

At last a book which brings together technological and social innovation in museums.
Tony Butler, Executive Director, Derby Museums Trust

A refreshing new approach to the interface of technologies, museums and especially younger museum professionals.
John Reeve, Institute of Education, University of London

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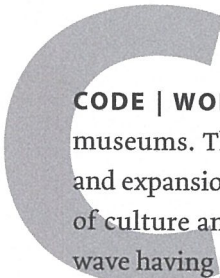
FOREWORD

Seb Chan
Chief Experience Officer
Australian Centre for the Moving Image

CODE | WORDS ARRIVES at an important juncture for museums. The world has been transformed by the growth and expansion of the internet and the increasing digitisation of culture and industry. The web, itself, is now in its third wave having passed from a novel information-led experience through "social" and now into a largely mobile experience. This shift to mobile has brought with it many first-time users in the developing world, as well as relegated the idea of logging-on to the distant past – we are now always connected. Internet access, increasingly, is now both considered and provided as a utility.

Museums, though, have been tardy in their adoption of digital services – despite museum workers' predictions as early as the 1960s of the coming of digitisation, centralised databases, and the potential of truly globalized access. Our cousins, the libraries, have been the canary in the mine since the 1990s and yet continue to struggle with their own transformation from book-bound knowledge to knowledge-as-a-service, made all the more complex by the shifting sands of subscription journals and born-digital works. UK academic Ross Parry (2013), examining organizational structures and practices, has identified the seeds of what he terms "post-digital" taking root amongst the UK's national museums, although when placed in the context of austerity cuts the long-term impact of these changes is still very uncertain.

As a series of essays emerging from a range of active practitioners, each at varying stages of their careers, produced "on the network" and originally through Medium, a post-blogging writing platform, CODE | WORDS provides a series of important vignettes of this moment of in-progress change.

Michael Edson's clarion call was the first to be published in the series and harks back to the optimism of the first and second waves of the web. And while the shift towards internet-as-utility has brought much of the "technological magical thinking" of the past two decades crashing down to earth, Edson's vision is paradoxically much easier to make a reality now than ever before. Although, as Nick Poole cautions, museums should be careful not to lose their way in their pursuit of Edson's vision of scale – there is no inherent "ethics of the web". Rob Stein, Deputy Director of the Dallas Museum of Art, forcefully argues the need for museums to shift their value proposition to their communities and warns that we lack many of the analytic skills we need as we rush headlong into quantifying our missions at the behest of boards and management teams. Merete Sanderhoff and Ed Rodley both demonstrate the value of opening up the treasure houses and make an important call for openness. Bridget McKenzie and Adrianne Russell's essays both question museums' engagement with social change, social justice and sustainability – a call echoed in Nick Poole's riposte to Edson's opener, while Janet Carding reflects on the challenges of organizational change, having led such efforts at the Royal Ontario Museum.

If there is any thread through these essays, it is the notion that museums now exist in a chaotic environment of constant change. There is no sense that "digital transformation" is a transition from one static state to another, but that the real challenge lies in building more nimble, flexible, responsive and ultimately resilient institutions. What this means, as many of the contributors suggest, is that digital transformation is ultimately the transformation of the museum itself.

CODE | WORDS:
THE BACK STORY

Robert Stein

IN EARLY 2014, Suse Cairns, Ed Rodley, and I began a conversation about whether it was possible to document the kinds of conversations that each of us saw happening across the museum technology community. We each noted that the quality of debate and discourse in the field had matured substantially over the last decade, but was not yet being captured in a form which could sustain or preserve an evolving theory of digital practice in museums.

In conversations online and at conferences, many of us in the museum technology field regularly tackle challenging questions about the identity of museums, their roles in society, their responsibilities to serve a global public, and the nature of collecting, preservation, education, scholarship, primary research, and ethics in a digital age. While the influence of these ideas is widespread among the immediate community of practitioners, they are not always shared more broadly throughout the field, limiting their utility. In spite of this, those discussions are beginning to inspire change in many museums and are demonstrating the important relationship between emerging digital practices and museum theory.

We wondered how we might capture the emerging ideas that exist at the intersection of digital practice and museums in a way that would not sacrifice the discursive richness that is so integral to this community's practice. While each of us had participated in various online and print publishing efforts in the past, those had always veered either solidly towards an informal online social discussion, or towards a formal, but static and selective document. We recognized the inherently closed nature of the traditional authorship model and wondered what might be possible if a group of colleagues tackled a set of interrelated

issues at the same time, in public, with an eye towards a more formal publication as the final product? The process itself would be an interesting experiment, and the outcome – meaningful discourse and new knowledge – could be a real benefit to the field. This idea evolved into Project CODE | WORDS.

Project CODE | WORDS became an experimental discursive publishing project which gathered a diverse group of leading thinkers and practitioners to explore emerging issues about the nature of museums in light of the dramatic and ongoing impact of digital technologies on society. In establishing the CODE | WORDS project, we sought to explore news ways to spread these ideas, and to engage the global community of museum professionals to explore how we respond to the challenges and opportunities which digital technologies present.

Starting points

As a group, we felt it was important to provide some guidance to what might otherwise be a very wide-ranging set of topics. We proposed the following prompts to our authors who – to their credit – addressed these ideas and expanded our notion of what the project might become. The questions we proposed were as follows:

- Making the value statement for museums in a digital age: How can museums determine what's important and not just what's easy?
- The politics of new technologies: How do we balance the shifting equations of power, audience, and authority?
- Dialogue and discourse in museums: Who's talking and who's listening?

- Creativity, innovation, and technology: Is there a relationship between the three that's unique to museums?
- Digital curation: What does it mean to collect and preserve digital media, art, and information?
- Eschewing both technofetishism and technophobia: New digital technologies won't solve all the problems in the world, or museum, nor will they destroy everything we hold dear. Things will change, as they always do. How will we respond to those changes in a deliberate manner?

Bringing the plan to fruition

To bring these ideas to life, the team proposed the CODE | WORDS project in three phases. The first was a series of online discussions held via web chats with project team members to discuss the framing ideas of the project and test our initial assumptions about whether this idea could fly at all.

In the next phase, the team chose to use the Medium website for publishing long-form essays which attempted to tackle some of the framing ideas described above. We chose Medium because of its ease of authoring, enjoyable reading experience for long-form content, and because it offered some unique features for inline commenting at the paragraph level.

We invited the public to discuss the essays across a variety of online channels, using the hashtag #CODEWORDS, with the aim of expanding and refining the arguments presented by the authors. We also invited and encouraged the broader community to comment, critique, and submit their own essays to the growing collection of CODE | WORDS material. We're proud to say that many people took us up on that offer and several significant essays were contributed to the collection which were

generated entirely from the community.

In the final phase of the project, we had hoped from the start that the quality of work from our authors would be valuable enough to justify a more permanent print publication. Using the open discourse of the online publication, our plan was to use that feedback to further refine and hone each essay.

As you can see from this volume, the CODE | WORDS authors have contributed a set of compelling and important thoughts and ideas to this discussion. We could not be more grateful to MuseumsEtc for their support and enthusiasm for the project. Without their expertise as publishers, this print edition would not be possible. Furthermore, I think it's so important to note that MuseumsEtc has agreed to publish this work under a Creative Commons BY-NC-SA license which has allowed it to be used freely for non-commercial use in other languages and will permit aspects of the essays to be remixed and extended as these ideas continue to grow and evolve.

The story doesn't end here

We've always thought of CODE | WORDS as the beginning of an experiment in publishing. I think it's fair to say that each of the authors has hopes and dreams held in our hearts about what CODE | WORDS might become, many of which were not realized in this first attempt. Many of us feel that our goal of a highly discursive and evolving conversation on museum theory was hampered by the tools we chose and the unfamiliarity this mode of discourse has for our audiences. That being said, there are seeds of promise here for a participatory form of long-form writing that are truly exciting.

From the beginning, the project has embraced an inclusive

ethos; an intention to draw out voices from our community that need to be heard. We hope that the dialogue will not end with this publication, but rather, that diverse participants from across the museum sector will also choose to engage in this discourse, writing essays of their own, or developing the dialogue further in other ways. We hope that in reading this book, you will feel free to pick up the CODE | WORDS moniker and use it to mark your own contributions to this discussion.

The project CODE | WORDS team

In closing, we would like to acknowledge and give thanks to those early contributors whose ideas and input were so critical to creating the CODE | WORDS project and format. Some authored essays, some contributed comments and questions inline to spark discussions, and some helped us to hone our thinking about the project itself. All were instrumental in creating a meaningful discussion about the state of theory about technology in the museum field for which we are proud and thankful.

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