

The Artist-Led Web: Curatorial Methods of Para-institutional Platforms



Tom Milnes
tom.milnes@falmouth.ac.uk
Centre for Blended Realities,
Falmouth University, Falmouth, UK

This paper argues that artist-led web platforms of the 2010s marked a shift in the scope of online artistic activity, from net art materiality and medium-specific experimentation toward a wider arts ecology conducted through the internet. Earlier histories of net art and online curation had already established the web as a site of production, distribution, and curatorial experimentation (Bosma 2011; Graham and Cook 2010; Ghidini 2019). By the mid-2010s, however, a number of artist-led platforms were using the web not only to exhibit work, but to stage residencies, organise dispersed biennial structures, publish criticism, and develop programme formats that mimicked institutions structurally and rhetorically. The paper proposes that the distinctiveness of these formations lies in three interrelated curatorial methods: dispersion, para-institutionality, and parasitism. Through a compressed genealogy of net art and online curation, and through case studies including Furtherfield, The Wrong Biennale, Cosmos Carl, Off Site Project, Digital Artist Residency, and The White Pube, it argues that the artist-led web platforms should be understood as a historically specific development within Web 2.0 culture.

1 Introduction

Artist-led web platforms of the 2010s emerged as a broader shift in the scale and scope of online artistic organisation – marking a distinction from the net art practices previously. A number of artist-led platforms began to use websites, social media, mailing lists, residency calls, linked services, and browser-based formats not only to show work online, but also to build recurring frameworks of exhibition, criticism, support, and public engagement. In this sense, the web became a site of curatorial method in ways that created a sense of para-institutionality of web and cultural infrastructures, in frequencies not possible previously.

To give some historical context, the 1990s and 2000s had already established the internet as a space of artistic production, social exchange, and critical intervention. Josephine Bosma argues that net art was never simply “art on websites”; instead, it emerged through unstable technical and social conditions in which software, interfaces, and communities all formed part of the work’s material context (Bosma 2011). Beryl Graham and Sarah Cook likewise stated that curating after new media cannot be reduced to selecting objects for display, because interactivity, computation, and networked participation alter both the work and the conditions of its presentation (Graham and Cook 2010). Marialaura Ghidini’s account of curating on the web shows that online platforms evolved from spaces of display into spaces for the production and dissemination of web-based art (Ghidini 2019). Taken together, these ac-

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counts make clear that there is no simple break between early net art and the artist-led platforms of the 2010s. The latter inherits a history of web-specific experimentation and curatorial adaptation.

Yet this paper establishes that there is a useful distinction to be made. What became newly visible in the 2010s was not just more art on the internet, but a set of artist-led formations that operated across a wider arts ecology. They incorporated criticism, residency formats, biennial structures, delegated curatorship, and programmed identities that mimicked institutions structurally and rhetorically, often without fully becoming institutions themselves. Rosie Hermon's account of the para-institution is useful here because it describes practices that work "besides and beyond" gatekeeping structures while remaining entangled with them (Hermon 2021). That formulation is especially apt for artist-led web platforms, which often borrowed institutional forms while reformatting them through networked and platform-dependent conditions.

This paper therefore argues that the artist-led web of the 2010s can be understood through three interrelated curatorial methods. The first is *dispersion*: the redistribution of curatorial agency, artistic contribution, and audience encounter across networked space. The second is *para-institutionality*: the adoption and transformation of institutional formats such as residencies, criticism, or exhibition programmes through web-native material and organisational conditions. The third is parasitism: the tactical use of existing web infrastructures, platforms, feeds, and hyperlink systems as both technical support and conceptual material. These methods overlap in practice, but distinguishing them helps clarify what was historically specific about artist-led web platforms in the 2010s.

2 From Net Art to Online Curation

Any account of artist-led web platforms needs to begin before the 2010s. Bosma posits that net art exceeded the browser and should be understood through the variable social and technical conditions of the network itself (Bosma 2011). This remains important because it resists a flattened history in which all online artistic practice becomes merely visual content on a screen. Net art's significance lay partly in how it treated networks as environments rather than channels.

Ceci Moss extends this discussion into the twenty-first century by describing "expanded internet art" as practice shaped by the informational milieu rather than confined to a single medium or interface (Moss 2019). This is a useful bridge between earlier net art conditions and the post-Web 2.0 environment, a moment in which art increasingly worked through feeds, image circulation, platform vernaculars, and networked audiences. Moss does not collapse these practices into one field, but her account explains why the internet could no longer be treated as a separate, sealed medium. It had become an ordinary environment in which artistic activity unfolded alongside browsing and communication.

Curatorial practice changed accordingly. Graham and Cook frame new media less as a neatly bounded medium than as a field defined by process, participation, and distribution (Graham and Cook 2010). Their argument matters as it pushes curation away from a model of static exhibition display and toward one concerned with behaviours, systems, and relations. The challenges of curating new media were already organisational as much as aesthetic.

Ghidini sharpens this further by showing how web-based curatorial platforms developed from spaces for presenting web-specific art into platforms that also produced and disseminated it (Ghidini 2019). Once the platform becomes part of the process of production rather than merely presentational, curatorial work begins to include the organisation of interfaces, circulation patterns, technical affordances, and online audiences. Dekker and Tedone's formulation of "networked co-curation" extends this argument by describing online curation as shaped by a wider ecology of human and non-human agents, interfaces, and socio-technical power relations rather than by content alone (Dekker and Tedone 2019). The web could therefore no longer be understood as a passive canvas for curatorial work or solely for net art practices but was established as the material part of the curatorial situation itself.

This genealogy clarifies that artist-led web platforms inherited medium-awareness from net art, sensitivity to systems and participation from new media curation; and an expanded understanding of platforms from online curatorial discourse. But the artist-led web platforms of the 2010s also changed the terms of online activity. It extended beyond discrete exhibitions or individual commissions toward recurring organisational forms. The relevant distinction is therefore not simply between old and new internet art, but between web-based exhibition and artist-led platforms that began to perform a wider set of curatorial functions.

Furtherfield provides an important precedent. Its *FurtherStudio* project, launched in 2003, offered live online artist residencies and treated the web as a site of ongoing production and exchange rather than merely presentation (Furtherfield 2003). *Furtherfield* matters less as a direct origin than as evidence that online artist-led support structures existed before the 2010s. What changes later is their multiplication, their platform dependency, and their broader embedding within Web 2.0 culture.

3 Web 2.0 and the Conditions of the Artist-Led Web

If the 1990s and 2000s made web-based art and online curation thinkable, the 2010s changed the material conditions under which those practices operated. Nick Srnicek's account of platform capitalism details that initiatives like artist-led web platforms emerge into an environment depended on an internet increasingly organised through platforms as dominant business and infrastructural models (Srnicek 2017). Van Dijck, Poell, and de Waal similarly describe the "platform society" as a connective environment in which social, cultural, and eco-

conomic life is increasingly mediated by platform infrastructures and their values (van Dijck, Poell, and de Waal 2018). Artist-led web projects were therefore never operating on neutral ground. They were working through an internet shaped by feeds, social metrics, data extraction, standardised interfaces, and privately owned infrastructures.

This is the condition under which the artist-led web became historically specific. The platforms of the 2010s did not simply build autonomous websites; they worked through site builders, social media, mailing lists, streaming systems, map interfaces, and third-party hosting. Their materiality was therefore inseparable from the habits of Web 2.0: sharing, posting, hyperlinking, embedding, tagging, and circulating. Ghidini's discussion of online curation shows how web-based platforms are shaped not only by art-historical questions but also by the affordances and constraints of the web environments in which they operate (Ghidini 2019). What later artist-led platforms inherited from this condition was not only an expanded set of tools but a changed environment of cultural production.

This helps explain why the para-institutional character of artist-led web platforms became so visible. Hermon's term names practices that are neither fully outside institutions nor securely inside them (Hermon 2021). Artist-led web platforms repeatedly occupied this adjacent position. They looked and behaved like institutions in certain respects: they had programmes, calls, recurring cycles, discursive framing, editorial identities, or public-facing opportunities. Yet they lacked the architectural permanence, staffing, and formal authority usually associated with institutions. Their rhetoric and structure often echoed institutional forms, but their material base remained lightweight, sometimes improvised, and distributed. It is this tension that distinguishes them from both the earlier online gallery and the more stable arts organisation.

4 Dispersion

Dispersion names the redistribution of curatorial agency across networked space. It refers not only to geographic spread, but to the refusal of a single exhibition centre, singular curatorial voice, or unified pathway through the work. In online contexts, this redistribution can become a method rather than a by-product of digital communication.

The Wrong Biennale is the clearest example. The Wrong Biennale's description of their project frame it as an international digital art biennial structured through pavilions, embassies, online projects, and distributed events rather than a single site or host institution (The Wrong Biennale 2025). That structure disperses the authority normally concentrated in a biennial's central curatorial gatekeeping. Instead of gathering everything into one architecture, it produces a network of delegated nodes. The biennial format is preserved rhetorically, but its execution becomes distributed. In this sense, dispersion is not simply logistical; it becomes curatorial. It determines how participation is structured, how visibility is routed, and how the event is understood.

Dekker and Tedone's concept of networked co-curation helps explain why this matters. Their account emphasises that online curation opens the field to multiple agents and unexpected encounters produced through online structures themselves (Dekker and Tedone 2019). Dispersion in *The Wrong Biennale* is therefore not just an enlarged submission system. It is a method of decentralising selection, authorship, and audience movement. It creates a biennial without one stable centre, and in doing so reimagines curatorial legitimacy as something distributed across a network rather than secured by a single institution.

Dispersion also has a democratic valence, and although the decentralisation of curatorial decisions may broaden participation, it does not automatically dissolve hierarchy. What it does do is reformat where curatorial authority sits and how it circulates. That reformatting is one of the clearest marks of the artist-led web.

5 Para-Institutionality

Para-institutionality names the tendency of these platforms to copy, mimic, or borrow institutional formats and rhetorics while reimagining them through web materiality. This is not the same as merely appearing professional online. The relevant point is that a number of artist-led web platforms developed structures that behaved like differentiated institutional functions.

Off Site Project platform presents a programme of homepage exhibitions, downloadable ZIP shows, and a residency situated in Google Maps (Off Site Project 2026). These are not just novel interfaces. They function like differentiated spaces within an institution: the homepage as a main exhibition site, the ZIP show as a compact project space or publication-like form, and the Google Maps residency as a process-led research space. In each case, institutional differentiation is reproduced through web-native means rather than architectural separation. During *The Photographers' Gallery's* "Screen Walk with Off Site Project" further confirmation of the legibility of these formats demonstrated a coherent curatorial programme rather than isolated web experiments (The Photographers' Gallery 2022).

Digital Artist Residency also supports this point in a different register. As an online residency platform supporting artists working with digital processes, with several Arts Council funded projects (Digital Artist Residency 2026), the significance is that it adapts the institutional rhetoric of the residency into a web-native structure: structured, serial, and temporally organised. It retains the recognisable framework of the residency by providing visibility to digital-based processes while dispensing with the need for physical co-location. This is a para-institutional move in Hermon's sense, because it sits beside institutional form while reworking it through a different material basis (Hermon 2021).

The White Pube extends para-institutionality beyond exhibition-making. Its project includes criticism, podcasts, practical resources, a fund-

ing library, and a recurring creatives grant (The White Pube 2026). The project's significance lies in how criticism operates as a form of infrastructural support rather than detached judgment. What is being mimicked here is not the museum but the wider institutional ecology of criticism, pedagogy, and artist development. *The White Pube* therefore demonstrates that para-institutionality in the artist-led web platform is not confined to exhibition architecture – or educational architecture for that matter. It can also operate through discourse, resource-sharing, and practical support.

This is perhaps where the paper's main claim becomes clearest. The artist-led web of the 2010s did not merely host work online. It expanded into a wider arts ecology by taking on functions associated with criticism, pedagogy, opportunity creation, and curatorial agency – all while taking the opportunity to reimagine how these modes can be restructured to redistribute agency or provide visibility politically.

6 Parasitism

Parasitism names the tactical use of existing web infrastructures as both support and material. In the context of the artist-led web, this means more than simply using social media for promotion. It means treating platforms, hyperlinks, hosting systems, and commercial infrastructures as things to work through, with, and against.

Cosmos Carl makes this logic most explicit. Its "Platform Parasite" manifesto frames the project as one that hosts nothing but hyperlinks supplied by artists, routing users outward to works hosted elsewhere (Cosmos Carl 2018). This is not minimalism for its own sake. It is a curatorial concept built from dependency: the exhibition exists by attaching itself to other systems. The host platform does not disappear; it becomes the very condition that the project exposes. In this sense, parasitism is both a technical and conceptual strategy. The work of curation is performed through the relation between host and hosted, rather than through a self-contained exhibition architecture.

Platform theory helps clarify why this matters. In a platformised internet, cultural production is already entangled with infrastructures it does not control. Srnicek's account of platform capitalism explains how digital activity becomes dependent on corporate systems that organise visibility, storage, circulation, and value extraction (Srnicek 2017). Van Dijck, Poell, and de Waal show that such platforms increasingly mediate social and cultural life at the level of infrastructure itself (van Dijck et al. 2018). *Cosmos Carl*'s importance lies in making that entanglement legible. Rather than disguising the dependency, it foregrounds it as a curatorial proposition.

Other projects participate in parasitism with varying degrees of conceptual polemic in comparison. *Off Site Project*'s use of Google Maps and downloadable ZIP structures depends on repurposing existing technical vernaculars – often pushing the boundaries and capabilities of these formats to their limit (Off Site Project 2026). *The White Pube*'s crit-

icism circulates through a website, podcasts, grant calls sites, and social media platforms – broadening and providing accessibility to art criticism through multiple platforms (The White Pube 2026). *Digital Artist Residency* also relied on the site builder platforms and social media dependency for residency visibility; with artists often glitching and conceptually questioning issues of platformised internet rather within those spaces ie. Alix Rothnie (Digital Artist Residency 2018). In each case, the artist-led platform is not autonomous in a strong sense. It survives through tactical attachment.

Parasitism therefore names a curatorial relation to Web 2.0 infrastructure. It registers the impossibility of pure independence online and transforms that condition into form.

7 Conclusion

The artist-led web of the 2010s demonstrates their significance in the way it widened the scope of online artistic activity from net art practices of materiality and agency toward a broader arts ecology. The field inherited a sensitivity to networked materiality from net art (Bosma 2011). It inherited a concern with process, participation, and systems from new media curation (Graham and Cook 2010). It also developed within the platformised conditions of Web 2.0, where visibility and circulation were shaped by commercial infrastructures rather than neutral channels (Srnicek 2017; van Dijck et al. 2018).

Within that condition, artist-led platforms developed distinct curatorial methods. Projects such as *The Wrong Biennale* redistributed curatorial agency through dispersed and delegated structures (The Wrong Biennale 2025). Platforms such as *Off Site Project*, *Digital Artist Residency*, and *The White Pube* reformatted institutional functions such as exhibitions, residencies, and criticism through web-native programmes (Off Site Project 2026; Digital Artist Residency 2026; The White Pube 2026). *Cosmos Carl* made infrastructural dependency itself into a curatorial strategy by treating the hyperlink and the host platform as both support and subject (Cosmos Carl 2018). These methods were not wholly separate, but together they marked a shift in what online curation could do.

This paper identifies a historically specific formation in which the internet became a means of organising criticism, pedagogy, opportunity creation, and curatorial hybridity not merely a place to exhibit. *Furtherfield* provides an important precedent for this development through earlier experiments in online residencies and networked cultural organisation (Furtherfield 2003). However, the 2010s intensified and multiplied these methods under conditions of platform dependence and Web 2.0 circulation.

The result was not a clean alternative to the institution, nor a continuation of net art alone, but a para-institutional ecology of online curatorial practice. These platforms shifted the understanding of what more hybridized and networked curation could be. These platforms showed that the web at this time hosted recurring, recognisable, and rhetori-

cally institution-like structures while remaining materially lightweight and unstable. That fragility if these platforms is pertinent as many were intermittent, financially unsupported, difficult to sustain, or vulnerable to technological change. Yet that instability is part of their historical meaning rather than evidence against it. Their legacy lies in having demonstrated that curatorial methods on the web could extend beyond exhibition display into the broader organisation of artistic life.

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