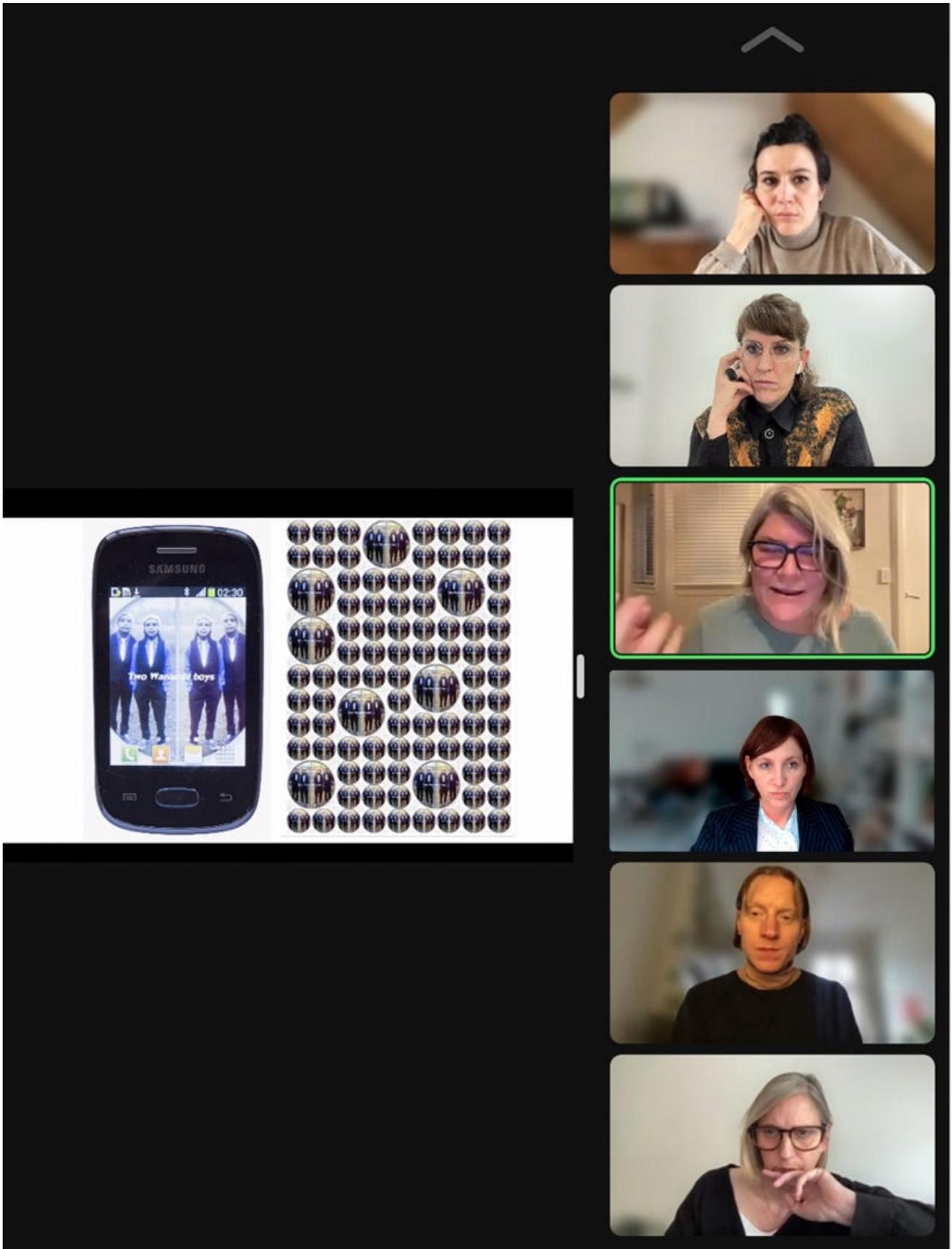




# **Multimodal Digital Curating as (anthropological) research, collaboration, and engagement**

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## Introduction

Curating has become a popular concept in anthropology in recent years, extending beyond traditional museum and gallery contexts to encompass social media profiles, feeds, websites, and algorithms. Everything can be understood as curating nowadays. This broad interpretation of curation has also gained traction in the field of media and digital anthropology, where anthropologists and ethnographers engage in digital practices such as developing online exhibitions, creating web sites, or using social media platforms as research tools. These efforts aim to produce and present research in multimodal digital formats to foster novel forms of knowledge production. This expands the scope of research practice to encompass modes of research presentation, while also engaging a broader audience.

Digital curating and exhibiting often embrace multimodality, reflecting diverse modes of fieldwork, production and representation that transcend the often implied online/offline divide. In this context, the digital and multimodality are not regarded merely as technologies or methodologies but “as intensely social and potentially transformative” that “creatively refigure the grounds of ethnographic encounter and, in this process, to recast what counts as academic knowledge” (Deger 2017, 318). Multimodal digital curating in this sense is “actively participating in, and commenting on the cultural-historical-technological dynamics from which they arise” (ibid).

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Considering these perspectives as presented by Jennifer Deger, along with more technical and hands-on take aways, the online workshop “Multimodal digital curating” on January 19-20, 2023, served as a platform for scholars and practitioners engaged in multimodal digital experimentations. Organised by Anja Dreschke, Simone Pfeifer and Anna Lisa Ramella in their capacity as co-speakers



of the media anthropology working group (<https://agmedien.de>) of the German Association of Social and Cultural Anthropology (GASCA/DGSKA) (<https://www.dgska.de/en>), the workshop was the third instalment of an ongoing series of workshops, offering an opportunity to share practical experiences and theoretical insights. This reflection on the workshop incorporates six out of eight contributions (due to the authors' choices and copyright issues) and contextualises our understanding of multimodal digital curating while highlighting key epistemic, ethical, theoretical, and practical aspects discussed in the various contributions.

## Curating, the curator and 'the Curatorial'

In its most fundamental sense, curatorial practices involve the selection, organisation, ordering, contextualisation, and public presentation of content. Departing from the (colonial) traditions of curation in ethnographic museum and exhibition contexts, anthropologists have expanded their understanding of curating beyond a representational mode to view it as a form of experimentation and critique (Elhaik and Marcus 2010; 2020). This shift towards curating in anthropology has brought the anthropologist as curator to the forefront of recent discussions, considering the different professional roles of the curator such as a mediator (see the contributions to Sansi 2020). On a theoretical level, drawing on critical art practice, 'the curatorial' has been differentiated from *curating* as practice as a process of knowledge production and mode of exploration (Rogoff and Bismarck 2012). 'The Curatorial' is conceptualised as a form of posing questions, reflecting on curatorial practices and decisions as integral components of exhibitory practices. When applied to anthropological contexts, 'the curatorial' is described as "an expanded mode of *research* rather than exhibitory practice" (Schacter 2020, 193; emphasis in original). In his workshop talk, Rafael Schacter explored 'the curatorial' as an ongoing critical research form and an anthropological method that "asks more questions than it gives answers" and engages in "knowledge production rather than representation," moving "away from illustration and exemplification" [see video ca. minute 8:00-13:00]:



Drawing on his co-curatorial work in the exhibition at the Brunei Gallery in London, Rafael Schacter discusses the artworks by Filipino artist Cian Dayrit to elaborate on what he terms “collaborative intensity.” This concept is a form of condensed and intensified research and fieldwork that can only be achieved through a collective undertaking and project.

## **Digital Curating, Collaboration, and the Archive**

The term curating has also been extensively applied to digital contexts, a theme explored by Carolin Höfler and Johanna Mehl in their contribution on “collaborating in design processes” [see video minute 2:22-ca. 5:10]. The widespread use of the term in the digital encompasses activities such as the selection of playlists of streaming providers as well as the collecting, indexing, displaying, and archiving of ever-increasing digital data. Moreover, algorithms play a role in this collaborative digital curatorial process. In this context, Höfler and Mehl pose questions that include examining how physical curatorial practices are incorporated into the digital landscape and vice versa, and how the onsite relates to the online:

Christoph Bareither’s research focus on methods of digital curating also ties in with this topic, particularly looking at digital curating as an everyday practice in social media use. He explores social media users as curators of popular culture and positions them as an integral component of participatory research strategies. His work employs an analytical framework of digital image curation to examine the interactions between museum visitors and users of digital image archives. Currently, he and his research team are actively developing a museum app aimed at prompting critical reflection among young visitors on the pervasive influence of “populist truth-making” in daily life. This endeavour is viewed as a form of ethnographic co-design, fostering interactive encounters to enhance the app while concurrently advancing ethnographic inquiries into the intersections of museums, populism, and the everyday experiences of young people.



Larissa-Diana Fuhrmann introduces digital projects that exemplify the intricate relationship between physical and digital realms. One noteworthy instance is the visual and digital design of the co-curated exhibition platform “reclaim: art as resistance against political violence” (<https://reclaim-platform.de>). Fuhrmann describes how this platform employs the “Petersburg hanging” [see video minute 18:00] wherein images of artworks are displayed closely above, below, and next to each other in an overview, reshuffling them based on selected keywords. Another of her examples refers to the exhibition “Mindbombs” at the “Kunsthalle Mannheim” where a digital tour and audio guide accompanied the physical exhibition [see minute 28:20], expanding and complementing the overall experience also after the physical exhibition terminated:

Throughout the workshop, numerous examples of digital curating were presented, showcasing a diverse array of curation technologies, including audio-visual media, VR-video, blogs, podcasts/videocasts, design-based web-applications, social media platforms or the critical use of AI technology. Importantly, these examples addressed hybrid formats and offline spaces as integral components of the digital curatorial.

Within these hybrid spaces, participatory and collaborative curating modes emerged as essential ways of knowledge production and social practice (Walton 2016). As emphasised earlier, digital curating is neither a form of representation of a physical exhibition, or a tool to inform or provide an overview of such. Instead, it serves as a means to initiating exchange and collaboration processes that extend beyond content sharing, clicking or amassing followers [see video of Höfler’s und Mehl’s talk]. These diverse collaborative curatorial practices involve not only research partners as co-curators but also researchers, designers, programmers, and other institutional actors, ideally fostering collaboration in non-hierarchical and asymmetrical ways. As Höfler and Mehl have scrutinized, collaborative curation involves a series of practices such as aggregating and transposing, sharing and versioning, re-enacting and pre-enacting. The resulting modes of collaboration and curation lend themselves as approaches to inventive



and future-oriented research, as can be seen in Mehl and Höfler's *Attending (to) Futures* conference and publication (Mehl and Höfler 2023).

## **Multimodal Digital Engagements**

Multimodality has also been conceptualised as a promising avenue for reimagining anthropological practice, and as a reflection on the evolving landscape of media ecology (see Dattatreyan and Marrero-Guillamón 2019). Rooted in the idea of the “(relative) democratization media production” (Collins, Durlington, and Gill 2017), multimodality is recognized not only as a methodology but also as a collaborative and experimental approach to connect with diverse audiences and explore various publication formats (Nolas and Varvantakis 2018; Westmoreland 2022). As Harjant Gill has stressed, multimodality not least fosters modes of knowledge production that defy the structural hierarchies research practices are often subject to (Gill 2019). In this context, digital curating in multimodal forms opens avenues for a more experimental use of audio-visual media that “evokes the heterogeneity of anthropological research across multiple platforms and collaborative sites” (Collins, Durlington, and Gill 2017, 142). Moving and still images, drawings, designs, and sounds that are (re)combined and presented in novel ways, expand, and reflect upon traditional forms of exhibitions, and transcend geographical constraints.

However, we must not take for granted that collaboration always calls for a close examination of power dynamics in collaborations between diverse actors and professional spheres. Especially in an era in which diversity has become a welcomed flagship campaign inside of institutions (Ahmed 2012), collaborative efforts need to account for the ways in which underlying asymmetries shape the collective process and output. This ranges from personal as well as political and technological biases, to the challenges of economic constraints or the unequal access to resources for research.



Roger Canals introduced the concept of eclectic assemblage in his workshop talk, advocating for relating multiple outcomes and multimodal formats as a bricolage of research, that bring together different actors, discourses, and modes of representation (Canals 2022).

Also Paolo Favero emphasises the potential of multimodal and audio-visual publication formats, with a specific focus on the visual essay and digital visuality in post-digital times (see also Favero 2020). Addressing the post-digital in relation to multimodality, Favero argues that the distinction between the digital and the non-digital is transcended in everyday life. He contends that “we are digitally connected almost all the time, even amidst the most “analogue” of situations. And we are analogue bodies involved in material relations with the surrounding world even when we are online” (Favero 2020, 7):

The multimodal as a means of sensory involvement was also reflected in Shireen Walton’s talk. Expanding on the focus of publication in multimodal digital curating, she explored the potential of co-curating to mediate, communicate and indulge in diverse worlds. In her workshop presentation, she shed light on the methodology of two projects she has actively curated over the past decade: photo blogging within and outside Iran, and the intersection of smartphones and ageing in Milan, Italy. Walton presented the varied routes and experimentations she undertook, ranging from digital exhibitions of photo blogs to graphic illustrations and translations. For her, digital multimodal curating encompasses creative methodologies, analytic approaches, and incorporates theoretical and epistemological dimensions [see video minute 37:27], fostering “multiple ways of doing anthropology - and the resulting multiple anthropologies - that create different ways of learning and knowing together” (Dattatreyan and Marrero-Guillamón 2019, 220):



## Conclusion

The current developments of digital and multimodal epistemologies in ethnographic research respond to the changing realities and research conditions in a globalized world. In order to engage with the prospective challenges in increasingly mediatized research fields, many scholars feel the need to expand the methodological spectrum and employ more-than-textual research means. They embrace multimodal approaches as an attempt to call into question the hierarchy of venues in academia that still privilege single-authored, text-based monographs and journal articles over collaborative, co-creative, decentring and more egalitarian forms of knowledge production. In this context, digital curating offers new opportunities to undo intellectual dichotomies and hierarchical relations that for long have been inscribed in ethnographic research.

Despite the numerous advantages and possibilities that open up for ethnographic research, we should not neglect the challenges of multimodal methodologies: in numerous instances they do not fit in existing structures of academic institutions and research requirements, and are thus not accounted for as scientific publications by our universities. This criticism is not new, so it is even more surprising that institutions and funding mechanisms still seem to be unable to create when it comes to creating sustainable structures for practice-based research. As a consequence, the use of digital curatorial approaches usually remains a surplus or an “activity on the side” (Westmoreland 2022) to text-based research. Thus, they create new ways of inequality and (self-)exploitation that often remain hidden behind the necessity to present an optimized, digitally curated CV on personal websites or commercial platforms like Academia.edu. Leading us to wonder whether every scholarly social media output can or should be regarded as “curated”? And if so, are we thereby creating new modes of gate keeping and exclusion that become even more complicated when we consider that the distribution of content within these platforms is influenced and shaped by algorithms whose functions most of us are not aware of. Moreover, digital curation can create an ethical dilemma since it frequently has to rely on commercial platforms and applications. This dependency not only raises questions



concerning data protection and copyright issues but also touches issues of sustainability of digital environments. Practices and platforms can be rendered obsolete, both from a media ecological perspective (regarding the socio-technological devices employed) and in an archival perspective (since the technologies employed can be resource-consuming and oftentimes fast-moving regarding technological standards). Furthermore, new hierarchies are inscribed in the use of digital technologies, especially when scholars have to rely on commercial platforms and tools. As Collins et al. (2017: 144) have contended, “the exposure of multimodality to the vicissitudes of capital accumulation, commodification, transformation, transnational circulation, and spectacle serves to critically locate the anthropological enterprise within a political-economic apparatus that the discipline as a whole has paid scant attention to”.

*Digital curating offers new opportunities to undo intellectual dichotomies and hierarchical relations that for long have been inscribed in ethnographic research.*

Emphasising the intricate complexities of multimodal engagements, Takagarawa et al. (2019) pose a critical question about how and when multimodal and collaborative anthropologies may inadvertently perpetuate, reproduce, or reinforce existing power structures, extractivist logics, experiences of violence and exclusion. They advocate for nuanced critiques of technologies and their infrastructures within the context of a capitalist power system, highlighting as a crucial step to critically examine multimodal encounters (2019, 522). Additionally, they stress the need for a close and critical examination of the disciplinary underpinnings and inheritances of the multimodal approach, acknowledging its embeddedness in global capitalism and technoscience. In resonance with Sara Ahmed’s work, the inclusion of elements such as refusal and disorientation can enhance this analytical process. Extending these insights to multimodal curatorial practices or ‘the curatorial’, such works possess the potential to actively comment on the cultural, historical, and technological dynamics from which they emerge. Multimodal digital curating, in our sense,



therefore, has to be viewed as a relational and ethical practice of care, aligning with the tradition of black and indigenous curators and scholars. Against this backdrop the guiding questions for future engagement with digital curating will be: how it can/does influence and transform ethnographic research in terms of methodology as well as epistemology and knowledge production?

## Contributions

Shireen Walton: [Multimodal Explorations: Digital \(Co-\)Curations In And Between Iran And Italy](#)

Larissa-Diana Fuhrmann: [Curating Artistic Appropriations Relating to Political Violence](#)

Roger Canals: [Research as an Eclectic Assemblage](#)

Rafael Schacter: [A Curatorial Methodology for Anthropology](#)

Paolo Favero: [When the Old is The New New](#)

Carolin Höfler and Johanna Mehl: [Collaborating on Design Processes](#)

## Abstract

This paper explores the multifaceted approach of multimodal digital curating, emphasizing its transformative potential in shaping ethnographic encounters and academic knowledge production. Drawing on insights and the talks from the “Multimodal Digital Curating” workshop organized by the Media Anthropology Working Group of the German Association of Social and Cultural Anthropology, this framing paper contextualises our understanding of multimodal digital curating while highlighting key epistemic, ethical, theoretical, and practical



dimensions discussed in workshop contributions. Furthermore, we explore the collaborative nature of digital curating, its experimental potential, and the challenges it presents, including economic constraints, technological biases, sustainability concerns, and power dynamics in collaborations. Ultimately, this report illuminates multimodal digital curating as not only a mode of knowledge production but also a dynamic social practice with far-reaching epistemic implications for the production, dissemination, and reception of anthropological research.

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