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BEYOND INTERFACE: AN INTERVIEW WITH ROBIN DOWDEN, NATE SOLAS, AND PAUL SCHMELZER

*Director of New Media Initiatives, Senior New Media Developer,
and Web Editor at the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis*

BY LATITUDES



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Robin Dowden

Nate Solas

Paul Schmelzer



01 The Walker Art Center's expansion, by Herzog & de Meuron, opened in April 2005. Photo: Paul Warchol

THE WALKER ART CENTER IS HOME TO ONE of the premiere collections of modern and contemporary art in the United States. Since its founding in 1940, the Walker has defined its role as an acquiring, commissioning and exhibition-making institution in a remarkably expansive and cross-disciplinary way, by encompassing visual arts, film, performance, new media, design, and archives. Established in 1996, the Walker's [New Media department](#) has since been at the forefront of museums engaged in the informational and artistic possibilities of digital technology, through online exhibitions as well as initiatives such as the [Digital Arts Study Collection](#), [Gallery 9](#) and [mnartists.org](#).

The Walker's institutional website – [walkerart.org](#) – was relaunched in December 2011 following a two-year conceptual reboot and complete redesign. Styled as an online newspaper, the new site heralds a paradigmatic shift for innovative museum websites in creating an online platform with an emphasis on publishing, while placing itself at the centre of generating conversations around content from both inside and outside the Walker's activities.

Latitudes: In developing the new [walkerart.org](#) you decided against leading with an information-retrieval or a searchable digital library model. Instead it mimics a newspaper or a magazine which reports on the Walker's activities and 'assets' as well as pulling-in art news from the web. So the site is no longer just pointing to content, but primarily creating new relationships through and to it?

Paul Schmelzer: Yes, we're trying to create relationships, and the content is a way to do that. The news format is first and foremost relational. It takes readers into consideration by presenting a variety of types, lengths, and formats for content that can be accessed based on preference. This could be anything from [tweets](#), [blog posts](#), and [videos](#) to, just recently, a 4,000-word [scholarly essay](#) on the role of dreams in cinema, from Georges Méliès to *film noir* to *Inception* (2010). And we've integrated social media for commenting and sharing. The news feel also underscores key aspects of [our mission](#): that we're global, multidisciplinary, and – perhaps most fitting for a high-churn news site – about the contemporary. Through [Art News From Elsewhere](#) we tease out connections

Paul Schmelzer is Web Editor at the Walker Center, and founder of the blog *Eyeteeth: A Journal of Incisive Ideas*. He was formerly Editor at *Minnesota Independent* and Managing Editor at the American Independent News Network.

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between the work we do and the art community – or the world at large. The site positions us as a culture hub, an entity that’s making these links (both literally and philosophically) between ideas.

As I see it, the site is dealing with the ways art can be more relevant to people’s lives, and a news format suggests that relationship, as art is often inspired by or responding to events in the world.

Nate Solas is Senior New Media Developer at the Walker Center, where he has worked since 2003. He began programming web and business applications in the mid 1990s at a variety of startups and small web companies.

Nate Solas: It’s not one or the other – magazine versus search – we’re just leading with the story. Search and information retrieval are an important piece of the overall site, as there’s simply too much content to present at once. Part of what we’re trying to do by pulling in art news from the web is exactly what you say: creating relationships. These relationships in turn help surface our own deep content and lighten the need for complicated search.

L: It is remarkable that the new website was developed entirely in-house. How did that in itself form new relationships?

Robin Dowden became director of New Media Initiatives in 2003, and has been worked with the Walker since 1997. Prior to moving to Minneapolis, Dowden was manager of the collection information system and website at the National Gallery of Art, Washington DC.

Robin Dowden: The site was designed and developed through a collaboration of design and new media. In 2009 these departments, along with education and marketing, were realigned under a new division called Audience Engagement and Communications (AEC). The formation of the AEC has been instrumental in shifting our processes. We’re now starting with the idea and then deciding what is the best publication channel rather than the other way around, which was past practice.

L: As you define the website as a retooled publishing enterprise, which old institutional sets of rules about publishing for print do you find no longer relevant?

RD: We’re no longer bound by the notion that others break our news or that Walker publications are discrete entities. Different publishing tiers with their own editorial processes and degrees of formality provide an opportunity to give others within the institution a voice, whether through the blogs or home page top stories. We’re really questioning what needs to come first. Instead of starting with the catalogue, print may follow online. For example, the ideas and essays in an exhibition catalogue may be developed as blog posts before a book is published.

PS: The site also makes us the principle actor in our



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August 29

HOURS: GALLERIES DINING SHOP

TODAY 11 am - 5 pm

DAILY 11 am - 5 pm

MON Closed

THU 11 am - 9 pm

TODAY'S EVENTS

TOURS & ACTIVITIES

Contemporary Journeys
Art Lab
AUG 29

OTHER

Doodle 4 Google
JUL 18 SEP 2

SCREENINGS

The James Dimond Home
Movie Collection
JUL 10 SEP 16

Artistic Programs

ARCHITECTURE/DESIGN

EDUCATION & COMM. PROGRAMS

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NEW MEDIA INITIATIVES

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VISUAL ARTS MORE ▾



Sculpture Garden

OPEN 6 AM - 12 MIDNIGHT

This Just In: Recent Acquisitions

BY VISUAL ARTS STAFF AUGUST 28, 2012



History and performance are twin threads that connect artworks recently brought into the Walker collection. This notable selection from our recent acquisitions includes several first works by new artists and inclusions by artists long in relationship with the Walker, including Andrea Bowers, Elad Lassy, Dave McKenzie, and Rirkrit Tiravanija. [MORE](#)

ART NEWS FROM ELSEWHERE MORE ▾



VIA ROLLINGSTONE.COM
Herzog and the Killers [↗](#)



VIA ECONOMIST.COM
Should Gov't Fund Art? [↗](#)



VIA THE DAILY BEAST.COM
Cat Critique [↗](#)

Top Stories

THE COLLECTION

This Just In: Recent Acquisitions

INTERVIEW

Stephen Duncombe:
Utopia Is No Place

LESSONS FROM OPEN FIELD

My Common Education

PUBLISHING A DECADE

Neal Cuthbert on *Artpaper*
and the '80s

SLIDESHOW

Walker Flashback: Art in
the '80s

THE TRACE

Searching for the Imprint
Movement Leaves Behind

DOCUMENTA (13)

The Uncommodifiable
Quinquennial

PERFORMING THROUGH CRISIS

Patrick Scully on Art and
AIDS in the 1980s

[MORE](#)

ARTS FILM ARTIST TALKS CLASSES WALKER ART CENTER EXHIBITIONS CONCERTS SCREENINGS DANCE KINVAPOUS SCULPTURE GARDEN PERFORMANCES LECTURES TOURS MUSIC

02

own message. While we maintain good relationships with legacy media, we don't necessarily need to wait for them to tell our stories for us. There's also timing: we can be much nimbler in publishing. We're no longer bound by print deadlines, which means we can develop content on the fly, instead of scheduling all our content based on a three-month process that culminates with starting the printing presses.

When a beloved artist we've worked with dies, we can – and should – respond quickly with a commemoration, or if we announce a new commission, we should be covering it the same way the mainstream media might, instead of

02 walkerart.org front page, 29 August 2012

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Nate Solas

Paul Schmelzer

waiting for a printed publication to come out.

L: Yet the independence and potential antagonism of a newspaper exhibition review, for example, is surely vital? If the Walker is increasingly involved in shaping its own media message, is there not a danger of creating a ‘feel-good’ bubble of consensus?

PS: It absolutely is a risk. Truth is, we’re still trying to figure this out, but my aim is to embrace a diversity of viewpoints and promote a discursive environment. We’ll occasionally link to pieces critical of us, but I’d like to do it more – to embrace the conflict, rather than pretend we don’t know criticism exists, and maybe use the opportunity to talk more about the work. As a contemporary institution, this kind of transparency is better than objectivity, which is a pretty fraught concept.

At the Personal Democracy Forum in 2009, [David Weinberger](#) had a great line that’s been instructive to me in journalism: “transparency is the new objectivity”. That is, rather than claiming to transcend subjectivity, something that seems an impossibility, embrace transparency by showing the sources of your work and sharing your processes, values, and biases.

We’ve linked to pieces critical of us in the past (including a [Newsweek story](#) that posed the is-it-art question about our outdoor [Internet Cat Video Film Festival](#)) and we’ve posted news critical of our colleagues (say, the recent [turmoil](#) at the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art). The point isn’t to be defensive but to present what we think is noteworthy in the arts. We also have a history of hosting criticism. Our Performing Arts department, for example, has a recurring series called [Re-View: Overnight Observations](#). In exchange for a pair of event tickets, we bring on a working artist to write a review of a Walker performance. The responses run the gamut, from gushingly positive, to well-reasoned negative reviews, to peer critique by artists in the same discipline, and at least once these posts have irked artists we work with. Creating that kind of platform is important to me.

L: Is Paul’s job as Web Editor becoming more akin to a curating role than a journalistic role? Is there a meaningful difference anymore in this context? You mentioned the new AEC division and realignment, in this respect what

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Nate Solas

Paul Schmelzer

ing the perspectives of artists, both those we work with at the Walker and those we know from the wider world of contemporary art. The site is still young, so we're still building our pool of freelancers, but my aim is to bring in voices outside the Walker – and, when appropriate, outside the arts – as our processes evolve.

L: Douglas W. Allen argues in *The Institutional Revolution* (2012) that the adaptation or extinction of aristocratic institutions in England went hand-in-hand with the ability to more accurately measure performance. Clearly if we try to extrapolate such an economic growth-and-efficiency model to art institutions, we must do so with great care. Yet web analytics allows such a profoundly fine-grained way of harvesting data, and it reaches far beyond just what content is the most popular. What wisdom are you gaining from this knowledge? And how might it inform what physical visitors might experience at the Walker?

NS: We can start to see paths between content. We had this vision that articles would lead people to events, and hence perhaps to physical visits, but this is extremely hard to track in any realistic timeframe.

One metric I think is interesting is the number of people on an exhibition page who methodically click through all the related articles we provide. We'd have to run a survey to find out if this is pre- or post-physical visit behaviour, but nevertheless it's encouraging and may eventually help inform in-gallery interpretation options.

L: How can you implement experiments and pilot projects on the website that you know might be failures? "The Walker is a safe place for unsafe ideas", as former director Kathy Halbreich once said. How do you feel that risk-taking spirit may translate into the website?

RD: The Walker willingness to take risks and embrace experimentation is part of our DNA. We believe the new site as a whole is an expression of this. In many respects the risk taking has been done. The challenge is developing a system for feeding it but not allowing those systems to become institutionalised in a limiting sense.

PS: As a publishing platform, the homepage gives us the space to try new things all the time. Since we developed and designed it in-house, we have the ability to test out with content types and new features, which we'll be using

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Nate Solas

Paul Schmelzer

dation was questioning the process and sustainability of the traditional collection catalogue as a standalone publication. Each participant was asked to submit a proposal – we’re not a consortium in the sense of shared services or solutions although the Indianapolis Museum of Art has developed a [toolkit](#) as a result of the work it did for the Art Institute of Chicago’s project.

From the outset the Walker took a fairly ambitious approach that reflected our more expansive understanding of collections, suggested systemic change in the institution’s documentation practices, and would be ongoing or perpetual. Titled the [Living Collections Catalogue](#), our project focuses on new acquisitions since 2005. With an emphasis on its multidisciplinary collecting strategies and the acquisition process, the Walker aims to redefine how research and documentation related to its collections is generated, assembled, and presented. As a contemporary art institution with ready access to primary sources (i.e. living artists), information gathering is particularly critical to this project. The Walker’s project is tied to the redesign of our collections’ site as a whole. The scholarly catalogue will be visible as a series of thematic volumes that we plan to generate on a regular basis (roughly every eighteen months). We hope to release volume one and the new collections site later this year.

“The Walker aims to redefine how research and documentation related to its collections is generated, assembled, and presented.”

NS: I’m really interested in moving the hub concept to the collections’ site. Instead of writing another biography for Merce Cunningham, how can we provide that which is uniquely Walker – like our history presenting and collecting his work – and point to outside resources like [Wikipedia for the common bit](#).

L: [Nate has talked](#) about the importance of not repeating what is already done better elsewhere on the web. Beyond utilizing YouTube to host videos, for example, are there more specialist technology-side collaborations you can imagine in the future?

NS: I was mostly referring to not repeating content, but your point of technology collaboration is a good one. We’ve just finished our own version of an image zoom tool, but it’s extremely similar to the one used by The Metropolitan Museum of Art and others. This should have been a candidate for a shared service, but that would

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Paul Schmelzer



05

take some organization to run it and maintain it. This continues to be the direction of things but we're not quite there yet infrastructure-wise.

L: Do you see any future for attempts to replicate physical museum experiences online?

RD: Replicating the gallery space – with or without avatars – doesn't make for a very compelling experience in my opinion. I'm reminded of our design director's ambivalence for e-pubs, essentially making a PDF of a physical book and putting it online. Neither of those approaches takes advantage of the medium. We're interested in giving the exhibition or publication a life online independent of, not in service to, the physical entity.

NS: The big piece that's missing in what's been tried in the past is the social perspective, the ability to turn to your companion(s) and exclaim or point out a detail. I think what Google's doing with [Hangouts](#) in their [Art Project](#) is on the right track and we'll be watching that closely. As for connecting to the physical gallery, I agree with Robin that this is mostly a gimmick and doesn't translate to a screen.

L: Putting your futurologist hats on, what emerging trends or behaviours do you see in terms of mobile or tablet devices, both in relation to physical visitors to the galleries and users of the website? For example, are there plans for an [Art on Call 2.0](#)?

05 Installation view of
*Dance Works I: Merce
Cunningham / Robert
Rauschenberg*,
Walker Art Center,
3 November 2011 –
9 September 2012

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Nate Solas

Paul Schmelzer

RD: We recently made a significant change to Art on Call, moving phone access to a separate service and implementing a standard schema that allows us to better expose our tours across platforms. Nothing earth-shattering just yet, but if you click on the yellow audio icon on the mobile site you'll see the [current version of our mobile tour](#). Ideally we'd like to create a mobile tour that really enhances the gallery experience across our collections – I think our challenges here are more content-related than the technology, that and making gallery visitors aware of the interpretive options they have access to on their mobile devices.

Artwork	Code	Artist/Title	Location	Track
	1543	Frank Gaard, Portraits (E) Daddio-Portrait of Bruce	Peggy and Ralph Burnet Gallery Frank Gaard, Pason & Candy	Artist Comments
	1542	Frank Gaard, Installation Wall	Peggy and Ralph Burnet Gallery Frank Gaard, Pason & Candy	Artist Comments

06

L: We are particularly interested in how the curatorial process in putting together visual arts exhibitions in the future might be informed by the ‘hub’ approach you are forging on the website. At the Walker, both the *How Latitudes Become Forms: Art in a Global Age* (2003) and *Brave New Worlds* (2007–8) exhibitions operated with a model of curatorial correspondents around the world, already suggesting the idea of the institution as a node or aggregator. Can you imagine what new possibilities the website as a platform could create in this respect?

PS: We’ve been having discussions for a while now on the new power this platform gives us. While we’ll still present art in an exhibition format, which means traveling the

06 Art on Call is a cell phone-based interactive audio information system and provides callers with a wide range of data beyond the scope of most traditional audio tour systems, including commentary by artists, curators, tour guides, and others about work on view.

#OpenCurating

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Paul Schmelzer

world to select works to physically bring to our campus in Minneapolis, we also have a way to reverse the direction of attention. For instance, the global breakout group in our Programmatic Think Tank is working on establishing relationships with independent art venues and collectives in Jakarta, Cairo, Chiang Mai, Lagos, and elsewhere that are doing innovative work. We can use our platform not only to direct attention to them, but to share in conversation online about the kind of work we all want to do. Maybe we can learn more about our own curating or arts administration through this sharing, but we can also give visibility to these groups we respect and want to know more about. Will this evolve into some kind of online exhibition? Who knows?

“We can use our platform not only to direct attention, but to share in conversation online about the kind of work we want to do.”

L: The exhibition *50/50: Audience and Experts Curate the Paper Collection* was half curated by Walker Chief Curator Darsie Alexander, and half via a voting app in which the public could view 180 print works through a ‘hot or not’ online survey system. Was the crowd wise? Was it a successful exhibition?

NS: An interesting part of the *50/50* voting was how quickly the crowd came to an agreement around the highlights they wanted to see. Once we had a decent amount of votes, the percentages didn’t really change, just the vote count. So I can’t necessarily declare that to be a ‘wise’ crowd, but it was a homogeneous crowd.

RD: As a crowdsourced, participatory experiment, *50/50* was OK. There are certainly other examples of collaboration between a museum’s curators and online community that explore a more rigorous set of questions around reactions to a work of art and the visitor experience (I’m thinking of the Brooklyn Museum’s exhibition *Split Second: Indian Paintings*). That said, we were happily surprised by the popularity of our voting app, and the exhibition provided a fruitful platform for discussions about ‘audience’ and ‘expert’.

L: Museums traditionally deal with the authoritative. Highly trained experts – curators, art historians – have for the most part had the final say. Yet web 2.0 is levelling the field by allowing cheap or free publishing online, and many people, irrespective of their experience or skills, can broadcast opinions or share work. How do you conceive

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Nate Solas

Paul Schmelzer

the intention of Art News From Elsewhere in this context, as it functions to take viewers away from the institution's site and into the 'open ocean' of the rest of the web, instead of directing them towards proprietary expertise and on-board content?

PS: We had discussions in the development of site about whether Art News From Elsewhere links would open in new windows (thereby keeping our page open, so we ostensibly wouldn't lose readers) or if we'd just direct people away. We decided to take the more confident route, by having readers click away from the site and trusting that, if we consistently delivered meaningful, smart and sometimes entertaining links, they'd come back on their own. The rationale is that by ceding authority, we maintain authority.

Similar conversations have happened around 'voice'. At the [National Museum Publishing Seminar](#) in Chicago in June this year, I was asked to talk about 'the voice of the museum'. While some in attendance were from more conservative institutions, which believe that it's imperative to maintain one unified institutional voice, we and many others think the opposite. By having a multiplicity of voices, we can better represent contemporary life. That is, by allowing many voices, instead of maintaining a death grip on the Voice with a capital 'V' we have a more authentic – and therefore attractive, we think – voice online. Same principle: by letting go, we gain more. #

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