FREE FORMS:
AN INTERVIEW WITH LAUREN CORNELL

Curator, 2015 Triennial, Digital Projects and Museum as Hub, New Museum, New York

BY LATITUDES

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Lauren Cornell

01 Courtesy
New Museum, New York

AFTER SERVING FOR SEVEN YEARS AS EXECUTIVE Director of new media non-profit Rhizome, in 2012 Lauren Cornell was appointed "Curator, 2015 Triennial, Digital Projects and Museum as Hub" of the New Museum, New York. During her tenure at Rhizome – a New Museum affiliate – Cornell initiated programmes including the annual *Seven on Seven* conference series, which bridges contemporary art and technology fields by pairing technological innovators with visual artists and challenging them to develop something over the course of a day. At the New Museum, Cornell was part of the curatorial team for *The Generational: Younger Than Jesus* (2009) and has curated exhibitions including Young-Hae Chang Heavy Industries' *Black on White Gray Ascending* (2007), and *Free* (2010), a group show that examined "how the internet has changed our landscape of information and our notion of public space". She is currently preparing the 2015 New Museum Triennial, a signature initiative of the institution, which she will curate together with artist and filmmaker Ryan Trecartin.

Latitudes: This *#OpenCurating* research has grown out of our work on *The Last Newspaper*, which was presented at the New Museum in the autumn of 2010 at the same time as your exhibition *Free* (more on that later!). As you remember we produced the catalogue as a weekly news-paper during the exhibition; we were working in public in the galleries, reporting on the "micro-community" of the show, interviewing participating artists, the curators, New Museum guards and staff, connecting with the museum's Facebook and Twitter followers, etc. All within the context of the shocks to, and innovations in, paper-based publishing, journalism and distribution that have taken place alongside the scaling of the effects of the internet and its impact on nearly every aspect of our lives.

In a 2011 article in *Frieze*, you wrote very aptly that the "wall text has historically been the designated area in which to explain art to the public, but institutions could amplify their educational and social role by publishing – daily and online – a great deal more history, opinion, context and an-ecdote around their activities, rather than just issuing press releases and visitor information. At the moment, institutions are relatively silent amidst conversations online, when

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it would really be so helpful to have staff (directors, curators, educators) be conversant outside of physically printed catalogues." * Are exhibitions traditionally produced within a synthetic separation between presentation and fact, or opinion and interpretation and sharing?

Lauren Cornell: Yes, but artists have long tried to push presentation and active interpretation together, from the immersive installations of Woody and Steina Vasulka, to Group Material shows, to Badlands Unlimited which collapses exhibitions into e-books, among countless others, and institutions try to follow and support them.

L: Do you consider that, generally speaking, mainstream contemporary art institutions have been slow or reluctant innovators, or sluggish in their responses to artistic engagement in this respect? Has the exhibition as a curatorial form been wary of pursuing, as you suggest, conversations outside the printed catalogue for respect of tradition? Do you feel art institutions have been too far behind the curve with respect to new possibilities for publishing and interpretation around exhibitions?

LC: This is an interesting question to me, partly because I would have answered it quite differently only a few years ago! In the piece I wrote for *Frieze* which you mentioned, I encourage institutions to coordinate traditional galleries with exhibition platforms that support digital work, and to harness the possibilities of public engagement that the web and social media offer, that is to speak and to participate more actively in debates about art and culture. Since I wrote that article, the landscape has dramatically expanded. Institutions are clearly trying to engage digital platforms for art presentation and publishing: you can see this through the many collections that have gone online, the The Metropolitan Museum of Art, for instance; dynamic magazines that have been initiated, such as Creative Time Reports; and curatorial platforms that have been put forward, like Tate Modern's online performance programme, or the New Museum's First Look: New Art Online series, which I direct.

All of these new efforts raise new questions. One I've been thinking about quite a bit lately, as we think through our own publishing platform "Six Degrees", is the question of how institutions speak online: what is the voice of

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an institution, and specifically the New Museum's voice. How can we represent the polyphony of curatorial opinions, productive disagreements, passionate investments that lead to our programming? And, how can we open that up to different audiences, those familiar with art world debates, and those new to them? Online publishing offers a chance to speak "differently" to an audience – outside of the more art historical commitment of a catalogue essay – and I'm interested in exploring possibilities for this.

L: The New Museum, as <u>founded</u> by <u>Marcia Tucker</u> back in 1977, worked through a committee and peer-reviewed structure of curatorial organisation and decision making. An academic rather than a corporate model. How is the partnership initiative <u>Museum As Hub</u> intended to be continuing this spirit? ★

LC: I'm new to Museum as Hub. I began working as curator this past fall. Prior to my getting involved, <u>Eungie Joo</u> directed it with <u>Ryan Inouye</u> in collaboration with international partners. (Joo has since left for Inhotim in Brumadinho, Brazil). I do think it carried an experimental

★ Museum as Hub is currently formed by the New Museum with <u>art space pool</u> in Seoul, <u>Beirut</u> in Cairo, <u>de_sitio</u> in Mexico City, <u>Inhotim</u> in Brumadinho, Brazil, <u>Miami Art Museum</u>, <u>Townhouse</u> in Cairo, and the <u>Van Abbemuseum</u>, Eindhoven.
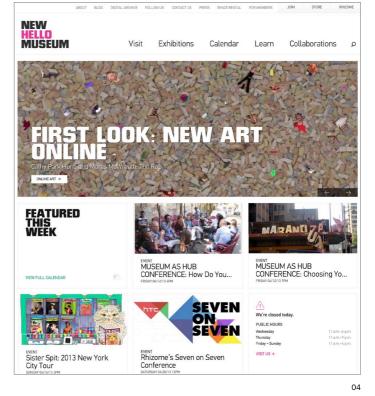
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spirit during this first phase, one I hope to continue with the current Hub team, my colleagues Ryan Inouye, Assistant Curator, and Johanna Burton, Director and Curator of Education of Public Engagement. There are lots of aspects that mark this time – such as the internationalism of the programme and the intense collaboration with partnering organizations of different scales (from the Townhouse in Cairo to art space pool in Seoul to the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven). Less visible, but equally valuable qualities are how "slowly" the Hub works with artists and in what in-depth ways. It is typical for institutions to work with artists over the course of an exhibition and, after the opening, to be done. Hub residencies and the partnerships themselves have unfolded over a long time. This seems simple but that longevity is key to a real relationship, right? And, that dedication and commitment to seeing a project through its different iterations, not in accordance to the deadlines imposed on it, is actually rare within institutions. So, to sum up, this long-term approach to individual artists and to partners, and the flexibility and openness it comes with, certainly works against a corporate model within a museum. These are a few qualities we hope to carry over into the second phase of the project.
L: Museum as Hub's Annual Conference has recently taken place (12–13 April 2013). Split between two days it examined "themes including: the concept of regionalism; the "question of feelings" in relation to curatorial practice;

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"Hub residencies and the partnerships themselves have unfolded over a long time. This seems simple but that longevity is key to a real relationship, right?"

and the imperfect institutionalization of the "discursive object" within the museum." How do you think your expertise directing Rhizome might influence the development of Hub in terms of working in a network in both an online and offline sense?

LC: In regard to what I bring from Rhizome, I feel like maybe what I would be expected to say is that I have experience working with an open or flat network but it was always more complicated than that with the organization which has, throughout its history, balanced curated programs and open forums in a productive tension, which was sometimes harmonious, and other times antagonistic.

Specifically for the Museum as Hub program, I would say I bring experience in online publishing that complements the familiarity with book publishing that Johanna Burton brings. This is relevant as we are currently working to create a new online publishing platform – to be

edited by Tareneh Fazeli, Education Associate – that will hopefully include articles looking at art internationally by artists, curators, writers, and our staff. Our plan is to make this a research-led publication which opens up the process and positions of contributors. This will be complemented with "quick and dirty" print publications around particular shows or collaborations.

L: In line with print and online publishing, where do you hope or expect the stresses and tendencies are going in terms of institutional text and printed word production; does the future catalogue belong wholly online?

LC: No. In general, I've always thought saying "print will be dead" is a hysterical attitude towards current shifts in publishing and reading. I would prefer to think about how online publishing coordinates with print instead of replaces it. And, I would apply that logic to the catalogue in the near future: it seems essential to engage the public of an exhibition via digital means but people still continue to want books, something to take away in their hands from the exhibition experience, so these two modes need to better collaborate with each other. That is a near future prediction. As for farther in the future, I don't know, and I'm sure anything I'd say would be embarrassing to read in thirty years. Maybe we'll be printing on mist – who knows?

L: Alongside the "peer review" structure, the "open" exhibition is a format with a long and venerable tradition. We could refer to the Whitechapel's various guises from *The London Open* to the "East End Academy" which dates back to 1932, the members' shows of the German Kunstverein model. This tradition, at least in Europe, reflects a legacy of a publicly-funded or community-owned infrastructure for the arts – which is in many cases being threatened or swept away in the present economic storms. Such exhibitions are in a way about the public participating in a public service. The American context is of course different in that public funding for contemporary art is minimal and support typically comes from private sources.

We're curious as to how the "open" exhibition spirit may have correspondingly played a different role in recent American institutions and contemporary art projects

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according to a different kind of context for what a public-access mission is, and the idea of "open" as in open-source or creative commons. Could you reflect on these loose thoughts in terms of how you conceived the exhibition _Free_ and the thinking around it? Where did the process start and where do you feel you ended up?

LC: *Free* was about the changed nature of public space, one in which the virtual has merged with the physical. The idea was to look at how our notion of "public space" had expanded to include shifting, hybridized commons of

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05 *Free*, 20 Oct 2010–23 Jan 2011. Installation view with Hanne Mugaas *Secondary Market* (2010) Mixed-media installation (left) and Aleksandra Domanovic, *19:30* (2010) 2-channel video (right) Courtesy New Museum Photo: Benoit Pailley

information we have through a digitally-enabled contemporary culture. In this culture, as the artist <u>Seth Price</u> put it, an mp3 that gets remixed continually is a more successful instance of public art than a monument in a corporate plaza. The works in the show all touched on what it is like to make work with and through this landscape; they explored its possibilities, and also, its repressions, secrets, blacked-out zones etc. All of the works took "traditional forms", like photography or sculpture, except for a work
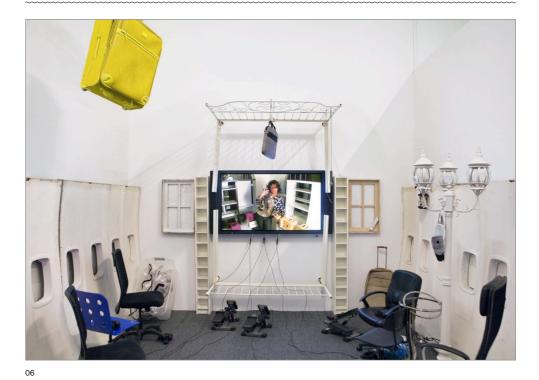
"I think it's important to work towards a kind open, transparent best practice for how to pay artists."

by Ryan Trecartin and David Karp, which was an open live stream of video clips, fed through a custom program, which they co-wrote. This brought a YouTube-like quality into the gallery, along with porn, satirical responses to the show, random shots of the moon, etc.

L: Could you talk about the involvement of W.A.G.E. in the *Free* show?; its contribution brought the issue of institutional transparency very much into play.

LC: Yes, their involvement was challenging and, ultimately, very productive. Firstly, I'll say, I believe in what W.A.G.E. is doing. I think it's important to work towards a kind of open, transparent best practice for how to pay artists, and I wanted to use *Free* as a vehicle to address some of their points. For me, the issue that underlined inviting them was an acknowledgement that in the landscape of contemporary culture, artists' works are being exposed, either online or in institutions, without them being compensated. Of course, artists want their work to be shown but, in this case, being "free" is not totally positive.

I invited W.A.G.E to participate as artists. Their response was to send me a set of terms, some I achieved (all artists were paid), some I didn't. In terms of what I achieved, all artists were paid, though a small amount. In terms of what I didn't, for example, they asked me to make the exhibition budget public. I did share the budget with them and we talked it through but, in the end, I decided I didn't feel comfortable making it public because there were numbers next to artist names, like $100 for production or $500 for travel, that had all been worked out on a case of individual need, and I didn't want to share that information or those negotiations without context.

W.A.G.E. introduced their "W.A.G.E. Certification" for *Free*, which means, essentially, they approve of the show, and it abides by their mission. It was the first show to be W.A.G.E. certified. I was proud of that.

L: You're co-curating the upcoming 2015 New Museum Triennial with artist Ryan Trecartin, who has spoken about his love of "the idea of technology and culture moving faster than the understanding of those mediums by people". How can you imagine sharing an affinity for incomprehensibility with, as you describe, making coherent exhibitions? (Or, to go further out on the speculative limb,

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and possibly run out of "scare quotes" – could some "exhibitions" be better "understood" by non-human "users"?)

LC: I don't read Ryan's quote as an embrace of incomprehensibility. I think he is very interested, as am I, in the way that new cultural forms are adopted by people, and sometimes used in ways that are technically "wrong" but become "right" through use. His characters use their iPhones in ways that Apple would not intend them to be deployed but, in a way, it resonates with the devotion we put into these devices. All to say – I don't think Ryan and I share an affinity around incomprehensibility, but rather in the deeply human, if strange, ways new technologies get used.

L: Can you talk more about the Triennial, will you draw on "open" or "free" models?

LC: We're still deciding on the model of the show. It's too early to say. We have ambitious ideas but are still testing them against the reality of our own resources, so I wouldn't want to make any false promises for what we'll do. I will say that we want to share the program early on –

07 Aaron Swartz and
Taryn Simon at Seven on
Seven 2012:
14 April 2012
Courtesy Rhizome
Photo: Alyssa Blumstein

running up to the show, we hope to have a kind of ongoing public think tank around ideas we are hashing out.

L: The fourth conference of the series which you initiated under the title "Seven on Seven" took place just a few days ago, on 20th April. The concept "pairs seven leading artists with seven game-changing technologists in teams of two, and challenges them to develop something new – be it an application, social media, artwork, product, or whatever they imagine – over the course of a single day". What have been some of the most interesting outcomes with regard to the work of the curator and the role of the institution, whether specific to you and the New Museum, or more generally?

LC: One of the "outcomes" that has been on my mind is the collaboration that took place in the 2012 edition between photographer Taryn Simon and programmer Aaron Swartz, who died tragically this winter. Together, they made *Image Atlas*, an online application that investigates cultural differences and similarities by indexing top

image results for given search terms across local search engines throughout the world. The project raises profound questions related to language, international culture, and systems of information. Swartz was – and still is – a kind of icon of openness, democratic culture and free culture and yet the project had a critical twist. It took advantage of information that was open and available. It questioned what popularity – increasingly the way we retrieve information – reveals. And also, how neutral is the statistical data? We do live in a more "open culture" but this is never something we can take for granted. It's important to consistently interrogate what exact freedoms or limitations structure our information environment.

L: The <u>Museum of Modern Art</u> show <u>*Talk to Me*</u> began with an online <u>journal</u> and the <u>Twitter account</u> that documented the organisational process and its progress from March 2010 through to the show's opening in July 2011 and beyond, which aimed at keeping the curatorial team "organized, connected (with you), and honest".

In a similar vein, the team of the forthcoming 2013 Carnegie International are publishing a <u>blog</u> which documents the run-up to the exhibition, documenting for instance their "Apartment Talks" events which are taking place in their satellite space in the Lawrenceville neighborhood of Pittsburgh – "giving form to the temporal aspect of the exhibition's development and, hopefully, bringing some (but not too much!) transparency to the planning process". Which aspects of these "behind the scenes" strategies are interesting for you?

LC: I know and admire the curators involved with both projects. That said, I wasn't aware of the *Talk to Me* Twitter project. I've been following the Carnegie International blog, and I like how it shines a light on the attitudes of the curators, and their involvement with Pittsburgh. I appreciate how they (Daniel Baumann, Dan Byers, and Tina Kukielski) are sharing an informal kind of research, and also the sincerity they bring to each project they write about whether its the new <u>Public Enemy</u> video or the "best photo <u>bookstore</u> in Pittsburgh". I also appreciate that they are opening up the process, and writing and taking pictures of the local art scene in Pittsburgh. As you know, one of the problems with biennials or triennials is that they bring the

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"art world" to different locales, but only for a short time. Their blog creates a kind of record of the art community in Pittsburgh which provides more than the superficial impression one might get from a brief visit to the show.

Much ink is spent on how we leave in an age of Biennials (and Triennials) and the problems associated with these large-scale, temporary exhibitions. The production of research, and the sharing of it, is one way these kinds of shows can be more than short-term spectacles, and I hope we can offer that through our Triennial by activating the show through discursive means – talks, publishing – before, and also after, the run of the exhibition, so we can publicly process the feedback and reception. **#**

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