

Art Institute Review

Issue 2: Data (March 2022)

Call for Proposals (closed)

From internet search engines to infographics, data shapes nearly every aspect of our daily experience even as it helps us understand and navigate the world around us. Yet we rarely acknowledge its role in structuring and replicating relationships of power in the world at large and in the humanities, including art history and visual studies. Data is never neutral or unbiased, and the choices that governments, companies, institutions, and we ourselves make in producing and consuming it affect our and others' lives in countless concrete ways.

This situation is, of course, not new. Systems of knowledge have always existed and structured our reality, establishing what counts as a fact, what sorts of questions can be asked, and who gets to ask them. What isn't valued isn't included, and what isn't included isn't seen as valuable—and so the cycle continues, with ethical, economic, and political implications. The art world is no exception. Here, archival and scientific data, especially information systems (most notably museum collection databases but also content aggregators like digital libraries), shape the contours of our research.

But there is also a long history of data being used for critique. At the turn of the twentieth century, for example, W. E. B. DuBois led a group of black sociologists in producing data visualizations to describe the experiences of black Americans. In our present moment, activists, art historians, artists, conservators, cultural workers, and technologists are reenvisioning data systems, harnessing their potential to pose novel questions and find answers to previously intractable problems. In particular, critical digital humanities work has found ways of making historical evidence an important data source for scholarly interventions.

For this issue, we invite proposals that critique the current state of data production and analysis in the context of cultural institutions as well as proposals from those producing innovative systems and content informed by those critiques. What new art historical questions does self-aware engagement with data and its production enable us to pose? How can we work with (and past) gaps and uncertainties in data? How might museums use data to promote social justice and equity? We welcome case studies, interventions, and meta-examinations of the history of the questions around data, its uses, and its representation. Contributions might engage critical race theory, feminist theory, and queer theory, among other frameworks, and could take the form of artistic contributions, data visualizations, essays, or interactive databases.

Proposals may address art of any time or place. We especially welcome proposals focused on historically underrepresented objects or narratives, and proposals from emerging scholars.

This issue is co-edited by Emily Fry, Director of Interpretation, the Art Institute of Chicago, and Erin Canning, Ontology Systems Analyst, LINCS (Linked Infrastructure for Networked Cultural Scholarship).