

Curating in a Wasteland: Formation of the Public Sphere

Haotian Fang 04/19/2024

TL;DR

Everyone should discover their own wasteland, a space where they can attribute new meanings. The objects in this realm are remnants of the past, stripped of their original significance, as understood by the mainstream; they are simply objects. A wasteland encompasses all aspects of the past—relics, debris, traces—that persist regardless of their former grandeur. We are left only with data from the past; it's all we have, and all we require. There are no old traditions to adhere to; instead, perhaps some older traditions can be revived as new trends. A wasteland is a place of desolation, a public arena that accepts everything that has occurred.¹

Part 1: Build a true public sphere

Over the past few years, I have spent much time searching for a sphere that suits me—a meaningful country, city, institution, career, class, and group of friends, as well as a meaningful public sphere.

Habermas defines the public sphere as “society engaged in critical public debate” [1].

Being critical and meaningful is essential when investigating any sphere. However, after years of experience, I have the following questions about this standard:

How do we decide which topics are critical?

Whose words are meaningful, and whose are meaningless?

What is the correct way to understand meaning?

In John Berger’s *Ways of Seeing* episode, he showed the masterpiece of Goya with two different clips for contexts showing below.

¹ My mentor Paolo helped me proofread this, which now should be a blend of Chinese and Italian flavors in English...



From John Berger / Ways of Seeing , Episode 1 (1972) [2]

As you see, the different meanings emerge in different contexts for different audiences. As he mentioned in the essay, “We never look at just one thing; we are always looking at the relation between things and ourselves. Our vision is continually active, continually moving, continually holding things in a circle around itself, constituting what is present to us as we are” [3].

Meaning can change, and there is never one standard for meaning; it always depends on the relationship between things and ourselves.

In order to build a public sphere open to everyone, the first step is that we don't need a gatekeeper. This means we don't want to judge whose opinion is more valuable. But what should the sphere do? It may seem that the sphere will do nothing if it is free for everyone. However, there is one thing it must do: store everything. Since we don't want to judge which data is meaningful and which is not, we don't want to delete any data occurring in this sphere. It always has potential to someone in the past, now, or even the future. However, this doesn't mean we cannot have preferences or the sphere we create cannot have

preferences. The key thing is that you own your data, and the data is always there; no one else has the right to delete it. Different public spheres might have different preferences or censorship, similar to current social media platforms. The biggest problem about them is that if you are a content creator, you record something critical or meaningful on your social media account, and one day the platform forbids your access to your account and deletes your data for violating their policy. That's the judgment of meaning. That's what the public sphere shouldn't do; you own your data at all times, whether you bring it to the sphere or generate it there. But one day, if you get kicked out of the sphere or choose to leave, you should always have your data with you, no matter if it is judged "meaningless, violent, illegal." The true spirit of democracy is that we trust people will choose the appropriate sphere to join and gradually form a good public sphere—or different good public spheres—with their freedom.

Once again, the most important thing for this step is that the public sphere should record everything and everyone in it should own their data at all times. This is a step where the entire decentralized movement with modern techniques can empower.

Part 2: Curate for an aesthetic space

But how to attract people to come to this public sphere? or how should it start?

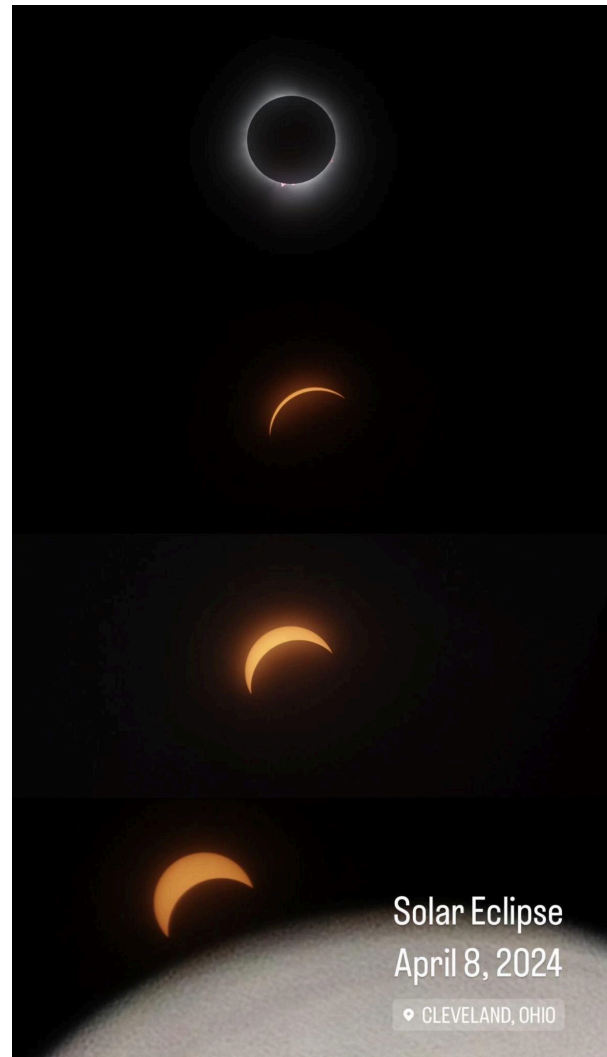
We need someone to contribute to the sphere from the beginning. They should not be termed founders, public leaders, or organizers. Instead, they are curators², committed to not only caring for the data and its ownership but also curing everyone involved in the exhibition or sphere. The primary focus in this sphere is the aesthetic experience. In the practical world, we have perceptual-level experiences, and before these experiences become rational knowledge in the ideal world, there is a space where aesthetic experiences occur, even possibly representing the movement itself.

Let me try to describe this aesthetic experience more vividly. Imagine your friend comes to you grinning; you see her face and immediately say, "You are smiling?" She mumbles a no, "I have a canker sore." With this new information, something comes to your mind; you might move your tongue to explore your mouth, you might think about something seemingly irrelevant, like what you should eat tonight. Both the description and the later thoughts are aesthetic experiences, not forming as rational knowledge in your mind from the perceptual level experience yet.

² From the Etymology Dictionary, curate is from Medieval Latin *curatus* "one responsible for the care (of souls)."

Here's another example I want to share with you: during a total solar eclipse, I enjoyed one of the purest aesthetic experiences for three minutes, surrounded by hundreds of people. As the eclipse neared, I took off my protective glasses. I wasn't thinking about the consequences or medical advice at that moment when I looked directly at the sun. When it happened, no one was trying to give a lecture on astronomy (although I might have been the only one in the group inclined to do so, but fortunately, I didn't). Instead, everyone around me applauded and enjoyed staring at it, letting their minds wander for three minutes. It was beautiful.

This aesthetic space also answers Roberts, Rockman, and Hui's call about "the space before science is reified as knowledge, a space between practice and episteme where labor and work come into focus in surprising ways" [4]. While the space they discuss concerns labor and science, I view labor as a representation of the practical world and science as a representation of the ideal world. The aesthetic space lies in between, where the act of curating steps in.



My friend took this when we were observing

What activities should the curator of the sphere plan to encourage more aesthetic experiences? Before answering this question, I want to spend a little time talking about the etymology of the term "aesthetic." It is derived from the Ancient Greek αἰσθητικός, meaning "perceptive, sensitive, pertaining to sensory perception" [5]. Perception is the essence of aesthetics by definition, and there is another important philosophical tradition focusing on this too: phenomenology, especially Maurice Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception*, which states, "The body is our general medium for having a world" [6]. We want to interact with the objects around us; we want to see, hear, touch, and even taste the things we create. Is there any way to foster this phenomenological or, to put it in another way, bodily aesthetic experience?

One potential method is data sculpture. Data sculpture involves using physical objects to represent data; these can be crafted from various materials, inviting people to interact with them on a different perceptual level [7]. A compelling data sculpture should offer multiple layers of engagement. Audiences can swiftly grasp the main narrative, yet the work always provides an opportunity for deeper exploration, encouraging everyone to co-create and support the narrative. When everyone engages in labor in the practical world, more perceptual level experiences emerge, and since this work is ongoing, there isn't time to reify it as knowledge, allowing more aesthetic experiences to arise from both creators and viewers.

There is a design pattern that should be introduced to our creators when they are creating their data sculptures—Design Fiction. It is not about the product or prototype itself; you don't have to follow current scientific rules or other norms, much like all other forms of science fiction. It is more about the potential societal, environmental, and political issues it raises. You think about the future, you design for the future, you realize the future. One of the best anecdotes to show this spirit is from Pablo Picasso, after he finished a portrait for his customer, and the madam thought that it looked nothing like her, to which the painter replied, “She will” [8].



Portrait of Gertrude Stein, 1906

Part 3: Find your romanticism in wasteland

What about the setup when we are curating? A wasteland is a potential setting.

*April is the cruelest month, breeding
lilacs out of the dead land, mixing
memory and desire, stirring
dull roots with spring rain.*

— *T.S. Eliot, The Waste Land* [9]

(I coincidentally wrote this paper at the end of April—beautiful.)

In a wasteland, you have objects from the past, but the old meanings assigned to them disappear. The meaning associated with functionality disappears when a sittable chair breaks; the object decouples from its traditional meaning. Long-suppressed traditions might come back, new traditions might form, and most importantly, everything somehow stays there in a waste shape—whether judged as good or bad—waiting to be recombined and reassigned meaning, and we can create with our own hands. No room for Nihilism, because in a wasteland we have to survive, we have to keep working, we have to keep reassigning meaning to everything around us. We might need science, but we might also need religion. We might need Utilitarianism, but we might also need unreasoned love. No rule will be set in the wasteland; old-fashioned values revive, and new values await birth. A song from Family Guy is playing in my mind now:

[Lois]

*It seems today
That all you see
Is violence and movies
And sex on TV*

[Peter]

*But where are those good old fashioned values
On which we used to rely?*

— *Family Guy Theme Song*

The most important thing we have to keep in a wasteland is romanticism; to Romantics, “science must not bring about any split between nature and man.”³ We ourselves are key parts of Romanticism. Starting from the 18th century, when our ancestors faced the engine accelerating everything in our daily lives, they realized there is something between the ideal world and the practical world. They used their dirty hands to wipe the sweat from their foreheads and realized it was themselves they were touching. There is always an “us” in the aesthetic space; it is us who experience this. A wasteland will amplify this self-awareness, this aesthetic experience—a dying beauty, only by reassigning meaning as romanticism can it be reborn.

Practically speaking, as a curator of this wasteland-themed exhibition for the public or ourselves, there is one key feeling we should evoke in every creator within this public sphere—survival. Survival forces everyone to think from the base level, like the protocol, the fundamental rules for our behaviors; all modern dilemmas like work-life balance disappear; everything is work, and everything is life in a wasteland. A new, or old-suppressed, dilemma might emerge: Do I need to harm strangers, or even my best friends and family, to survive? Emphasizing this awareness could help everyone in the sphere realize the importance of collaboration and humanity. The reasons for science, for tradition, and for our very existence need to be completely reflected upon.

The beauty we are looking for here somehow transforms into good craftsmanship. To survive in a wasteland, you might not aim to create some “subversive” artwork; the hard work required for survival is already subversive because you have to create your own work or job. Slavoj Žižek said in an interview, “the most subversive thing today is to be truly disciplined and do your hard work” [10]. I would like to add one word to that: the most subversive thing today is to be truly disciplined and do your “own” hard work. That’s how we connect craftsmanship with the beauty that a wasteland can empower.

Part 4: Some daily rituals you can do

Warning: Nothing should be taken seriously in this section. (Or maybe in the entire paper...)

Before you go to the wasteland, I recommend you strengthen three abilities: dreaming, synesthesia, and repeating failure.

³ This serves as the best expression of what I want to convey here: the science (ideal world), nature (practical world), and man (aesthetic space). However, this is from the Wikipedia article on "Romanticism in Science," contributed to by one of its authors. Wikipedia is an excellent example that fits the spirit of my paper here—open to the public, where everyone can contribute. It represents a potential public sphere.

Take a nap and daydream. To increase your chances of dreaming, I suggest you take a nap at noon. After you smash your clock for another nap, that's when dreams are most vivid at least for me and some of my friends.

Another approach is to be "feeling it" and "tipsy." That's when synesthesia comes to us, and we forget which sensory faculties we are good at. For example, we believe we are good at hearing and seeing, but poor at touching and tasting. Now you can have something to eat and imagine a whole picture.

The last thing is about repeating failure, and we can practice this through playing video games.

Let me elaborate more on this part. This connects to Derrida's Différance, a central idea in deconstruction, emphasizes the fluid and deferred nature of meaning in language and texts. It is a play on the French words "différer," which means both to differ and to defer [11].

In the gaming scenario, every player's interaction with the game represents a continuous process of differing and deferring. As players navigate through the game, their decisions, movements, and strategies differ from one attempt to the next. This aligns with the "differ" aspect of Différance, where each concrete step is unique, informed by previous experiences but never exactly the same. The player's actions are not just reactions to the game's environment but are part of an evolving strategy, a dynamic interplay between the player and the game.

Moreover, the "defer" aspect of Différance is also evident in the video game. The meaning or outcome of a player's actions is not immediately apparent but is deferred as the game progresses. Each decision, move, or strategy leads to further possibilities and outcomes, influencing future actions and decisions. In the context of Super Mario Bros., every time Mario dies and the player restarts, the understanding and mastery of the game are deferred to future attempts. This deferral creates a space for learning and adaptation. So, try some video games that fit the spirit of repeating failure, as that's what we need in a wasteland. You will repeat failure and you will grow.

Hope the above three can help you use a needle to loosen structures from the past world, and to braid a tight structure for the new world.

Part 5: Now, how will the wasteland last?

It is important to think about the future, or at least what will happen before we make a proposal, and it is what makes me most uncomfortable when some self-proclaimed leftists fail to do that. I think what my friend Fangting is hardworking, contributing, and promoting could be a potential way for the wasteland to last: “Poetic Scientism.” Since it is the beginning stage of her thought, I am likely to misinterpret this in my discussion here, but even just the name of it is promising enough for me.

The poetry best fit aesthetics and romantic philosophy is transcendental poetry [12]. I’ll let the author speak for himself.

There is a poetry whose One and All is the relationship of the ideal and the real: it should thus be called transcendental poetry according to the analogy of the technical language of philosophy. [...] But we should not care for a transcendental philosophy unless it were critical, unless it portrayed the producer along with the product, unless it embraced in its system of transcendental thoughts a characterization of transcendental thinking: in the same way, that poetry which is not infrequently encountered in modern poets should combine those transcendental materials and preliminary exercises for a poetic theory of the creative power with the artistic reflection and beautiful self-mirroring.

- Friedrich Schlegel 1800

The creators in the wasteland could be called poets; they travel from one place to another, from one public sphere to another. They create poems, communicate through poetry, and own their poems. They are constantly moving, using poetry to create new science, to work, and to farm in both the real world and the ideal world.

Part 6: Thank You Notes

Two important figures inspired me to complete this.

This is written in the last week of my undergraduate studies so the first figure that comes to mind is Paolo Palmieri, who was my mentor in History and Philosophy of Science (HPS) at Pitt for two years. He gave me the true freedom to find my own HPS study method without my being kicked out from the university and helped me realize the limitations and even failures in this field to better help my career.

The other is Fangting, a Web3 Humanities Researcher creating her own research area. She is a role model showing how a creative researcher should conduct their research freely. She has encouraged me to develop this writing for many weeks and introduced me to relevant groups for further connections.

Part 6: References (Bibliography)⁴

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⁴ “Bibliography” sounds more connected to me than “references.” The reason I emphasize it here is that both figures mentioned show me how important it is to research figures and find connections among them.