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Canon, Value, and Cultural Heritage: New Processes of Assigning Value in the Postdigital Realm

Nuria Rodríguez-Ortega

Historia del Arte, Universidad de Málaga, 29016 Málaga, Spain; nro@uma.es; Tel.: +34-62-5168-356

Received: 21 April 2018; Accepted: 8 May 2018; Published: 11 May 2018



Abstract: The range of modes through which the new conditions of the postdigital society is leading to a redefinition of the processes of assigning value, and the values themselves, which have hitherto prevailed in the comprehension of cultural heritage, are diverse and broad. Within this framework of critical inquiry, this paper discusses the mechanisms of canon-formation in the context of the web as the new laboratory of cultural production. It is argued that the main dynamics observed can be elucidated under the form of a triad: hypercanonization, socialdecanonization, and transcanonization. These three processes operate simultaneously interlaced and unfold in dialectical tension between the rise of the new (practices, actors, values, ideas), and the maintenance of the old (those structures that already exist). This paper delves into the paths through which such interlace dynamics and tension might reshape the principles by which canonicity develops, as well as poses open questions about the challenges facing us, which should be discussed in further studies and approaches to the problem.

Keywords: canon; postdigital; value assignment processes; cultural heritage; Digital Art History; digital humanities

1. Introduction

The processes of assigning value to cultural objects and establishing the canons that derive from those processes have constituted until today one of the intellectual, ideological, and political pillars in the development of Art History as an institutional discourse [1]. Due to the different meanings assumed by the term “canon,” it must be clarified that in this text “canon” is understood as the institutionalization of specific values representing the ideas and interests of those who hold a sort of privileged position of authority (intellectual, economic, political, etc.), and is collectively assumed as such by society. That is why the canon can be defined as a structure of power, a criterion of authority, and a legitimizing argument. That is also why the notion of canon has represented a significant line of inquiry from postmodernism to recent postcolonial theories ([2–5] among others). In particular, the need to bring out a critical awareness of the multiplicity and heterogeneity that define the processes of assigning value and meaning to objects on the basis of the variety of cultures, genders, races, and territories has been emphasized. It has been stated that in our global world it is essential to understand the concepts of canon and value in terms of plurality and difference. It has also become necessary to explore the specific idiosyncrasies of those processes as a way to make that diversity recognizable and significant.

Within this framework of critical thought, the conditions of postdigital societies, first defined by the naturalization of “digital,” [6] but also by the omnipresence of software and algorithms in every aspect of human life [7,8], the dissemination of dataism as new religion [9], the potentiality of user interaction in a transmedia ecology [10,11], the growing relevance of user-generated content, and, at least in theory, the global access to and massive distribution of cultural information in the form of data, images, 3D recreations, videos, etc., offer us another scenario of critical analysis to rethink the matter of value and canon from a different perspective.

The range of modes through which this new context is leading to a redefinition of the processes of assigning value, and the values themselves, that have hitherto prevailed in the comprehension of cultural heritage is diverse and broad, and certainly this is not the first time that this matter has been the subject of inquiry. In this line, this paper pursues an approach to pinpoint the main dynamics observed in these processes, which are liable to result in new forms of canonization, new concepts of canon, and a new cultural axiology, with the objective of proposing a general categorization that can, and should, be discussed in further studies and approaches to the problem. Therefore, the ultimate purpose of this paper is not to define what the canon is or which the characteristics that define it are, but to contribute to the debate on the mechanisms of canon formation, as well as to aggregate critical material to feed the discussion about how the so-called postcanonical age [12] unfolds.

This line of inquiry also emerges within the framework of Digital Art History studies, whose growth as a redefined field of research and practice has been very significant in recent years. However, there is still a need to reinforce the critical perspectives of Digital Art History in order to discover what sort of art-historical discourses and narratives and artistic culture are being built in the postdigital realm. Therefore, this paper is also intended to be a contribution to the advancement of such critical discourse.

In this paper, I make an argument for subsuming the heterogeneity of practices, actors, and driving forces related to canon and value assignment into three kinds of processes that follow the form of a triad—canonization, decanonization/countercanonization, and recanonization—which actually represents a constant of the cultural dynamic [13]. How this triad is reshaped in the postdigital realm is just the issue argued in the following pages. In this regard, we must bear in mind that the advent of new cultural dynamics is always defined by a dialectical tension between the rise of new processes, actors, values, ideas, and structures and the maintenance of those that already exist that characterized previous orders and regimes. Yet examining this tension is a complex task, since these practices are simultaneously interlaced and in confrontation; hence it is in the interplay between the new and the old where the discussion must be situated. Considering that, the inquiry must be performed at least on three levels: (a) the current transformations in regard to the processes of assigning value to cultural heritage must be examined; (b) the traditional logic that continues to govern the processes of assigning value, sometimes invisible or unnoticed, must be brought to light; and (c) the resistance and/or negotiation paths established among the new and the old must be analyzed in order to understand to what extent the new processes and practices entail a destabilization of the traditional ones—in other words, to what extent the traditional institutions of the cultural heritage system (museums, art criticism, the art market, Art History, etc.) are being put in crisis as an argument of authority.

Due to the complexity of the matter, involving multiple threads of analysis, it would be impossible to draw a complete picture in the context of this paper. That is why my approach is based on a specific dimension of the problem, related to a conceptualization of the web as the new laboratory of cultural production, where new actors, in some cases completely unrelated to the traditional ecosystem of cultural heritage institutions, arise and perform, fostering a paradoxical redefinition (paradoxical due to its ambivalence, as will be explained in next paragraphs) of the traditional concepts of canon and value.

2. Defining Hypercanonization

The process that I propose to call “hypercanonization” [14] superimposes and at the same time encompasses the traditional processes. In my approach, the “traditional” processes are those based on hierarchical power structures where decision-making is circumscribed to a reduced set of actors who are recognized as legitimate authorities. Consequently, the hypercanonization process maintains the regime based on institutional authority, legitimizing power structures, and a top-to-bottom orientation [15]. The difference with respect to the previous institutional regime, explaining why I propose the name hypercanonization, resides in two main factors: the scale, or, in other words, the ability to obtain a wider and global audience, which makes these structures a much more powerful

instrument in the process of modeling worldwide collective cultural values; and the scope, that is to say, the ability to manage unprecedented amounts of cultural information in the form of images, data, metadata, public-object interactions, etc. The question, then, consists in determining what the new power structures are, who has the capacity to control them, how power relations unfold, and what their effects in modelling the cultural values that global communities potentially assume as legitimate could be. Thus, the definition of the hypercanonization process has to do with the redistribution of symbolic power that is operating within the framework of our global society, which is an issue that constitutes one of the main research topics of so-called Global Art History.

I will refer first to the case of the new macro and transnational repositories conceived as a sort of “archive of archives” or meta-archive, such as Europeana and the UNESCO World Digital Library, to cite just two very well-known examples, that must be analyzed from the perspective of the recently named “critical archival studies” [16]. Endorsed, promoted, and developed by metanational organizations as part of their long-term strategic policies, they can be thought as a translation of the traditional cultural institutions (archives, libraries, museums, etc.) for the digital world. They bring together several corpora of distributed cultural documents into a specific metadata structure, classification system, the use of terms, graphic and interactive interface, etc. They also build narratives about the canon on the basis of the cultural legacies recorded and how they are ordered, represented, and displayed. Therefore, they continue to perform as power structures that hold political, economic, and ideological discourses through the practice of aggregating, recording, classifying, and displaying cultural legacies, with the fundamental difference that they can manage larger amounts of cultural information worldwide to produce any narrative or representation, which, in turn, has the capacity to reach a global audience.

Europeana is an example of a political project aimed at building a shared European identity, taking as a base the richness of a very diverse cultural heritage that is inscribed in a common framework of organization, access, and representation: Europeana [17,18], which also stands as protective guardian of the European cultural heritage against external forces, such as those of the market. Europeana thus carries out a process of “appropriation” of cultural legacies coming from the diversity of European territories, all of which fall under Europeana’s political decisions. These decisions comprise codification and representation standards, technological frameworks, intellectual property rights, and prioritization of actions in relation to the digitized cultural heritage.

Without diminishing the worth of these infrastructures to increase the access and democratization of the cultural heritage, and to facilitate its use for the generation of knowledge, wealth, and value, we must bear in mind that, due to its “transformative” mission—as Europeana’s own motto affirms (“transforming the world with culture”)—it is crucial to analyze what kind of cultural narratives are being produced under this aspiration to “transform the world,” what kind of “alternative narrative to citizens” are being, or will be, deployed. Therefore, these infrastructures raise ethical issues that have to do with practices of transparency in relation to the production of narratives. In this sense, it must be said that including the “credits” among the information provided in online exhibitions, especially the names of the curators as a statement of intellectual responsibility, which a few years ago was not a systematic practice, represents a step forward. Other ethical problems lie in the reuse of artifacts and documents belonging to different cultural legacies for the assemblage of certain discourses. It is important to carefully consider how the meanings produced by the new narratives might distort or obscure the “local” meanings (historical, cultural, political, etc.) of the reused artifacts, and what impact, negative or positive, this could have on the resemantization of the cultural heritage.

In addition to that, and despite their global and transnational mission, a clear subrepresentation of specific cultural contexts is still an issue, as can be illustrated by the UNESCO World Digital Library, which is also a political project to fulfill, among others, UNESCO’s objective of “promoting international and intercultural understanding” [19]. The WDL explicitly assumes the role of decision-making body over the recorded contents. According to the information provided by the WDL itself, there are two fundamental aspects that determine the decision-making process by which some cultural legacies are digitized or recorded and others are not: first, “the identification by the WDL—in collaboration

with potential partners—of interesting cultural and historical contents that represent a particular country or culture”; and second, the digitization capacity of the potential partners. Both aspects are problematic in the context of constructing a global representation of the world’s cultural heritage. The first one is directly related to articulating the notion of “cultural relevance” within the framework of institutional decisions that, in addition, have a transnational effect, with direct implications on the valuation of cultural heritage located in different territories; the second one obviously places developing countries in a disadvantaged position. The problem of the imbalance caused by digital divides is not new, but it cannot be overemphasized that this fact is one of the determining forces in the construction of canons (present and future) in the digital sphere. It is important to note that the WDL policies include actions aimed at strengthening the digitizing and technological capacity of potential partners. However, it also must be carefully considered to what extent such actions might channel new processes of colonialism—technological and epistemological—and dependencies on the use and control of certain infrastructures, which also applies to the action framework proposed by Europeana. It should also not be forgotten that, like Europeana, the WDL establishes a framework of common codification and structuring, and that the main actor in the elaboration of these rules and norms has been the Library of Congress, one of the main legitimizing institutions in the field of cultural documentation, the promoter, in the end, of the WDL project.

At the same time, gaps related with right issues of digital images reveal a complex scenario where different power structures conflate. How property-regime structures interfere in the canonization processes and in the building of a collective cultural imaginary, especially in those cases where the geopolitical differences are crucial in configuring altered representations of the cultural heritage, also constitutes an important line of inquiry [20].

The hypercanonization process must also be put in relation to the rise of the technological global actors of the digital economy, which, not by chance, belong to the same north-west ideological and economic-cultural context. They control the infrastructures, the algorithms for data processing and retrieval, the channels for content distribution, and the social interaction platforms that are used by cultural actors to interrelate among them. At first, it could be thought that this process might have a greater effect within the framework of those business models that are based on and oriented to the art and cultural sector, but it does not happen exactly like that. The example illustrated by Google (a software oligopoly that has become, in recent years, a real cultural institution), the Google Art Institute, seems to me very powerful. The Google case, and particularly the Google Art Project, now renamed Google Arts & Culture [21], helps me to illustrate some of the phenomena connected with the hypercanonization processes [22].

The declared objective of the Google Art Project when it was launched in 2011 was to become the global gate for accessing the entire collections of museums worldwide. However, the apparent philanthropic mission of providing comprehensive and free access to museum collections around the world underlay a form of cultural monopoly that threatened, among other things, the museum identity and, consequently, diversity in the comprehension of culture and deployment of narratives. As is very well known, all museums, as differentiated institutions, are defined by certain discursive strategies, intellectual positions, and art criticism perspectives, which are expressed on their websites and through their digital narratives. However, such signs of identity could have dissolved if collections had been accessible only through the Google Art Project as the main gateway. Complementary to that, the consequential redirection of data traffic toward Google’s own servers and the accumulation of more information to be exploited is not a trivial argument and deserves deeper reflection.

On the other hand, although Google claimed that the selection of artworks included in the Google Art Project had been made by the museums themselves, leaving to museums the responsibility of assigning representativeness values, it also said that its purpose was to organize the worldwide information and make it accessible and useful to everybody in the world, with the objective of educating and serving as inspiration to future generations. And does it not imply the process of “putting in order” the building of a narrative and therefore a canon?

Even further, in a very short time, Google became a real cultural legitimizing structure in itself. In the very beginning, the Google Earth Prado project, whose objective was to digitize specific masterpieces using high-resolution technologies, entailed a negotiation process: On the one hand, the weight of the Prado Museum as a universally acknowledged cultural institution legitimized the technology developed by Google as a valuable tool to access and enhance the user experience with the artworks' digital surrogates; in turn, Google's innovative technology placed the Prado as a pioneer of the technological development applied to cultural legacies [23]. However, rapidly the landscape changed: "being" in the Google Art Project—or, even more, "being selected" to be part of the Google Art Project—became a value in itself.

Clippings gathered from the international press (shown in Figure 1) clearly evidence how being part of the Google Art Project or being selected by the Google Institute became a factor that in itself gave value to the museum collections. The negotiation process had been lost: the "selection by" Google was claimed as the unique value of legitimacy. Not surprisingly, it was common to find museum websites pointing to the Google Art Project among their recommended and authorized information sources. To what extent museums themselves participated in the process of legitimizing Google as a new institutional and authoritative discourse of the cultural field or, better said, in the process of displacing authority between power structures is an inquiry that would need close examination. In any case, this scenario appears most understandable if it is elucidated under the notion of a "network system" described by Juan Martín Prada [24] a few years ago; that is, the change from a network society, as Manuel Castell [25] defined it, to a configuration of a global world where new regimes of inclusion and exclusion regulated by the technological spaces of digital interactions operate. It also would explain the massive presence of museums in social networks of every nature: this is not a question of choice, it is an inexcusable issue to be part of the system. Is it possible to imagine a museum outside the digital arena where everybody theoretically habits and performs?

Finally, the Google Art Project has become Google Arts & Culture [26], expanding its objectives and scope. Google Arts & Culture is a large-scale database of millions of images freely provided by cultural institutions, constituting an exceptional resource for experimenting with machine learning and artificial intelligence technologies. These experiments allow for the creation of applications that amuse users—who cooperate with Google without being aware of it every time they play to search for a pictorial portrait that looks like their own selfie [27,28]—and generate an exceptional research field for code artists and computer creativity advancements [29]. All of this is not free; obviously, it is part of Google's strategy to expand the venue by which to improve the technologies that support its business model, gain more data input, and, in the end, boost its income.

The business models of the digital economy that are based on and oriented to the art and cultural sector on a global scale also require attention within the framework of the hypercanonization process, especially those based on the technologies of information accumulation and its algorithmic quantification. I will use ArtFacts.Net [30] as an example to illustrate some of the phenomena associated with them, since ArtFacts.Net represents an interesting model in the development of an axiological quantification, which is intimately imbricated in the contemporary culture of rankings and impact indexes that measure value and establish orders of relevance through metrics.

ArtFacts.Net is a digital platform, owned by a German company, ArtFacts.NetTM Ltd., based in Berlin, whose objective is to offer analytical computing services to the different actors that make up the art system (artists, collectors, curators, museums, art historians, etc.). For that, ArtFacts.Net has built a large database of exhibitions held around the world since the early twentieth century.

However, the "Artist Ranking" is its star product, given that one of its fundamental services, the genesis of ArtFacts.Net as a business model, is to facilitate (intervene in?) the decision-making process of collectors, curators, and museums. Its ranking system is based on a quantification of the attention received by the artists from the "art system," taking as a measure the number of exhibitions in which they are featured. The ranking makes it possible to detect market trends, while determining an order of relevance for artists [31]. According to the company, it is currently

“the industry approved rating, used by curators, galleries and collectors to assess an artist’s positioning in the art world” [32]. In other words, it is an instrument that accumulates symbolic capital and performs a legitimizing function. That is why, beyond the specific market services for which it has been conceived, it deserves some kind of consideration as an “epistemic tool” to the extent that it contingently produces comparisons, as has been proposed by Paul Buckerman [33] in a very recent article, but also as an agent of axiological production, since the ranking constitutes a valuation system in itself that builds specific notions of relevance.

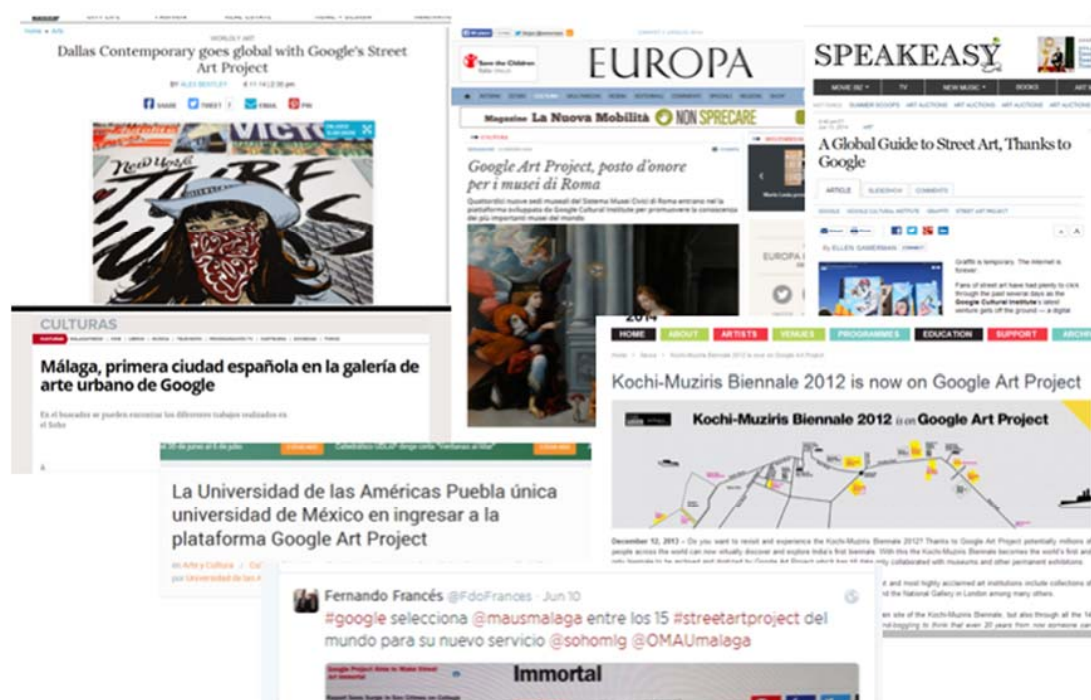


Figure 1. Clippings gathered from the international press about the incorporation of new museum collections in the Google Art Project.

The rhetoric of algorithm objectivity, understood as a mathematical formula that operates on a comprehensive set of evidences, can make us lose sight of the fact that an algorithm implies a conceptual and mathematical formalization, and that it is in this formalization where we must look for the notions of value and relevance that are being managed and proposed as a “gold standard.” The ArtFacts.Net algorithm does not measure the possible quality the art production of a certain artist may have in terms of artistic value as it is understood by the judgment of the art system, but the presence/visibility of the artist in exhibitions. Many exhibitions have more relevance, but the relevance of the exhibitions is weighted, in turn, by the degree of internationality of the organizing institutions—what is meant by “internationality” and how this is measured is not specified—and this also influences the position of the artists in the ranking. Therefore, the notion of relevance in the ArtFacts.Net algorithm has to do with the capitalist-based concept of the “economy of attention” as defined by Georg Franck [34] and the contemporary discourse of the global economy, which make “internationality” an essential parameter of valuation.

The critical judgment of the art system is embedded in the algorithm conceptual model, as it can be deduced that the artists who participate in numerous “relevant” exhibitions are those consigned as relevant by the art system. Strictly speaking, then, we cannot say that the algorithm operates independently from the critical valuations of the art system, but rather that its complexity as a discursive practice is synthesized in an indicator that can be measured (presence in or absence from exhibitions). Therefore, the negotiation and discursive practices on which it is considered

artistically relevant, that had been the base of the values operating within the framework of the art field, are transformed into a quantification and ranking process performed by an algorithm that in its model conveys its own argument. In view of that, it must be problematized to what extent the concept of “relevance” proposed by the conceptual model of the algorithm is coincident with the concept of “relevance” defined by the art system through its discursive practices, and consequently what are the tensions, conflicts, reshapings, etc., that take place in that axiological transformation. However, this inquiry is not easy to carry out, since generally the algorithms used are not transparent, as they are proprietary. In addition, the standardization process of certain values as a universal measure that is involved in such global-oriented tools must be considered. Can such measures be used in the entire art field, whatever the circumstances might be? Finally, it is important to examine the future impacts associated with the maintenance of a valuation system ultimately based on hierarchical structures, now “objectively” measured, which tend to be self-recursive, that is, actors that accumulate the highest scores will continue doing so precisely because they have the highest scores.

3. Defining Social Decanonization

Social decanonization is the name that I propose for the second process, which emerges from social and distributed users’ interactions with cultural content on the web or through digital means. This process, therefore, is interlaced with the unprecedented empowerment of citizens and social communities to interact with and give new meanings to cultural legacies through their multiple, heterogeneous, global, and distributed digital activity, all of which configures a scenario also unprecedented with respect to other decanonization processes.

This idea of social decanonization is also different from other notions of decanonization proposed within the framework of the digital developments of culture, for instance, those related to the opening and expansion of the cultural universe that make possible large-scale image databases with the potential to redirect attention toward a much broader spectrum of cultural production than was considered by historical canons. Yet such a decanonization process has been argued by M. Pratchske [35]—rightly, I believe—in view of the restrictions imposed by different image reproduction rights and, consequently, by the gaps or blind spots that we usually find in these types of image repositories, as has been mentioned before.

On the one hand, due to the flexibility, transformability, and ubiquity of digital content, and the relatively easy access that users have to it, we are witnessing multiple processes of appropriation [36] and redefinition of the meanings that were traditionally deposited on cultural legacies. Any individual, group, or community can build its own discourse about the culture and obtain a global audience, such as Sunnifa Heinreksdottir, a woman in a small German village who, as Michael Edson tells us in *The Age of Scale*, managed to make her own vision of the Bronze Age accessible to thousands of people around the world. In *Rogue Archive* (2016), De Kosnik [37] explores among other things the anticanonical archiving styles of Internet preservationists through the analysis of the practices associated with a multitude of self-designated non-professional archivists (fans, pirates, hackers, etc.) who built accessible online archives of whatever content that they consider that deserves to be digitally preserved. Likewise, easy-to-use digital devices make it possible for anyone to digitally convert the environment around them: distribute it, share it, remix it, and re-edit it. These appropriation practices are never reproductive, but are creating, recreating, and co-creating ones, and they tend to respond to interests and motivations that differ from those of traditional institutions. The web offers us a large number of examples that illustrate these processes of appropriation and resemantization of cultural legacies, and it makes available multiple mechanisms for them to be validated by social communities.

On the other hand, the social production of cultural values that challenge historic and institutionalized canons is also associated with self-management communities, whose members participate collaboratively in the modeling of values that define their identities and cultural legacies. This is the case, among many others, of an initiative led in 2011 by the Spanish activist Juan Freire, a professor of sociology, and Karla Brunet, a Brazilian artist and researcher [38]. Over a couple of

weeks, inhabitants of the village of Garapuá, Brazil, participated communally in a redefinition of their own cultural identity, exploring by themselves the key concepts underlying their common territory, history, and traditions through the production of collaborative digital narratives and storytelling. This is also the case of an initiative named Cabanyal Archivo Vivo [39], which was born within the context of the citizenship movement of resistance that emerged almost a decade ago to defend the Cabanyal neighborhood in the city of Valencia, Spain. Despite the neighborhood's historical and cultural value, preservation of the Cabanyal was threatened by an urban project endorsed by the government of the city, which included demolishing more than a thousand houses in the area to extend a great avenue to the sea. As a response, Cabanyal Archivo Vivo proposed a digital platform to channel a variety of collective actions devoted to bringing to light the cultural value of the neighborhood. In doing so, the resistance fight was transformed into a propositive movement through which citizens contributed to identify and make visible the inherent values of the neighborhood on the basis of their own experiences and memories.

Taking as base the idea of cultural heritage as common ground, these processes, associated with the social appropriation of technology and co-creation *inter pares*, bring to light the notion of shared and egalitarian authority that dismantles the idea of hierarchical arrangement of knowledge and values. These sorts of bottom-up social practices give rise to a new cultural axiology where not only social memory, subjectivity, emotionality, and affectivity but also dissension, resistance, criticism, demystification, etc., become crucial factors in the resemantization of cultural objects and their relocation in new scales of value, while communal validation replaces institutional authority as a means of legitimacy. From my perspective, what is in crisis here is the traditional concept of "canon" itself, since the dehierarchization process involved, as well as the horizontal and bottom-up orientation, dissolve the idea of canon understood as the institutionalization of specific values representing the ideas and interests of those who hold a sort of privileged position of authority (intellectual, economic, political, etc.). Yet these practices of social decanonization involve new ways of understanding the canon as a mechanism of legitimizing certain values. However, far from responding to a common and homogeneous project, this process rests on contributions and valuations from multiple heterogeneous and diverse subjectivities, where numerous discourses, interests, motivations, and conceptions are mixed. The construction of the canon thus becomes a decentralized and plural practice, characterized by discontinuity, fragmentation, difference, dissonance, and contradiction. Therefore, social decanonization operates as an ambivalent dynamic, putting into play decanonization, countercanonization, and recanonization forces.

Simone Winko also defines the canon-formation as a complex process of micro and macro dynamics that converge. As she argues, the micro-actions carried out by individual or little groups are very diverse and heterogeneous, but "only by affecting a change in the position of a group of experts can an individual influence the ongoing negotiation of the canon between all groups within the system of literature" [40] (p. 12). In other words, the legitimating force of the group of experts is needed. My argument is that in the new context of the post-digital society, values accepted communally as a point of reference do not need any more to be legitimated by the "system." Winko also acknowledges that, "because these groups are more visible and exclusive than the large and undefined group of individual readers, a scholar or a critic can exert more influence on the canon than nonmembers of these institutions" [41] (p. 12). This position of relevance and visibility is also liable to be dismantled in the new postdigital scenario, with its positive and negative effects. Certainly, we must recognize that we move here in slippery and risky terrain, which oscillates between the richness embodied in the creative and innovative capacity of individuals and communities to give new meanings to objects that are part of our cultural heritage, and pure ochlocracy, global ignorance, emptiness, and banality.

4. Defining Transcanonization

Although hypercanonization and social decanonization processes operate as driving forces in themselves, a sign of our hybrid time is the convergence of both dynamics in rebuilding traditional

and historical canons and narratives. Institutions, individuals, and communities, from both outside and within the cultural heritage domain, come together with the purpose of articulating a hybrid epistemology and axiology and producing a new kind of negotiated institutionalism. This emerges within an “interstitial” context, that is, open spaces where institutions, social communities, individuals, and cultural and political agents interact, debate, and negotiate on how and where to identify shared cultural values and new forms of legitimacy. The exploration of new forms of institutionalism as a way to rethink the place of cultural institutions in the world and their role in the articulation of the public sphere is not a phenomenon exclusively associated with the rise of the digital realm. Actually, this is an intellectual, critical, and actional movement rooted in the institutional critique of the last decades of the twentieth century. Yet, this certainly acquires an interesting dimension when the web becomes a social web and when technology empowers individuals and communities with new tools in order to be heard.

Not by chance, the appropriation of the logic of participation and sharing that characterizes the P2P platforms of the social web is at the base of the so-called social and participatory museum [38], which underlies one of the most dramatic redefinitions that museums have experimented with so far. Multiple initiatives have been, and are being, carried out by museums to promote participation and engagement by citizens [42]. Europeana has incorporated this objective into its mission: “As a community we need to increase participation making our cultural heritage personal and relatable by connecting family stories and memories to major shared cultural themes. Europeana and its network will continue to invest in our successful programme of campaigns encouraging the contribution of family stories.” [43]. Of course, Google is leading similar movements of social engagement with its cultural projects. From another perspective, the aggregation of user interactions, measured in terms of numbers of “follows” and “likes,” as a popularity index to ranking and positioning algorithms, as illustrated by the Mutual Art Index [44], is also a sign of the significance of social valuation that is included as a strategic variable for the production of reputation values in the art field.

The significance of social engagement has been widely claimed by memory institutions that advocate for a hybrid knowledge and shared authority, which may result in new value-assignment processes and new forms of canon. Certainly, the incorporation of knowledge dimensions, values, and actors, historically underestimated in the canon-building process, has the capacity to dissolve the notion of epistemic hierarchy, the prevalence of the monofocal point of view, and the pervasiveness of unidirectional discourse [45]. However, for the purpose of this text the important issue is not what is able to be transcanonized but how this mechanism unfolds. In the so-called interstitial contexts, canonization is a horizontal negotiation process among the different structures of civil society. As mentioned in the previous section, Simone Winko also recognizes the double dynamic (micro-macro) in canon-formation, but the concept that she develops of “the invisible hand,” which operates as an inertial force, becomes here a conscious one: in the inter-canonization process the negotiation is not the result of dynamics that converge in an inertial manner, but rather a conscious project of collective building for reimagining the present and the future.

Nevertheless, while recognizing the clearly positive components of this convergence movement, some critical questions arise, especially if we bear in mind that many of these initiatives are led and designed by museums, organizations, and technological global actors with an institutional legitimizing power in the cultural field, a circumstance that could compromise the negotiation process on which a new institutionalism should be built. An example of this might be the practice of social tagging, which emerged as a decentralized and distributed activity by which users tag digital content according to their own interests. Museums soon realized the potential of this practice, especially for increasing access to their collections. Thus, along with the descriptors provided by experts, tags contributed by multiple individuals soon began to appear as part of museum information systems. In a short time, and to put order to the noise that an excess of labels could imply, museums began to design guidelines and protocols to orient taggers in their activity [46], which resulted in reshaping the social practice from the institutional parameters [47]. The example of the Centre Pompidou, where the tagger

must comply with words previously systematized in an established thesaurus, also showcases how including social tagging among the museum's own practices has reduced spontaneity and potential creativity, becoming subsumed as another vector of the institutional strategy.

Just on the other side, the competition of museums to obtain more audience and users might have the effect of transforming popular judgment into the arbitrator who leads the making-decisions of cultural institutions. This circumstance, besides undermining the notion of institutional authority, might influence the conformation of the narratives of the canon, as pointed out by the young researcher Dorothy Howard [48]:

Museum strategies and budgets are tied to impact measurements and data-centric reports that put increasing statistical weight on their social-media reach and engagement metadata. The general implication here is that museums no longer trust themselves to be the arbiters of culture as they react more and more to the popular trends demonstrated by online audiences. While some might say this leads to democratization and a necessary shift away from the standard narrative of the Western canon, a move that might especially attract younger audiences, it may also lead to an echo-chamber effect where consumers (i.e., audiences) are exposed to only those things that might be already likely to please them, while other ideas are pushed out of view down the rhetorical newsfeed.

Likewise, incorporating "social valuation" as a parameter for reputation indices does not imply the production of a hybrid knowledge, but an appropriation of such social knowledge to generate a new knowledge with pretensions of institutional legitimacy that afterward is sold in the form of services to third parties, including the users themselves who contributed the social knowledge.

Therefore, how this convergence happens, and what is lost and what persists in the negotiation process, is just what must be problematized. In other words, we must make transparent and discuss the power-knowledge relations that underlie this renowned cultural valuation process. Some questions that should be included in a future agenda are as follows:

1. To what extent are these initiatives where different canon-building forces converge producing a real hybrid and shared axiology?
2. To what extent are traditional institutions appropriating the logic of participation and sharing in order to subsume them as part of their institutional discourse and canon-building narrative? To what extent are we facing a sort of "domestication" process attempting to redirect outsiders to the "center," establishing in that way a "controlled" framework for their activities, which is perturbing sometimes for the institutions? In short, are we witnessing the emergence of processes oriented to building a new institutionalism or, conversely, are we witnessing a re-editing of processes oriented to institutionalizing divergent thoughts, values, and practices with the purpose of integrating them into the framework of the established system?
3. To what extent might the transformative potential associated with the practices, thoughts, and values emerging at the margins be deactivated if they are sanctioned by the legitimizing mechanism of the established system?
4. If cultural institutions need to establish a distance to produce the critical mediation that is part of their mission, the task of achieving a balance between institutional assessment and social valuations becomes a complex goal. How does one overcome this challenge without falling in demagoguery? Is it not just the maintenance of this tension that is really valuable?

5. Closing Remarks

In 2013, James Cuno (President and CEO of the Getty Trust) wondered from a postcolonial perspective: "Who owns the past?" [49]. I think that it is the time to ask: Who owns the cultural values in the postdigital society? Who has the capacity to assign values to cultural objects, actors, and images? Who holds now the authority and power to establish the new canons and legitimizing discourses? The objective of this paper has not been to establish closed conclusions on these questions, but rather

to propose an open reflection about the problems and challenges facing us. Social empowerment, participatory cultures, scale, globality, technology-driven actors, and algorithmic-generated knowledge are the main features that reshape the canon-building processes within the context of the postdigital society. The establishment of general driving forces (hypercanonization, social decanonization, and transcanonization) through which to explain the heterogeneity and diversity of actors, practices, and values that operate in canon-formation processes is only a methodological position that allows us to manage the complexity by focusing the attention to the shared characteristics and underlying common logics, even assuming that the internal diversity is very significant and that there are multiple overlapped and intersected pathways. Some of these interlaced processes have been pointed out throughout the exposition. What is more, taking into consideration that the hybridity is the sign of our time, the greatest complexity that we must face in the near future lies in determining and analyzing the power relations that operate in the negotiation avenues that rise when different canon-building forces converge.

Acknowledgments: This research article is part of the results of the project funded by the Ministry of Economy and Competitiveness of Spain [Catálogos artísticos: gnoseología, epistemologías y redes de conocimiento. Análisis crítico y computacional, HAR2014-51915-P] and the project funded by the Centro de Estudios Andaluces of the Junta de Andalucía [Metodologías de datos aplicadas al análisis de las exposiciones artísticas para el desarrollo de la economía creativa, PRY128-17].

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest. The founding sponsors had no role in the design of the study; in the collection, analyses, or interpretation of data; in the writing of the manuscript; or in the decision to publish the results.

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- This idea of hypercanonization differs from the concept theorized by Damrosch under the same term. Damrosch defines hypercanonization as “older major authors who have held their own or even gained ground over the past twenty years” [12] (p. 45).
- Actually, the field of digital humanities has become aware that there is a real risk of perpetuating in contemporary societies, and in the practice of digital scholarship, the same problems of power-relation structures and the prevalence of hegemonic discourse, with the consequences of marginality and subalternity, that characterized our predigital world. That is why the critical perspective of digital humanities encourages researchers to pay attention to the mechanisms underlying these processes as an inexcusable responsibility.

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