



CURATING.ONLINE

Curating on the Web - Webinar @Walkin Studios (Bangalore, India)*: A reflection on our collaboration

May 2021

During the series of online meetings that preceded the formalisation of the webinar, our team (artist Vivek Chockalingam (Bangalore, India), curator Vidya Shivadas (New Delhi, India), researcher Padmini Ray Murray (Bangalore, India), curator Gaia Tedone (Milan, Italy) and curator Marialaura Ghidini (Bangalore, India) discussed the trajectory of curating on the web. We began to reflect on the responses that museums, galleries and independent curators adopted to confront the closure of art spaces and the inability to dwell, socialise and engage with art in public spaces brought about by the Covid-19 pandemic.

The screenshot shows a Google Docs document titled "CURATINGontheWEB_Walkin-ASEF". The document contains a list of exhibitions and a discussion point. The list includes:

- 12 2017 #exstrange by Marialaura Ghidini and Rebekah Modrak
- 13 2017 The Recombinants (Madja Edelstein-Gomez) by Martine Neddham, Emmanuel Guez and Zombectro, <https://www.neddham.info/madja-e-g-online-curator/>
- 14 2013 Beautiful Interfaces by Miyō Van Stenis, <http://miyovanstenis.com/blog/beautiful-interfaces-the-deep-in-the-void/>
- 15 2010 Temporary Stedelijk, <http://temporarystedelijk.com/>
- 16 2020 Screen Walks by Jon Uriarte, Marco De Mutis, <https://screenwalks.com/>
- 17 2020 FitArt by Nina Roehrs & Damjanski

Below the list, there is a section titled "2) Short discussions about the above perhaps in relation to creating different infrastructure for art and thinking critically about tools". It includes a bullet point: "+ start addressing how things have changed during the Covid-19 pandemic + in specific what has been happening in India?". Below this, there is a sub-section titled "+ we could talk about some of our experiences:" which lists:

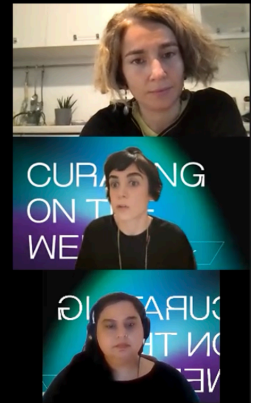
- WALKIN doing interviews on Instagram
- GAIA Screenwalk 'This Image is Not Available in Your Country' commissioned by Fotomuseum, Winterthur and The Photographers' Gallery, London: <https://screenwalks.com>
- VIDYA FICA doing workshops online?
- PADMINI the play project you are working on.

At the bottom of the document, there is a paragraph: "Shall we also bring in the idea: in time of need, why is it important to think critically about the tech we use as curators." and another line: "Shall we also bring in current use/misuses of tech, e.g. problems and 'bizarre' uses by the".

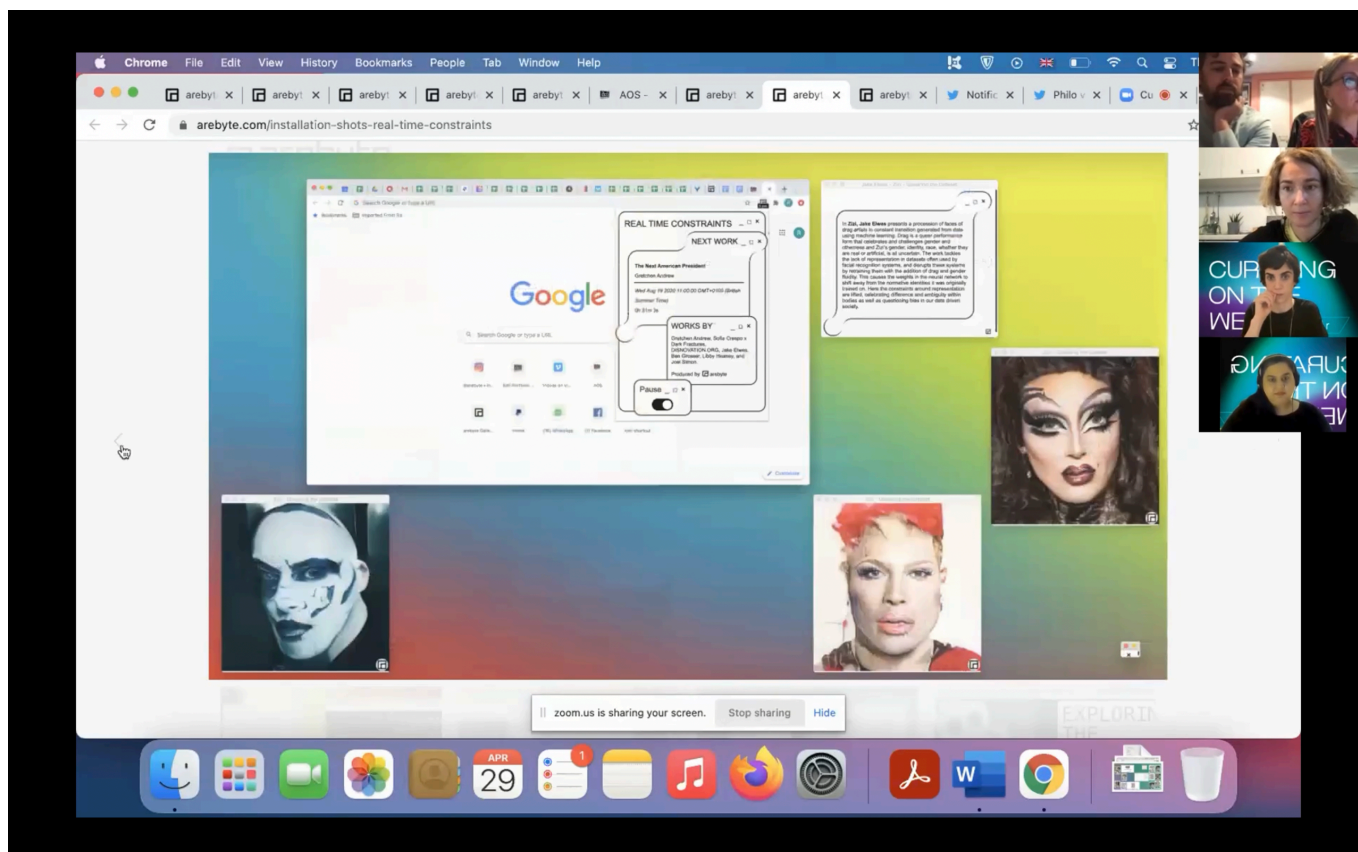
On the right side of the document, there is a video call overlay showing four participants: a woman, a man, a woman, and a man.

We noticed that the movement into an online mode of display and distribution of contemporary art was often understood by institutions as 'the only' solution, and that institutions in particular struggled to understand and confront the characteristics of curating on the web, which is a practice that occurs in a networked environment. Our reflections led us to formulate the idea that, from the 2020 onwards, curating in the online environment has become more akin to publishing and broadcasting, rather than a practice that creatively engages with a space of diverse possibilities, as well as limitations, for exhibiting and engaging with art. In this scenario, the web emerges as a space that has lost its aura — no more a space for freedom, escapism and unbound collaboration like in the 90s, the web has become the mirror for a simplified understanding of the idea of network. We also noticed that many institutions, in different manners and across the world, started to conform to the workings of online platforms (what a platform allows for); turning the agency of a curator operating on the web into what 'platforms ask curators to do.' While many exhibitions were shifted online often by using documentation images and taking the form of 'online viewing rooms', many curatorial projects entailed inviting artists to produce artworks for the social media channels of a given institutions to 'animate' their online presence, often without compensating artistic labour. In this confused panorama, our team decided to locate curators (independent, institutional and from the not-for-profit sector) and exhibitions projects that instead confronted working on the web creatively, by proposing different approaches to exhibition-making and audience engagement in a moment of structural crisis. We therefore decided to invite some of them to be guest-speakers at the webinar and present the way in which they approached their work during the Covid-19 pandemic. The invited speakers presented their practice and a focused selection of their projects for 20 minutes each; presentations that acted as prompts for opening the discussion with our live audience. The guest speakers were: ZHANG Ga (US/CHI), Guido Segni (IT), Aarushi Surana and Kaushal Sapre (IN), Virginie Tan and Astrid Lours-Riou (FR/UK), Guildor (IT) and Nimrod Vardi and Rebecca Edwards (UK), and they were chosen for their distinctive approach to operating online and for the geographical location of their projects, and therefore way of addressing specific cultural contexts. Each day of the webinar opened with a presentation by some of the members of our team that were meant to provide a historical context and an overview of the current scenario for both our audience and the presentations by the guest speakers.

The web is not just as a
medium or a publishing
channel but is an
ecosystem that is
socio-cultural,
economic and political

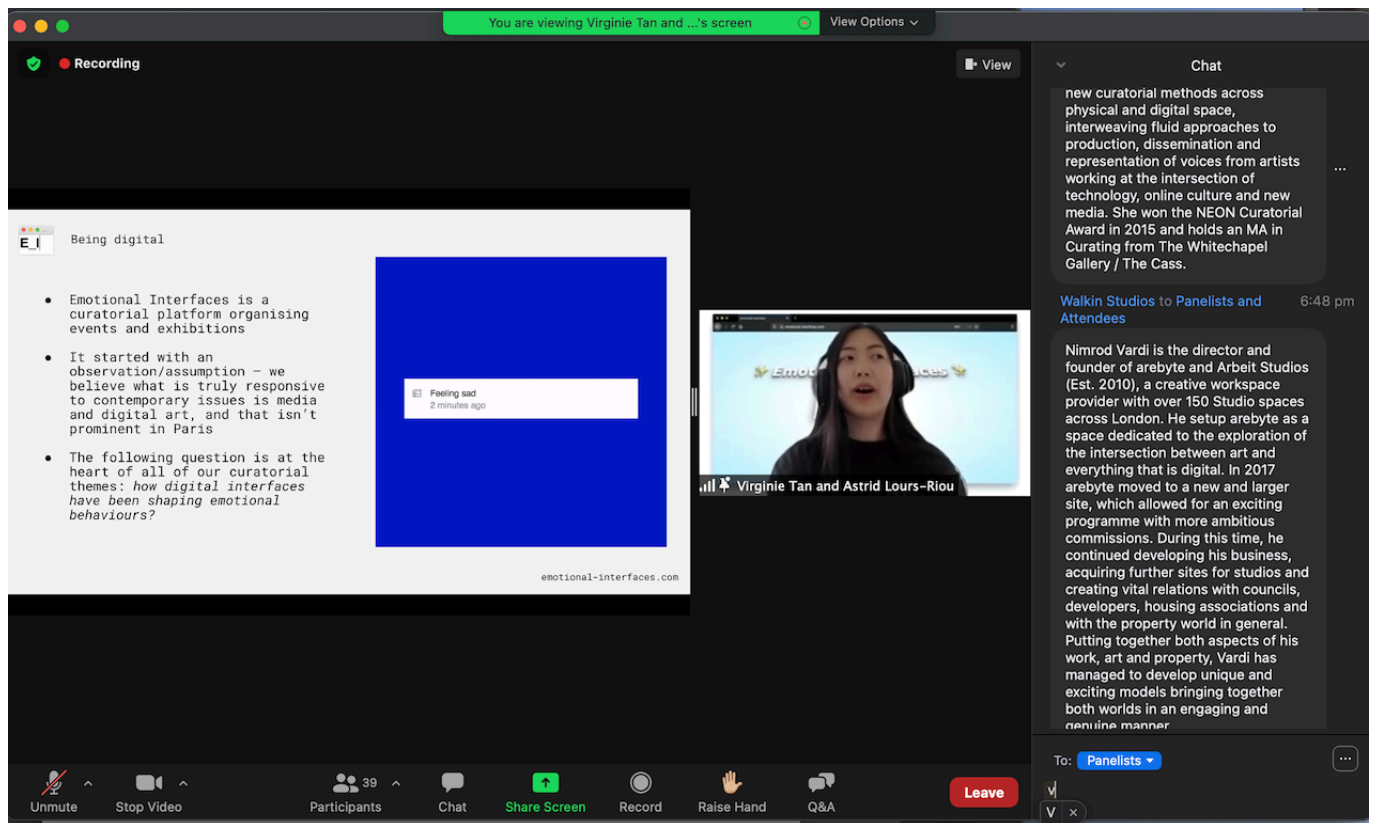


Day 1 of the webinar started with the presentation “The Dawn of Online Curating” by two members of our team, Marialaura Ghidini and Gaia Tedone. Such presentation was meant to give an overview of the evolution of curatorial approaches to exhibiting contemporary art in the online environment from the early 90s till today. The idea was to present the methods by which curating web-based exhibitions has proposed a revision of the concepts of artistic originality, authorship, collection & archive, and audience participation in artistic and cultural processes, from within and outside the infrastructure of the contemporary art system. The presentation also discussed the year 2020 as the year of the sudden ‘digital awakening’ of art institutions prompted by the Covid-19 pandemic and the physical shutdown of cultural venues, and put forward the concept of networked co-curation. During the Q&A, questions by the audience enriched the discussion by raising issues related to accessibility of art online and linguistic diversity, the invisibility of power structures embedded in the network environment, as well as the evolution of modes of online engagement in a moment in time dominated by the screens of smartphones.



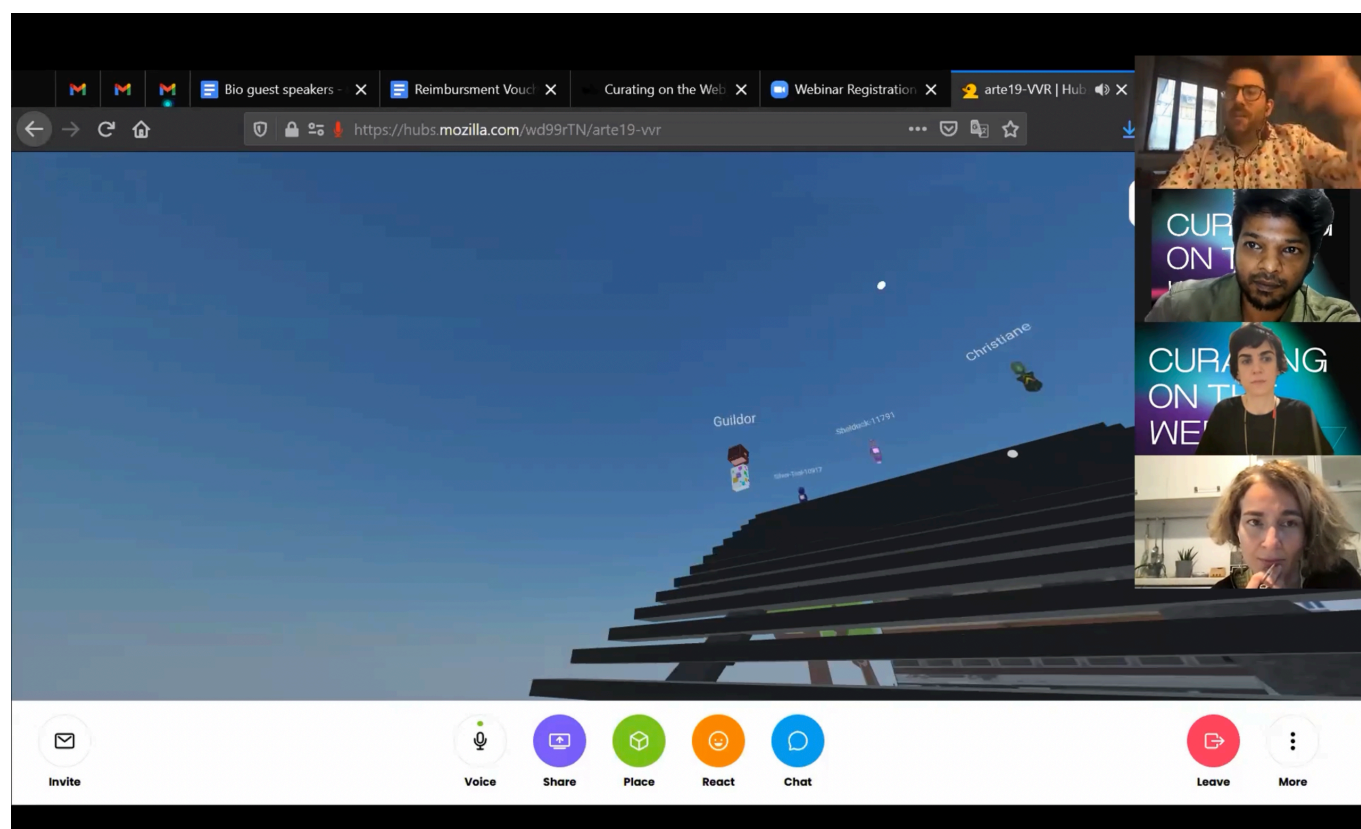
Our first set of speakers were Rebecca Edwards and Nimrod Vardi, curator and founder of Arebyte Gallery in London (UK), respectively. The duo presented the way in which they have been creating connections between their programmes of on-site exhibitions and online projects. Although they started operating online 2014, they rebranded their online activity as Arebyte on Screen in 2019 and started to include different kinds of activities, such as Arebyte Skills, which proposes educational activities with invited curators, and Arebyte Chain, whereby exhibitions are artist-led and based on the idea of artists inviting peers to create artworks in the manner of a chain of invites. During their presentation, Edwards and Vardi put the stress on the fact that the boundaries of working online are very different from working in the physical space; a difference that makes their online programme more dynamic and able to respond more quickly to “what goes on in the world”. They discussed their exhibition project “Real Time Constraints” (2020) which was presented at the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic, and adopted the downloadable plugin and the pop-up window as an exhibition format. Their idea being not only to create a different experience for the viewer, but also to use what already exists, like software or web structures to “put themselves inside them” and give form to new ways of creating art and engaging with it. Edwards and Vardi also discussed the web as a space of wonder, where “someone can travel through”; stressing that it is important to rethink what the web means, how we should operate in it, and who is in control of it and its underlying structures. The questions by the audience focused on issues related to the way in which curators can qualify people’s engagement on the internet, and the problems

related to documentation and conservations of online projects.



After a short break our next speaker was Virginie Tan of the curatorial platform Emotional Interfaces, which she curates with her collaborator Astrid Lours-Riou. According to the curators, Emotional Interfaces is a project that grows by responding to the present moment, and exists both online and offline — the common thread between the projects presented on the platform being the question: How do digital interfaces shape emotional behaviours? While their first project focused on creating a web-based exhibition that acted as a “world when one can get lost” and moved away from the seamlessness and user-friendliness of the digital services we use in our day-to-day life online; the project they curated during the pandemic addressed the audience directly, from the walls of EP7, an exhibition venue in Paris (France). Confronted with the sheer amount of activity online, which became “a default choice” according to the curators, Tan and Lours-Riou decided to explore the idea of the interface by giving life to a sort of “Twitter feed” or a “mural of Twitter” for people to experience by passing-by in the period between the two lockdowns in Paris. As a complement to the exhibition, which for obvious reasons was not accessible to everyone in IRL, the curators created an online documentation that mimicked mainstream communication platforms, whereby documentation of the artworks was accompanied by interviews with their artists that used intimate language to discuss their work, such as “How do you feel?” and “How was the year for you?” What was important for Tan and Lours-Riou was to stress the emotional aspects embedded in the artworks by talking informally to their creators. The questions by

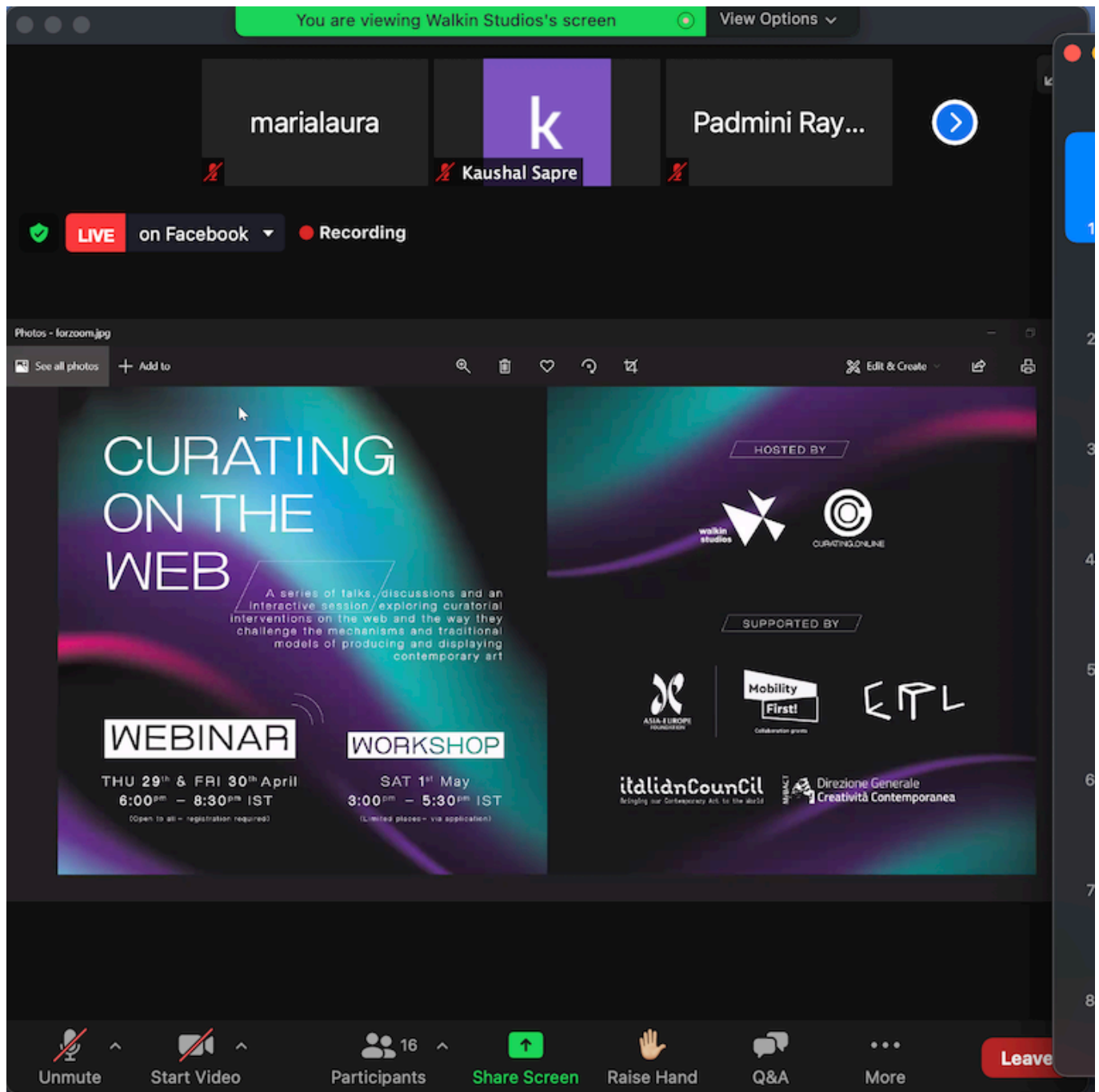
the audience ranged from wanting to know more about the experience of working curatorially with interfaces that are online and offline or across the two, and how museums are going to adapt to the growing number of digital artworks that are created today.



The last speaker of the day was Guildor, who discussed the project “Arte-19 – Virus Virtual Reality Games” (2020) curated by Valentina Tanni for the cultural space Fusolab in Rome (IT) and to which he participated as an artist. “Arte-19” used MozillaHubs to recreate the architecture of the square that hosts the building in which Fusolab operates in Rome, the Casilino Mall, and presented a series of live artworks and performances in a 3D environment. “Arte-19” was framed by a game narrative for which the audience was invited to “free the artists and their work that were secluded in the digital realm as a result of a virus”. Guildor took the audience on a live tour of the exhibition and presented the work that he exhibited during the project in video format. He discussed the changing role of performance in a moment in time where liveness comes to the screens of an audience as a double performance: IRL (when performed by the artist body) and as a digital mirroring (when performed by the avatar of the artist) — two forms that the artist aimed to bring together in his artwork “Imagine me happy”. In this artwork, Guildor took the audience on a walk up and down a staircase (real and virtual) with the intent to give life to a “virtual room that could be used for more than just watching streamed content on screens”; creating a sense of community through the repetition of tasks and the story that the artist was narrating. The questions by the audience revolved around the use of poetic gestures and language that Guildor

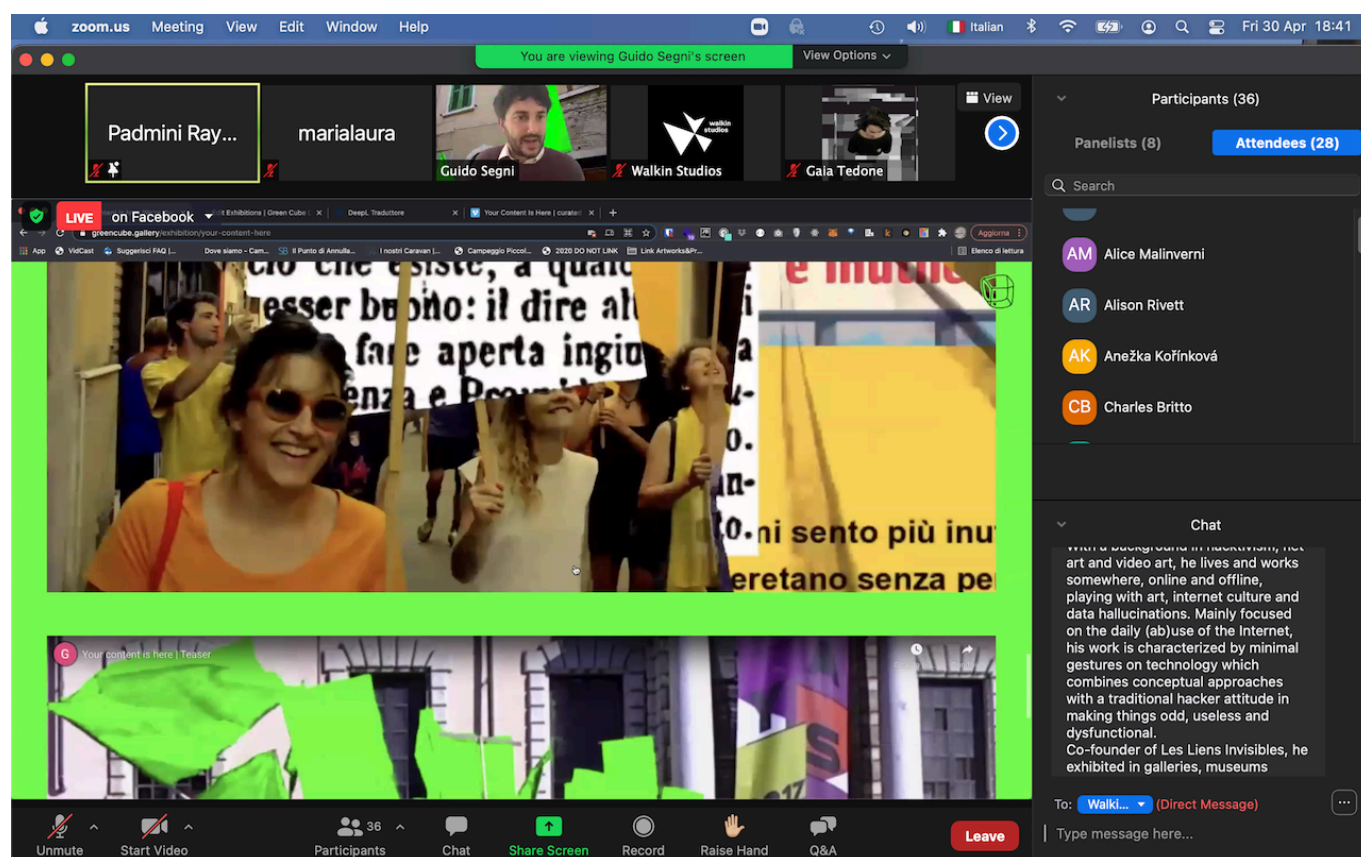
made for his performance as a way of transcending linguistic and cultural barriers. Other questions revolved around the notion of content ready to be online versus content that is just uploaded online, and the responsibility that curators have not only towards the artists they work with but also their artworks when operating in the online environment.

During the final wrap-up session, the idea of the curator as someone that orchestrates dynamics online was discussed in relation to that of operating in a networked environment that requires to “embrace the wilderness of the web as a place where one can encounter and stumble across things that were not expected.” Another idea that emerged is that of the necessity, when working online, to be able to translate the experiences one has by understanding the differences in behaviours that occur when inhabiting different environments, and the possibilities attached to it. The day closed with an open question, “How can we shape new way of acting as artists and curators by coexisting, interfacing, with what often appears opposite, such as the virtual and the physical, the online and the offline?”



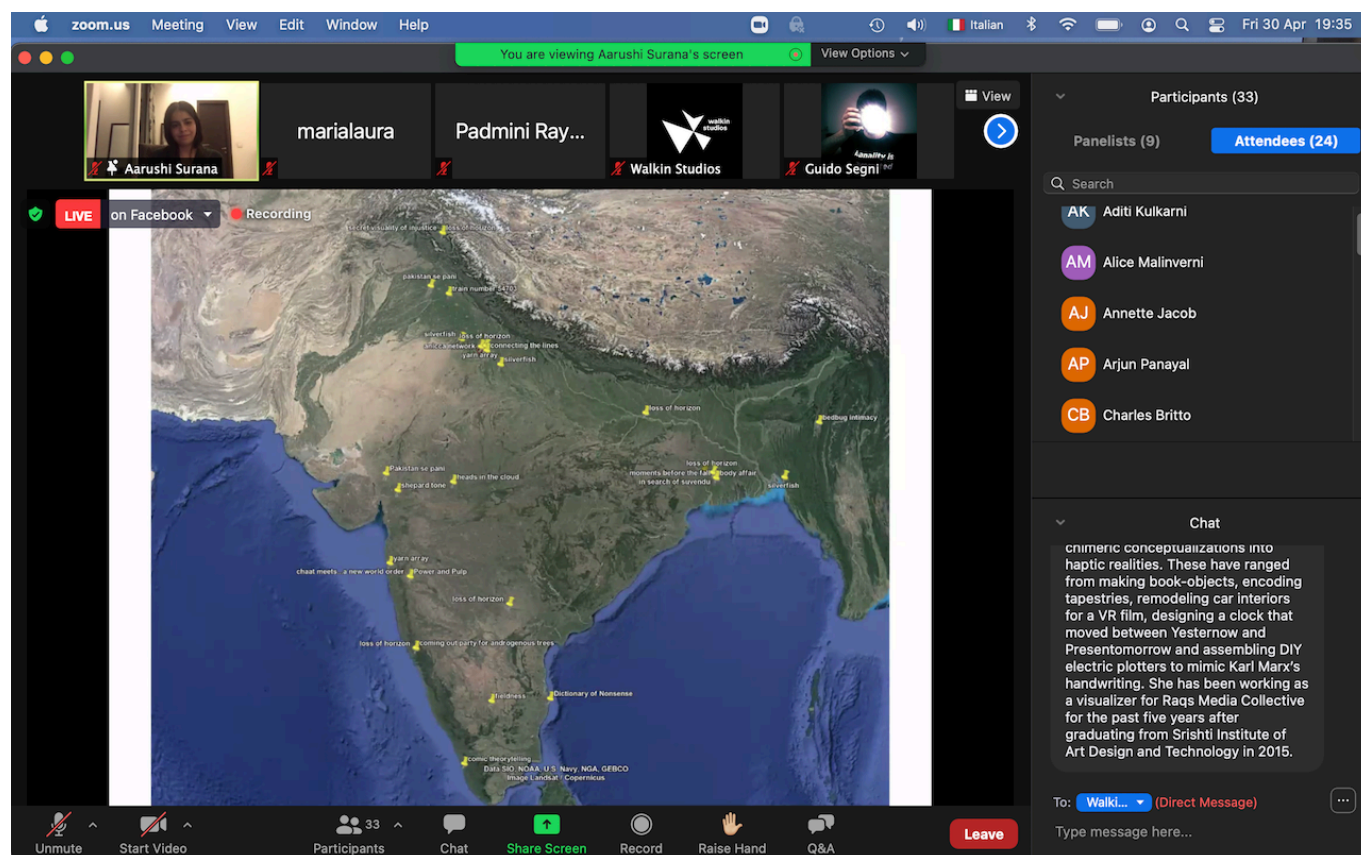
Day 2 of the webinar opened with the presentation “Zooming into the Indian Landscape” by two members of our team, Marialaura Ghidini and Padmini Ray Murray. Such presentation was meant to give a brief, yet quite varied overview of exhibition projects that used the web and web platforms as mediums of production, display and distribution of art in India. Based on conversations with a number of artists and curators about their relationship with the web in the context of their artistic practices, the presentation brought to light that the notion of site-specificity that was visible in several projects that were discussed during Day 1 had had a different evolution in India, mostly in relation to the relationship the web has had with the exploration of different media (public) scapes, and in processes of knowledge creation. The presentation ended with the question, “What does it really mean to curate online when we

loose connection with the spaces we normally inhabit?”, which also referred to the particular moment in time of our webinar — a time where the Covid-19 crisis turned into a humanitarian crisis in India. After a short discussion between Ghidini and Ray Murray about the evolution of web technology in India, Vivek Chockalingam introduced our first guest-speaker of the day, Guido Segni.



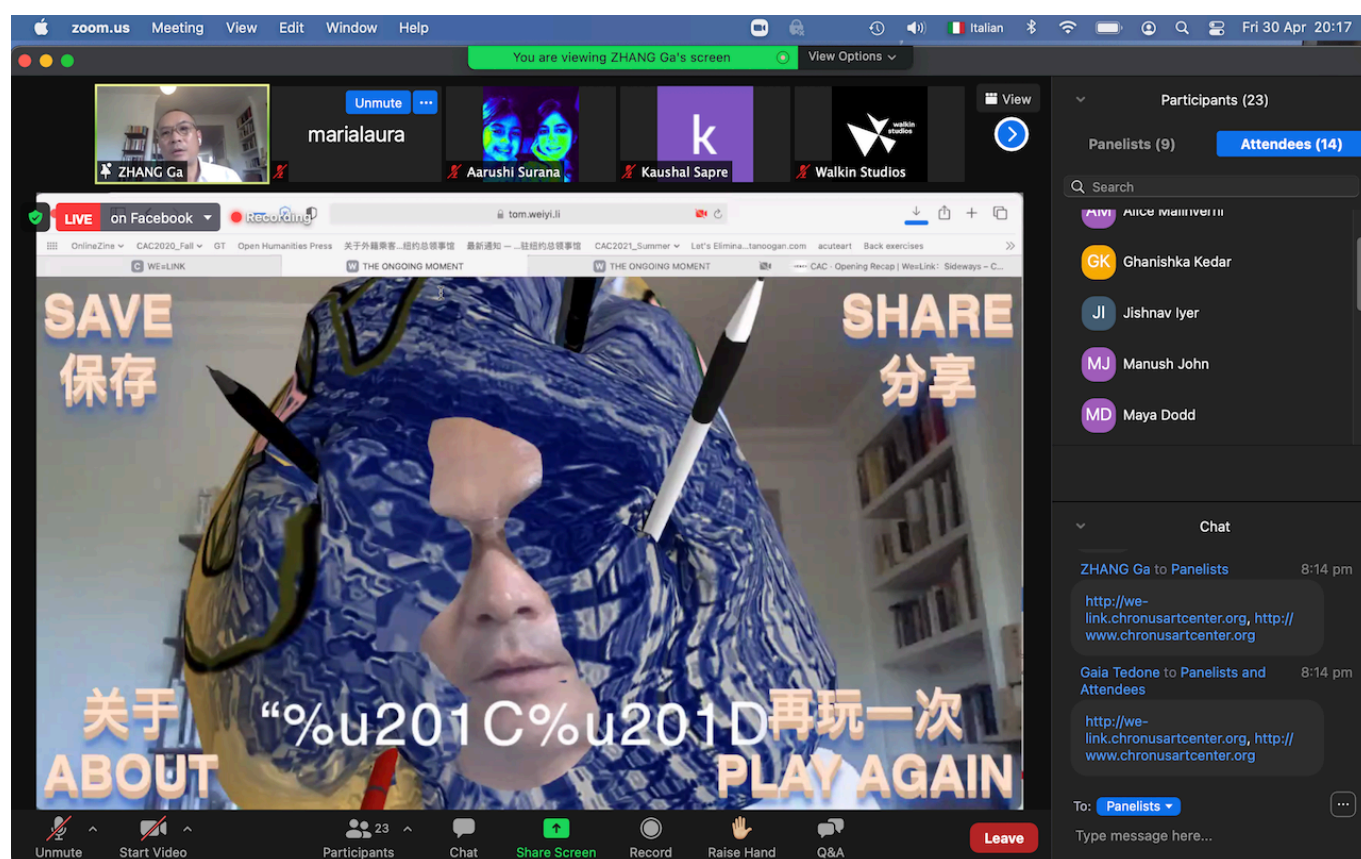
Segni is an artist and the co-founder with Matias Ezequiel Reyes of the online artist-run space Green Cube Gallery in Carrara, Italy; a project that was born from Segni and Reyes’ frustration with the “common opinion is that digital content lives only on a screen and in a separate space from the world.” According to Segni, in fact, “URL and IRL aren't opposite but just two distinct forms in which matter can exist under different conditions.” Since its inception in 2017, Green Cube Gallery explored the way in which the digital can dialogue, interact and influences public spaces, and ultimately people’s opinions and behaviours — it did so by presenting 7 exhibition projects curated by various guest curators and artists. This is the reason for which, when the first Covid-19 lockdown happened in Italy, the founders of Green Cube Gallery decided to pause their exhibition programme in that such dialogue was no more available. Segni presented the first and last exhibitions of Green Cube Gallery: “Your Content is Here” (2017) curated by the collective TWT1 in Carrara and online, and “Gallery.Delivery Milan” (2020) curated by Sebastian Schmeigh in collaboration with Silvio Lorusso in Milan. If the former explored the digital image in relation to the idea of the protest, whereby a live protest acquires meaning online through the digital works submitted by selected artists; the latter explored the mixing of digital

algorithmic services with reality by using the format of an exhibition delivered to people's houses using a rider — “the same one uses when ordering food to be delivered at home.” The questions by the audience touched upon various issues that were also discussed in Day 1. One issue was related to the idea of performativity and repetition in giving life to an exhibition format that straddles both the online and offline environment. Another question touched upon the role of the body and the tension between embodiment and disassociation, to move onto the idea that bodies are the same but “move in different states in different conditions.”



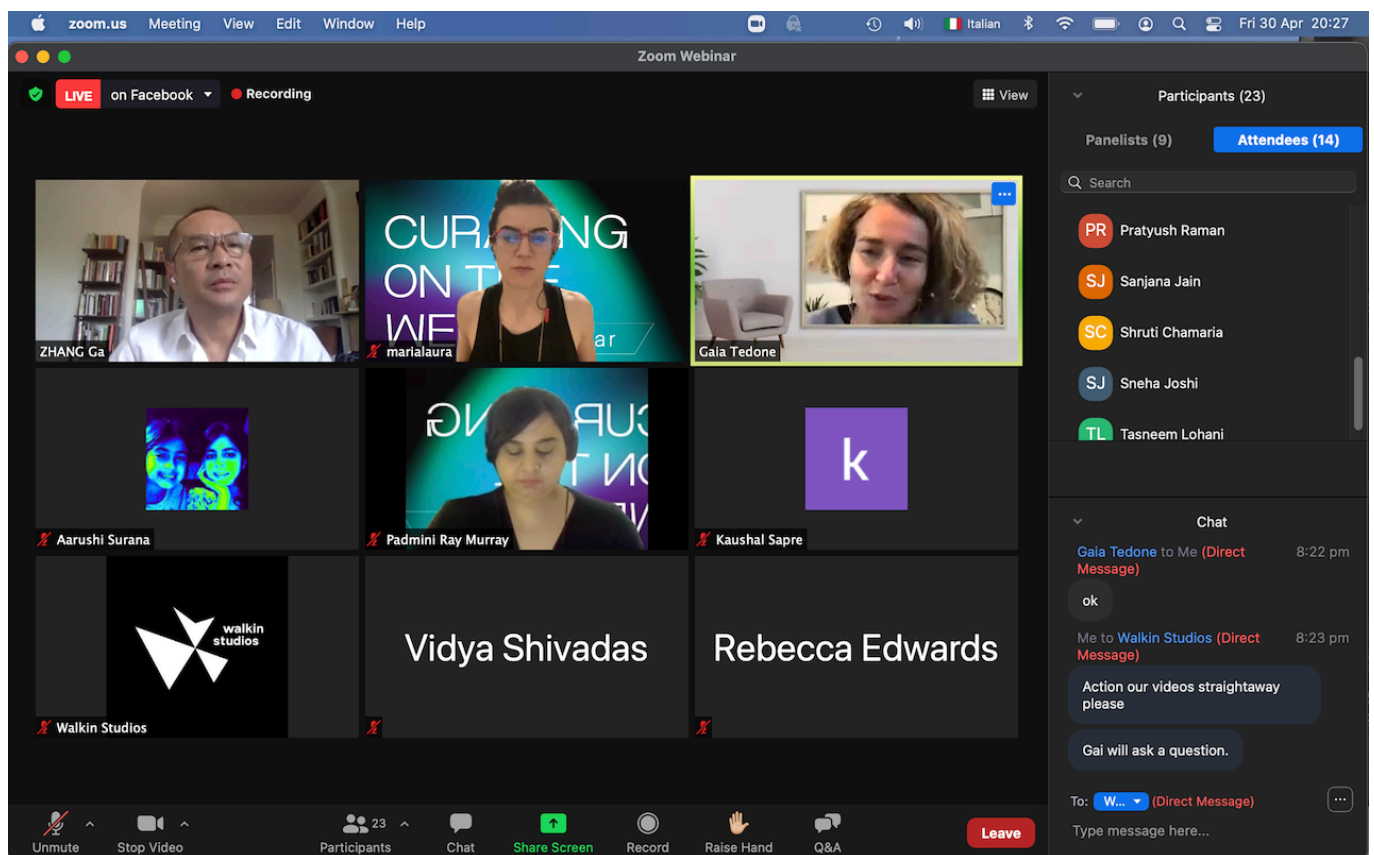
After a short break our next speakers were Kaushal Sapre and Aarushi Surana who worked on the online transition of the project “Five Million Incidents (FMI)” curated by RAQS Media Collective for the Goethe Institute in Delhi and Kolkata, India, between August 2019 and August 2020. After a brief reflection on what happened in the contemporary art world in India during the pandemic, Sapre and Surana presented the approach they used to facilitate the “spatialisation of artists projects on a multiplicity of online platforms”, also while providing specific example of artworks along with the mapping of their online presence. They brought forth the idea of “localisation” or “localised internet” in relation to the experience they had with working with multiple artists who with their projects brought in a different culture around the internet and using the internet. Sapre and Surana discussed the risk of artistic projects that manifest themselves online to get “templatized” when an artwork “starts mimicking

the demand of a platform and feed that demand” rather than having a public life per se. And they proposed the idea of “modulation” as a way of inhabiting the online environment. The question of the role of an institution when it does not have a physical infrastructure to offer was discussed in relation to their experience with FMI; stating that working online allowed them to negotiate swiftly the shift that art practices have been going through during the pandemic — shift that allows to create a sort of expanded education programmes through a network of peers, such as making and producing self-help videos to use certain technologies or platforms. The question by the audience touched upon the future of art infrastructures in India and the possibility to build new structures based on shared experiences and learning. Other questions focused on the problems of categorising practices too strictly and therefore running the risk of misunderstanding how to inhabit the various online spaces that are at our disposal in a critical manner, or superficially adopting them.



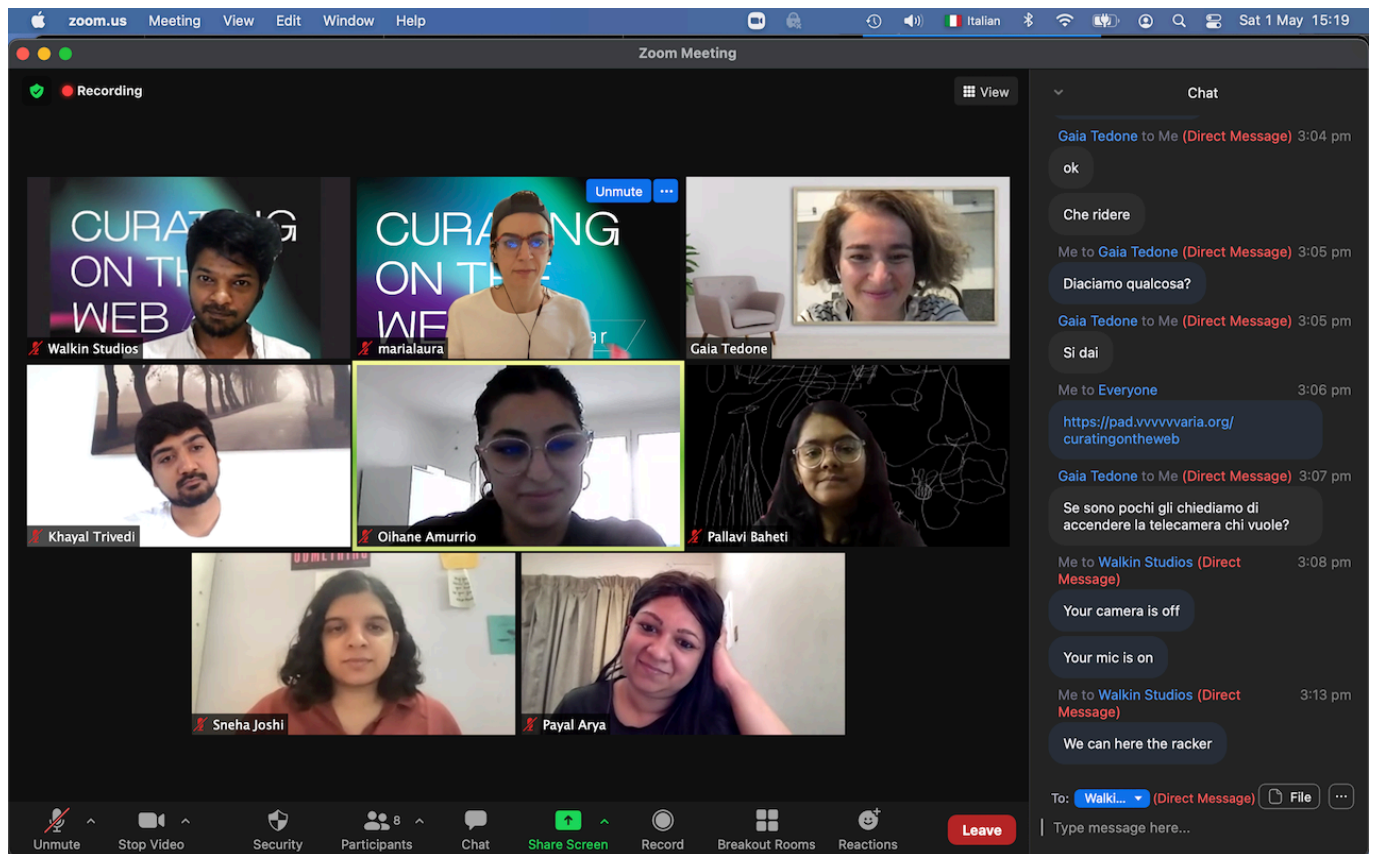
The last speaker of the day was ZHANG Ga who curated the exhibition “WE=LINK: 十个小品 Ten Easy Pieces” for the Chronus Art Center in Shanghai (China). While taking the audience on a tour of the exhibition, ZHANG discussed the way in which this project responded to the sudden lockdown that happened in China in January 2019 — a response that made use of a network of peers and institutions to give life to a collaborative exhibition that responded to the urgencies of the current moment. ZHANG stressed the difference between working online in 1997 (when he curated his first exhibition) and more than 20 years later; highlighting how cumbersome was to curate an exhibition on the web then

compared to now, when technology is ubiquitous and very easy to access and use. In his view, working online today is an opportunity to revitalise this particular media as “a platform for artistic intervention and discourse” in the light of the changes that have occurred to the web over 3 decades. ZHANG discussed the notion of “resistance mentality” as a way to confront the “panopticon infrastructure” of the web, and as a way to collaboratively engage with it by carving out a space in the mainstream contemporary art world, which has been resistant towards these kind of practices thus far. The questions by the audience touched upon the networks of solidarity between people, institutions and artists that have emerged during the pandemic and the difficulty in dismantling hierarchies embedded in the existing institutional infrastructures. The problem of romanticising collaboration and understanding it as solidarity was also brought forth, along with the divide created by a knowledge gap between the general contemporary art world and the media art field.



Day 2 ended with the idea that the work of the curator that operates on the web is a work of translation on many different levels and amongst many different actors — peers, specialists, platforms, environments and services. This idea also connected with an image that was presented in the team’s presentation “The Dawn of Online Curating” in Day 1, whereby a constellation of actors collaborating with each other showed how people, algorithms, places and platforms work in unison when operating in the online environment — a fact that also emerged in different ways in the presentations of our guest

speakers.



The workshop “Room Viewings” took place on Day 3 of our activity and for it, a group of participants worked with the moderators to generate observations, questions and speculative interventions related to the idea of the ‘viewing room’, on- and offline, also in response to the reflections that arose during the 2-day webinar. The workshop began with a presentation by Marialaura Ghidini and Gaia Tedone that starting from the idea of the Modernist viewing room of the gallery space, moved onto proposing examples and prompts that presented how working in the online environment has allowed for a merging of different spatio-temporal and bodily dimensions that could offer interesting approaches to curating in museums and galleries.

After the presentation and a group discussion, the participants were divided in working groups and given a task:

“If you were to create an exhibition room....

Where would it be?

How would it look?

Which background would it have?

How would it smell?

How would it sound?

How long would it last?

Who would be in it? / Who could access it?

Who would not be in it? / Who could not access it?

What would happen in the room?

What would the room make happen?

What room service would it offer?"

The workshop ended with the presentation of each group's speculative projects and a feedback session.

We would like to conclude our reflection by giving a recap about what we think we achieved during this research collaboration and activity. Our project nurtured cross-cultural exchanges between India and Europe, and was experienced by a wide audience that included students, researchers, independent and museum curators, as well as artists located in different parts of the world, including Argentina, USA, Canada, Singapore, various parts of Europe and India. We managed to present different angles about what it means to curate on the web, historically and in the present, and to open up questions about the role of curating online in confronting the structural transformations of a moment of systemic crisis like that of the Covid-19 pandemic. The project also allowed us to start a critical conversation about curating in the online environment in India, including bringing together approaches and methods used by curators over the past 20 years and discussing this area of work in the context of the changes brought about by the pandemic.

Please note: full documentation of the webinar is available on <https://www.curating.online/event/curating-on-the-web-subverting-the-mechanisms-and-traditional-models-of-producing-and-distributing-contemporary-art-and-culture/> and Walkin Studios YouTube channel, <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCnjXQArbhqIBVyTS725xvKg>

* This report was written in fulfilment of the grant *Mobility First! – ASEF Cultural Mobility Initiative* (2021) that supported the development of the activity *Curating on the Web - Webinar* organised by [curating.online](https://www.curating.online) (a research project funded by the Italian Council (9th Edition 2020), programme to promote Italian contemporary art in the world by the Directorate-General for Contemporary Creativity of the Italian Ministry of Culture) in collaboration with [Walkin Studios](https://www.walkinstudios.com)