The Digital Exhibition - Considered in the Long Term

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For Alain Seban, president of the Pompidou in Paris, "Museums are places where things are considered in the long term. They serve as beacons, distilling a sense of authenticity and truth – and they are also, quite simply, places of beauty and meditation."

In this same article Christopher Beanland, author of the Independent article quotes Penelope Curtis, director of Tate Britain. "Looking at art slows us down and takes us in unexpected directions: this is increasingly unusual – and something people cherish[1]."

Abstract

This chapter will draw on the traditional museum visit to consider whether, in an age of digital reproduction, end-users encountering digital exhibitions have similarly rich experiences that could be comparable to those of visitors to a physical museum.

We of course draw a straight line here from Walter Benjamin's seminal essay, where he described works of art in an age of mechanical reproduction[2], to a consideration of their digital descendants. They are just as easily reproducible as their mechanical ancestors were and, in their digital form, far easier to clone. As Benjamin was responding to the role of art in society and the idea of the modification of art through mechanical reproduction, his essay has ramifications not only for artists, but also for curators as well as the museum public. According to Benjamin:

> *In principle, the work of art has always been reproducible. Objects made by humans could always be copied by humans. Replicas were made by pupils in practicing for their craft, by masters in disseminating their works, and, finally, by third parties in pursuit of profit. But the technological reproduction of artworks is something new (ibid.).*

Benjamin embraced the severing of the quasi-mystical "aura" from the original as a potentially liberating phenomenon, both for the reproduction of works of art and for the art of film, thereby making art widely available and introducing new forms of perception in film and photography. Most critically, it released art from the private to the public domain, from the elite to the masses. While the mechanically reproduced image that Benjamin discussed represented new possibilities, what was forfeited in this process was the "aura" reflecting the authority of the object, and encapsulating within it the values of cultural heritage and tradition.

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Digital exhibitions therefore must be considered with respect to scale and screen-aesthetic, but most importantly in terms of their auratic quality. Only then can we ascertain whether the traditional museum qualities still resonate in their digital footprint. Otherwise, the loss of aura in a digital exhibition becomes so critical that it causes an irretrievable loss of its potency, depleting the art so that it no longer acts as a *beacon distilling a sense of authenticity and truth*.
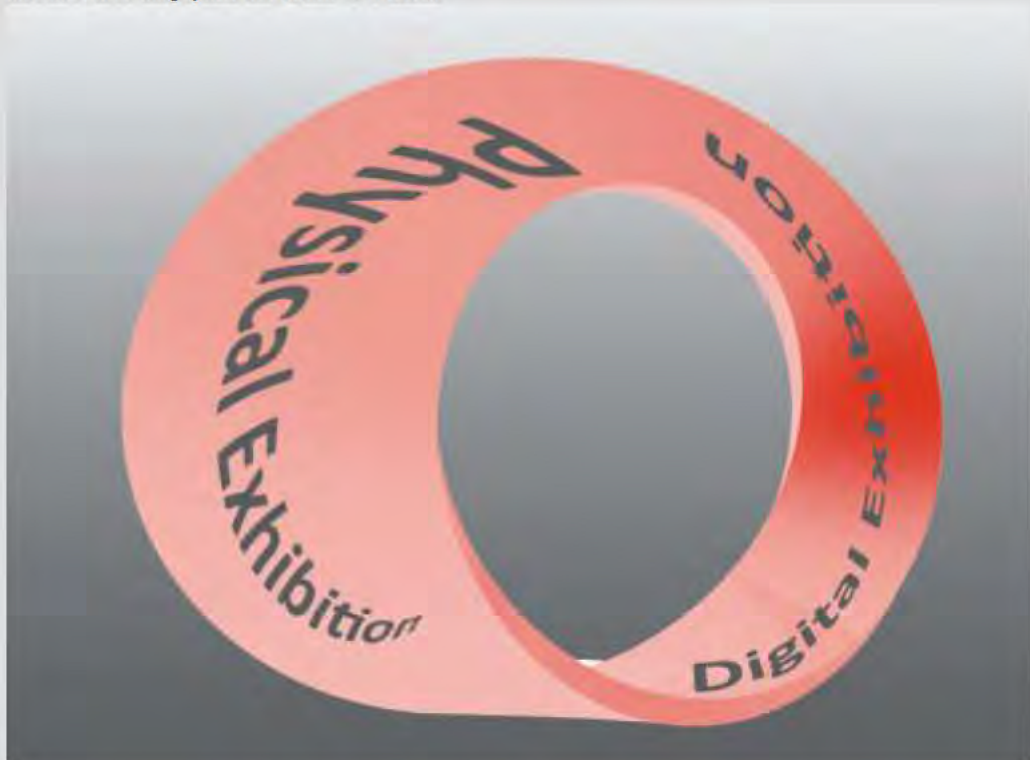
In the palm of your hand

Digital exhibitions in their non-physical or intangible forms appear on your screen from a museum website, a cultural portal, or in a tiny application held in the palm of the hand. These objects have clearly lost all sense of scale, appearing as a tiny resonance of their original selves on your screen. Yet they still command a presence that demands that we look at them, look into them, and beyond, straight through to where we imagine their original selves. This is because we are confident that we sense that somewhere, beyond the screen we know, there is a physical presence of the objects, and, even if we are not experiencing them in their materiality, we do discern that they do exist – somewhere. This is the nature of telepresence that we are so familiar with, whether from cinema, the TV, or the Internet. The screen, whether small or not so small, extends – with little resistance – straight into our comfort zone to mediate the world in which we choose to travel in high-dynamic-range (HDRI), yet as an oh-so-tiny-image (OSTI).

Let's consider what is happening in contemporary artistic practice. It is interesting to read in the Reuters[3] report on last year's Turner prize that *"…artists who work with film, video, recorded sound and photographs took all four slots on the shortlist announced on Wednesday for the 2014 Turner Prize, one of the annual high points of the British art calendar"*. All works – it is worth observing – were processed digitally and presented to the audiences on screens of varying dimensions. Digital exhibitions are very much a part of our daily lives, and whether we sense them as real or virtual we are very much at home with them.

Pierre Lévy[4] takes exception to the ideas of real and virtual as dialectical counterparts, and argues that *"virtualization, or the transition to a problematic, in no way implies a disappearance in illusion or dematerialization. Rather it should be understood as a form of 'desubstantiation' [...] the body as flame, the text as flux"* (Lévy 1998: 169). To avoid locating real and virtual in such a dichotomy, he likens this desubstantiation to the Moebius effect, *"which organizes the endless loop of the interior and exterior – the sharing of private elements, and the subjective integration of public items"* (ibid.: 169). I will argue that the integration of the material and dematerialised, the tangible and intangible, causes new forms of museum hybridism that are continuously modifying museum practice. When bringing practices that have traditionally revolved around the tangible object together with the emerging methods of collecting and displaying art that refuses to remain fixed within its four walls, in the way that the 2014 Turner Prize exemplifies, it becomes clear that the museum essentially functions in an endless [Moebius] loop of interior and exterior presence. Digital exhibitions reside both within and beyond the gallery, yet are connected to, and located in, the global networks of museums and galleries, and cultural centres that circulate with the very same ideology of authority and scholarship that seamlessly integrate all these processes into the fully articulated museum network that resides in the greater digital ecosystem.

Moebius effect: the physical and virtual. © S. Hazan

One of the ways that the museum imbues authority and scholarship into this ecosystem can be read in the taxonomic ordering and documentation of knowledge. Museums excel at the taxonomic structuring of their physical objects into comprehensive knowledge systems, and, similar to the practice in sister institutions, such as libraries and archives, digital exhibitions are structured in much the same way as they are in the museum, invigorated by a rich and informed body of scholastic materials – texts, documentations, images and histories. Collating these materials into orderly taxonomic structures – and replicating the breadth and width of traditional museum practices ino the digital footprint – demands exactly the same dedicated, scholarly research approach that is practiced in the physical museum.

Let us take a closer look at museum practice, as laid out in the definition of the International Council of Museums (ICOM). The museum as defined by ICOM describes first and foremost an institution in the service of society:

> *A museum is a non-profit-making, permanent institution in the service of society and of its development, and open to the public which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits, for purposes of study, education and enjoyment, material evidence of people and their environment* [5].

A virtual museum therefore is based on this definition by association, and can be described as a digital entity that draws on the characteristics of the museum, in order to complement, enhance, or augment the museum experience through personalization, interactivity, and richness of content. Virtual museums can either perform as the digital footprint of a physical museum, or can act independently, while maintaining the authoritative status as bestowed by ICOM in its definition of a museum. In tandem with the ICOM mission of a physical museum, the virtual museum is also committed to public access to the knowledge systems imbedded in the collections and the systematic and coherent organisation of their display, as well as to their long-term preservation[6]. Aligning the digital exhibition to the core agenda of the physical museum therefore provides us with a firm foundation for discussing the digital exhibition, now appreciated as an entity that essentially acts as the footprint of the physical museum. Digital exhibitions that reside in physical museums can then augment or extend the institution in its responsibilities to collect, conserve and display objects that continue to reflect cultural heritage and scientific processes.

To describe cultural heritage I would argue that communities need to convey a testimony of their lived life, to be able to transmit their creative expressions, while securing the traces of their history for future generations. Cultural heritage therefore can be described as a bridge, or two-way process, paving the pathways that connect the past to the present and to the future. As a receptacle of memory, it embodies the symbolic value of cultural identities and constitutes a fundamental reference for structuring society[7]. But who is responsible for producing a digital exhibition as a manifestation of these characteristics and conveying them to the public with the prescribed authenticity and integrity that is expected from an actor that denotes itself a museum? Who are the players who have the authority to promote cultural heritage in the public domain with professionalism and integrity?

Trust her, she is a curator. © S. Hazan

Referring to *The New Renaissance, Report of the Comité des Sages*:

> *For centuries, libraries, archives, and museums from across Europe have been the custodians of our rich and diverse cultural heritage. They have preserved and provided access to the testimonies of knowledge, beauty, and imagination, such as sculptures, paintings, music, and literature. The new information technologies have created unbelievable opportunities to make this common heritage more accessible for all. Culture is following the digital path and "memory institutions" are adapting the way in which they communicate with their public* (New Renaissance Report, P.4).

This realistic approach is a call to publically funded institutions in a bid to draw on their institutional knowledge and seek new kinds of partnerships with players from the private sector to develop Europe's cultural heritage over digital platforms. This has many benefits for society, both for individual users who will be able to interact with their own cultural heritage in novel ways, and for the use and re-use of rich content as important building blocks of the digital economy.

The curated digital exhibition

One of the ways to author a digital collection is by re-embedding atomized, cultural objects and re-contextualizing them in a curated environment – as an exhibition. The physical museum organizes the narratives into thematic order through a scholarly interpretation of the physical objects, and as these narratives develop, the taxonomic ordering of knowledge similarly emerges in the digital. The Virtual Museum often follows the same logic, except that instead of the material object in the gallery, the digital image takes the place of the physical object while re-enacting the same conceptual scenario. This does help explain how the same terms are invoked when describing the Virtual Museum – the gallery, the exhibition, and the online visitor, all terms resonating with the idea of a physical museum, serve to sign what is familiar to us.

As with a physical exhibition, a digital exhibition can be designed around specific objects (as in an art museum, or a natural history museum), or can consist of exhibitions created around specific concepts using found or manufactured content (as with exhibitions in science museums). Moreover, a virtual museum can refer to the mobile or Internet versions of traditional museums (e.g. displaying digital representations of its collections or exhibits) or can be born digital content such as net art, virtual reality, and digital art. Often, although considered in conjunction with other cultural institutions, a museum by definition is essentially separate from its sister institutions such as a library or an archive in that the end product is almost always an object or series of objects or art works. Virtual museums reproduce the very same narratives and are usually, but not exclusively, delivered electronically when they are denoted as online museums, hypermuseums, digital museums, cybermuseums, or web museums.

At the same time, physical displays may deploy a new media application or digital objects to augment the exhibition, often representing a key item in the narrative when the original object is unavailable.

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It may be useful to consider the terms used by the group researching digital exhibitions in the ATHENA Plus Network who are attempting to identity the key concepts of a digital exhibition as they describe the characteristics of different kinds of digital exhibitions:

> **Virtual exhibitions:** *to be used mainly in the case of 3D reconstructions in which there is actually also a virtualization environment in which the works are located.*
> **Digital exhibitions:** *the object is not faced with any kind of reconstruction; the work of art is approached "individually", included in a "path" that performs a logical combination of materials based on different criteria: subject, author, time, technicalities.*

The Group argues how *"virtual/digital exhibitions are often* **generated by real events**, *even though they may result in products that are* **autonomous**, *due to the web language they use while online virtual/digital exhibitions can be staged with* **more or less sophisticated IT tools**, *depending on the degree of complexity and the goals in question. In summary, a collection of digital items, in and of itself, does not constitute a material or virtual exhibition. Only when the items are carefully selected to illustrate a topic, and are* **tied together forming a narrative or a logical itinerary**, *do they constitute an exhibition"*[8].

Bringing together all these different notions of the digital exhibition, it is important to evaluate them, not only for their technical or organisational principles, but more for their aesthetic, auratic or emotive qualities and their ability to convey places of beauty and meditation to the end user in the way their physical counterparts do so effortlessly.

Conclusion

In order to discern whether digital exhibitions will retain their auratic potency in the long term we do need to consider TODAY how they will fare five, ten, or fifty years from now – what will be left of these emotive qualities?

Once the original hardware/software platforms have marched forward through their countless upgrades, how will we be able even to view them unless they have some sort of enabling emulation at their disposal? Will they, say in 30 years, still be *distilling a sense of authenticity and truth?* For the sake of argument, let's presume that they have magically emerged, technically unscathed, into the mid-21ˢᵗ century. What kind of experience will they relate to future generations? We can only guess how

Long-term preservation. © S. Hazan

they will be experienced once their physical provenance has become separated not only by space and technology, but also time. We can but ponder - and hope - that we will be left with more than a mere shadow or echo of the original after all our dedication and effort. On the other hand, if high resolution, high fidelity, and institutional integrity are sustained, the results could possibly be exemplary.

We don't have any crystal ball promises here. We can only do our best – only time will tell.

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