Performing the Museum in an Age of Digital Reproduction

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Abstract

This paper introduces the concept of the Musesphere through a discussion about the role of digital exhibitions by museums. The paper considers digital exhibitions within the concept of Walter Benjamin’s theory of mechanical reproduction and aura, as well that of museological narratives and authority.

Keywords: Musesphere, digital exhibitions, digital reproduction, museums, mechanical reproduction
Introduction

This paper draws on the traditional museum visit to consider whether, in an age of digital reproduction, where art and artefacts are reproduced for the screen, end-users view digital exhibitions, and online collections, are in any way comparable to how they encounter them during a visit to a physical museum. Miniature objects, and re-scaled exhibitions moving through the web; over apps or smartphones, and social media all act to represent the museum – albeit reduced to a diminutive performance over a tiny screen. End-users consume this content and in doing so, intuitively acknowledge their provenance as museological narratives; assured that their physical presence is waiting for them somewhere in a museum – in a real location. In this way, I would argue those very same notions of trust in the authenticity of the physical object are transposed onto the digital object that, in fact, never really leave the boundary of the Museum but act in tandem with their mother institution in a space that I have called the Musesphere. The term ‘Musesphere’ signifies not only the Greek term that described a space dedicated to the Muses – an intellectual space where one could escape from every day matters to an alternate ethereal realm – but also reflects the spherical nature of contemporary museological activity. The term Musesphere therefore, can be applied to describe the tangible and intangible content made available to visitors through digital networks; now harnessed to describe both the physical and digital footprint of the museum.

This paper will revisit notions of the museum in the Musesphere that shunts endlessly-cloned digital objects from gallery to screen, and, in doing so, inevitably forfeits all claims to originality and singularity; assets greatly valued in the physical object in the museum, but irrelevant in the digital.

Walter Benjamin’s seminal essay describing the work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction (1937) clearly resonates with their digital descendants. Where Benjamin was referring to print, film and photography, today’s digital objects are just as easily reproducible as their mechanical predecessors were – and far easier to clone and disseminate. 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 today’s 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* (Benjamin 1937, p. 217-251.)

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. The quality of the aura, I would argue is one of the great attractions of a museum; for where else can you get up close to wonder at the genius of Rembrandt’s paint strokes or the lifelike carvings of a Michelangelo sculpture?
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." (Independent 2014).

In this same article Christopher Beanland, author of the article (Independent 2014) also 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" (Independent 2014).

Digital exhibitions, therefore, must be considered not only with respect to their scale and screen-aesthetic but most importantly in terms of their auratic quality. According to the University of Chicago, there term 'aura' refers to the authority held by the unique, original work, which under modernity is liquidated by the techniques of mass reproduction (2015). 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 (Independent 2014).

The Musesphere

The objects and experiences that move through discursive space of the Musesphere no longer need to depend on the physicality of the museum, but, at the same time, neither can they be described as being totally liberated from the museum or freely articulated over the mass media. I argue that once they are identified as museum-affiliated activities, and bear the stamp of the institution they emerge from, they are actually performing in a dedicated space that represents the museum – yet lies beyond the museum. This is comparable to watching a TV program, or news item that is presented by, or for a museum that frames the content according to professional attributes and processes that are identified as museum culture.

The term Musesphere draws on Jürgen Habermas' concept of social life that was open to private people, and where public opinion could be articulated to serve the interest of civic society. Habermas described this space as the Public Sphere (Habermas 1973), reflecting the developments in Britain, France, and Germany in the late 18th, and 19th century where individuals came together in formal debating societies, and informal meeting places, such as coffee houses, where they formed interest groups, to engage in critical debate, often opposing government action. Habermas argues ‘a portion of the public sphere is constituted in every conversation in which private persons come together to form a public (1999 p.92). However, critics of Habermas’s idealisation of the Public Sphere, such as Nicholas Garnham argue that it was far from democratic, or even public, noting ‘it was public only in the sense that a British public school is public (i.e. excluding all but white bourgeois males)’ (1992, quoted in Lister et al, 2003 p. 178) and that Habermas’s example of a Public Sphere, that is limited to those that may be able to afford to spend time in the coffee house, and therefore, in effect, fairly limited in its scope.

Other critics reflect on the qualities and the role of public debate in post-modernity. The Public Sphere, John Hartley argues, has been in decline from the once pure and
rational public sphere and has consequently evolved into a post-modern public sphere, which he argues, has become:

Suffused with images and issues which connect popular readerships and popular meanings together, and there too the focus has moved from masculine command to feminized juvenation and domestic privacy; the mainstream of contemporary journalism, fashion, gossip, lifestyle, consumerism and celebrity, and ‘news’ is private, visual, narrativized and personalized.

(Hartley 1996 p.17)

Associating the museum, and the activities that takes place under its patronage, with the arena suggested by Hartley’s post-modern Public Sphere, would align the museum with a popularistic discourse. An association with discourse that is concerned with fashion, gossip, lifestyle, consumerism and celebrity, rather than with rigorous intellectual debate is an alignment that some museum professionals would prefer to avoid. These debates, however, have been taking place in the museum long before the introduction of digital activities. Hartley’s textual system draws journalism into the hub of what he calls a Mediasphere where, he explains, accordingly modernity’s twin energies, the pursuit of freedom and comfort, could be played out globally. Hartley visualises the Mediasphere as containing within it the Public Sphere drawing into it another over-arching system, Lotman’s Semiosphere (Hartley 1996 p. 79). As Hartley’s Mediasphere draws journalism into its centre, so the Musesphere draws the generic notion of the museum into its hub. I would argue, therefore that a museum that was once considered through the legacy of an institution identified with modernity, must now be considered in its newly modified as it has evolved over the decades to now become an institution that is grappling with post-modernity and distributed identity.

Fig. 1 The Musesphere as a discursive space. © S. Hazan
**The Musesphere - In the palm of your hand**

Digital exhibitions – in their non-physical or intangible forms may appear on your screen from a museum website, as social network, a vast 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 they are located. 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 immediate materiality, we 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; probably in high dynamic range (HDRI), yet at the same time 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 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” (Reuters, 2014). 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 takes exception to the ideas of the 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 p. 169). To avoid locating the 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” (Lévy 1998 p. 169 I will argue that the presentation of heritage objects in a digital form 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 artefacts in a digital form accessible outside the physical museum, it becomes clear that the museum essentially functions in an endless [Moebius] loop of interior and exterior presence, the Musesphere. 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 have the same professional credibility as traditional museums.

The diagram below describes this seamless integration of digital and physical Museum activity. One of perhaps the most vexing questions of the work of art in the age of digital reproduction, at least for a museum, is clearly the notion that a physical museum is highly amplified by its digital presence – but how does a stand-alone digital museum fare in a mediated world without a physical counterpart?
One of the reasons why museums retain their authority in the digital realm is 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 digital libraries, archives, and exhibitions are structured in 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 within the digital footprint – demands exactly the same dedicated, scholarly research approach that takes place 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 (ICOM 2015).

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 traditional museum and it aims 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 embedded in the collections and the systematic and coherent organisation of their display, as well as to their long-term preservation (Wikimedia, 2015). 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 collections, which will then resonate with those very same
qualities of authority, trust and integrity, in their narratives, staff directives, and interaction with the public.

Fig. 3. Trust her, she is a curator. © S. Hazan

Conclusion

I propose that the Musesphere represents the overall space where technological innovations are consciously adopted, not as a goal in themselves but in order to enhance museum activities in a continuous hybridization of old and new media, which together serve the museum's own mandate, and extend the institution's goals.

There are many ways in which museums flow through bespoke networks and harness a whole range of digital solutions to advance their institutional mission. Museums have adapted evolving technologies to their own agendas, other sectors and sister institutions, such as libraries and archives, have also evolved their own kind of hybridisation of the old with the new. I argue that as libraries and archives integrate similar technologies and strategies available to them, their institutional identity will resemble the system that they have evolved from, rather than an entirely new technologically driven entity. In the same way that museums move into electronic networks while preserving their institutional integrity, they move into spaces that resemble their own provenance – steadfastly nestled in the arms of the Musesphere.

The Musesphere, therefore, derives its potency from the museum legacy; a legacy that was constructed on, and sustained by the museum collections, sometimes acquired over hundreds of years that have built the bedrock of the museum system and continue to conserve and maintain this tradition for future generations.

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Bibliography


