

Virtual Exhibitions: How to put the gallery on-line?

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Abstract

This research is part of a project I developed at York University and realized at the Walter Phillips Gallery at Banff Centre for the Arts. It originated from a preliminary survey on the galleries and museum's approach to the web: how did these institutions engage with the virtual space? What tools did they employ to display their content? How did they exploit internet in order to promote and advertise their content and transmit a certain message? Following the examination of several interfaces and modes of display, a list of recurrent strategies, needs and lacks was compiled.

A further development of the research consisted in a practical attempt to include all the characteristics observed and to add the elements supposedly missing in a single project. The project examined two distinct and very different exhibitions which took place during the summer at the Walter Phillips Gallery in Banff: they were analysed, documented and rendered on-line using a popular animation software such as Flash.

A Preliminary Observation

During a survey conducted on Museums web sites and on line interfaces for exhibitions, two

tendencies were observed: on one hand there's the decision to establish the museum's presence in the virtual space, dictated by the acknowledgement of Internet as an indispensable and necessary tool, on the other hand there is a sincere willing to engage with a space which gives enormous possibilities of experimentation. In the first case the interface used is kept fairly simple and essential: minimal information about a museum or an institution and an ordinated disposition of data on a few pages. In the second case one can observe more effort in the visual language and in the construction of a –functional– but more creative or more “artistic” interface. A further distinction can be found in the interpretation of the museum's presence on line: some institutions understand the on line content as an archival material, that is they like to display a choice of their collection, exploiting internet basically as an informational system. The web site has the basic function to inform what the museum can offer, once the audience decides to visit it; on the contrary, other museums or galleries prefer to integrate their material in a complex designed interface, which acts as a metaphor for a particular message or suggests a special atmosphere: they try to convey a concrete idea of the type of institution, the mandate and the kind of audience they address.

While the majority of medium and small size institutions still relies on its physical or traditional content (books, slides and images documenting painting and sculptures), it has been observed a predisposition –usually by major, recently founded or contemporary art institutions– to display net based projects. Web based artworks have been successfully hosted by famous museums or cultural institutions which acted as “host,” “promoter,” and pioneer in this practice. Institutions such as Walker art, MoMA or Guggenheim dedicated part of their on line space to permanently displaying, as in a collection, net art projects which otherwise would have disappeared, substituted by other more recent artworks. The resulting collections are often linked to the

museum's web site as to create an archive: on one hand they are bounded to the museum through a link, or a sort of portal to a special collection, on the other hand they maintain their independency. It is usually not necessary to pass through the museum's site to visualize them, and there is no sign which indicates their connection or belonging to any museum. The works, in these particular cases, are still isolated and separated from the general context of the museum: there is no difference between a net art project displayed in this way and a painting inserted in a page as a jpg image. However the visitor perceives the first more vividly, thanks to the particular nature of the work, located in its "original" place, while she records the latter as pure information, because of the displacement the work has undergone.

Interfaces for Virtual Exhibitions

In the last few years several institutions showed a particular interest in displaying "virtual exhibitions" which would present artworks in a particular context and under a particular denomination or special topic. In order to communicate the concepts proposed and the artists presented on the web, the traditional formulas used in the past aren't sufficient any more. In fact Internet has become famous for its immediacy and its capacity to communicate through visual language. The viewer is used to short sentences and synthetic description, to screen grabs and multiple links, a fluid and non-linear navigation [2-4]. These characteristics could invalidate the work of the curator, who is used to deeply analyse, describe and comment works. An interesting but too "verbose" exhibition runs the risk to bore the viewer who approaches the web looking for something different from what she is used to see while walking through the rooms of a museum. How not to annoy the visitor? How to represent concepts without describing them? And how to integrate images, text and exhibition? The last "010101: Art in Technological Times,"[10]

“Telematic Connections,”[11] and “Data Dynamics,”[12] exhibited this year, aimed at presenting a choice of works that reflected the themes and the nature of the hosting institution, while adopting techniques suitable to Internet conventions.

The first exhibition, whose web component was launched January 1, 2001, contained five internet based projects commissioned by the SFMoMA, in addition to several other installations exhibited in the museum’s space. The web commissions were kept on line to be viewed from any remote connection, while the installations were documented on line and fully displayed in the museum’s space. The whole exhibition was included in a sophisticated interface which, according to the curators (Benjamin Weil and five other co-curators), was conceived as an architectural metaphor for the SFMoMA building [7]. In the same way that “one has to navigate the physical space of the museum in order to see the works hanging in the galleries, one would similarly need to *maneuver* through the virtual halls, virtual walls and doorways of the web site in order to view the projects on line.” [5] The architectural metaphor was designed to create a link between the Net projects and the gallery installation. The design, smartly created with flash animation, had to enable the viewer to explore and to immerse within multilayered pieces.

According to a review appeared on *Afterimage*, the far too complex interface acts as a thick filter between the viewer and the work, therefore disturbing or disrupting the experience of viewing, which creates “almost as much impact on the experience as placing the work within the physical space of the museum.”[5] The extremely sophisticated interface results difficult for several aspects and affects the site navigability: the viewer is required to have a high speed connection to see the site (this element narrows the amount and the type of visitors of the virtual exhibition) and a discrete familiarity with interactive interfaces (another element that limits the public to a highly interested or skilled participant). The design itself strives to reach an original but

standardized “web style,” more suitable to e-business companies than a museum of modern art [9]. Although brilliantly designed, the mentioned exhibitions underline two main visible threats partially due to the ideological and technical distance still existing between the medium used and the institution. On one hand the institutions still prefer to commission the exhibition design to specialized agencies which rarely succeed to render the atmosphere originally conceived for the exhibition, on the other hand the web is treated as an informational resource (and not a space artistically shapeable).[1]

While the first exhibition is affected by the first threat, “Telematic Connections: the Virtual Embrace” tends to go in the second direction. As the curator affirms, “like many of the works in it, it is a hybrid affair.” It was conceived to represent the “ways in which artists use technology, to explore the utopian desire... and the dystopian consequences... of computer mediated technologies.”[8] The complexity and density of the topic forced the curators to pay a particular care in texts, descriptions and essays, using a non-linear paradigm typical of Internet as an ideal tool to present the variety and diversity of the contributions proposed. Being a travelling exhibition, the site didn’t have to convey the idea of any particular space. Once again the net art projects were inserted in the site as links, while the installations were only described and documented. The historical approach, which is felt throughout the entire exhibition, makes it a comprehensive resource for the present history and progress of net art [6].

The last exhibition, “Data Dynamics,” explores how physical movement and information can be mapped in real time. [5] The titles of the works are floating on the screen ready to be captured by the viewer, who is entertained and interested at the same time. The exhibition involves the viewer in a game, invites him to interact. However the exhibition doesn’t have any pretension to

be integrated in the general context of the museum (the Whitney), it is isolated from it, as if it was a sort of experimental divertissement.

On Line/on Site

In the cases above described, the Virtual exhibition is accompanied by an exhibition on site. The artworks themes always present an exclusive relation with technology; they are interactive installations and artworks involving digital technology. The installations on site (in the museum's space) are often conceived to be enjoyed both on the web and in the gallery: there is a technical continuity which makes them particularly suitable for a virtual exhibition [2-6]. So far, museums and galleries have exploited only these types of works when constructing their on line exhibitions. They haven't formulated neither any strategy to display more traditional works, nor haven't they found a way to present interactive installations which don't employ internet as essential for their fruition. The presence of both web based artworks and on site installations create several problems either on the physical space and on the net. The installations hosted in the physical gallery or museum place are still managed in a traditional way: the web is considered a virtual place to display a sample of a particular piece, not a continuation or an integration of it. On the other hand the web projects work perfectly on the web, while an effective way to display them in the gallery has still to be found: even the most recent displaying methods revealed themselves a failure. [4] A further problem which can be observed in these hybrid exhibitions is a general lack of consistency: the web sites don't take into consideration the nature of the exhibition and the way it has been installed in the physical space or vice-versa. A visitor who approaches the web site before visiting the on site exhibition perceives an idea which may not correspond to the original conception of the curator or the style of the museum.

The phenomenon of the “virtual exhibition” has been explored and experimented mostly by the biggest institutions. Small galleries and cultural centres still tend to see internet related tools as simple means of advertising the exhibition: usually they show small and often inaccurate images of the exhibition accompanied by a few words which indicate the dates and the place the exhibition is taking place. The common thought is that an on-line exhibition with a fairly more complex interface requires huge funding, professionals who can fulfil the task and a lot of time: usually a virtual exhibition is considered superfluous.

The Project

The preliminary research underlined several elements institutions haven't developed yet, and suggested new solutions which may be pursued to give virtual exhibitions a more incisive identity and allow institutions to display works which have been neglected. Can a traditional work or an installation conceived to be displayed in the gallery be represented or integrated on the web (and vice-versa)? How can a web site for an exhibition be constructed in a way that doesn't affect the participation of the audience and the original goal of the exhibition? What weight a computer generated environment could have in fulfilling this task and what characteristics should it be able to stress? To what point is the gallery necessary for an on-line project?

The general purpose was to create an exhibition which worked both in the institution and on-line, where the web and real space reciprocally integrated in a unique project. The practical exercise and experimentation allowed a better understanding of the importance the electronic environment plays in the goals' accomplishment and helped reaching the awareness of new theoretical issues around a specific curatorial practice.

The starting idea is that the web site needs to contain information about the exhibition, material and artists presented and theoretical content, although it doesn't necessarily have to be a repetition of the catalogue, usually too dense and detailed, suitable for a very interested public. It cannot resemble an archive, otherwise it would provide only a standardized and impersonal list of mere data not inserted in any artistic environment. An exhibition originates from a concept developed through the eyes of the curator, who usually conceives the initial idea, through the interpretation of the artists and through the physical display provided by the museum's designer or the preparator. A web site for the exhibition should respect these components and be constructed in a way that suggests them in a visual, immediate way. It has been thought that the web version of an exhibition hasn't to unveil completely the works displayed in the gallery (the archive can perfectly fulfil this task). It has to stimulate the curiosity of the potential viewer who may be more likely to visit the exhibition. On the other hand it has to inform the viewer so that she is enabled to go to the exhibition "not totally unprepared."

The Banff Centre last Summer offered two different exhibitions: the first one "computer voices Speaking Machines" showed two interactive installations to be experienced in the gallery only. Although using computers and electronic sounds, and employing in some way the concept of network community, the artists hadn't conceived their installations to be enjoyed on line. The catalogue provided several essays which explained in details how the works had been developed and what concepts had been involved in the construction of the exhibition. It was necessary to create a web site which suggested all these elements without creating a copy of them. The works were located into a dark environment, where lights softly enveloped the essential elements, while hiding cables and unessential equipment. The works were poetically presented as if they were floating in the gallery space and as if they were breathing organisms. In the web site it was

decided not to show the installations in full, but to reproduce details which could be representative of the exhibition or the artists and the parts which mostly represented the spirit and the moods of the pieces. A light animation was used to suggest the breathing activity of the works, while essential information was inserted in various more or less predictable points of the site among the artworks' elements. The works were in part transformed and cropped in order to maintain the "idea" the curator desired to convey. The text which accompanies the web site contains what usually is displayed at the entrance of the gallery (and nobody ever reads): the press release, an abstract of the curator's statement and the biographies of the artists.

The second web site had to present an aboriginal art group exhibition, "Multiples." The goal was to show how native artists had continued and re-interpreted the ancient tradition of constructing multiples (dolls, boxes, everyday tools) in their artistic practice. For the comprehension of this exhibition a particular attention was paid to the artists' biographies, strongly connected to the works proposed. Light and colours were accurately studied to create a warm, earthly atmosphere. The show was composed of artworks created using traditional media (painting, photography, mixed media), an element which prevented cropping or modification of the originals on the web. Therefore some images of the works were entirely included but mixed and integrated with the web site context. The curator brought at the last moment some native "multiples" to be displayed to show the continuity between tradition and contemporary artistic practice. The key element of the exhibition, the multiple, was reproduced in the web site interface, using multiple layers under which information and images were hidden. The colours and luminosity used reminded what could be observed in the gallery.

On the web site the artworks presented in these two exhibitions are approached in different way, because of the media used, the colours and lights displayed and the content expressed. Although

the interface is differently designed, the two sites share some elements in common: they both visually represent the gallery. It was in fact considered vitally important to remind the visitor the importance the exhibition place plays in the success of the exhibition: the hosting institution has to maintain and display its peculiar characteristics, mandate and message also outside its walls, within a virtual space, since it is not only a container or a neutral provider of works, but also a carrier of ideas and a space for reflection. The continuity of the gallery space outside its physical building cannot exist unless the gallery constructs its own landmark or recognizable style.

The hosting gallery plays an important role also on the web. A virtual exhibition must be consistent with the nature of the exhibition and the type of hosting gallery.

The case of Banff presents a very interesting situation. The Walter Phillips gallery is located in a fairly isolated place, the Canadian Rocky Mountains, almost one hour drive from the first big centre, Calgary. A strong presence on the web may be of great importance for its visibility. The position of the gallery within a well known Centre for the Arts (the Banff Centre), forces it to pay extra attention in terms of appearance and promotion, otherwise it wouldn't be distinguished from the several departments existing there. At the same time one cannot forget its location inside a famous National Park.

The web site for an exhibition displayed in such a dense environment should be constructed accordingly, by suggesting all the above elements. At the same time the way the exhibition has been installed, the colours prevailing, the lighting used, the topic, should shape the site in a way that underlines the peculiarities of each exhibition conceived.

The web site proposed, long from being exhaustive, tried to gather all these elements and information in a unique solution. A particular care was used to integrate the artistic content with the mountains location (an incisive presence for the gallery and an important characteristic for

the centre), which was suggested in both sites using different styles, but similar profiles (the profiles of the mountains, although simplified, tries to give an idea of the special atmosphere of the environment around Banff). The works and the information provided had to be harmonized both with the external landscape and the internal artificial light studied for the exhibitions. The darkness of the room and the material used in the first exhibition coincided with a lunar and sharp landscape, while the soft and earthly colours recreated by the works and the atmosphere of the second exhibition resulted in a colourful landscape.

The two softwares used were chosen because of their fairly user-friendly interface (a basic familiarity can bring to decent results), their general diffusion on the web and their satisfactory capacity to meet the ideal type of visual environment I wished to create. In order to meet the desired consistency mentioned above (the style and label of the gallery, the place and environment, the different atmosphere and effects created by the two exhibitions, the ideas the topic tried to convey) a particular attention has been paid to the use of animations and degree of interaction. The latter is supposed to be not always immediate, some elements are hidden under images and layers: the purpose was to increase and challenge the curiosity of the user. There are no traditional buttons, and no indications about what action the user has to take. However the level of interaction was kept very simple, by displaying a few elements for each page, in order not to confuse and frustrate the visitor.

The site could be constructed by using other methods: the idea of employing java script embedded in the html document was discarded for two reasons: first because of the instability in its functioning with different browsers, second because of its proved difficulty to be adopted by a person not familiar with its mechanism. In fact one further goal of this experiment was to provide simple methods of web design to enable non professionals to reach creative results.

The virtual exhibitions above described cannot be found within the official Banff Centre web site, since they intended to be only an exercise, a practical demonstration. Their actual location is temporary available in the York University web site.

<http://www.yorku.ca/robb/banffcentre.html>

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