Extended Engagement:
Real Time, Real Place in Cyberspace

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Introduction

When we install a hypermedia application into a museum space we change the nature of both the space and the media. That accommodation must be addressed at the start of the design process or it will compromise both space and media. A careful (and effective) installation will take into account a number of specifics, including site and audience. What are the dimensions of this space? What is its configuration? Who is the audience? How do they visit the site? In school groups? Families? Alone? Both media and space are then designed and produced to create a dynamic visitor experience.

However, both site and audience are subject to change. The exhibit may travel to different venues in different cultures. A developer may create an electronic version of a physical installation. Increasingly, as the cost of exhibitions escalates, museums collaborate, sharing the expense of design and production, lending and borrowing collections. New technologies make the exchange and collaborate creation of exhibits more practical. This trend has forced designers to develop hypermedia exhibits that, while they speak directly to a specific architecture and audience, can also be adapted to new spaces and new audiences without losing their effectiveness. At the same time, in some exhibits (those that juxtapose hypermedia with live performers) the very nature of the space changes as the "exhibit" takes place, in front of a different audience every performance.

By exploiting modern technology, we can transform the problems attendant on the restrictiveness of site into an advantage. We will discuss a variety of such strategies. One strategy is to design an exhibit specifically for those unable to attend the site itself. Multimedia allows us to reach the distant public through electronic catalogues and through electronically enhanced traveling exhibits. This permits the museum to expand without building new walls and it provides the institution with new audiences, new venues, and new production possibilities and problems.

We can also use new technology to invite the public into the process of design by including their reactions and comments into the exhibit itself. Indeed, the show might actually originate in a workshop where the public creates, contributes, and annotates objects which will eventually form the exhibit. Such communally-created exhibits can then be exchanged between two culturally different sites, thus allowing the public to compare its reactions to those of another group.

Finally, we can rethink the site itself, defining it not as a physical but as a cultural and/or conceptual space. With the help of networking technology, for example, we might distribute the exhibit in space and time, forcing visitors to create the final experience on their own.

Part One: the traveling exhibit and the electronic catalogue

One of the most popular forms of hypermedia in museums is that which is developed for the distant visitor, designed either as an electronic catalogue or as a traveling exhibit. This allows the museum to expand without building new walls and it provides the institution with new audiences, new venues, new production problems.

The American Library Association (ALA) has long recognized the advantage of keeping an exhibition alive after the actual installation has been closed. For the past ten years the ALA has cooperated with a number of large institutions (including the Smithsonian Institution Traveling Service, the National Museum of American History, the Newberry Library, the Library of Congress and the New York Public Library) to adapt traditional exhibitions for travel to libraries across the United States. These exhibits, generally flat panel shows, present photographic reproductions to their visitors. Panels are arranged to support and clarify exhibit themes and images are enhanced by text and/or labels. The exhibit stays in each library site for six weeks and during that time the institution features an organized series of events, including lecture series, film series, reading and discussion groups, school activities and other programs to supplement the actual panel show, which becomes a central component to a larger educational program.

This model, of a central visual and physical structure supplemented by "multimedia" programs, has been adapted by the ALA. In addition to lectures and films, CD-ROM is the most recent format that can, like the other elements, enhance and expand the larger visitor experience. This effort accepts the traditional definition of an exhibition, as a site-specific program, but develops both the nature of the site and the nature of the program. At the same time, it acknowledges that all of this work is based on real collections and real objects. Likewise, the conceptual connection to real collections lends to the electronic program both substance and authenticity. This connection clearly serves the museum's traditional goals (to conserve and interpret real collections) but it also serves the public. It reminds audiences that these ideas and images are based on real experiences and real physical objects, ideally helping them to read the lessons that are inherent in three-dimensional objects.

To a producer who works inside the museum environment, the electronic catalogue and the traveling exhibit expand both the number of the potential audience and its nature. Any institution knows its audience, from the general audience to those who come for special exhibitions. When the institution reaches out to new audiences this familiarity cannot be guaranteed. Instead, a hypermedia program might attract a younger audience, even a remote audience whose demographics do not match the standard museum visitor. These users deserve the same respect, the same access to collections and those collections deserve the same respect that they receive inside the museum's walls. They must be identified and properly introduced to the user. They must be reproduced by the highest production value possible; and the producer must determine the most appropriate (and reliable) delivery system for that presentation. The same care and collaborative effort that produces an exhibition must go into the production of the hypermedia program. At the same time, however, there must be some accommodation to the different audience that this program will attract.

Another version of a "traveling exhibit" is the electronic catalogue, in particular a catalogue of a temporary exhibition. In the winter of 1991, the National Gallery of Art, Washington, opened a spectacular exhibition, *Circa 1492: Art in the Age of Exploration*. Managing Curator Jay A. Levenson persuaded over three hundred institutions worldwide to lend over six hundred objects for the show. It was a stunning collection, including many Renaissance works (23 Dürers and 22 Da Vincis), ancient Chinese scrolls and gold figurines from various Amerindian tribes. This remarkable installation was open to the public for three months. Within days of its closing, most of the items had been returned to their original owners, scattered around the world.

The Gallery produced a catalogue for *Circa 1492* and most of the works of art are represented in this catalogue. The book includes a number of chapters, written by internationally renowned scholars and including articles on "The Spain of Ferdinand and Isabella," "Picturing the Levant," "Art in Japan 1450-1550," "The Aztec Empire: Realm of the Smoking Mirror" and similar titles. This is a popular and well produced publication. But it does not have the dynamic energy of the actual exhibition. No printed catalogue could duplicate that energy. A multimedia program is similarly limited but it can create for the "visitor" a more dynamic relationship to the works of art.

Modeled after Ruth Perlin's *American Art at the National Gallery of Art* the electronic version of *Art in the Age of Exploration* was based on digital files produced from transparencies of the original works of art. The program includes a brief introduction to the themes of the exhibition and it respects the original organization of the physical installation, arranging the works of art into three chapters: 1) Europe and the Mediterranean World; 2) Toward Cathay; and 3) The Americas. Within each chapter, the works of art are arranged by culture (as they were in the exhibition). Toward Cathay, for example, features work by Japanese, Korean, Chinese and Indian artists. The chapters are essentially visual databases, with a single frame "label" identifying the work by culture, artist, name, medium and dimensions. This label is followed by a full frame of the image and, in many cases, by details of that image. The result is an electronic tour of the same works of art that were collected for the original installation.

No one would argue that this version of the exhibition provides an experience equal to the original installation. This is simply another kind of museum experience, one that gives the museum an opportunity to explore the same exhibition themes and educational goals long after the (temporary) installation is closed.

Part Two: audience participation in creating the exhibit

We cannot only move the works to a new city or even a new country we can also invite the audience to help create the exhibit and to reflect on its own participation. This strategy is particularly appropriate to exhibits that depend heavily upon multimedia or digitized information.

With the help of scanners, digital video cameras, digital microphones, and more standard input devices such as the keyboard and the touch screen, the public can enter their own experiences into an exhibit or comment on the materials they have experienced at the show. Members of the audience can also engage in digitized "conversations" with other visitors, or can assemble from a large database their own version of an exhibit. The public's contributions can be rechanneled into the exhibit, thus creating multiple layers of experience and comment. If we share these layers of comments with other audiences in geographically or culturally remote sites, then we enrich the experience even further.

For example, the San Francisco Exploratorium and the National Museum of Scotland are planning a series of joint exhibits over the next few years. The Exploratorium is developing a series of exhibits concerning the nature of memory. One section will deal with social and public memory, especially the way the communal transmission of experience continually reinterprets and re-inflects the original event.

In order to examine this process of transformation and reinterpretation, the two museums will each present exhibits dealing with the events or experiences of deep importance to their cultures and allow the audiences to comment upon and, indeed, construct the content. Then these culturally-inflected works will be sent to the opposing place an re-interpreted by another group.

Memory exists, in part, as a kind of mentally constructed image, and these images are often shared communally. An event of world-wide significance, such as the dropping of the atom bomb on Japan, is not only grasped and disseminated through shared images, but these images are also modified and transformed over time as they are received by new generations and as they travel to cultures quite remote from their origins.

For the first joint project, the Exploratorium will exhibit - on the World Wide Web - a group of digitized photographs of Nagasaki taken by an official Japanese photographer the day after the atom bomb was dropped on the city. The audience will be asked to enter comments and reactions to these extremely powerful images into the computer. Once the San Francisco public (which has a large Asian

population) has thus inscribed its own experiences on these photos, the exhibit will be transferred to the very different cultural and demographic site of Edinburgh. There the Scottish public will not only be able to view the photos but will also have access to the San Francisco public's commentaries. The Scottish visitors in turn will add their responses. This layering will, hopefully, result in a multimedia conversation about both the subject at hand, the atom bomb, and the nature of memory, culture, and history.

Ideally, the exhibit could then travel to numerous other places and at each site enrich itself with commentaries. Exhibit developers might create a computer interface which would allow people to view the original photographs together with the responses from a city of their choice.

The two museums plan an even more ambitious joint exhibit to take place the following year. This will deal with the theme of exile, immigration, and memory, examining the way people retain and reshape the memories of their past homes as they adapt to a new setting and culture.

Exhibit developers are not sure of the exact form this exhibit will take, but hope it will grow out of a series of workshops held in both California and Edinburgh. Participants would be asked to bring or select objects, photos and mementos which represent for them the culture of their origin. These objects, together with the annotations and additions of the group, would constitute the core of the exhibit. Once again museum visitors would be invited to continue this process of inscription and annotation by entering their own reactions. Finally, the exhibits would be exchanged and re-presented: the public in San Francisco viewing the results of the Scottish displays and vice-versa. If the technical details can be worked out, the two museums might offer synchronous sessions, where the two publics could talk to each other in real-time.

Part Three: rethinking the notion of the site.

Another and perhaps more radical re-imagining of exhibit and site is to redefine the site itself. That is, the museum may be conceived as occupying not simply a local and fixed place, but a cultural or conceptual one as well. If the National Museum of Scotland is to consider itself a truly national museum, perhaps it needs to understand itself as virtually inhabiting the site of the entire country. What does this imply?

Imagine a museum linked electronically to important sites across a country: schools, homes, archeological digs, industries, historical societies. All of these places together might be considered the "site" of the museum. A museum exhibit might be conceived as taking place, not in a room in Edinburgh, but in the network of relationships and shared identities that constitutes the "virtual" space of Scotland. A show about the western islands, geographically remote from Edinburgh, might originate on the islands themselves, with inhabitants collecting, documenting and assembling materials about their lives history,

geography, etc. This information, appropriately digitized, would then be transmitted to other islands as well as to urban centers. At each reception site, the original materials would be digested and annotated anew by different publics, then it would be routed to the actual museum which would add resources and expert comment and send it on its way again.

This process itself would constitute the source and basis of a series of different exhibits, which would be visible in many different formats: as a record of exchanges, as a selection of objects and reportage, as additions to the museums' collections and archives.

Conclusion

Increasingly, museums have become interested in using hypermedia to supplement their traditional programs, helping expand both the nature of programs and also the nature of their audiences. Hypermedia can serve the school-age public more directly and more often than a single visit to the museum. Likewise, it can provide the basis for further study and/or discussion of exhibition themes.

Like other design arts, hypermedia starts with a concept, an idea that is unfinished until it takes practical form. Those of us who work inside museums recognize that this is a collaborative process and that collaboration begins at conferences like these, where we gain a greater understanding about image capture and processing, software design and application from our colleagues. What we bring to this exchange is a keener insight into how to present the information available in that image, how to shape it so that we might share it with a larger, ever expanding, audience.