

## **The Dilated Museum 2**

### **Observations on the Virtual Extensions of Museums**

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Translated from the French by Simon Pleasance

It is quite legitimate to expect that exhibition venues and museums should provide intelligent media coverage of artists' work. Be it with strongly-held personal viewpoints or in an ideal form of objective readability, the function of the curator is to weave bonds together between distinct things. On the Internet, the way of accessing projects, exhibition views and other types of data thus has to be well organized. Without denying the similar meanings which works made with the same technique may have, it would be a pity to reduce them to just this. The issue which now concerns us is the following: Is it possible to associate museum activities with Internet activities in a coherent way?

For the time being, there are only a few significant examples, represented by the presence of computers in certain exhibitions, and sites presenting projects commissioned in tandem with the exhibition programme. As an exhibition curator, I can only bemoan this fact and try to come up with other models. In 1997, the Documenta website sought out thematic groups permitting a contextualized approach to the projects involved. In the exhibition, a room earmarked for web projects unfortunately put them all together in a technical category. Even though they could be seen on their own account--a computer, a project--the alignment with other Documenta projects was no longer visible.

Needless to say, major projects existing both on-line and installed in exhibitions are still not very frequent. It is nevertheless worth underlining the extremely fine success stories represented by the pieces of Muntadas (Fileroom) <<http://www.thefileroom.org>>, Claude Closky (+1) <<http://www.sittes.net/indice>>, Reload (reload.org) <<http://www.re-load.org/berlin>> and the joint installation of Matt Mullican/Peter Kogler/Thomas Bayrle. All these projects work perfectly in both contexts and manage to develop the particular features of the medium, while at the same time being undeniably situated in the continuity of each artist's work. If they can be very well presented in an exhibition with more classical installation aspects, the way in which they are indexed on websites is still a major problem.

In 2000, the architects of fabriclch developed for the Canal+ television channel the site La\_Fabrique <[http://www.fabric.ch/La\\_Fabrique00](http://www.fabric.ch/La_Fabrique00)>. Made in VRML, this site depicts a two-storey building, with ground and first floors. Only the first floor is occupied by an exhibition. But the passage through an "airlock"-like double door offers access turn by turn to other exhibitions which all occupy this same first floor, thus giving visitors the impression of being in an eight-storey building, instead of a two-storey one. As far as the programming is concerned, the double doors work like a virtual lift by giving access to different files/exhibitions. It is worth noting this specific programming procedure which right away makes the architecture of the site compatible with a new form of architecture. On the other hand, the quality of the projects of artists and students is less deserving of our attention, apart from the possibilities they embrace.

A year later, Peter Kogler developed a project for the Mudam <<http://www.mudam.lu/projectmudam2001>>. After making a maquette based on the actual

museum then being built (the architect was I.M.Pei), Kogler, as is his wont, set to work on it by wallpapering the walls of its rooms (in miniature, this time), installing mice, and producing eight Quicktime sequences. These short films can be viewed by clicking on a cursory 3D model of the museum. With considerable irony, the artist deals with the virtual without doing anything. Using classic methods and surfing, he nevertheless opens up an additional gap in the relation between a physical museum and its Internet version.

Without being pure representation like the Louvre, or taking part in the all-encompassing nature of the Web, this project creates a bridge between one reality and the other, and offers glimpses of new possibilities with regard to artists' interventions and the job of exhibition conception and design. The contemporary art arena is a precise context, at once historical and living. It is not a sum of specialized ghettos, nor must it be content to exist in a way that is established once and for all. Artists' praxis and activities have consistently caused the museum to develop. So the museum must take part in this while developing communication and popularization strategies. But this cannot be done any old how.

Over and above their albeit classic arborescence, the innovative interest of the projects of Kogler and fabriclch lies in this incredible potential for convergence between worlds which we imagined to be separate: two distinct realities that it was hard to bring together in one and the same problem-set: exhibition conception and design with new media, their dispersal on the Internet, and their relation to the museum.

Museums are opening their doors to installations, and websites are producing projects, but how is it possible to make the museum's different missions converge in a structural way. How are real/virtual exhibitions to be created? how is a form of net surfing to be developed which can be reflective? These questions have given rise to a project within the exhibition "L'Image Habitable ABCDEF"/"The Inhabitable Image ABCDEF". As the outcome of a joint project between version <<http://www.version.ch>> and fabriclch, a site formulated in virtual reality has tried to develop liaisons in the exhibition (and vice versa).

On-line, although still in the prototype state <<http://www.electroscape.org/002>>, this site proposes a link-up between the activities of a museum (the Contemporary Art Building in Geneva) and on-line projects, in the form of a building, which is neither realistic nor altogether fantastic. By borrowing the volumetry of the museum and making exhibition rooms, this virtual architecture will simultaneously accommodate artists' projects specifically designed for it AND represent meaningful existing rooms AND the museum will present site-related projects. The aim is at once perverse and serious. But by working these three aspects in concert, the challenge will be to question the various possibilities through both praxis and criticism, while at the same time causing a confusion of meanings.

The first artist to have occupied the premises is Heimo Zobernig. The project has been produced specially for this setting, and is in two parts: in the virtual museum and in the physical museum, like the two sides of a sheet of paper. This analogy is not haphazard for the project itself is devised around this contrast between flatness and volume, page and wall, 2D and 3D, and between the immaterial and the physical.

By re-appropriating the heimozobernig.com homepage made by a student (to start with without his agreement), the artist shows this like a magnetized surface in the stripped-down virtual architecture. This homepage consists of five identical pages in which it is only possible to go top to bottom, and left or right. In an apparently empty museum room, there is a

computer hidden behind a moveable partition (a heavy wall that you have to turn yourself on its axis) which gives access to the site. In a nutshell, whether the real or the virtual is involved, Zobernig operates in a radical way, as he always does, since each space is dealt with for and through its intrinsic qualities.

If VRML surfing makes it possible to freely design exhibitions by emphasizing the relations between the projects much more than with hypertext, it is still not a question of breaking free of a reality and its representation. Some selected rooms at the MAMCO (one of the institutions in the Contemporary Art Building) will be digitized or offer methods of reproduction in order to permit a continuity and a contiguity on-line, too. Artists will be invited to produce works in both contexts, willy-nilly. Even access to data will have to follow the same path.

It is obvious that the aim here consists in advancing head-on two realities which are, for the time being, turning their back on each other. Exhibition conception and design and the coverage of artists' work should emerge strengthened. Will this promising project manage to come up with sound replies to all the questions raised earlier? The future will let us know soon enough.

By way of conclusion, we should further note the response to the above-mentioned project, adopted by Claude Closky for the iGalerie on the Mudam website. Working on the same principle as Gallery9 at the Walker (an extension of the museum on the Internet for accommodating web projects), its interface makes ironic reference to the white cube of the museum and to the 3D representations of rooms: a succession of rooms passes before our eyes, displaying like so many pictures the visuals of the websites there. The iGalerie comes across in a seductive way through its visual slogans: this time you can choose on the basis of what you see. The architectural link is openly displayed as both fantastic and offhand, because the museum rooms are in no way realistic. On the other hand, it is still not possible to know how physicality and virtuality will be connected... Because the Museum is still not finished, it can be hoped that a line of thinking will be developed in the direction of a coming-together rather than a clash.

So, as we have seen, the contemporary museum is facing a whole host of new technologies and new methods of dissemination, as well as their rapid development; so it must tackle the foreseeable redefinition of its exhibition, storage and information areas. Its transformation is being brought on by, among other things, the appearance of projects produced in media which still did not exist just ten years ago. The society of metamorphosis and artists are forever inventing new types of projects. As in the past, museum must adapt to the way attitudes, artistic practices and works are all evolving.

This adaptation calls for an awareness of the origin of the changes occurring and what they entail. Today it seems crucial that cultural institutions take this into account. Just as it is important that webmasters and electronic architects take into account the linkages between the different aspects of media coverage, be this done in concert with curators, or for the good of museums, artists and the public.

Simon Lamunière, 30 April 2003

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