

The Virtual Artefact: Social media and the play of the image

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This conference paper is part of a larger book project using new media theory, art history and anthropology. The book is concerned with the technologically enabled movement or free-play of images, and the new forms of attention that develop alongside. These new forms of attention are often seen as replacing the receptive, individual contemplation historically associated with museums. Part of my project is to look at the latest developments in image sharing: websites and apps like Flickr, Tumblr, and Instagram. But, for the purposes of this paper, I am going to focus on the twentieth century debates about the image that were responses to the impact of technology on art objects in museums.

Some of this is familiar territory: I'm using André Malraux's *Le Musée Imaginaire* (or *Museum without Walls*) and Walter Benjamin's *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*. However, I want to look at these arguments from a different angle than usual. I am interested in what recent writers have variously called an 'elastic', 'delirious' or 'exploded' museum: a more anarchic and playful museum without walls

I'd like us to consider whether the interchange or free play between virtual images and material artefacts helps a more democratic, collective and active experience of the museum. Perhaps it enables a new playful museum, which might be both more democratic and more desirable. Alternatively perhaps new technological developments actually damage one of the special things about museums: the museum was never outside capitalism, but it was one of the few spaces where quiet, receptive contemplation was both admissible and possible. Jacques Rancière suggests that in the contemporary social context, "Constructing a place for solitude, an 'aesthetic' place, appears to be a task for committed art" (Rancière 2009: 53).

The emphasis on receptive, individualised contemplation in art museums developed from Romanticism and the Romantic notion of communion with the artwork, which was

fundamentally a secularization of religious experience. After all, the art museum exhibited in front of paintings that were once altarpieces, statues that were once gods. The art historian Hans Belting gives a good example when he quotes the painter and physician Carl Gustav Carus in 1857, who, after seeing Raphael's Sistine Madonna in its new chapel-like installation at the Royal Gallery of Paintings in Dresden, wrote that the painting "presented itself ever more radiantly and in its full significance to my soul" (cited in Belting 2001: 61).

The Sistine Madonna is a special case because of the legend associated with it: which is that the painter, Raphael had a vision or dream in which he was visited by the Madonna. This gave the painting a kind of immediacy and power for nineteenth century viewers, but it was also supported by a Romantic belief in the autonomy of art. The Romantics conceived of both art objects and objects of nature as lively, not mute: able to reciprocate the gaze, to speak back to us. Artworks were not merely expressive of the artist and the culture, but able to generate their own meanings to the receptive and sensitive viewer.

Walter Benjamin wrote about the decline of this kind of communing with the art object. He was not basing this on a change in behaviour within the museum, but on what was happening, from the late nineteenth century onwards, as photo-mechanical reproductions of artworks gradually displaced engravings and woodcuts as the principal reproductive techniques. Anonymously authored photo-mechanical reproductions had the advantage of being able to depict famous artworks without (apparently) the intervention of another artist's hand.

According to Benjamin, the mass audience did not treat these artworks in reproduction with quasi-religious reverence but grasped at the image, with the hand as much as the eye, because they had been trained, by cinema and mass culture, in a new kind of attention. Together with avant-garde artists such as Moholy-Nagy, he saw the new form of attention is grasping, tactile, instantaneous, urgent and active but also habitual and almost automatic. This was the way that the working class engaged with images; very differently from the bourgeoisie, who preferred to savour them.

It's important to realize that even the old Romantic conception of the original artwork had been shaped by the existence of reproductions: the reputation of artworks circulated in advance, museum visitors arrived having seen engravings, woodcuts and lithographs based on the artworks they now saw in the original, so that to see the 'original' was an ever more heightened experience. The cult of originality was the product of a culture of facsimiles. So,

the decline of receptive contemplation was not simply the result of the circulation of reproductions, but of the massive growth in visual culture that happened in the second half of the nineteenth century thanks to photography, new print technologies and the growth of a new commercial culture.

Late nineteenth century paintings were born into, and inseparable from, this world of mass imagery. Photographs had been transmitted by telegraph since around 1900, and photo-mechanical printing had been in use since the 1860s. Painters copied from reproduced images, included reproductions in their pictures, and had their own pictures mass-reproduced. They were influenced by popular imagery, and also contributed to the wider image culture through the production of newspaper cartoons, illustrations and posters. Daumier's lithograph of the photographer Nadar of 1863 shows photography spreading and aspiring both to the status of art and mass culture: competing with but also intersecting with, Daumier's own practices of newspaper caricature and painting.

In 1975 Michel Foucault beautifully characterized the pervasive image culture had emerged with technical reproduction and flourished in the late-nineteenth century. He described, "...a new frenzy for images, which circulated rapidly between camera and easel, between canvas and plate and paper" from about 1860 until 1880. Manet's portrait of Zola, from 1868, shows something of this circulation. Manet painted, on the wall behind Zola, a reproduction (possibly a photograph?) of Manet's own painting *Olympia* (1864-5), an engraving based Velasquez, and a Japanese print, while Zola holds a book about painting.

I'm particularly interested in Foucault's characterization of this late nineteenth-century culture of images, because it differs very radically from more conventional accounts of the circulation of art in reproduction, or the relationship between so-called 'high' culture and popular imagery. More conventional accounts tend to make sharp distinctions between original and copy, and to be based in an idea of the medium (and the media) as something that delivers images to an audience. For Foucault, the medium is a prison, which the transgressive image is always slipping out from. He recognized that reproduction was not a secondary process but integral to the culture of the nineteenth century.

Ironically, most art historians and museums that embraced photographic reproduction used it to underwrite the importance of direct experience of the original. For example, the art historian Heinrich Wölfflin placed great emphasis on the experience of the artwork but this experience was conjured through the magical technology of the lantern slideshow. His

signature technique was to show two slides alongside one another for comparison (using two projectors), and accompany this with a charismatic, mesmerizing presentation style.

The lecturer's performance, the darkened space and the illuminated screen all heightened the sense of presence. Yet Wölfflin emphasized the importance of students becoming 'cultivated' through a direct perceptual experience. This is underscored by this portrait of him, which shows him studiously examining what appears to be a framed original rather than a reproduced print.

Because his priority was to convey to students how to look at original works of art, Wölfflin was very precise about how the artwork should be photographed as his essay "How One should Photograph Sculpture" demonstrates. Here, he argues that the public was being duped by false images in reproduction. For example, he compares two images of the statue of David by Verrocchio. The image on the left is captioned "incorrect photograph, the one on the right "correct photograph" (Wölfflin 2013, 55). He discusses in great depth how most sculptures have a correct viewing point, which visitors to the actual sculpture in situ naturally gravitate towards and why the left image misleads, unbalancing the statue, and making it appear (for instance) as if the head of Goliath is sat on David's left foot.

Wölfflin's view was that photographs of sculpture that could be more or less misleading: by contrast Benjamin's artwork essay, and later Malraux's *Museum without Walls*, explicitly recognised that technology had changed the way we see. Malraux noted how reproductions of art created relationships of equivalence - affinities - between disparate objects, by rendering objects of different sizes at the same scale, and by making them monochrome. He saw how small and ancient objects, such as belt-buckles and amulets, coins and seals, appeared surprisingly modern in reproduction, because their minute scale necessitated a simplicity of form. Through photographs, in examples such as this one, he says,

"The unfinished quality of the execution, resulting from the very small scale of these objects, now becomes a style, free and modern in its accent" (Malraux 1967, 86).

Style is no longer something innate in the original (as it was for Wölfflin) but a product of photography itself, particularly black and white photography which in Malraux's words:

"imparts a family likeness to objects that have actually but slight affinity" (Malraux, 1967: 84).

Malraux also noticed how the faces of sculptures were lit for photographs using the same techniques as the lighting of film stars faces, so that a new expressiveness and vivacity

became apparent. He juxtaposed two photographs of the same statue, The Lady of Elche one labelled “recent photography”, and the one on the left captioned “early photography” (Malraux 1967, 82-3).

While Wölfflin might prefer sculptures to be photographed in a way that gave a “true impression” of the original, Malraux exposed the fact that sculptures were now sharing the same field of action as film stars. Not only are they lit like film stars, they sit alongside them, so that the physiognomy of Nefertiti can be compared with Garbo or Dietrich. The great irony here is that Malraux actually held a very low view of mass or popular culture. He envisaged the artist as a tragic–heroic and solitary figure, working against the grain of mass society, pitting his art against a declining west and a sham mass-culture, and asserting art’s autonomy.

Even so, Malraux imagined a relatively benign world of reproductions, which expands human capacities and accelerates artistic progress. It enabled the ‘minor arts’ to rival the major ones, expanded the range of historical artworks to which artists and audiences could refer and continued the task of the museum, acting as a resource of great culture and giving artists a rich repertoire of images and styles to draw on, literally a *Musée Imaginaire*, a museum in and of the imagination.

The Museum without Walls has an equalizing effect (some have called it homogenizing), since everything becomes comparable in monochrome reproduction. As I’ve suggested with sculptures and film stars, it damages hierarchy far beyond what Malraux would have wished. Of the three earlier writers I have discussed here, only Benjamin associates the new technologies of mass image production with an increase in play, as Foucault does later. In the early versions of the “Work of Art” essay, he argued that the origin of the technology of the machine age “lies... in play” and that the machine age, by liberating people from drudgery increased the “scope for play” [*Spielraum*] (Benjamin 2002, 107). This means, not just increased leisure time, but an expanded “field of action”. Play here has the double sense of extension and amusement.

Art had always involved an element of play, but now, as new mechanical, reproductive technologies takes precedence, the possibilities for play increase: Benjamin writes: “that which is lost in the withering of semblance and the decay of the aura in works of art is matched by a huge gain in the scope for play” (Benjamin 2002, 107).

Today visitors to museums regularly take out their camera-phones, take pictures, and post them online. These images go to their Flickr stream, to Instagram or their Tumblr blog: even the brand names evoke a kind of pleasurable transience – flickering, instant, tumbling. Many of the images produced in this way are what the artist Hito Steyerl has described as “poor images”, degraded, “travelers in a digital no-man’s land” (Steyerl 2009, 8). This world of digital reproduction does not leave the original untouched.

In 1911 the Mona Lisa was supposedly “removed for photography”. In fact it had been stolen. Even though it was later recovered, according to Calum Storrie, Mona Lisa is still in a sense missing and in her place there are ‘poor images’. Storrie’s idea of the ‘delirious museum’ develops from the argument that “museums should be a continuation of the street” (Storrie, 2006: 2–3). . Storrie is attracted to museums that have a “messy vitality”, that spill over into the everyday. He is thinking of a form of curation, but we can also think about the variously reverent and irreverent ways in which people take and share souvenirs of their visits using mobile, handheld media. While many museums and galleries discourage visitor photography, some encourage it – for example, in 2012, Arnolfini, in Bristol UK, encouraged visitors to take personal photographs of their Matti Braun exhibition ‘Gost Log’, inviting them to share them via Twitter, Facebook and Instagram.

I asked at the beginning whether this new play of virtual images and material artefacts contributes toward a more democratic, collective and active experience of the artefact, or does it damage one of the few spaces where contemplative reception was still admissible? It is worth bearing in mind that this is not simply a question of looking through or with a camera versus looking without one, or mediated and unmediated perception. As Frances Robertson kindly reminded me in her comment on the spoken version of this paper, artists and students have long used the museum as a space for producing their own drawn and painted transcriptions and facsimiles of artworks. Photographing the artwork with a phone is also the production of another composition, another image that translates and transcribes, situates and interprets, the artefact in the museum. The question is to do with the ways in which the circulation or play of the image, technologically accelerated, allow us to reimagine aesthetic experience as something other than a “savouring” or quasi-religious communion.

Arguably, digital, computer based and mobile media are not a good place to look for a different model of aesthetic experience. A number of writers firmly associate them with skittish, superficial, glancing attention. Anne Friedberg makes the point that parallel processing – the computer’s ability to keep several programs running at the same time –

trained computer users to hop between tasks, and she suggests that this kind of ‘multi-tasking’ feeds into “the increased expectations of 24/7 productivity” (Friedberg, 2006: 235). . Sherry Turkle has suggested that the social media may not be so sociable after all and actually damages our ability to relate to one another. Critics of the “attention economy” show how attention is transformed into consumption and into labour via information technology and social networks (Crogan and Kinsley 2012).

In this context, perhaps the questions of whether and how the museum is transformed, and of whether aesthetic experience (understood as sustained contemplative reception), is damaged or replaced by something different, are not the right questions. We already know, from Benjamin, Malraux and others, that the wide circulation of photographic reproductions not only transformed the museum, but also heightened the value attached to the experience of originals in museum contexts. I am interested, following Foucault and Hans Belting, in what happens if we rethink the history of art and the history of photography from the perspective of the image. What happens if we follow its play backwards, and see how concepts such as originality, style and facture have been asserted to shore up and protect the artefact against the footloose image? What kind of museum, with or without walls, will then come into sight?

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