



# Is the Future of Exhibitions in Digital Storytelling?

## Curatorship in the Age of Internet and the Rise of the Amateur Curator

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**Abstract.** Since the last two decades more and more museums and other cultural institutions are exploring the possibility of deploying their curatorial expertise through new virtual assemblages that can be experienced everywhere and by anyone. The simplest interface consists in downloadable applications or portions of websites, where high-resolution images of works from the collection are accessible, accompanied by information and metadata, quite often an audio piece that describes the image. But several experiences indicate instead novel and more advanced approaches to involve the audience. Recently leading museums moved clearly towards becoming a platform where ideas and audience engage in multiple ways: physical and digital, before during and after visiting, one way or together. With this paper I intend to look at how the practice of museum experience is changing, increasingly conveyed by images, comparing different experiences that through images open their archives to visitors.

**Keywords:** Museology · Prosumer · Digital curating · New media

Ten years ago, museum directors Nicholas Serota and Neil MacGregor, at that time respectively directors of the Tate and the British Museum, pointed out the future of museums as organizations of mediation. I quote: “The future has to be, without question, the museum as a publisher and broadcaster. The challenge is, to what extent do we remain authors, and in what sense do we become publishers providing a platform for international conversations?” [1]. Ten years later our current digital context supplied us with an answer on what seemed speculation in 2010: In a world of developed use of social media the role of the museum expert is redefined. But with this redefinition, the user got into a new social position and the role of the artwork also changed.

In my contribution I want to sketch these changes, evaluating some of the most advanced practices of museum communication of today and exploring the way in which museums are facing and embracing this change thanks to the adoption of the more recent digital technologies. I will address the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam, the Canadian Centre for Architecture in Montreal, and the Cooper Hewitt Museum in NY.

To accommodate new attitudes, behaviours and interests of the audience, the main international museums are moving towards a platform model. When the Rijksstudio project [2] went online on October 2012, distracted users might have thought it similar

to the already well-known Google Art Project: images from the world's most important art collections, published in remarkably high definition on the web. But upon closer inspection it became clear that this initiative is much more powerful. Not only does the museum let the public *admire* the works in great detail, it also openly invites viewers to *use* them: People who inscribe to the webpage can select their favorite pictures, chose details and order print-outs on different materials, which will be sent to them by the museum. To encourage a highly inventive and non-literal use, the museum organized a competition 'Make your own Masterpiece' [3] inviting the audience to get inspired by the Rijks's collection and asked a few designers to take the first step. Resulting ideas and products ranged from morphed animations of figures from 200 prints (Christian Borstlap) to a temporary tattoo based on a still life (Droog).

This was – to my understanding - the first time a major museum has chosen to play with the rules in this era of rampant image manipulation, and accepted the idea that individual members of the public can now think up and produce meaning. I would however put in question the designerly intervention to which the museum invites the public. To select an image, to re-edit it and print it on t-shirts, handbags or even bodies (like my example) follows very much a model of commodification. Is it really so easy to 'create your own masterpiece' (as the webside proclaims)? At stake here is the border between marketing and a shared production of knowledge. If I appropriate a detail of a Rembrandt painting and print it on my t-shirt I just follow the path of a consumerist reification of art. This might turn me into a passionate customer of the Rijksmuseum, but it does not really allow to develop and contribute my personal knowledge. Instead of spreading images of the collection todays museums should be more interested in negotiating meaning and creating deviate knowledge.

Here the CCA, the Canadian Centre for Architecture seems to give an inspiring example. In September 2019 the CCA published the first issue of a new editorial project entitled "The museum is not enough". Through a first-person narrative ("I think I still have so much to learn that I don't think I can actually teach anyone else." [4]), the 'empowered' museum explains its intended practice and shares programmatic points with the imagined audiences. Crucial in this redefinition becomes the productive dialogue with the ones addressed and thereby avoid the traditional classification of the 'visitor'.

The CCA tries not to repeat the model of the museum as an educator that offers 'edifying' experience. The pedagogical mission of the museum is abandoned. Instead, the museum is looking for cooperators: "I want to share my questions and doubts, to invite others to range on my field or research. I want to provoke conversation." [4] I experience here a major shift in the mission of the museum. In earlier years the curator played a central role in selecting and interpreting the objects and communicating their meaning to an audience meant to 'learn'. Today the role of the experts is questioned. Not only in the museum world the legitimation of the author is put in question.

Roland Barthes 'The Death of the Author' [5] was published in 1967, replacing 'biography' by the collective practice of writing. It seems that Jacques Rancière, when he published his 'The ignorant schoolmaster' [6] in 1987 described the consequences for education: If language or the museum are defined as a social structure under continuous production of the many, then the authority of the individual vanishes. The writer, following Barthes, is more a translator than a creator. This is why Ranciere criticises the

subordination of one intelligence under another (the one of the teacher) and instead opens a space where every intelligence is used in its specific way, oriented by a specific individual history and its demands, transgressing epistemic territories more than adopting to its limits.

So the CCA instead of spreading a message tries to create situations “in which anyone who comes to visit or gets in touch with me becomes a potential agent for transformation. This means not defining the end, but instead establishing different conditions for beginning” [7].

When at the beginning of this paper I mentioned Serrota and his colleague, they spoke under the influence of digitalization. With my reference to Barthes and Rancière I want to indicate however that we should not be hypnotized in a technological shortcut by digitalization, which apparently is only one aspect of cultural change. It is not the computer which changes the museum practice, but the cognitive division of labor it introduces. So we should no longer ask how we adapt the museum to the world of the digital, but how the museum practices have to be reorganized under the new premises of the division of cognitive labor.

This is what makes the CCA interesting for us: The traditional role of collecting, defining and transmitting knowledge has been replaced here by the attempt to generate a space where questions emerge, ideas collide and new visions of the world and its possible futures appear. The CCA adopts a completely dialogical and problematizing approach, aimed at exploring, through exhibitions and publications, the grey areas of contemporary debate, architectural and not, in an attitude of constant questioning and sharing of the own research. A new debate has been opened up on the new roles and functions held by the museum today. Also thanks to the new availability of digital technologies, visitors themselves acquire the role of negotiators of meaning and participate in a public discourse.

CCA's web page [8], renewed in 2016, is organized in three sections. The primary one, referring to the homepage which is considered a publication platform, is the one where reflections are presented and shared to generate a broader dialogue. The second is the traditional component of communication of the institution is more controlled and limited on the site – it is addressed by an easily referenced service component and includes a timeline considered to be a kind of institutional archive where the story of the CCA is told through the things that the institution has done. The third part is a powerful search tool designed not only for the collection, but to also access all the activities of the CCA – to allow people not only to reference the collection and archives of prints and drawings, photography, book, ephemera, but to also discover all of the activities: such as exhibitions, publications, conferences, seminars.

It appears, then, that the website is not just informing online visitors about what is happening at the building, but is based on ideas – ‘the website is a thing in itself’. A second building different from the first. The physical experience of visiting the exhibition and the digital experience are complementary and different at the same time. These two experience elicit process openly aimed at creating an internal conflict, a constant friction between the online and the physical building, continuously opening new debates and points of view. Clearly the two supports have many things in common, but yet they are diverse. Furthermore, these two spaces overlap with research and other events that take

place within the CCA buildings. These activities also translate into exhibitions or books, but some of the ideas and initiatives emerged in more ephemeral events materialize on the website independently of their physical outcomes in the building.

The physical site of CCA in Montreal is a sort of laboratory where things are produced and shaped; the electronic publications, the website, the presence on social media are instead spaces of continuous digital construction and evolution.

Two things are the most interesting and radical aspects about the project.

Firstly, that the primary page is an editorial project that represents the institution through ideas, not by information or facts. As in the case of CCA's printed publications, it is never a question of creating a catalogue documenting in a descriptive and didactic way what happened in the physical exhibition space, but the work of research finds breath in an autonomous publication that goes into certain aspects thematically and provide material for long-term reference. The goal is to reinforce and test new habits in the museums practice taking advantage of digital tools.

Secondly, the open and complex approach to the archive and search. The archive is shown here not only as a collection of past events, but as a database inviting for further development. The entire collection and the library, together with the objects in the archive and the contents of the website are questioned simultaneously in a single interface. This means that browsers' thoughts can develop into a free network of connections, which do not compartmentalize individual areas but find space through a sensitive and expanded platform. Inside the archive the funds are named, described and catalogued and during the consultation they can be saved inside a personal folder where all the elements consulted and pinned are stored, ready to be shared via email, printed or requested for consultation. In this way, the physical visitor as well as the digital one are invited to create their own personal narratives and produce their own contents and meanings.

As a confirmation, studies on museums' audiences suggest that the behavior of museum visitors has rapidly changed over the past three decades [9]. Instead of following the explanations offered by the curator, the narration of the exhibition is negotiated: the object becomes a process and the visitor is called to actively interact with it in order to assign meaning to what he is experiencing. The notion of *apertura dell'opera* (*openness of the work*) [10], theorized by Umberto Eco during the sixties, appears useful to clarify this change in the visitor, because it allows to position the viewers in the sphere of actual social practices, and in reshaping his role profoundly.

Following Barthes, but also Eco's 'opera aperta', the art object presents itself as a field of possibilities and opens the (artist's) work to multiple interpretations mediated by the users. In the reaction to the plot of stimuli, each viewer engages with their concrete existential situation: a particularly conditioned sensitivity, a certain culture, tastes, inclinations, personal prejudices, so that the understanding of the original form takes place according to a certain individual perspective. The form is aesthetically valid to the extent that it can be seen and understood from multiple perspectives, manifesting a wealth of aspects and resonances without ever ceasing to be itself. In this sense an object, while being made accessible as a finite form, is also open, offering the possibility of being interpreted in a thousand different ways without its irreproducible singularity being altered. Every fruition is therefore interpretation and execution, since in every fruition the work lives again in an original perspective.

Today, the digital context allows the visitor a new active role: one of unfolding the narrative act as the result of a stroll through the museum as a database. In addition, this stroll generates a path (digital first and then real in the gallery space) that constitutes a suggestion for the next visitor.

This phenomenon of *apertura/openess* actually transforms the single collected or displayed object into an infinite and self-generated open database that the viewer, -fully transformed into a *viewer* - physically experience, navigating, modifying and sharing it daily. As indicated by Lev Manovich in “The Language of New Media” (2001) [11], database narration represents the awareness that narrating is organizing a data space. This means that the elements are used by a user who is no longer passive but who is able to choose his own narrative structure.

Furthermore, a linear path through the exhibition has dissolved into a network which allows every visitor to follow his own interests, in a hypertextual structure that resembles and reflects the digital experience. In this way, the recipient turned into a producer of meaning. The visitor’s production is not starting or ending at the entrance of the museum: The exhibition is an institutional field which is crossed by the new ‘visitor/cultural producer’, who produces knowledge as part of their individual and collective identity – prior and after the experience.

The way in which CCA addresses its audience might raise some questions. The fact that architects, designers, artists, in short: experts, might feel attracted makes us aware that instead of the one big audience we should deal with smaller communities, that might form around different types of new museal practices.

The other question concerns the mainly digital practice of the CCA. No doubt: Also the exhibitions of this institution are original and surprising. But how could the changed habit of the museum’s prosumer [12] be specifically supported during the actual visit of the real site? The altered distribution of roles in the museum should find its resonance in the organization of the exhibition space itself and the practice of its visitor. We should not disregard the difference between the user of social media and the user of a museum space.

The renewed Cooper Hewitt design museum in New York elaborated a new practice which might serve as a model. Since its reopening in 2014 it allows visitors to collect their favorite content on a pen drive given to them at the entrance. Once back home the collected items can be downloaded freely in high resolution from the website for further use. On this platform the *viewers* can engage in multiple ways: physical and digital; before, during and after the visit; individually or collectively. In this implemented concept of a museum, each visitor, with the digital devices at hand - f.e. mobile phones and apps - collects and catalogues available materials - such as objects seen, texts read.. - together with their personal physical experience. Thus, they organize and produce a discourse, taking into account both virtual and concrete aspects, planning their experience as part of an individual cultural production, expecting controversial answers from other producers. This is not an individual discourse, but a discourse that is ‘owned’ by an audience. The experience of participation in this kind of dialogue by and by becomes more dominant than the actual visit of this or that museums, that represent in this sense an accelerator of discursivity.

In conclusion: The three examined case studies undoubtedly represent interesting models of how the museum is trying to expand its walls towards a barrier-free exchange with its public and visitors.

They encourage an active participation in museum practice and, as a result, to free the audience from passive consumption.

Through new forms of mediatization, the concept of participation not only includes the idea of visitor involvement within the exhibition space, but rather represents a moment of active creation.

At the same time, the different models present unresolved questions. Such as the commodification of the collection as in the case of Rijks; a lack of strong connection between the exhibition and the digital platform in the case of CCA; and a lack of freedom in the manipulation of the data offered by the Cooper Hewitt experience.

The open question for further investigations is exactly how to overcome these obstacles in negotiating meaning and creating deviate knowledge.

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