# Virtual Museums

...being here and somewhere else at the same time is not possible for us vulnerable human creatures, it is maybe something for the gods and we are not. So 'tele presence' is a most reductionist example of human communication, a flickering image far below the scan rate of the human eye, flat with no dimensions, no touching, no sensing of the personal aura, no code for this in communication protocols...

so here I am with you in low resolution and voice from Tokyo.

## Multiplicity of opinions

I see history as the projection of our visions of the future onto the past. History in this sense is the product of a dynamic process in which it is reformulated again and again by each culture, generation and person. It is a vision of what will be on the basis of what was. So this explains the continuous shifts of emphasis, the differences in interpretation, the multitude of opinions, differing from person to person, from generation to generation, from culture to culture.

The museum has always been a place that was trying to deny the multiplicity of opinions, a place were the interpretation of the world was fixed through selection, presentation and comment. Selection as a decision process what not to present and preserve, presentation as a reordering of meaning of the selected objects, and comment as a an extra device for fixing the meaning of things presented.

## Unending variations of human expression

Cultural heritage is a selection of things from the past for future usage.
Whose past? Whose selection? Whose future? These questions need to be asked. Is not someone's victory the other one's defeat... Do we want to prove how unique and important were the cultural expressions of a specific religion, race, nation, tribe, class, group, or person, implicitly devaluating other cultural expressions? Or can there be a more positive approach which points at the unending variation of human expression, the art of making distinctions between things seemingly similar and showing similarities between things seemingly different. A cultural heritage that also explains new generations about failure and defeat, violence and oppression.

Museums tend to be state institutions or institutions that are closely linked to existing power structures. So it is not surprising that their educator role is for a great part defined by this social position, giving most often a singular interpretation of the phenomena on show.The technology of museum presentation as it evolved from the mishmash of the 'Wunderkammer' to the time and style ordering of the 'Galleria Progressiva', has only slowly absorbed the possibilities of the electronic media. The physical restrictions of the presentation of

objects whereby the public needed to move through the museum space to 'read' the exhibition have also made that very little has been done in the traditional museum technology with presentations that would give multiple interpretations of the objects on show.

## Stimulation to draw one's own conclusion

The electronic media, just on their own or in combination with more traditional presentation techniques, have the potential for making presentations that do give multiple viewpoints, both literal and on the level of explanation and interpretation. It is not the new media as such which will bring this needed shift in the functioning of museums. It is much more a better understanding of how the construction of our social memory system, how 'history' works, that could change the role of the Museum from an institution that spreads 'approved truth', to a space where one is stimulated to draw one's own conclusion from conflicting viewpoints on show. It is like using a good library and by searching for one subject you will find a series of published sources which have different, often conflicting interpretations of the same subject and study is needed to form your own opinion. Such an approach will stimulate the public to get out of its passive consumer role, it will force the curators to go beyond their single minded interpretations.

## A museum on the net: a too limited idea

Now the reality of the Internet shows some of these ideas, though often in a very confusing way. A question to a so-called 'search engine' will generate a multitude of options, but the unstructured character of such a search often means that what could have been useful is lost in the pile of hardly relevant references that also formally matched the search criteria used. A virtual museum on the Net could in this way well be invisible. A crisp definition of 'virtual' is 'in effect but not in fact'.
I think that a museum just on the Net is a too limited idea, that the Internet could be part of another structure of more tangible objects or places were Internet a museum just on the Net is a too limited idea, that the Internet could be part of another structure of more tangible objects or places were Internet access to a specific site or groups of sites is made possible. So a network of more or less public spaces (galleries, cyber cafes, cultural centres, spaces within existing musea, libraries and archives) were 'dramatization of information' through the use of interactive devices is realized. Also there could be a combination of content made available through the Internet with input and output devices that would be much more dramatic and much more spatial than a computer screen with a keyboard and a mouse.

Such public spaces where such interaction could take place should have more bandwidth and storage capacity than the standard consumer equipment provides. It could be a combination of 'on' and 'off' line material with local digital libraries on tape robots, Compact Disc or Magneto Optical jukeboxes and protocols for fast exchange of big quantities of data between similar centres on the line of the traditional 'inter-library loan' system. It could be a flexible combination of Local and Wide Area networks, with special mutual agreements for educational and research usage, to overcome prohibitive commercial copyright claims.

## A balanced combination of real and unreal

There is another reason for my pledge for concentrating on public spaces from where electronic materials can be produced and

accessed. It is to counterbalance the market mechanism that is pushing individuals to stuff their homes with more and more obsolete equipment with the side effect that the public realm is diminishing and social isolation on the increase.

Now consumer media products tend not only to be reproduction machines but have production capabilities as well, taking pictures, movies, sound... But when it comes to showing these products there is a void... Yes there is 'the Net', but many people lack the means to make their products available in this way and even if it could be done it lacks the more social and lively interaction of the contact with a 'real public'. So a balanced combination of 'real' and 'virtual' ways of contact needs to be attained.

The atmosphere of such meeting places is also of importance. Nowadays there is still a strong tendency for a highly polished high-tech look, that tries to impress the public with its futuristic modernity. The design of such new places is mostly in the hands of professional designers, a strata of society that is very sensible to the latest fashion trends pushed by big industry. The images generated by the computer industry to advertise their products are often reflected in the modernistic designs for new media centres. There are a few examples of another approach however, such as the 'reading table' project of the Society for Old and New Media in the medieval Waag building in Amsterdam.

## A non-linear approach to history

This symposium states in one of its texts that there is a need for drawing the future and the past closer together. I would say that we need to rethink our concept of time. Overcome the narrow-minded view that we as humans evolved from a primitive to a higher developed stage, that there are inferior and superior cultures. Primitivism is very much an element of our age (think of the trance dance sub-culture in the West), there are many examples of very high elaborate structures, within what was long presented as a lower phase of development of the human race. The massive interest at the end of the twentieth century in the occult, in myth, in all kind of expressions of the super-natural, is a sign of re-occurrence of the same ideas over centuries, of non-linear history. The New Age industry might be for a great part extremely superficial and commercialized, it remains that the interest for this kind of subjects and phenomena with the broad public is genuine.

It is the fixation on the material culture, the multitude of objects man produces, that makes things appear so different, so incomparable over time. When instead we would focus on the spiritual side of things, change is much less evident. All these material things, contraptions, constructions, consumer goods, blind us and let us think that what is now was never before. A history of basic concepts of humanity could be written that would show repeating patterns only over long stretches of linear time, far beyond human comprehension. It is in the recurrent themes of old and modern myth that, at an abstract level, such basic concepts become visible.

This non-linear approach towards history can be a fruitful way of approach for using the electronic media. Instead of an attitude that everything is newer than new and that the electronic media do not have a past and should just blindly point at the future, an attitude whereby inspiration for the electronic media both on the content and interface level is taken from the past, whereby high technology is combined with low technology. Instead of the 'effect driven multi media' with its urge to be the most modernistic and futuristic, a more content oriented multi media, that has

something to communicate beyond the flashing electronic effects of modern machinery.

## New creative ways of fair use

To have more content in multi-media, a great barrier has to be overcome that I can only point at briefly... It is the question of the claims of ownership of human products, be it authorship, copyright, or the multitude of protective devices established by modern industry. Without denying any author some income from his work, one can see that in the hands of big industry most of the positive ideas that might be linked to copyright have been perverted. Our cultural heritage is not only endangered by urban blight, air pollution, economical neglect and the like, but also by the attempts at worldwide control and exploitation of image, sound, text, genes and whatever might come into the hands of the law industry...
When one would project the current principles of copyright back into human history we would not have Baroque music (an example of heavy sampling and quoting), folk songs would have been standardized, woven patterns fixed, poetry regimented and the distribution of printed works severely limited. The advocates of aggressive modern copyright sometimes point back into European history to find early examples of the need and usage of copyright. They often forget to mention that these rights were always for a limited time (five to ten years) and that in most cases copyright only came into being because of the needs of Kings, Popes and others that reigned to control the content of the printed word.
So new creative ways of 'fair use', the right to quote, the right to comment, are needed. After all culture is made by many, the elitist point of view whereby only the great masters are pointed out, is a denial of how human creativity evolves.

Tjebbe van Tijen, Tokyo 8/5/98

## Biography, projects, links

Recent exhibitions:

*Orbis Pictus Revised* (with Milos Vojtechovsky) for Medienmuseum ZKM Karlsruhe, National Museum Prague, Society for Old and New Media in Amsterdam (1994-1996).
*Neo-Shamanism*, an installation for the Royal Tropical Institute in Amsterdam (1997) and for the NTT/ICC Gallery in Tokyo (1998)
Initiator of the *OCCASIO, digital social history archive* for the International Institute of Social History, a project that preserves endangered electronic materials relevant for the study of social history for future generations.

Other links:

*Ars Oblivendi*, about the construction of the social memory system, text written for the Ars Electronica festival in 1996.
*Reading table project* of the Society for Old and New Media, Amsterdam.

Tjebbe van Tijen, Imaginary Museum Projects