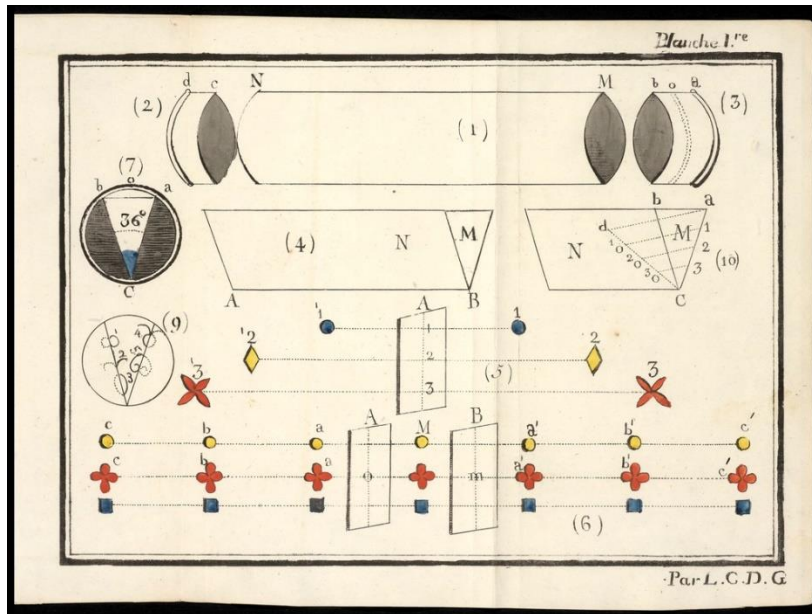**Essays for The Exhibitionist Blog**

Share and Share Alike (Part I): Museums and the Digital Image Explosion

January 6, 2014 | Daniel S. Palmer

Disassembled kaleidoscope, 1818 from the Getty's Open Content Program

Why are so many museums making digital images of their artworks available online? JiaJia's previous entry on this blog examined the trend that has made "audiences shift from on-site and local to online and global." This suggests that the process of digitization and distribution of museum images is inherently a good thing because it gives audiences contact with otherwise-inaccessible objects.

But other effects have resulted from this shift, as well. We should be attentive to these developments because they will dramatically transform how visitors interact with museum collections. They also have significant implications for curatorial practice.

Museums seem to understand how important it is to have a strong visual presence in the digital sphere. Recognizing that web and social media are often the first (or the only) way that audiences today engage with art objects, the Getty, the Rijksmuseum, and other institutions have launched important initiatives that make high-resolution digital pictures of their collections more accessible. Likewise, major museums are developing increasingly creative ways to (virtually) explore their holdings.

But our concern for scholarship, education, and standards of authenticity and contextualized display put us at an immediate disadvantage in the ever-quickening global image race. Moreover, new distribution methods are fraught with countless potential abuses. While we can certainly

help ensure that artworks circulate in properly cropped and color-corrected form, the mere fact of their virtual circulation creates opportunities for them to be divorced from their original contexts and shared without information that is essential to understanding their material existence (artist, date, scale, et cetera). Or even in ways that strip away such facts and replace them with misinformation.

Digital image sharing also offers myriad opportunities for us, as curators, to redefine our profession. Think about technologies such as the MP3, which created a societal shift in how we think about experiencing music and forced the music industry into an existential crisis. Likewise, the web has catalyzed a reevaluation of image copyrights and the obsessive control that many museums and other rights holders still maintain over their potentially lucrative assets. Such a mindset seems archaic when files can now be shared with such ease. Institutions, curators, and artists should participate in the ongoing redefinition of the status of the digital image in relation to the object, and also keep pace with intensified image sharing by working to develop reliable ways for images to be traced back to their makers and/or sources (such as more resilient metadata). We should be lobbying Google and Wikipedia to assure that their images are given preference over others that come from questionable sources, are improperly cropped, and so on.

Ultimately, we are witnessing a fundamental change in the dynamics of audience participation, to which museums must respond. Social media users and bloggers are not only having a significant impact on how images of artworks are disseminated, but they are also changing the ways in which audiences relate to actual objects in the museum. If all looking is participatory, I worry that the most substantial consequence of reproducing objects online is that it will make us perceive art differently.

We were already facing a daily deluge of images from advertising, and now there is the endless torrent of online photo streams to contend with. This bombardment clearly has a significant impact on our ability to process and appreciate the minutiae of an artwork: Superficial scrolling and close reading are not the same. High-resolution images on museum websites and Google's Art Project (as well as its new Open Gallery) allow for careful scrutiny, but there is never any substitute for the real thing, regardless of how detailed the digital image might be. This is partly due to the fact that computer screens are flat and back-lit, and because they mediate our sight in a way that distances us from the benefits of direct experience.

All of this has certainly had an impact on exhibition design, since curators are aware that visitor images of our shows will be spread around the world. I hope to explore this further in my next post.

We curators should learn to display traditional art objects in ways that reflect the changes in perception brought on by digital technologies. But we should also ask how we can leverage the advantages of digital media to express aspects of a work that cannot be conveyed in a museum, and be especially cognizant of the exciting new exhibition possibilities (both online and off) that digital art offers. Whether technology helps us overcome conservation concerns, spatial restrictions, or logistical impossibilities, the digital image has a type of mobility and durability that the object does not. It is also much more open-source and encourages user-generated content—albeit a different type of participation, but one that defines our era.

In the end, we must be clear to ourselves and our audiences that the images we are seeing online—and often leveraging to increase our viewership—are in fact digital *translations*. They completely lack the original object's material conditions and the contemplative possibilities offered by the heterotopia of a gallery space. The gallery, for me at least, has provided some of the most transcendent experiences of my life, and the richness of experiencing artworks live and in person is in itself a definitive retort to the impertinent question: If I can see it on my computer, why leave the house to see it in a museum?

– Daniel S. Palmer (@ddotpalmer)

Share and Share Alike (Part II): Sharing and Liking and Lacking
February 4, 2014 | Daniel S. Palmer
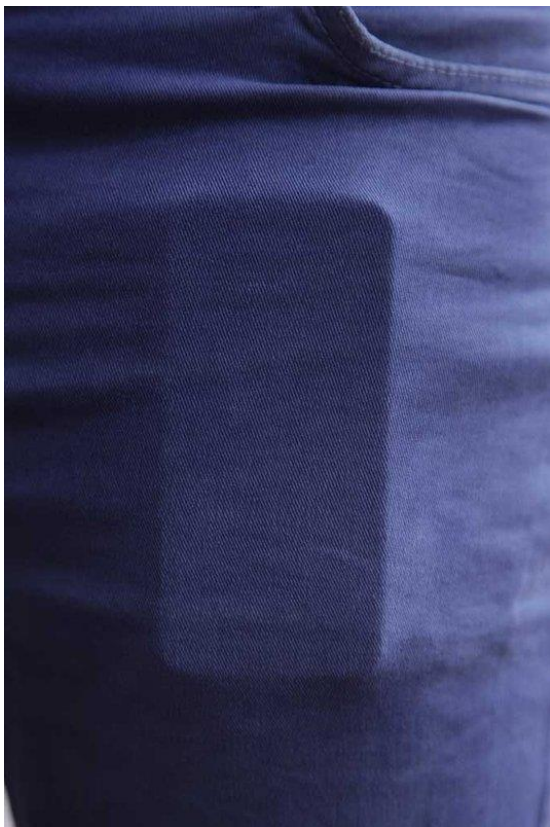
Simon Dybbroe Møller, *Untitled*, 2013.

Smartphone photographs and social media have undeniably changed how (and maybe even why) we perceive and interact with art. The museum experience of most visitors now includes cell phone documentation and sharing, and this is part of larger trends permeating nearly all facets of contemporary life.

Yes, the urge to capture beauty and meaning is legitimate and has precedents in the classic tradition of sketching a work of art, or the touristic tendency to photographically document artworks, which is as old as the advent of portable cameras. But today, social media is playing a central role in determining the popularity of artworks (and maybe even which artworks get made and exhibited at all), based on an acute awareness of what kinds of images are most likely to transmit successfully on the web. This phenomenon is the museum-audience complement to the issues I explored in my last post on this blog.

If people are more motivated these days to visit exhibitions for social reasons or to think of art as spectacle, and this is defined and validated through social media, then technological constraints are clearly having an effect on the way art is being seen. This is partly because of how smartphone photography has a tendency to flatten space, and also because most image-sharing technologies present images in thumbnail versions. Another part of this change is because we so often see things secondhand before we experience them ourselves. And we tend to view an artwork more superficially when we know we can snap a photo or find one online later.

I would make the bold assertion that because of this, we are not only seeing art differently, but actually being shown art in a transformed way. Yes, artists and curators are consciously designing artworks and exhibitions for an audience that looks at and experiences things in this new manner, and who very likely have smartphones in their pockets. I would call many recent art-world attractions (I choose that word advisedly) meme-worthy publicity machines that emphasize spectacular views, even if they do not officially allow photography in their galleries (usually because of copyright restrictions).

Basically, museums have caught on and realized they'll strike attendance gold by showing anything that will titillate (#mikekelly @MoMAPS1; #rainroom @MuseumModernArt), is funny (#christopherwool @Guggenheim), is big (#chrisburden @newmuseum), or will make for a good #artselfie (#kusama @davidzwirner; #turrell @Guggenheim). Of course, it also doesn't hurt if your art project involves a celebrity (#picassobaby @PaceGallery).

I've also noticed more moments within exhibitions that seem crafted to encourage visitors to reach for their phones and take a shareable picture. This is evident in the almost scrolling arrangement of works, with a few choice show-stopper moments, that has been the de facto standard since the advent of Contemporary Art Daily and intensified since Instagram. This kind of moment reached an apogee in the grand finale of *PUNK: Chaos to Couture* (2013) #costumeinstitute show @metmuseum, which gave viewers an irreverent middle finger to unquestioningly relay to their followers.

The question I really should be asking is: "Is this a bad thing?" I am certainly glad that technology is making art more accessible, and Jillian Steinhauer has written thoughtfully about smartphone photography as a way for museums to reach broader and more diverse audiences. But her final sentence in that post gives me pause: "Sure, I miss the quiet sometimes, but now I have the satisfaction of looking around a crowded gallery and knowing that at least some of these people are finally seeing what I see."

Sure, we're all looking at the same things, but what I'm wondering is: Are we all actually *seeing*?

What I'm calling "changes in perception brought on by digital technologies" often serve to obfuscate art historical meaning. Smartphones have intensified a process of not just visual, but also conceptual, flattening that has been going on for some time. Paintings and other artworks that are frequently reproduced become understood more abstractly, as icons. The popularity of an over-shared or famous image creates a type of blindness that precludes close reading. I call this the "starry-eyed *Starry Night* effect."

The scientist Linda A. Henkel of the Department of Psychology at Fairfield University has demonstrated that taking photographs of an artwork has a detrimental effect on memory (she uses the term "photo-taking-impairment effect"). The caveat of her finding—that taking a detail photograph of an artwork does not have the same negative impact on memory—still does not engage an even more central problem: the fact that people often examine these details or even entire works of art through their screens, rather than actually viewing the art object in front of them in an unmediated manner.

The flatness and image-sharing acceleration on our backlit screens and smartphones strips artworks of richness and meaningful information. This over-documentation (or "mechanical reproduction," to use Walter Benjamin's term) allows viewers to contently imagine that they are "getting" everything that an artwork has to offer, when in reality they couldn't be further from it.

As many techno-utopians have argued, people like me are purists for resisting smartphones and other incursions that reduce a museum visitor's experience to a touristic checklist of snapping a picture and moving on to the next attraction. This is even more problematic when these pictures are shared and encourage vicarious or superficial browsing of otherwise extraordinary artworks.

Eric Gibson pleads for a rarified "art experience" in his recent screed against smartphones in museums. But something much more profound is happening with regard to how we see and experience the world around us. The willingness of museums to embrace #museumselfies and other effects of social media promotion certainly encourages higher attendance and younger crowds, but I worry whether these audiences actually know how to really look closely at art . . . or anything in the physical world. Sure it's fun to share pictures of things you enjoy with your friends. But please look—and think—long and hard before you share or like that photo.

– Daniel S. Palmer (@ddotpalmer)

Curating the Curatorial: An International Summit

November 14, 2013 | Daniel S. Palmer

Okwui Enwezor, director, Haus der Kunst, Munich via @svacurate on Instagram

The description of the "Curating the Curatorial" conference at the School of Visual Arts on November 2, 2013, was short and to the point: to assemble "more than twenty prominent curators, museum directors, artists, and theorists to discuss the state of today's vastly expanded curatorial field." Of course, the list of attendees was much longer because it included many of the usual names from the developing canon of contemporary curators (Okwui Enwezor, Maria Lind, Daniel Birnbaum, Chus Martinez, and Jens Hoffmann, to list just a few). Surely the organizers knew that these speakers had addressed the day's topics countless times before. So, why did SVA feel it necessary to have these discussions yet again?

The answer almost certainly lies in the fact that this "international summit" was meant to celebrate the school's new master's degree program in curatorial practice. Accordingly, SVA was using the presenters' cachet to legitimize its dubious endeavor of profiting from "training" large numbers of students for curatorial jobs . . . that don't exist. This is indicative of an even more prevalent trend plaguing the field, which takes the form of sponsored conferences or talks that happen every few months, less to advance knowledge than for more self-interested reasons. Simply put, institutions seem to view curatorial conferences as worthwhile because they elicit the tacit approval of the field's celebrities. They also attract gawking fans, who help spread the word with photos and tweets about the curator-celebrities throughout the proceedings.

The growing popularity of curatorial conferences can provide insight as to why students would want to become the next Hans Ulrich Obrist, but, unfortunately, the superficial themes and excessive frequency of these panels mean that they are unlikely to produce original critical analysis about real, current issues. Throughout the (long) day at SVA, each of the participants offered eloquent remarks, but most of it had been said countless times before.

"Position" statements by Enwezor, Lind, and Birnbaum were insightful, but none of these well-known and well-published figures presented material that was revelatory in the context of their recent lectures or articles. The same was generally true for the rather broadly conceived panels (titled "Thinking Objects," "Remapping the Collection," and "Ecology of the Expanded Curatorial Field"). These also generally had an uninspired tone, and offered few real insights or true debates, as if participants lacked enthusiasm due to the perceived insignificance of the platform or its modest attendance numbers.

While scholarship and critical thought about curatorial practice had a sense of urgency in the 1990s and into the 2000s, the format and frequency of these conferences in recent years has lulled the major players into comfortable demonstrations of habit, self-promotion, or hagiography. (The same can probably be said about biennials, too.)

I was pleased, however, to hear some of the panelists challenge the role of "trade school" curatorial degrees, much to the dismay of the co-organizer of the summit and chair of the new program, Steven Henry Madoff. Perhaps if we can collectively encourage these dissenting voices, we can avoid falling into a pattern of solipsistic, self-congratulatory monotony. Certainly the day would have been more engaging and memorable if it had been crafted to critically evaluate the concept of "curatorial training" that it was meant to advertise.

This isn't to say that we can't keep addressing the same issues, or even hearing from the same figures. Rather, I am suggesting that we reexamine how, why, and how often we gather to talk about our practice. The stakes are clear: If we aren't able to innovate beyond this tedious "curatorial summit" model, then the field risks becoming increasingly divorced from its audience, until it reaches its ultimate crisis and sinks into irrelevance.

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