Reinterpreting Collections through Online Collaborative Participation

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> Lucy Van Pelt: Aren't the clouds beautiful? They look like big balls of cotton. I could just lie here all day and watch them drift by. If you use your imagination, you can see lots of things in the cloud's formations. What do you think you see, Linus?
> Linus Van Pelt: Well, those clouds up there look to me look like the map of the British Honduras [now Belize] on the Caribbean.
> Linus Van Pelt: That cloud up there looks a little like the profile of Thomas Eakins, the famous painter and sculptor. And that group of clouds over there...
> Linus Van Pelt: ...gives me the impression of the Stoning of Stephen. I can see the Apostle Paul standing there to one side.
> Lucy Van Pelt: Uh huh. That's very good. What do you see in the clouds, Charlie Brown?
> Charlie Brown: Well... I was going to say I saw a duckie and a horsie, but I changed my mind. (Charles Shultz, Peanuts, 1969)

Like virtually all other societal institutions, the museum has changed and is changing in many ways thanks to the Internet and Web 2.0 (Dicker 2010; Kelly 2010; Simon 2007; Weibel 2007). Whereas Web 1.0 was an easy transition that involved providing information in new digitally mediated ways, Web 2.0 is about facilitating interaction, democratizing participation, and ceding control to the audience. An example from the world of commerce is the amateur ad competition hosted each year by the PepsiCo Frito Lay Doritos brand. Consumers are invited to submit their video ads to a competition in which the winners will receive $1 million U.S., a showing on the U.S. Superbowl broadcast, and an invitation to work with a famous film producer. A set of the ads is placed on the Internet and anyone can vote for their favorite. The company takes a chance each year in fielding this competition, but results have been very successful and are among the most loved ads on this very prime time event. This is proving much more difficult for museums to embrace. It is still early in the ongoing digital revolution and many experiments are being conducted in museums around the world, stimulated by the new possibilities of Web 2.0. Some of these experiments are proving more successful than others. The particular experiments on which I will focus involve collaborative participation by visitors to museums – both the brick and mortar type and various online instantiations. In discussing these experiments I want to consider how museums can be more effective in engaging audiences, better represent the viewpoints of those whose works and culture are being presented, symbolically repatriate colonialist acquisitions, and cede power to patrons, artists and others who have a stake in real and virtual museum presentations.

Although André Malraux's (1967) forecast that print reproductions of art would replace museums has also not come about, the digital revolution may change things. For at least some of objects like music, film, and manuscripts, the idea of an original evaporates as every copy is a perfect copy. With 3D printing other objects from collections may also become perfectly replicable. As collected objects become more accessible virtually, access is democratized and there is a greater potential for public input and collaboration. My title may be misleading with regard to reinterpretation and collaboration. By "reinterpreting collections," I mean not only

reinterpreting the existing objects in a museum, but also reinterpreting what objects (including virtual objects) should be included in museums, as well as rethinking what a collection is and what a museum is. Full collaboration means the ability to have self-generated objects included in a museum collection or at least to have a voice in their selection and display. This is a fundamental challenge to museums and their self-appointed roles as gatekeepers, experts, and cultural guardians. The idea of a museum as an elite institution run by professional museum staff and a board of directors composed of prominent social leaders has clearly passed. The museum must compete with popular culture attractions for visitors, patrons, and survival. This need not mean that it must compete with similarly entertaining offerings or that it must totally invert the power structure from top down to bottom up, but it demands a greatly leveled playing field. Web 2.0 means that the museum comes to represent the community, indigenous groups, artists, or others whose work, history, culture, art, and science it claims to represent.

We might begin with the concept of collecting (Belk 2001; Pearce 1992), updated for a digital age. Gray (2006) suggests that collecting in an Internet age is composed of 1) discovery, 2) accumulation, 3) categorization, and 4) sharing and collaborating within online communities. Not only is the last stage potentially shared with the museum public, *each* stage offers an opportunity for public input and participation. Just as Wikipedia and open source software are collaborative accomplishments of volunteers, online collaborators can assist the museum collecting project in various ways. In the four sections that follow, I suggest ways in which the museum in the age of interactive media can enlist a broader public in each of Gray's stages of institutional collecting. There is an artificial sense of separation in discussing these stages, for they often go hand-in-hand and need not occur in this sequence. I also want to problematize the notion of the museum as a collection of objects for public edification. Both the things collected and the interactions between museum institutions and their publics are increasingly experiential, especially in the age of Web 2.0 (Pine and Gilmore 1999).

Discovery (and Creation)

Consider the Jewish Holocaust Museum in Melbourne Australia (http://www.jhc.org.au/). The museum was created by Polish survivors of the Holocaust in 1984 (Witcomb 2013). A large part of the museum's artifacts are comprised of the photos, journals, maps, and surviving clothing from the concentration and extermination camp victims. But more than this, the living survivors are represented through videotaped interviews, interactive displays, guides, and artworks drawing on the memories of the survivors who founded of the museum. That is, more than the objects in the museum's collection, there is a focus on the experiences of the survivors who have come to Australia and the experiences of the audiences who come to the museum, visit online, or are reached by the educational outreach programs of the museum. The links to the people behind these objects and their experiences are essential to the message, credibility, and impact of the museum. Moreover, guided by the museum founders, families, and volunteers, this is clearly a museum that draws upon a uniquely qualified group of non-professionals in order not only to source its material, but to enliven this material with the stories behind these objects and representations. The fact that some of the material in the museum consists of paintings, sculptures, and models made by these survivors to represent their experiences and emotions further illustrates the ability not only to find museum objects through collaborations, but also to create them collaboratively.

Weibel (2007) takes the idea of patrons discovering or creating collectible objects one step farther, especially in the context of online museums:

> We have to free the museum of time and place restrictions, which means that in the future, people should be able to come into contact with the museum and its works even when they're not in the museum; and this means something different than simply visiting a website. The museum must be available 24/7. An asynchronicity of sorts is necessary…. Beholders must have the opportunity to put their own artworks there. This means that the idea does not stop at simply transferring the existing museum structure online, but goes on to allow beholders to put their own artworks online and thus become artists and curators.

An analogy here is that of Wikipedia—a radical concept of crowdsourcing an encyclopedia, but a highly effective one. If someone posts inaccurate, biased, or misleading information on Wikipedia, others correct it. If the facts change, the entry can be updated immediately. And all of this takes place without engaging "experts," or employing a team of fact-checkers and editors, or having contracts, buildings, printing presses, and other components of the traditional infrastructure of encyclopedia creation (Lessig 2008; Shirky 2010). If this sounds like the museum as citizen's forum, that is exactly what Weibel (2007) is calling for.

In a still broader sense, citizens are creating their own de facto online museums through photo and video sharing sites like Flickr and YouTube, which have become archives of all things audio-visual (Belk 2011, forthcoming). With over 150 million videos, YouTube is more comprehensive than virtually any other archive of film material. And rather than just allowing consumers to source material, aided by the potential for mashups, digital sampling, and remixes these media offer collaborative, participative, and interactive public art and science. Even the ubiquitous parodies and send-ups on YouTube are a public dialogue with the art, music, and entertainment they parody, through undermining of the authority of the original (Paul 2008). As Robinson and Halle (2002) conclude:

> The interactive quality of digital formats has a unique characteristic that makes it different from other media advances. With digitization, not only are consumers able to access many genres of art easily and quickly through the medium of the Internet, they are also able to both produce their own works and take existing works and edit them using digital media tools. …not only is art consumed and understood through a new medium, it is then translated back online by users, a process that essentially digitizes the experience from start to finish in a process that is much more accessible than anything in the offline world (382).

Such activities are a form of crowdsourcing (Sunstein 2006; Surowiecki 2005) in which volunteer labor is enlisted to enable projects that would not otherwise be possible or would be prohibitively expensive with paid labor. If these ideas seem radical, Bruno (2011) points out that the Smithsonian Museum has been crowdsourcing since 1849. In that year Joseph Henry set up a network of volunteer weather stations. Within a decade their number grew from 150 to more than 600 throughout North America and Latin America and the project eventually evolved into the National Weather Service.

Such developments are not without their critics of course (e.g., Carr 2010; Keen 2008). Both criticisms and a more theoretical analysis of what is going on in crowdsourcing museum collections will be addressed following an consideration of the other three aspects of collecting in a digital age (Gray 2006).

Accumulation

Liebetrau (2010) suggests that the following types of objects be considered for digital collections: text, photographs (including photos of paintings and three dimensional objects),

graphics, data sets, harvested web sites, CAD/CAM creations, geo-spatial GIS, digital audio, music scores, digital moving images and video, animations, and games. We have good examples of collaborative accumulation for some of these types of objects in YouTube and Flickr. There is no institutional gatekeeper who regulates what can and cannot be posted other than removing copyrighted material when there is an objection from the copyright holder. The result on these and other photo and video sharing sites is a huge archive of material. Much of this material is trivial or of interest to only a select few. But in other cases the material can be interesting to many others in a variety of ways. It can be humorous, entertaining, or amazing, in which case its URL is more likely to be passed along to others and perhaps “go viral.” It can also show a degree of professionalism that allows its creator to cross-over into commercial media representatives like record and video companies. It can, individually or cumulatively be useful and valuable in the same way that Joseph Henry’s amateur weather stations proved useful to weather forecasting. An example of the latter is a recent analysis of YouTube videos that stigmatize fatness according to the gender of the person being stigmatized and the person ridiculing them (Hussin, Frazier, and Thompson 2011). Surprisingly they found that men were the targets of fat stigmatization twice as often as women. Unsurprisingly they found that men were also more than 10 times more likely to be the ones doing the ridiculing. This is just a small example, but research is increasing using such huge and collaboratively constructed archives.

The principle behind such accumulation is dramatically different than that of a traditional museum or library. Like the old library card catalog system, museums catalog each item with a few descriptors or metadata. On library cards the content might be author, title, publisher, place and date of publication, and a few key words about the content. Depending on the type of museum, the descriptors differ, but are not much more extensive than this for most of the museum’s holdings. Weinberger (2007) describes the use such methods as “sort on the way in” systems. By contrast with information on the Internet, the principle is “sort on the way out.” That is, given that today’s search engines can perform Boolean searches across the vast Internet virtually instantaneously, the accumulation principle is to let everyone put up anything and everything online and then to rely on search engines to sort it for relevance to a particular purpose. Rather than having to rely on a few key words and descriptors that fit on a library card, we can now do full text searches for any combination of words, quotations, phrases, and other such details that were unavailable or restricted to quite limited indices before the Internet.

The resulting accumulation of information on the Internet has not led to the information overload that many once feared. With search engines we also have less need of experts to catalog. This pertains both to deciding which objects enter the collection (they all should) and what metadata should be used to describe them. For example, the U.S. Library of Congress is building an archive of all public Twitter messages since its inception in 2006. As of October, 2012, the library was archiving more than half a billion tweets a day (Allen 2013). The collection has not yet been opened to researchers, but some expressed research topics range from “patterns in the rise of citizen journalism and elected officials’ communications to tracking vaccination rates and predicting stock market activity” (Allen 2013). When data from the archive begins to be related to many sorts of other archived data, we are truly in the arena of “Big Data.” The point is not that all or even most of these billions of tweets are going to be valuable, but that we cannot anticipate just how they may be valuable in the future. And given the relatively small cost of digital data storage today, it simply makes more sense to accumulate them all.

Categorization

But searching on the way out does not eliminate the need for cataloging. Full text Boolean searches work well for books and other textual objects like tweets, but they are not possible for two- or three-dimensional visual material, even if it exists in digital form. In this case, rather than curators attempting to classify an object, it is again possible to crowdsource. A photo put up online can invite anyone to add "tags" suggesting categories. There are several reasons for doing this. The one most commonly cited is that online viewers of a museum's catalog do not search for the same terms that curators use to index work in the museum's collection (Chun, Cherry, Hiwiller, Trant, and Wyman 2006; Trant 2006). This bottom-up "folksonomy" has even proven superior to top-down taxonomy when the U.S. Library of Congress put historic photos online and relied on the "wisdom of the crowd" for interpretation (Surowiecki 2005; Weinberger 2005).

The practice of inviting users to tag objects in museum collections also provides the benefit of greater audience engagement with the museum and its holdings (Trant 2006). As Cunningham and Masoodian (2006) point out, end-user searching of museum content is now more common than professionally mediated searches, both by the general public and by art historians. Tagging is also a highly personal activity that allows users to engage in meaning making through their own efforts rather than being offered meanings by others – a much less effective form of learning (Golder and Huberman 2005). The project called Steve.museum is a joint museum project and a demonstration of the unique power of user tagging and folksonomy through a number of museums including the Metropolitan Museum in New York, the Powerhouse Museum in Sydney, and The San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (see Trant 2006). However, as Geismar (2012) points out, the project is now largely defunct. As noted earlier, this is an age of experimentation in museums and not all experiments work out. Still the principles of tagging and folksonomy seem sound and promising, as readily demonstrated with their success in non-museum contexts like Flickr.

Sharing and Collaborating within Online Communities

Perhaps the most evident shift in museum collaborations is in online as well as offline collaborations with various communities. From the user point of view,

> You can visit the world's finest museums—and their gift shops—at midnight, in your pajamas. You can explore a once-in-a-lifetime multimedia exhibit that was mounted, years ago, in a faraway city. You can examine unique primary documents from private collections and restricted university archives, with a coffee at hand and a noisy toddler on your lap. (Have a comment or a question? The curator is often just a click away) (Richards 2008, 168).

There is a certain technological euphoria in such characterizations, and it is well to remember that earlier technologies were also greeted with waves of extreme optimism and extreme pessimism (e.g.,, Gitelman 2006; Gitelman and Pingree 2003; Jennings 1985; Standage 1998).

The combination of new technological possibilities and the representational crisis in ethnography (e.g., Clifford1988, 1997; Clifford and Marcus 1986) have had the effect of precipitating "the new Museology" or "museum 2.0," in which those whose cultures are being represented have a collaborative voice in curating the collection in a way that reappropriates control of self-presentation and weakens the authority of the museum in a post-colonial age. A number of examples can be found, especially in North America, Australia, and Oceania (e.g., Christen 2005, 2006; De Varine 1998; Erickson 2002; Hughes and Dallwitz 2007; Krmpotich and Anderson 2005; Srinvasan, Boast, Furner, and Becvar 2009; Veran and Christie 2007). In the ideal case, museums benefit from the insider perspective of indigenous culture bearers, while

these culture bearers share their knowledge as well as represent themselves in culturally sensitive ways.

Even when the indigenous people are in another part of the world, such sharing can also virtually repatriate collected objects. An example is the British Museum's online interactive presentation of an Australian bark shield obtained by Captain Cook in 1770. A remote audience of Aboriginal Australians performed an interpretive dance and discussion in response once the shield was "released from its glass case" where it was physically stored (Hogsden and Poulter 2012). A number of other examples of virtually repatriating collected objects can be found in Christen (2011), Hennessy (2009), and Peers and Brown (2003).

Problems in Collaboration

As the opening vignette from a Peanuts cartoon suggests, just because we get a more democratic representation doesn't necessarily mean that we get a better representation. Throwing the floodgates open to Web 2.0 interactive public participation or empowering indigenous communities to present their own stories within sacred grove of the museum results in a different truth, but not necessarily a truer truth (Simon 2010). Interactivity isn't always desired or appreciated, especially if the person is just seeking relaxation and contemplation (Liu and Shrum 2002; Huffington 2010). Even with the sensitively staged and technologically sophisticated National Museum of the American Indian, Isaac (2008) worries "that Native American material culture is not the central theme within these exhibits, instead media technology − such as LCD and television screens, and video projectors − has become the museum object" (Isaac 2008, 289). Similarly Srinivasan, et al. (2009) suggest that even with tagging and folksonomies, the technology and digital interface is disruptive, difficult to understand, and gets between the viewer and the object (see also Gell 1992, Sassoon 2005). Others worry that despite the best intentions, rather than forging new relationships with users, Web 2.0 merely replicates old ones and replaces old colonial practices with a new neocolonialism (e.g., Boast 2011; Geismar 2012).

There are technological difficulties with digital representation as well. At a practical level digital storage media, programming languages, and web links are forever changing and disappearing. With digital art this has made it virtually impossible to show once cutting-edge artworks that are now inoperable (Ryzik 2013; Smith 2004). And like Damien Hirst's preserved, but decayed and replaced, shark artwork, there is a question of whether a restored digital artwork is any longer the original artwork that was acquired (Thompson 2008). While Walter Benjamin (1936/1968) worried about the fate of the work of art and the loss of the artist's "aura" with mechanical reproduction means like film and photography, with digital reproduction another set of issues emerges when each copy is a perfect copy indistinguishable from the original. What happens to the authority of the museum and the claim of owning the "real thing" under these circumstances? But perhaps this is a modern hangup (Chenhall and Vance 2010, Conn 2009). There was a time when museums were happy to display plaster casts of famous sculptures from other countries (Belk forthcoming). But this practice lost legitimacy in the Twentieth Century. And so perhaps, in another reversal, will the distinction between originals and copies, art and artifacts, amateurs and professionals in the Twenty-first Century museum.

Now that it is possible to preserve anything and everything digitally aided by what Derrida (1995) called "archive fever," it is also possible that the former task of the museum to bring order to chaos will be abdicated in favor of folksonomy and that this will turn the institution into something little different from the carnival midway or Barnum's one-time New York museum of spectacles (Bennett 1995), which incidentally is itself being recreated digitally.

This fear of bastardizing and diluting the museum has been heard in other ways, not only as museum collections retreat to the basement to make way for gift shops and performance spaces (Conn 2009), but also as high fashion brands and other blatant shows of corporate sponsorship further colonize museum spaces. (Kimmelman 2005; Rosenbaum 2005; Silverman 1986). For example, in 2009, Louis Vuitton wrapped the entire exterior of the Hong Kong Museum of Art in its logo for three months, while a few years earlier the Salvatore Ferragamo exhibit at the Victoria and Albert Museum was cross-marketed with legitimizing museum posters in Ferragamo stores.

Conclusion

As I have noted, new technologies tend to evoke extreme reactions when they are new. It is only after we have come to accept them as a part of daily life that these polarized reactions disappear. And it is then that the new technologies have their greatest impact. Just as the telephone, telegraph, and television markedly changed the way we live, learn, and gain an understanding of the world around us, so are digital technologies markedly changing our appreciation of the world today. The digital revolution and the move to empower indigenous communities as well as consumers at large can only grow in the environment of the future.

But this doesn't mean adopting technology for technology's sake or collaborating for collaboration's sake. Rather it means recognizing that the museum of yesterday cannot long survive in a Web 2.0 world, much less in whatever the future may bring. When anyone can start their own online museum, when there are such a large number of educational, entertaining, and useful online sites vying for our attention, and when so many grass level groups are demanding the opportunity to represent themselves, the non-interactive and non-collaborative museum itself becomes a fossil like the Pitt-Rivers Museum at Oxford University; historically interesting, but a mummified artifact of the past.

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