
MUSEUM COLLECTING IN THE AGE OF VIRTUALITY¹

ANNE BRITT YLVISÅKER, SENIOR CURATOR AT THE ART MUSEUMS OF BERGEN,
HEAD OF THE COLLECTION DEPARTMENT AT WEST NORWAY MUSEUM OF DECORATIVE ART
aby@kunstmuseene.no

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The great collecting phase of museums is over, Hooper-Greenhill proclaimed in 2001², and this corresponds with the noticeable turn from exclusively physical objects in the revised ICOM's Code of Ethics from 2004, also comprising our intangible heritage. My paper is motivated by the feeling that the idea of traditional collecting as our *raison d'être* is under pressure, both internal from the museums themselves, but also from the art world represented by my museum, replacing durable materials with ephemerals.

Virtual collecting, defined by Werner Schweibenz in 2004 as making a *logically related collection of digital objects with no real space*³, seems to be an adequate response to these contributions. But the idea of virtual collecting is also exceedingly demanding, raising a multitude of questions, both fundamentally and technically, and the questions I want to address the next 15 minutes are:

- 1. Can a virtual collection really turn out to be a rational alternative, perceiving the objects as equivalent and valuable as the "real" objects already collected?**
- 2. And is it even a chance to make the experience of a virtual collection exceeding the traditional reception?**

¹ My project is a part of the project *Creating Artistic Value – a Research Project on Rubbish and Readymades, Art and Ceramics*, managed by the Bergen National Academy of the Arts. This is also a part of the Research Council of Norway's program *Assigning Cultural Values*, running 2008-2012.

² Hooper-Greenhill, E. (2001): *Cultural Change in Museums: Professional issues, taking the lead. University of Leicester Department of Museum Studies: Online Papers*, University of Leicester 2001. Localised March 2008/ June 2009 at:
www.arkade.aub.aau.dk/links/60/610/index.tkl?tkl_search_scope=entire?query=&query1=museumsh%C3%B8jskolen&query2=&field_query1=term&field_query2=&type=&op1=

³ Schweibenz, W: *The Development of Virtual Museums. ICOM NEWS* no. 3:2004. Underlined by me.

Before proceeding, I will stress that in my reading objects in a virtual collection do *not* have any *physical* counterparts in a museum collection, but are representations *based on* physical objects; this as opposed to both objects *born digital* and *digitized databases* of physical collections. What I am really approaching is a kind of mixed reality (MR), where the real and the virtual objects are intertwined in a hybrid museum collection intended to be seen as an entity.

I have chosen to use this talk as a way of framing the issues of presence, distance and value, which I feel are significant to explore the idea of apprehending virtual collecting.

PRESENCE AND DISTANCE

As a museum being in the possession of “the real thing”, we often present this as a unique quality separating us from corresponding institutions. But what constitutes this quality? When Walter Benjamin in the 1930s introduced his concept of aura, he described the phenomenon as a special quality belonging to unique works of art; the sense of the ‘*here-and-now*’ that each work possesses, making the viewer simultaneously perceiving the *distance* to the history of the production and transmission of the art work, which can in turn evoke an attitude of reverence.⁴ *The physical presence* of the art work seems to generate this significant sense of *distance* between the art work and the viewer, and therefore generates aura.

Benjamin also argues that media of reproductions, as film and photography, diminish or destroy the aura attached to the earlier art, because the reproduction do *not* hold the uniqueness and thereby the distance essential to achieve aura.

How does this affect the idea of a virtual collection?

DISTANCE AND REALITY

In his essay Benjamin proclaims museums to be the self declared guardians of the auratic art.

Old art does not need museums, Boris Groys argues, because they already hold a distinct distance to real life. On the contrary, he emphasizes the museum object’s distance to “real life” as a necessity for evolving an art scene characterized by the *lack of visible differences from the trivial everyday life*. History, he says, is a dynamic process, editing the boundaries between life and death; between what is new and what is already filed – and the museums hold the position as editors. In museums ordinary objects are promised a difference they do not enjoy in reality, referred to as

⁴ Walter Benjamin: *Kunstverket i reproduksjonsalderen*, Oslo 1991, p. 24

“*the difference beyond difference*”.⁵ Objects are promised eternity, but the “real things” do not belong to “reality” any longer.

Also Michael Fehr stresses the content of museums as a reality different from that of which we are a part. He makes a distinction between actuality, which is fundamentally escaping human influence, and different kind of realities, which can be grasped with our senses and our brains to form more or less conceivable constructions⁶. Even felt like actuality, both empirically experienced reality and fiction are relative and fragmentary, and they also have a dialectical relationship to each other. The difference between the meaningless, *physical* characteristics of an image, as canvas and oil paint, and the meaningful image can only emerge in the perception by a beholder, which in turn presupposes the beholder’s active ability to reproduce a fictive, but recognizable reality. Without using the term *virtual* reality himself, the resemblance to other realities described by Fehr is evidently there, being just as real or fictional – with their equivalent distance to actuality.

AUTHENTICITY AND AUTHORITY

A virtual object is a representative, characterized by its existence whenever brought up on a computer, and opposite: When the computer is shut down, the virtual object does not exist. Its presence is depending on the on or offs of the computers, and correspondingly the virtual objects can emerge anywhere or nowhere. What about Benjamin’s auratic “*here and now experience*” with its “*unique appearance of distance*” as substantial to our perception of authenticity and authority of objects?

If aura is supposed to be an integrated part of the physical object, the materiality of the object ought to be significant. And in decorative arts represented by my museum, exploring materiality and tactile qualities has been the main issue in the 20th century: In history of art we even refer to tactility as a distinctive quality of a painting. This idea can be traced back to Bernard Berenson, who in 1896 claimed the paintings are transferring tactile values to retinal impressions, giving the viewer the *illusion of touching* the painted objects, corresponding to previous experiences.⁷ The viewer is predisposed to read, feel and appreciate tactile qualities which aren’t *really* there.

Gérard Genette has a fairly similar approach, when he proclaims an object having two identities, the material piece itself, and the awareness of its existence, experienced indirectly through: “*everything that can provide more or less precise knowledge*”

⁵ Boris Groys: *On the New*. Localised 24.06.2008 at www.uoc.edu/artnodes/eng/art/groys1002/groys1002.html

⁶ Michael Fehr: Art-Museum-Utopia: Five themes on an Epistemological Construction Site. Jörn Rüsen, Michael Fehr and Thomas W. Rieger: *Thinking Utopia*, New York/ Oxford 2005, p. 169-173

⁷ Localised 06.07.09 at: www.encyclopedia.com/topic/Bernard_Berenson.aspx

of a work, whenever the work itself is definitively or temporarily absent”⁸. The representative is displaying some, but not every characteristic of the original object, and the extent of equivalence with the original will distinguish copy, reproduction and documentation, provoking various art experiences, *not depending* on the presence of the *real* object.

Even the authenticity of an object is not static, the experts from the DigiCULT program conclude – it has to be approached from the contextual point of view. Authenticity appears to be about the original, but can also imply *being faithful* to the original⁹. Nor is the value of an object inherent or permanent, but is progressively defined – and redefined – by those authorized to do so, Michael Thompson declares in his rubbish theory¹⁰. This leans upon what Susan M. Pearce marks as one of the characteristics of museum collections: Some degree of belief that the whole is somehow more than the sum of its parts¹¹. Objects are transformed and made valuable firstly by being selected, and then by becoming part of a collection, contextualizing and being contextualized by the others. Value, authenticity – and aura – are relative qualities depending on contexts and authorizations. If this is an appropriate approach, virtual collecting should not be significantly different.

VIRTUAL PRESENCE

Benjamin never identified the end of aura, Bolter and his research group argues, but rather described an ongoing crisis, in which the experience of aura is alternately called into question and reaffirmed¹². The “*tension between far and near – between the unapproachable and the approachable both at the psychological level and at the cultural and economic level – in fact ensures that aura as our collective or individual reaction to art can never simply disappear*”.

They suggest a simplified definition of aura as: “*the personal and cultural significance that an object or place holds for an individual or a group of viewers*”, proclaiming this to be usable also for mixed realities, in which the physical, which is unique, *lends uniqueness* to the experience.

⁸ Gérard Genette: *The Work of Art: Immanence and Transcendence*. Itchaca and London 1997, p. 218. Quotation from Line Daatland: *Det virtuelle kunstmuseet. En studie av formidlingsteoretiske og estetiske problemstillinger*, Post-graduate thesis, University of Bergen, 2001.

⁹ DigiCULT1: Integrity and Authenticity of Digital Cultural Heritage Objects. August 2002, p. 13

¹⁰ Michael Thompson: The filth in the way. S. Pearce (ed.): *Interpreting Objects and Collections*. London/New York 1994/reprint 1996.

¹¹ Susan M. Pearce: *Museum Objects and Collections A cultural Study*. Leichester 1992, p. 7.

¹² Jay David Bolter, Blair MacIntyre, Maribeth Gandy and Petra Schweitzer: New Media and the Permanent Crisis of Aura. 2006. Localised 17.03.09 at www.andredeak.com.br/pdf/newmedia_crise_aura_bolter.pdf

Presence in virtual reality can be described as either the feeling of being in an environment different from the physical one, or as absence of mediation that makes the user to forget about technology – a condition of transparency. My colleague Line Daatland emphasizes in her thesis that a digital construction holds particular qualities, eliciting a *new kind of experience* far beyond Benjamin's reproductions¹³.

In my research I will be working with the game engineer Fredrik Sundt Breien from the company Turbo Tape Games, exploring the new kind of experience related to virtual collection in augmented reality, characterized by its dynamic interactions, possibility of different perspectives, and what Schweibenz refers to as connectedness – an interrelated and interdisciplinary presentation of information.¹⁴

Schweibenz' stance is that virtual museums can never replace a museum, but only play the role as a mediator between the museum and the public. Hopefully we will be able to frame a niche where the virtual and "real" objects *together* are enriching each other in a way exceeding traditional reception.

¹³ Daatland, op.cit.

¹⁴ This definition is originally an appurtenance of Glen Hoptman. James Andrews and Werner Schweibenz: The Kress Study Collection Virtual Museum Project: A New Medium for Old Masters, Version 12/03/1996. Printed in *Art Documentation*, Spring Issue 1998, Vol 17 No 1, pp. 19-27. Localised 14.03.2008 at: www.is.uni-sb.de/projekte/sonstige/museum/kress_virtual_museum.html, part III, paragraph 8