Seminar: New technologies and the art museum

How has new technology and new models transformed the experience of the contemporary museum visitor?

Changing times call for new-found stories along with creative ways of narrating them. Museums have seen penetration of technology since the 20th Century. Automated models have accelerated efficiency while expanding the reach of museums. These models consequently have been an incredible support for enlarging the scope of interpretation and interaction, has proven to be the fastest way to empathise with the audience. By undertaking quick surveys and visitor feedback, museums accumulate data to understand needs to eventually deliver for audience comfort and pleasure. The most sought after curator of contemporary times, Hans Ulrich Obrist states, *"The very idea of an exhibition is that we live in a world with each other, in which it is possible to make arrangements, associations, connections and wordless gestures, and, through this mise en scène, to speak."* With this statement, it is made certain that the grander scheme for museums has dramatically transposed. Museums no longer are seen through the orthodox lens of formal gathering spaces for the elite, rather social spaces to instigate a sense of 'belonging together' [1]. Looking closely at case studies, it is possible to see how this purpose is better achieved by the use of technology.

The first case worth examining would be that of a design installed by a company called Local Projects led by Jake Barton, which is inherently a group of multidisciplinary artists, coders and designers, with an end goal of using strategy and design to induce a magnificent user experience for museum visitors. They do so by integrating physical design and digital media. Their project for the National September 11 Memorial and Museum in New York, called 'A Museum of Collective Memory' is one that envelopes members of the audience. With the use of technology, it prompts to recreate the haunting experiences of victims, each installation sending chills down the visitors' spine [2].

At the entrance of the museum, the audience is welcomed by an audio tapestry. The curtain-like installations accompanied by accurately synchronised echoes of 417 people narrating their memories of when they first heard of the devastation, greets the visitor as they navigate past the fabrics resembling nothing less than ghosts of the fallen concrete structures. The voices heard are of those who encountered the attacks from afar, on phone calls or via news reports from all over the world. Walking past the introductory vertical layers of textile, visitors see many such instances in the museum where they are confronted with realities of the attack, rather than traditional didactics of texts overflowing with facts or figures.

Visitors get to explore recorded interviews of to-scale American national figures who address convoluted questions about 9/11. The holograms are of personalities such as Donald Rumsfeld, head of the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) who played a vital part in crowd management, post-attack. Incorporated adjacent to the room of recordings is another room known to be a space to reflect. This 'reflection room'

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[1] Museums in the 15th century were places of contemplation. The word museum was equivalent to a 'temple', of muses. They were used as a private study or for philosophical discourse accessible to a limited number invitees. It was only in 1683 when the first private Ashmolean museum was open to public. Since then, museum concepts have been remodelled, no longer being looked at as just repositories. Contemporary museums are forums for communities, seen as a place for social exchange — of ideas, cultures and dialogue.

[2] Patrick Pfanner from Sandusky Register (News) explains how 9/11 museum leaves a lasting impact, calling his experience "somber, beautiful and chilling all at once". During his visit, he mentions his sight fall upon a girl, about 11 years of age, sobbing beyond control. He explains how she couldn't have been alive at the time of the attacks and was responding solely to what she understood of the museum data put forth. Looking at this, he also states how an emotion of anger triggered in him. His statements justify how brilliantly technology could induce the emotions of horror, remorse and anger, making the visitor experience one of a kind.

allows visitors to add their narratives by employing recording booths, in turn encouraging them to actively build the archives of the museum. Curators integrate these additional responses as part of future exhibits.

Local projects, with the aid of radical technology and progressive design thinking, challenged the formal quality of the museum, disregarding conventional storytelling methodology of institutions, instead turned to navigate it towards a continual, Tetris-like system, whereby each visitor could leave a personalised account of the event within the museum. Digitisation of means, then, allow osmosis of information, emotions, experiences between the institution and the audience. Therefore, using technology to transform museums into a source of sensorial time-travel while prompting spatial inhibitors to have an *immersive and additive* experience.

Towards the end of their September 11 Museum journey, there is a 34-foot projection showcasing spots on the world map, indicative of the birthplace of 4 million articles that were published about the event. These 'spots' present plurality of views and are constantly updated by museum curators. Prior to exiting, the audience may leave a note of expression for the victims or the museum.

Another project of the Local Projects, channels technology to visibly morph not just physical interiors of the museum but also psychological and somatic behaviours of museum visitors. The technological model is called 'Body Metrics' and is an integral part of the Tech Museum of Innovation in San Jose, California. The facility provides each visitor with a wearable device, similar to the looks of a plastic hairband with an extra piece protruding from the left ear to the centre of the forehead. Different from devices such as FitBits which track basic changes, this device is responsible for tracking more complex physical and emotional changes that take place in the subject while wearing it. Using an electrophysiological monitoring method, in which electrodes are introduced in the vicinity of the human scalp, the device tracks heart rate, loudness, muscular tension and such, to document muscular and neurological activity. Sorting data post documentation, the device then realises the visitor's emotional and physical state. This leading-edge device thus is tailored to each individual, making their museum experience a *unique* one. It allows smart guidance such as recommendations for certain exhibitions which may be suitable for a particular physical or mental mood. The device sends cues to the user such as 'to be talkative' or 'to be chill' followed by suggesting an installation they might like to explore. In addition, it informs users of what the installation is about and it's location. One example given by Local Projects while explaining their innovation is that of the NASA space-walk which is supposed to be a great exhibition to visit when a person is willing to test their focus.

Another important function of the device is to empathise with the proximity to other people. It recognises that users may not be alone. The documentation of the device for each individual can then stir competition as well as record comparisons between people, making the user experience an *interactive* one [3]. The device instigates interaction first between visitor—staff, while the staff member explains the working of the device, then an interaction between device—user to finally, initiate interactive conversations and competition between contemporaries. Technology, in this case, seems to fuel the idea of museums as forums and/or laboratories, where there is a prominent exchange in dialogue as audience acts as a subject to themselves; moreover, being subjects of the museum. At the end of the museum visit, the audience is presented with a pool of data which states a range of comparisons, changes in their emotional and physical wellness, accurately stating visitor high points and lows throughout their journey. This information tends to stir up

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[3] On surveying popular tourist website Tripadvisor, it was seen that many reviews positively reflect on the incorporation of technology within museums. Visitors, both young and old, seem enjoy the hands-on experience. Specifically, pointing to the IMAX facility offered by the museum, audience reviewed their visit as 'exciting', 'thrilling' and 'best in San Jose', proving The Tech Museum to be a spot they would drop in on multiple times as well as recommend to others.

social conversation while conscious direction towards self-realisation. In this manner, museums also divert a slice of audience attention from the objects in display, to the audience itself. This allows for contemporary museums to have a *transformative* experience for its audience. The device informs users of their distinctive biometric signature.

Recently, with the infamous outbreak of unprecedented times due to COVID-19, there is no debate that technology has been nothing less than saving grace for art, it's people and it's places. Museums have succumbed to digital media to conduct viewings and sales, resorting to modes of communication such as ebooks, podcasts, webinars and so on. With the arts in lockdown, some new festivals sprouted online, for instance The Social distancing festival; while others which once looked forward to unleash their splendour 'in the flesh' on the international market, soon had to be buried in *virtual* ways.

One of the first festivals to take up virtual stage was Art Basel, Hong Kong. The cancellation of the art fair steered an immediate shift to online viewing rooms. It was this technologically driven opportunity that slightly toned down the challenges faced by galleries on account of the standstill, giving museums a chance to survive. After the proposal of a virtual shift from Art Basel, 235 out of 242 planned exhibitors were on board. With catalogues set in place, carefully curated viewing rooms could be accessed, most showcasing precise details of the usually printed labels seen in galleries, at instances even more.

Certain galleries decided to declare prices on the online platform which turned sales transparent. Art Basel HK's declared audience was about 250,000 people this year. While last year, visitation figures oscillated somewhere around 88,000. The virtual fair subtracted factors affecting viewing such geographical boundaries, social or economic hesitation, temporal concerns as well as the peculiar under confidence that follows of not knowing enough, creating heightening *inclusion* in the realm of art. Similar benefits are seen in the 3D virtual tours galleries now offer, which permit an art enthusiast sitting in Osaka, Japan to visit a piece of architecture housing art in Düsseldorf, Germany on a single click.

Apart from physical galleries moving online, there is also an emergence of a new genre of museums which completely rely on world wide web. An example of the latter is Acute Art gallery which shrinks the museum into a smart phone-sized establishment. The gallery portfolio has accommodated some of the biggest names of Contemporary Art including Anish Kapoor, Ai Wei Wei, Marina Abramović et al. The gallery provides its audience with a *redefining experience* as it recreates real-life works in a virtual environment using real-time rendering (VR), birthing an entirely experimental art form [4]. An exhibition to be looked at closely would be that of KAWS Expanded Holiday Companion. It started as an exhibition of a large-scale work of augmented reality (AR), situated at 12 hotspots all over the world including Melbourne where it hung over the entrance of NGV, International on St Kilda Road. The concept seemed to follow traces of the very popular, buzz-worthy game Pokemon Go, to create a new niche for art. Soon, for its promotion, Acute Art advertised one 'free to download' Companion for everyone who had access to the Acute Art mobile phone application, which would be followed by multiple paid downloadables. Works of KAWS being some of the most popular across the world were now floating in homes of everyone which opened the museum audience to a *novel* experience. Many Companions are now priced up to $10,000, turning AR sculptures into money-making collectables.

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[4] In his article 'A Virtual KAWS Exhibition Tests the Market for Augmented Reality Art', Justin Kamp on Artsy sheds light on Acute Art's democratising phenomenon of AR and VR art experiences. Using the same, Acute Art has previously initiated projects such as an augmented balloon-like sculpture by Jeff Koons, a virtually intimate performance by Marina Abaramović to now, bringing the very popular KAWS within cities and even homes of people, from all over. The total downloads seen right after the launch of KAWS Expanded Holiday were estimated to be 100,000 which shot up drastically post the COVID-19. The numbers are approximated to 250,000 downloads.

It is clear that technology is now an essential part of daily functioning, not too different from vehicles which may not be food, water or shelter, but a *must-have* of the age. Although, it may be left on personal perspectives whether if one deems it to be a 'necessary evil' or looks at it as a brand-new engine for opportunity generation; for art businesses, it is a path which can not be left unexplored. Especially considering the booming Contemporary Art market, which is incredibly elastic and rarely needs to withstand remorse market conditions. Today, art needs ever-changing ways of presentation and communication. It is the need of recent times to make ideas accessible and collaborative, which is easiest by using digital mediums such as electronic mail, social media and telecommunication platforms specialising in video chats and voice calls. Furthermore, even during the deteriorated times of a pandemic, it is seen that technology solely functions as a way to reach out for museums to their audience and vice-versa. Therefore, new technology and new models transform, fantastically, the experience of the contemporary museum visitor.

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