

Book Review

Robert R. Janes:***Museums in a Troubled World. Renewal, Irrelevance or Collapse?*****London & New York: Routledge. 2009.****Beryl Graham & Sarah Cook:*****Rethinking Curating. Art after New Media.*****Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press. 2010.****Fiona Cameron & Sarah Kenderdine (eds.):*****Theorizing Digital Cultural Heritage. A Critical Discourse.*****Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press. 2007/2010.****Ross Parry (ed.):*****Museums in a Digital Age.*****London & New York: Routledge. 2010.****Lois Tallon & Kevin Walker (eds.):*****Digital Technologies and The Museum Experience.******Handheld Guides and Other Media.*****New York: AltaMira Press. 2008.****Nina Simon:*****The Participatory Museum.*****Santa Cruz, CA: Museum 2.0. 2010.****Kjetil Sandvik**MedieKultur 2011, 50, 185-192

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This review will present six books in which various researchers address the challenges that digital media/technology, as well as the paradigms of globalisation and experience economy in which the digital media are embedded, present to museums as agenda makers and curators of cultural heritage. Digital media with their focus on user participation and co-creation constitute a challenge not only to museums communicating art, history and other types of cultural heritage, but to all types of institutions, organisations and businesses. And especially with the emergence and vast (and fast) spread of so-called social or participatory media and Web 2.0 technologies, this challenge increasingly invites us to rethink communication all together. The open-endedness of these media and media technologies, the radical possibilities for dialogic processes, collaboration and co-creation when it comes to both user-generated media content and user-centred or user-driven design and innovation vouch for (re)thinking communication as a dynamic process, which – instead of a processes transporting information/media content from a provider/producer to a consumer/user – is regarded as something that is continuously developing and constantly changing as a result of a communication format characterised by collaboration, participation and co-creation.

The books reviewed here address in various ways these new challenges presented to museums concerning administering and communicating cultural heritage. In the same way as Web 2.0 applications are developed in dialogue with their users, allowing the user to play a role as a *producer*, as a collaborative, participating and co-creating party, the communication designs used for curating exhibitions using digital technology (and relating to experience economy as a paradigm) need to be open-ended and open to change, to dialogue and interplay between the exhibition and its users. This presents a variety of challenges to the museum in that consumers become users and then even participants and co-creators, information becomes communication and communication again becomes dialogue, and finally: the museums are challenged to shift from static standards to open and dynamic solutions in order to maintain or reclaim their status as agenda setting and culturally significant institutions.

Museums in a Troubled World. Renewal, Irrelevance or Collapse? may be read as a lengthy and well-argued political manifesto for museums in a world facing severe challenges. The fundamental question posed in this book is to determine which social institutions exist to address the challenges the world is facing, recognising – as the author puts it – the growing ineffectiveness of government bureaucracies and the wreckage left by the corporate profit agenda. Robert R. Janes, museum consultant and Editor-in-Chief of *Museum Management and Curatorship*, identifies museums as one of the few social institutions with vast potential for proactive and effective community engagement, for the presentation of diversity and alternatives and the nurturing of reflection. Analysis of primarily museums in the US and Canada demonstrates, however, that this is not a role that many museums play even though the introduction of new architectural structures as well as new technology supposedly should improve the museums' ways of communicating to and engaging with their audi-

ences. Using an interdisciplinary approach combining anthropology, ethnography, museum studies and management theory as well as an insider's perspective, the book performs a constructive examination of what is wrong with contemporary museums and explains, for example, how museums tend to make use of existing mental maps restraining them from rethinking and representing the past, present and future in new ways. Furthermore, an overall tendency to focus on consumption and entertainment and a "marketplacification" of the museum imply that museums, instead of being critical, are embracing the very values and logics of relentless consumption that underlies the very planetary difficulties of today. Janes argues that museums need to adapt to the circumstances (as they have been able to do throughout the centuries) and develop into a new breed of museums grounded in a consciousness of the world around them and play the role of being institutions for challenging the global discussions on, e.g., climate change and environmental degradation and asking – and engaging audiences in asking – troubling questions regarding the state of affairs and the desired development in the years to come. Museums should be about empowerment, trying to enable people to participate in making decisions in our so-called democracy, and its political polemic aside, the book provides advice in both pragmatic and constructive ways on how this may be done and as such the book is an important contribution to ways to challenge and go beyond conventional museum thinking, which also is a core issue in the other books which will be reviewed here.

Rethinking Curating. Art after New Media explores the characteristics distinctive to new media art (that is, art which in broad terms makes use of digital technologies), including its immateriality and its questioning of time and space, and relates them to contemporary art forms such as video art, conceptual art, socially engaged art and performance art. Even though the use of the term "new media", understood as digital media, may appear somewhat out-dated in a book published in 2010 (the new media of today are not digital media as such, but rather are specific types of media: mobile, pervasive, ubiquitous, social and participatory), the questions put forward regarding the ontology of new media art and its challenges to curating exhibitions are still highly relevant. The book presents extensive discussions on this topic, based on the authors' own experiences as curators and on a huge amount of theory (the book contains a thirty page list of references!), and we are presented with numerous examples of artworks and exhibitions which illustrate how new media art redefine the roles of curators and audiences. The book is divided into two parts, both dealing with digital media's influence on art. The first part examines the work of art "after new media", from both a historical and theoretical perspective, discussing the hype of the new and the evolution of new media art as well as specific characteristics of new media artworks concerning time, space and materiality and the question of interactivity and audience participation. To some degree this part of the book does not provide us with that much new insight: even though the book's main question regarding the methods for curating in the light of new media art is asked in every chapter, the discussions and analyses here have been

previously presented to us by authors such as Christian Paul. The second part, however, dealing with contexts, practices and processes for rethinking curating, successfully presents and discusses new models for curating and modes of curatorial practice – from working in a museum to creating platforms for engagements to curating a festival or running a lab to adopting modes from the practice of artists – which match the structure of new media art. This part focuses on how the characteristics of new media art force the curator to cross boundaries between roles and between departments within an institution or even beyond the institutional frames when it comes to networked artworks and how curating even may imply the “death of the curator” as exhibitions are allowing audience participation as well as co-creation and thus putting the audience in the curator’s place.

Theorizing Digital Cultural Heritage. A Critical Discourse and Museums in a Digital Age both present a most useful collection of articles when it comes to discussing, analysing and/or professionally handling the challenges digital media present museums and the communication of cultural heritage. The former contains contributions written especially for this anthology, while the latter consists of a broad selection of articles which already have been published on the subject, but for the first time collected into one useful reader. In *Museums in a Digital Age* we find groundbreaking articles such as Lev Manovich’ “Database as Symbolic Form”, Erkki Huhtamo’s “On the Origins of the Virtual Museum, and Manuel Castells’ “Museums in the Information Era: Cultural Connectors of Time and Space”. All in all there are 43 articles divided into 7 parts addressing important issues such as: information as a combination of data, structure and meaning and physical space in relation to computer mediated (virtual) spaces, presenting the concept of museums without walls from Malraux’ imaginary museum to the virtual museum. Access to and use of museums is discussed in terms of ability, usability and connectivity, as well as in terms of communication, interactivity and learning. We also find useful articles on authenticity, authority and trust, such as Clifford Lynch’s “Authenticity and Integrity in the Digital Environment”, which analyses how digitisation of museums and the museum object challenges our conception of documents and artefacts and their legal, social, cultural, and historical contexts and roles. As such, for the scholar working with and teaching communication of cultural heritage in the age of digital technology, this reader is a must.

Theorizing Digital Cultural Heritage contains articles by a variety of experts, which offers a critical and theoretical appraisal of the use of digital media by cultural heritage institution, thus rectifying the lack of critical theory applied to studies examining the challenges of using digital media in the research, preservation, management, interpretation, and representation of cultural heritage. Important issues such as ontological transformations when historical objects are digitised are addressed in the first part of the book. “Replicants/Object Morphologies”, while the second part. “Knowledge Systems and Management: Shifting Paradigms and Models” addresses the problems and potential embedded in digital com-

munication systems providing heavy information access and possibilities for user influence and new localised, personalised and constructivist learning styles. Finally, the third part of the book, "Cultural Heritage and Virtual Systems", takes a closer look at the intersection of cultural heritage research, documentation and interpretation, as it is mediated through the techniques and modalities of virtual reality, thus addressing the implication of museum exhibitions being remediated as computer generated texts, graphics, objects and spatial structures for the user to be immersed in.

Digital Technologies and the Museum Experience focuses on the potential of mobile media for designing museum exhibitions. It explores in a most enlightening way how mobile devices and digital technology as such may be used to enhance and transform the visitor's experience of the museum, and examines the ways in which these technologies may extend the museum's ability to invest the world with meaning beyond the museum's own walls, by inviting visitors to contribute to the museum's meaning-producing activity. This is being done not just by looking at the state-of-the art of present day use of media and communication technologies in museums, but also by adding an important historical context to the analysis. The use of media as a means for enriching the museum experience, for providing the museum visitor with augmentary information in, e.g., the shape of catalogues, has been known since the dawn of museums, but what digital media contributes is a means for creating personalised museum experiences by introducing handheld guides and other types of mobile media technology such as mobile phones, digital cameras, MP3-players and PDAs used for interaction and learning. As pointed out in the opening chapter of the book, the first handheld museum guide, the Stedelijk Museum's Short-Wave Ambulatory Lectures (1952), was designed with a vision of the (at that time) new media's potential for facilitating an experience individually controllable by each visitor, which was content rich, was personal to them, was available at any time, and which suited learning styles not served by catalogues, text panels, or labels. This type of customisable, available-at-any-time and – with the introduction of mobile network technology – also available-at-any-place mediated museum experience results in a museum visit that no longer begins when a person enters the building, nor need end when she or he leaves. The museum's physical space is but one site – albeit a privileged one – in the continuum of the visitor's imaginative – and we may add, mediated and augmented – universe. The use of information technologies in museum exhibits is by no means of recent date or even necessarily tied to digital technology. Nor is the idea of the augmentation of museum experiences through digital technology something that has surfaced with the introduction of mobile devices, such as, tablet computers and mobile phones. At for example MIT and its Media Laboratory, researchers have been experimenting with and theorising augmented reality and interactive spaces in the context of, e.g., museum exhibits since the early 1990s. But – as the book underlines – in the last 10 years the amount of projects and systems being developed and research being conducted within the field of museum communication have increased considerably; projects which

have focused on augmentation strategies. An example is the *History Unwired* project, developed by MIT in collaboration with University of Venice and presenting the tails of historic Venice in the shape of a walking tour through one of Venice's more hidden neighbourhoods and making use of location-aware multimedia phones and PDAs. This and other projects have over the past 10 years explored the potential and challenges of digital and especially mobile media in museums and how the new media technology both enhance, enrich and expand the museum experience in ways which may be said to realise the concept of *museums without walls* put forward by André Malraux in 1967.

While the other books reviewed here address digital media and museums from a more theoretical and/or general point of view, *The Participatory Museum*, by museum consultant and exhibit designer Nina Simon, presents a practical guide to working with community members and visitors to make cultural institutions, such as museums, more dynamic, relevant, and essential places. By weaving together innovative design techniques and case studies, the book stands out as an important useful text, especially regarding participatory practice. Through 11 lengthy chapters, the book discusses important principles of museum communication designs, which in various ways focus on audience participation and how this implies that the audience is placed at the centre of the communication design and its members are treated as individuals. The book criticises how many museums tend to make exhibition designs which are only partly focusing on important principles of participation, such as dialogue and creative expression, shared learning and co-creative work. Often the design – although making use of, e.g., mobile phones as a creative multimedia tool – settles on a “traditional museum way of communicating” in which the institution provides content for visitors to consume. With her emphasis on museum visitors as contributors, collaborators and co-creators, Nina Simon takes a starting point in the so-called second generation experience economy. Whereas the focus in the first generation of experience economy (Pine and Gilmore) is on the design of experiences, the second generation experience economy, suggested by, e.g., Boswijk et al.,¹ focuses on the creative dialogue between supplier and customer instead of the supplier deciding what the customer wants. It builds upon communication as a sharing of knowledge and the idea that value creation no longer takes place within the company but is created in the individual. The development of meaningful-experience concepts cannot take place without the direct participation of the (potential) customer. Nina Simon is obviously influenced by this way of thinking, i.e., the relationship between provider/producer and consumer/user in her descriptions and analyses of how communication in museums should be designed. Designing museum exhibitions in the age of digital media is not just about providing mediated content to be searched and interacted with as layers of information augmenting the traditional museum artefact or object-oriented exhibitions: the exhibitions should be creative and game-like spaces for sharing and producing knowledge, for examining and discussing topics like what is history, what is cultural heritage, in playful ways which are adjusted and developed according to the wants and

needs of the visitors as participants, collaborators and co-creators. The point put forward in *The Participatory Museum* is that there are lots of creative, community-minded people who are ready to visit, contribute to, and participate with cultural institutions which support their interests. While many of them explore their passions in online communities, there is a large potential for them to come together in physical spaces organised around stories and objects that matter to them. These physical spaces, the book claims, may be historical societies or science cafés, art centres or libraries: they may be museums of all sizes and types.

An important aspect which all six books are addressing is the learning potential available in the new modes of communication for museums enabled by mobile media technology, characterised by a radicalised focus on the role of the participant. The educational model which is at work here is not that of one-way-communication and an instructional approach to learning implying that the museum possesses knowledge and the visitor receives it, which is based on the empiric assumption that behaviour is predictable, and that educational design, therefore, can occur in isolation from educational execution. The point is that a lot of learning does not come from knowledge resources at all, but stems from the activities of learners solving problems (e.g., museum visitors playing on-site role-playing games about historical events), interacting with real devices (like digital cameras, augmented reality browsers and maps embedded in their mobile phones), interacting in their work and social situations, and so on. The activities of the learners in the learning environment are accountable for the learning, and thus learning is understood as something which is happening in the learning individual as a result of an active reworking of content, which in itself does not include learning, but which is related to the knowledge which has already been built up in a manner so that the most basic learning activity is a dialogue between the learner and the content. This understanding of learning is based on a participation- and experience-based model in which knowledge is not just a question about sending and receiving, but about collaboration and co-creation and collective learning-processes. In these processes the interactive media technology used in the museum exhibition design become creative tools in a learning constructing and knowledge producing way.

As these six books presented here indicate, communicating cultural heritage in the age of digital technology cannot just be a matter of transferring knowledge, but should facilitate ways in which the visitor can get involved in a participatory, knowledge-producing dialogue with the museum and the material being communicated. The visitor is granted a genuine agency when it comes to participation, collaboration and co-creation; the user becomes a player engaging in activities which may address the way in which knowledge is produced, analysed and valorised.

Notes

1. Boswijk, A. et al. (2005). *A New Perspective on the Experience Economy: Meaningful Experiences*, Amsterdam: Pearson Education.

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