

CAS Annual Conference Report: The Virtual in Museums: Hot Medium?

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The 2018 Contemporary Art Society annual conference hosted by the National Gallery London, chose the topic of VR and Museums as a 'hot medium'. Referring to Marshall McLuhan's description of a hot medium that immerses a viewer by completely engaging one sense (*Understanding Media*, 1964), VR was discussed in a variety of contexts: as a medium that artists are using to design, render or archive new works or extend pre-existing ones; as a method of animating visitor learning and participation within the museum; as a method of digitising object or exhibits in order to transpose or circulate them online; and as a means of conservation particularly for performance, time-based or digital media.

The daylong conference, attended by museum staff, artists and other cultural facilitators was programmed over three sessions delivered by academics and historians, technologists, curators and artists. Contributors to the first section, 'Context', set out the historical grounds from which VR emerges, mapped a contemporary field of play for artists using VR, and raised some primary questions posed by VR to the museum. The 'Engagement' section looked at how VR is used to challenge viewers or establish new audiences and the 'Immersion' session discussed the potential and limits of viewer participation, attending to different forms of VR production and installation in a gallery setting.

Following an opening introduction by Caroline Douglas, proposing the ontological possibilities and limits of Virtual Reality, particularly for and within the social space of the museum, began a presentation by Professor Andrew Dewdney from the Centre of Media and Culture Research from the South Bank University about the history of VR technologies. Dewdney asked several key questions about VR in relation to its viewer's consciousness: Where is the medium? How, from different intellectual and institutional positions, do we identify and analyse the intensity and definition of VR as a medium? And how is possible to forget this medium whilst using it? Dewdney outlined several theoretical paradigms through which to consider the advancement of this new medium, firstly McLuhan's concept that as technology advances, consciousness follows: that new technologies such as VR have the capacity to drive and shape human consciousness. The second position Dewdney raised was that which opposes this form of technological determination (as proposed by Raymond Williams), arguing instead that social movements or formations shape technology and media. A third position would suggest that neither technology nor the society that designs, manufactures and implements it are working from neutral positions, but these are often unstable, co-determining and mutually productive.

Dewdney talked the audience through the various optical, dimension-scaling apparatuses from the mid eighteenth century. These included 18th century Zograscopes; the surround displays of the Coliseum in London (c.1829, pre-dating the panorama); Brewster's stereoscope; the Sensorama (1950s); 3D cinema; the first VR & AR system (Harvard, 1963); and current VR headsets. Dewdney also suggested considering variants of VR and their apparatuses within this discursive context, including AR sets (Augmented Reality) and Microsoft hololens (a Mixed Reality headset apparatus). Museums are moving towards more 3D interfaces, he observed, the advantages of which include their many interpretative and educational potentials, the disadvantages being their constant teething problems. Before further implementation, Dewdney advised, museums need to reconcile their own existence within the 'unruly network', or less regulated space of the internet and consider how the museum constitutes, legitimises and self-imagines within a multi-tasking, multi-located digital culture.

In the second presentation Sabine Himmelsbach, Director of the House of Electronic Arts Basel presented a range of commissions and displays at HeK by a range of leading artists that employ VR with diverse conceptual and aesthetic sensibilities. She outlines various acquisitions at the museums, the infrastructures which they are working within and how VR both utilises and challenges the gallery's exhibition spaces, and the various ways that they have integrated VR presentations with other media (evident in her slides of *The Unframed World exhibition*, 19 January to 5 March 2017).

Himmelsbach outlined a concern of hers to make sure that they were always showing works of art, and not examples of advanced technology. Works upon which she focused included those by Martha Hipley (*Ur Cardboard Pet*, 2017), Rachel Rossin (*Just a nose*, 2016), Fragment.in (*2199*, 2017), Banz & Bowinkel (*Mercury*, 2016), Marc Lee (*10 000 Moving Cities – Same but different*, 2016), Mélodie Mousset & Næem Baron (*Hana*

Hana, 2017 and *Pattern for Hysterical Change*, 2017), Gilles Jobin & Artanim (*VR 1*, 2017), and the Geneva Dance Company. Other events and programme contributions Himmelsbach presented included those by Cod.Act, Alva Noto, Noise Gate alongside technology seminars and workshops for family and children at the museum. Himmelsbach proposed the positive uses of VR as a new kind of empathy machine that may be fundamental to new orientations of space and time, and challenge binaries of public and private space. In her terms, the artist is a real agent who can handle the various sensory implications of such change, and do so with impunity.

A subsequent panel moderated by Ariane Koek, Independent Cultural Strategist Producer and Writer, discussed how institutional procedures and processes may need to adapt to emerging technologies like VR. How, for example, do we record visitor experience with VR as this seems, at least provisionally, very difficult to read and measure? Dewdney proposed that it prompted revised staffing structures within the museum, as the relevant skills that staff members will need are in flux. Himmelsbach raised the issue of conservation of VR works as being very complex coding exercises, dependent on specific technical skill-sets and already or soon-to-be obsolete operating systems, which will present routine challenges to museum conservators. Dewdney suggested that museums, artists and cultural producers need to better self-conceptualise and take steady measures to get involved and impact the future of technology, and particularly as its place in the museum is shaped from the outset by British cultural policy.

Artists' presentations throughout the day outlined various ways that artists are engaging with (or challenging) digital technologies and hyper-media. The first was a screening and talk by collaborators David Blandy and Larry Achiampong about their work *Finding Fanon 2* (2015, video, 8 minutes). Shot from sequences of play from *Grand Theft Auto 5*, the work tracks two men's movements, decisions and actions while moving through a rainy, red-lit, post-industrial, digital rendering of Los Angeles. Quotes of Frantz Fanon's structure the soundtrack: this is a part of a trio of works inspired by the lost plays of Fanon (1925 – 1961) examining the challenges and psychopathologies of de-colonisation. The work questions how we consider and experience the constructed nature of virtual and augmented realities when other realities – wealth, society, class, race, gender – might also be understood to be socially constructed too. It asks, from which reality is VR ultimately deriving?

Chris Michaels, Digital Director at the National Gallery spoke through the various steps he and his team were taking to 'virtualise' the museum, including attempts to 'relocate historic space', and to establish new forms of audience interactions or physical experiences with works. With the aim of establishing a 'social virtual space' (as opposed to the potentially isolating space of VR) he presented the project of *Sunflowers Live*, the networked live streaming of talks around Van Gogh's *Sunflowers* organised through a number of participating museums which attracted 5.7 million worldwide viewers. Daniel Hermann, Curator of Special Projects, National Gallery, spoke briefly about his long-term interest in audience interaction, and in the use of play, games, processes and game objects as catalysts to such engagement, particularly with respect to their

perception altering effects. Among early case studies, Hermann outlined the exhibitions *Cybernetic Serendipity* at London's ICA (1968) and *Play Orbit* (Royal National Eisteddfod, Wales, 1968 and the ICA London, 1970) as being of interest.

Artist Ed Fornieles subsequently spoke of his interest in 'unsticking' online identities, of the troubles and pleasures of creating them, about his own VR work, *Truth Table* (2017), about the processes of establishing and then assimilating virtual versions of self, and the complex emotional, social, sexual and psychological aspects of these internet-based habits. Suhair Khan followed Fornieles with a considerably different slant on the myriad possible uses of networked technologies for the museum, her presentation about the remit and workings of the Google Art Project, run by Google Arts & Culture. Khan, a Google employee, proposes that Google creates technologies that 'make the world's culture accessible to people anywhere', and promoted this multi-partnered, multi-platformed scheme for museums to invite Google to track and image their interiors and collections to digitally consolidate and open them up to new online visitors, retrievable through her company's integrated search engine.

This diversity of interests was brought together in a panel led by Ben Vickers, Digital Curator Serpentine Galleries. The main question raised here was about the relevance, purpose and purchase of museums in networked, digital society, in short: do we still need museums? Fornieles suggested museums as available sites similar to other digital or offline exhibition spaces; Michaels suggested that works of art differ, some need museums for meaning making and others don't, and accordingly, museum staff need to be constantly rethinking their roles in, 'dis-intermediation and re-mediation'; Khan proposed that while knowledge, expertise and objects may be translated online they are still facets belonging to the museum; Blandy raised the capacity of the museum to 'change the artwork' from its previous iteration, a context that imposes different meaning and values, while Achiampong talked about his ongoing effort to make work that create different kinds of experiences in different contexts, for example his ongoing work with sound.

The final session of the day entertained the theme of immersion. Opening my conversation with artist Cecile B. Evans, I recapped some of day's earlier points with the following questions: how far have new VR headsets and interactive situations developed from the succinct history of VR apparatuses presented by Dewdney? How do we experience physical vulnerability rather than immersion within socialised VR settings? What kind of realities are we experiencing in simulation if the realities that are departed from are also arguably constructed (gendered, racialised, politicised – see Danah Boyd article in reading list)? How do we measure, qualify and quantify visitor experience and understand different forms engagement online and off? How can archival and conservation processes facilitated by VR accommodate new media (like performance and moving image)? And finally, how important is it to consider the specific economics of VR and other attention trafficking and data harvesting technologies when considering how we integrate it into museum economies? How do we use interactive or immersive media, new digital media that is widely regarded as also using us, and what is the function of art within this exchange?

Evans' spoke about her video installations incorporating digital technologies, 3D printing, robotics and AI, and her frequent distain for the how the word 'virtual' is applied, presenting a false binary between physical and digital domains. Evans quoted Chris Marker's *Sans Soleil*, 'He claims that electronic texture is the only one that can deal with sentiment, memory, and imagination' to locate the very specific materiality of media and its real cause and effect on our perceptions. VR, Evans proposes, we understand as a product used to service an idea and that, further to this, the museum be considered as the 'richest site where this argument can be made of a lack of binary, where reality is not a singular thing in opposition with something else, but rather something that exists in multiple.' Evans has long engaged with the idea of humanness within technology, and how the second that's achieved we arrive at a totality. Much of her work questions this trajectory including her current trilogy of films called *Amos' World* (2017 – 18), about a socially progressive housing estate, the precursor to digital cellular living: alone, together. Her installations echo this concern, housing and isolated gallery visitors into modular viewing units.

Colour scientist, Dado Valentic of Acute Art then discussed his interest in VR and art. Identifying how new vehicles for distribution (Spotify, Netflix) have changed the music and film industry he recently asked himself, 'Is there any area in entertainment that needs an innovation?' and, 'it was not difficult to realise that art is so behind when it comes to digital.' Considering how art might be digitally distributed, he remarked 'a new galaxy got discovered: a new galaxy called VR', by which he specified an interest in real time rendering technology to render or archive works that may then appeal to wider audiences through digital platforms. Having worked extensively over the past year with Olafur Eliasson, Marina Abramović and Jeff Koons to render their works in VR, Valentic foresees how real time rendering might become more widespread as new software and tools become accessible online, where Pixar animation quality might be achieved by younger artists and animators, presenting a democratisation of the 'hot' medium, and a new model of collecting, connecting viewers through a pay-per-view subscription model.

In the concluding panel discussion, led by Andrea Lissoni, Senior Curator of International Art at Tate Modern, various issues for museums were raised including the financial problem of producing VR for artists and of showing VR for museums, as well as the infrastructural and technological problems of how we staff, install and mediate VR within museums. Curators, Valentic proposed, will remain an important resource as digitised works move online, providing a trusted view on which works deserve attention. The issues of ownership and inclusion were raised especially as VR is a hardware that is difficult and expensive to run domestically – dependent on institutions for its public forum. Lissoni and Evans discussed the issue of how to accommodate publics when VR requires isolated screening environments with timed entry or long queues? To the question of how staff implement VR within their programming my response was twofold: firstly, the planned marketisation of VR means that, if we're to believe the schedules of the technology corporations currently investing in its development, we may see marked change in the distribution of VR technologies in handheld devices between now and 2022, and the second solution might be in creating a tech-share and skill-share network

to better afford, run and distribute both the technologies necessary to show work but also the technicians or technical skills to facilitate circulation of works, allowing artists wanting to show VR or digital media-dependent installations in various regional institutions.

Hot Medium? The Virtual in Museums showcased a variety of interests, skillsets and observations about the myriad possibilities of VR in a museum context, particularly as it brings the museum online. And while this technology develops at its fastest pace since the 1980s, there is a strong sense that the museum will reshape itself in correspondence with VR over the next five years. If one imperative might be drawn from the day, then it is that the museum might not only respond to VR and its online integration (a form of technological determinism), but that instead, and in collaboration with artists, those staffing the museum might think laterally, creatively, innovatively and critically about the range of virtual realities it brings in, and through which, it in turn extends out.