

Virtual museums and the Web: a dilemma of compatibility?

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1. Introduction

What happens when a museum is presented on line? The Internet is a very ductile space, where content is transmitted not only by means of text, but also, and more effectively, by means of images and, recently, other multimedia tools, which support, substitute and make immediate the reception of meanings. Everything is instrumental to the achievement of a purpose. It would be logical to think that the institutions, by means of the characteristics proper of the medium, would be able to re-propose or transfer, through an act of translation, the same concepts, ideologies, scopes originally included in their physical spaces. However such a direct translation cannot take place without producing problems and major tensions. In fact, some characteristics proper of the Internet constitute a challenge for the institution, which seems to be forced to either find a balance between its traditional configuration and an acquired new image on the Web, or to discard some of its original premises in favour of new ones. Although it is possible to see an effort to find new strategies of engagement with the medium used, I believe that the museum still hasn't completely managed to follow either one or the other solution: it is still not clear whether the existence of the virtual museum will produce a final transformation of the museum as we know it, or, on the contrary, it will use Internet tools in a way that serve its traditional goals. This paper will analyse the existence of incompatibility or unsolved contrasts between the physical museum and the virtual museum related to tasks, purposes and representation. I will try to demonstrate that this contrast cannot be limited only to the operation of translation from the real into the virtual space, but it is implicit in the concept of the museum itself.

2. A Definition of Virtual Museum

The word **Virtual** originally indicates a computer generated space, which only exists within the computer or in the imaginary space of the network and doesn't have apparent relation with reality. However, when it is associated with the museum, the term virtual is commonly used to indicate the Internet version of a real museum space. This means that a real building, containing concrete objects, exists beside the space dedicated on line. The majority of museums' web sites contains a choice of collections or images which can be also admired during a normal museum visit, and they are always accompanied by an indication about the location of the museum, its hours of operation and what the real, and not the virtual space can offer to the viewer in terms of programmes, events, services. This strategy seems to indicate that the interest of museums is remote from constructing a virtual space, whose development is independent from the configuration of the real museum: they are inviting the viewer to visit the real space. The Internet

in this case is interpreted as a promotional tool. A second interpretation sees the Internet as an indispensable communication tool, which enables museums to transmit information and to communicate with a prospective or established audience. This goal was particularly privileged when museums started engaging with the Internet: they interpreted it mainly as a way to remind the public of their existence, privileging the informational potential of the medium. Their interface displayed information about a museum and an ordinate disposition of data on a few contiguous pages. Museums are still adopting this solution: their web site is usually designed in a very functional way in order to facilitate access to the source of information.

The possibility of uploading onto a virtual site an enormous amount of information is a further feature very appreciated by the museum: the virtual museum can contain an overview or the physical museums' Centre collections, information about specific artists or periodic exhibitions and updates about events and upcoming initiatives. The Museum of Modern Art in New York used its virtual space to display a part of its collection not accessible to its public. If part of its building cannot be visited, due to major renovations, the web site has the function of providing images of prestigious works not on display. A similar strategy can be seen on the site of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art², where a special focus is given to the exhibitions. Instead of having a detailed description of the works contained in the permanent collection, the Museum chose rather to present its new acquisitions. The web site in these two cases acts as an addition and an integration to the physical building, and a temporary source of information for the potential visitor. The Guggenheim³ Museum web site represents a different way to interpret the function of the Internet: it contains the museums' Centre collection with images the viewer can magnify, biographies of the artists and related bibliographies. The Guggenheim museum is interested not only in showing its collections, but also in attracting the viewer to visit its identifiable buildings, which are not representable in their complexity on a web site, but they can be admired during a visit to their real location. The web site becomes in this case a way to advertise, reaffirm and stimulate the curiosity of an audience who can see the works, but, from her position on line, she cannot have access to the buildings, an essential component of the Guggenheim circuit.

In the examples above it is clear that what is displayed on the web site is only a part of the entire institution: there always something not displayed, therefore a simple visit the web site is not sufficient.

Does a museum with no corresponding real location exist? There are a few examples of virtual museums, which don't count on a real location: in most cases their content doesn't exist outside of the Internet but it is virtual as well. An example is constituted by the Walker Art Centre sections on net art: Gallery 9.⁴ This section of the museum contains net projects, designed and conceived to be viewed on line only. A second type of institution on-line is represented by the Uruguayan Museum El Pais.⁵ In this case the virtual environment contains images of real paintings and sculptures, which could not otherwise be seen in any museum, because they belong to private collections or sit in the artist's atelier. As its organizers affirm, *The construction of an art museum like the outstanding ones in the world's great metropolitan capitals would have cost*

3. The Creation of a Context in the Virtual Museum

Every virtual museum usually contains a huge amount of data, ordered and classified according to a logic sequence. As Manovich observes, since the world today appears as an endless collection of texts, images and data, it is appropriate that we will be moved to model it to a database. The database model has been largely adopted by the Internet, and it is often employed by museums to upload their information, collections and programs by means of lists and menus. However the information, alone, is not sufficient to allow the viewer to identify a museum on-line, nor to distinguish one museum from the other. The database is not conceived as a mere gathering of information but as a proper environment where data are accordingly located and contextualized in an electronic landscape. The Internet is particularly suitable to the creation of such an environment, since its increasing capacity to concentrate on a single site images, sounds

diffused worldwide. The above mentioned museums share a characteristic in common: their content cannot be seen in other places, by the general public, except on-line. In fact, in the first case, the artworks themselves are computer based and cannot be permanently displayed in a physical space unless an enormous number of computers were to be placed in the Center's conventional gallery. In the second case, the building for the collection is missing. In these two examples, the web site cannot be interpreted either as a promotional tool, which attracts audience to a real space, nor an addition to the original museum entity. Their web site is *The Museum*, and for this reason it has to be entirely and totally present in the virtual space only.

A third category of virtual museums exists, although it is currently represented by a single example: the Virtual Museum of Canada. This museum can be defined as a hybrid form. Its space neither contains virtual works, nor it displays anything which cannot be seen in other museums. The brochure which describes the VM and its goals suggests that the operation is an attempt to unify under a single roof the resources of all Canadian museums. On a content level the VM attempts to gather in a single space the variety of cultures, traditions, landscapes and backgrounds Canada can offer. The intention of the web site was not limited to the task of piling up collections, but also of those collections to develop digital content that reflects Canadian experiences. Because of the new interpretation given to the content taken from other real museums, and the new tasks this special museum wants to achieve, the VM can be considered a virtual museum.

The three categories of virtual museums, I have identified, underline some major distinctions: In the first category, the virtual space is functional but not essential for the life of the museum, it is, rather, an addition, or an enhancement of the physical site. The web site, alone, only works in conjunction with the physical site. In the last two categories the virtual domain represents the core, without which the museum itself wouldn't exist: these virtual museums completely rely upon the Internet space, which has to fulfil also the functions normally accomplished by the building.

over 100 million dollars, a prohibitive sum for the Uruguayan reality. Building a virtual museum was a way to avoid these prohibitive costs with the advantage of having Uruguayan art

and video and its hyperlinked nature gives its developers the possibility of building an environment where visual architecture, different strategies of information display and metaphoric language are intertwined.

The creation of a context makes virtual museums distinguishable and recognisable: the process involves both the transmission of information, representational strategies, and the integration of the two. The way virtual museums have been constructed and developed demonstrate this interdependency: the location and the amount of information as a technique of display (and not as pure data) contribute to define the context, while the content (in the form of data) is inserted in a more or less complex visual structure. By means of these techniques the web site as a whole establishes its presence as a recognisable entity.

It is important to observe how the location of the information displayed contributes to determine the character of a virtual museum: In the case of the first category of virtual museums, a particular emphasis is given to data referring to their location, their hours of operation and their entrance fee. This reinforces the dependency of these sites upon their real space. Several American museums, such as the Guggenheim, the MoMA in New York and the SFMoMA, chose a similar model to locate and classify their information on line.

The second category of virtual museums presents a similar approach to the transmission of information: extended use of menus and lists, where the most relevant information is classified under the guide of submenus. The virtual space is conceived as a sort of curated archive (in the case of Gallery 9) or a space, which can be explored through guided tours (the MUVa).

In the case of the VM, the inclusion of Canadian content implies the consideration of a series of components to be emphasised in the web site. Information is displayed in order to convey the idea of diversity. A list of the museums from all over Canada is gathered by province and in alphabetical order. There is no division by type of museum or importance. All the institutions are democratically placed at the same level of importance, in order to avoid any classification or preference for one or the other museum.

On the Internet, the location and the amount of content displayed are always accompanied by visual elements, which characterise and define the web sites context, and facilitate the viewer's identification of the nature of the web site. Although information and data retrieving still represent the most important way of giving an orientation and providing a sample of the institution to the viewer, the interface, which is designed to enrich the context, and to project the web site purpose beyond the simple task of giving information, is also critical. In the virtual museum, functional data, inserted in a visual frame, constitute not only an aesthetic embellishment constructed to please the viewer, but also an architectural structure, which stands for the museum itself. The existence of the Internet as a metaphorical space, where ideas and contents have to be transmitted in a figurative way, forces the institution to reflect on its visual aspect in real space, to formulate a solution for the virtual space, and to specify the goal of this operation. The informational aspect of the web site is in this way integrated with its representational configuration. The visual representation of a museum on line is defined by the virtual architectural frame, which contains the information, and by those visual aspects, which contribute to emphasise some data rather than others.

A number of on line museums adopted visual elements, which evoke their real buildings or create the perception that the viewer is entering a real place.

Several museums and institutions have reproduced part of their physical buildings appearance as a background image for their web site. One would assume that this use is adopted only by the first category of virtual museums and when the museum represented is well recognisable.

However, even if in the second category of virtual museums the building is absent, a similar tendency can be observed: their interfaces either reproduce imaginary or potential buildings, or strive to evoke in the viewer the sensation of being in a real space. In the new web site of the National Gallery of Canada,⁸ powerful images of the interiors of the building are displayed in the frames located around the content. The image of the National Gallery, with its imposing architecture, is used both as a landmark to remind its public and as an aesthetic element to enrich the web site. The MIVA, which has no building, has invented its own imaginary space: its architecture has been designed on line by several architects who shaped it according to an hypothetical idea of how a real museum could look, and they have ideally located the building in the very core of Uruguay's Capital city, so that the viewer can understand the importance and the prestige such a museum could play for the country.

A second element, which contribute to create the impression of the building and the closed space is, as observed before, the use of entrances, doors and gates. This strategy acts as a sort of introduction of the museum to the viewer and communicates her that she is entering the museum, as if she was entering the door of a real institution. The VMC presents a stylised entrance, where two minimally designed arched doors welcome its audience. Though the idea of a door is only suggested, the arch, thanks to its historical triumphal and ceremonial connotation, denotes the presence of an excellent content behind it.

The use of photographic samples of the building to identify the museum or the display of facades and doors to indicate the entrance are defined by Claire Simard as 'theatricality' (with a trait)⁹ conceived to involve the viewer and convey an atmosphere for the site. They seem to be dictated on the one hand, by the necessity to delimit the web space in the same way as a real place, and, on the other hand, by the need to confirm the symbolism and the value of the traditional museum building although operating in the virtual space. This tendency can be explained in part by the concept introduced by Mac Luhan and defined as *remediation* by Bolter and Grusin: new media become systematically dependent on each other and on prior media for their cultural significance.¹⁰ The use of images of real facades or design shapes establishes a virtual or metaphorical correspondence with the real objects. Carol Duncan, in her work on the traditional museum, explains the use of arches and gates and the triumphant display of facades and buildings. She observes how the museum in its external and internal appearance resembles a ritual space, carefully marked off and culturally designated as reserved for a special quality of attention. Additionally, the typical prominence and monumental appearance of the traditional museum as a way to affirm its power and authority, 'O' seems to be transmitted on line not only through the wide angle, beautiful photographs displayed in its pages, but also through the gates, not represented as simple doors, but depicted as arches.

The representational aspects of the virtual museum are not limited to its visual frame: the

navigation mode is often created with the assumption that the viewer is not able to understand entirely the structure of the site, thus she needs a determined path to follow. The viewer is offered a choice from the visible links ordered as submenus, which carry special topics or overviews on exhibitions. Usually she has the option to jump from section to section, thanks to the links provided by the main menu, but she won't find any link connecting the submenus. The existence of these paths mimics the way the real museum is constructed. As Carol Duncan observes, "The situation resembles in some respects certain medieval cathedrals where pilgrims followed a structured narrative route through the interior, stopping at prescribed points for prayer or contemplation."¹²

The quality and quantity of information, combined with the visual appearance of the web site, are carefully calculated to determine the museum's specific goals, the target audience it addresses and the ideas it embodies. The web site, in the cases examined, seems similar to the programming of a real museum, even if some of these virtual museums don't have a real space.

4. The Relation Internet/Museum: is there Conflict?

In "City of Bits" William J. Mitchell affirms: "If before the electronic revolution Architecture played an indispensable representational role by providing occupations, organizations, and social grouping with public faces, now computer-generated graphic displays are replacing built facades and the public faces of institutions."¹³

Mitchell sees in computer generated graphics and the virtual space represented by the Internet the possibility to faithfully render, by means of metaphors, what we can observe in the physical space. According to him, using the tools proper to the medium, museums shape the virtual space to achieve similar goals, so that the visual interface is able to reconstruct entirely and faithfully the message, the mandate, the goals and methods of the real museum.

Mitchell's discourse assumes that the real space and the virtual space are basically compatible and that the first one has characteristics, which can be easily adapted to the second one. He seems not to take into account the distinct qualities of the Internet as related to the particular environment of the museum. If Mitchell were right, the process of transfer of data from the real space onto the virtual space wouldn't create any difficulty and the virtual and the real museum would contain the same data and pursue identical choices. However, some characteristics of the Internet are potentially able to transmit an idea different from what could be defined as the original mandate of the museum. These characteristics seem to be only in part accepted by the museum, which, on one hand, adopts them for its purposes, on the other hand, it withdraws from them, when they threaten to modify its original organisation.

In their virtual museums, the institutions seemed to appreciate and fruitfully use Internet potentialities such as its archival qualities, its non-linearity and its rhizomatic development, its user-friendly approach and its ephemerality. However, exploiting these characteristics means to create a certain friction, a yet unsolved incompatibility with the traditional museum configuration.

The majority of virtual museums contains a selection from their entire collections, ordered and classified to give the audience an orientation through the works offered by the institution.

Showing the painting or the artwork in a photographic format accompanied by a short description, the size and the author's name is a commonly followed strategy. While, in the main page, the museum tends to recreate its original atmosphere by means of graphical and visual devices, in the page dedicated to its collections the environment disappears. It is as if a sort of neutral space were established, where any kind of work could be displayed, without having to worry about the strategies that would be used in a real museum environment (light, the position as related as the other works etc.). The collection space becomes the equivalent of an assemblage of data, which show no evidence of their common provenance from a certain collection or as works peculiar to a particular museum.

The open nature of the Internet means that not only it is easy to add new data to an already existing structure, but it also means that new links to other spaces can be created at any time. This possibility makes the general structure of the web unfinished, and open, and 14

characters which work in favour of an extreme freedom of manageability on the part of the institution and navigation on the part of its audience. In the virtual museum the space given to the collection is infinitely up-datable, but it is distinct from the rest of the site: it doesn't show any visual sign (except the title) of its belonging to the whole web site, and it is not consistently linked with it. There are no internal links to other sections of the museum, nor to other sites, so that its content seems to be isolated from the general context of the museum and from other web sites.

Vannevar Bush asserted, as early as 1945, that linearity, as we usually conceive it in our systems of indexing, is artificially constructed: *Q. data are filed alphabetically and numerically. The human mind doesn't work that way. In its grasp, the mind snaps instantly to the next that is suggested by the association of thoughts in accordance with some intricate web of trails carried by the cells of the brain.* 5

His idea of non-linearity is realised on the Internet, where a myriad of hyperlinks takes the viewer to as many different places. On the Internet, figurative and textual links may take the viewer to other elements thematically or visually connected with the originals. The navigation in this way doesn't follow any hierarchical order, but a continue if never-stopping flow. This configuration is explained by what Deleuze and Guattari defined as rhizome: *Q. unlike trees and roots, the rhizome connects any point to any other point, and its traits are not necessarily linked to traits of the same nature. It brings into play very different regimes of signs, and even non-sign state...the rhizome is reducible neither to one nor to multiple...it has neither beginning nor end, but always a middle from which it grows and which it overfills.* 6

The virtual museums tend to work between the acceptance and the use of the above aspects and their rejection. Although their general structure is modelled according to a non-linear pattern with several hyperlinks and an apparent absence of any hierarchical categorisation (the menu doesn't suggest any favourite section to be visited first), there is a tendency to create a few internal master narratives by means of ordered menus and predetermined paths, which seem to deny the viewer a completely free choice. Additionally the links are planned to connect elements present in the same section and they are always limited solely to the museum the viewer is currently exploring.

The tendency to constrain the navigation to determined choices or maintain a certain linearity can

create an overall order and could lead the viewer to a better understanding of the entire content, avoiding confusion and disorientation. Additionally it is a way to insert a curatorial view in the virtual museum in the same way as it is shown in the galleries of the real museum. However these choices damage the breadth of navigability and limit the viewer's choices, contributing to constrain her freedom. On the contrary, if a great number of links between objects and topics were added, the desired curatorial view would probably be negatively affected or rendered unintelligible by the viewer.

The refusal to use links connecting to other sites or to external museums seems to be related to the necessity on the part of the virtual museum to create its own distinct place, separated from the rest of the other sites, on the web in the same way as in the reality. The institution welcomes the ephemerality of the Internet because of its ductility and the ease of being reshaped and modified at any time. However it usually references a physical site or the equivalent thereof, to prevent the traditional image of the museum with its monumental building, and its austere presence from being damaged by the ephemerality and volatility of the Web. Stephen Borysewicz argues that a World Wide Web site and a cd-rom might seem less fulfilling than a museum visit.⁶⁷ Among the reasons he cites are the environment, the imposing facade, the atrium of the museum, all elements suggesting us that we are about to have a really important experience.⁶⁸ Any building then is an independent reality, closed between the walls, and not graspable from outside. The Internet with its multiple links and its open ended nature can preclude the existence of an entity separated from the others. In order to preserve their singularity and their independence, and to recreate a similar atmosphere the viewer could find also in the real museum, the virtual museums are planned in a way so that the viewer is allowed to enter them exclusively from their main entrance but she is not allowed to exit them unless she types a different domain name on the browser address string. In some cases, like in the AGO¹⁹ new virtual space, the museum has found a way to create a delimited and constrained space using the web development software Flash: this software allows the designer to build a web site conceived as a movie, meaning that the virtual space has to be navigated starting from the beginning page and cannot be accessed at any other point.

The use of gates and icons, as observed above, seem to be used to re-establish the traditional idea of the building. This technique, although succeeding in the task of distinguishing the virtual museum on the Internet, prevents the visitor from establishing links with other sites which may integrate its content and lead her to a better understanding of artworks and topics proposed. When Borysewicz mentions the unsatisfactory experience of visiting a web site instead of a real museum. He refers to the condition of the viewer sitting in front of a fourteen inch screen instead of standing in front of a sumptuous facade. On the Internet not only the concreteness of the For Borysewicz the loss of scale experienced can result in a loss of interest in the viewer, who is no longer attracted by the environment and the power it represents.

Yet, several museums have acknowledged the great potential the Internet offers to establish a more open dialogue with its audiences and to attract the interest of new ones. Proof of this availability is the transformation of the language the museum undergoes on line: it becomes

colloquial and friendly, which can be felt as an effort from the part of the institution to include and establish a dialogue with the viewer (a reconciliation public/museum);²⁰ additionally the viewer is often addressed with several friendly messages such as 'No more visiting hours. At any time of the day or night, you can read on the National Gallery home page. However, the colloquial inserts are often undercut by the visual appearance of the site and its ambition to resemble a real museum. The elements providing the context for the virtual museum (the gate, the photographs of its real appearance, the limits set to the visitor's navigation) can constitute obstacles to the new dialogue the virtual museum is attempting to achieve.

5. Ideology and Transformation

Some characteristics of the Internet (volatility, dissolution of physicality and non-linearity) have been accepted and modified, although partially, to achieve the virtual museum's goals, proving to be, under certain aspects, very beneficial to the museum both as physical space and as institution. The use of some of these elements would denote a closer approach of the museum to its audience and an opening of its spaces towards the exterior, suggesting that the institution, through its virtual configuration, would be trying to reshape and rethink its own role in relation to its traditional space and to its audience.

However, the lack of links and connections between different sections in favour of a more ordered navigation and the isolation of the collection from its context and from the rest of the denote the presence of a contrast between the rhizomatic, non-linear structure of the web and the creation of narratives sought by the museum. They reveal a desire by the institution to control the fruition of the site content. Whether the content is conceived to be on line only or it finds a physical correspondence in reality, the visual appearance of the virtual museum strives to resemble as much as possible a real place (even when there is no real space), establishing a distance from the rest of the other web sites. The potentially new aspect achieved by the museum is counterbalanced by several elements, which seem to deny it.

Why is the institution using only some characteristics of the medium to transform its scope and purposes, while refusing to accept to take advantage of others, thus running the risk of undermining the changes achieved? The difficulty by the museum to completely accept certain qualities of the Internet, which would modify its mandate and goals, reveals its fear that these qualities would threaten basic elements of the museum, which cannot be negotiable. The institution uses certain elements (friendly language, exploitation of the Internet as a shapable, updatable and enormous archive) because, although slightly modifying its original configuration, they don't represent a change, which puts into danger the entire concept upon which the institution is built. The refusal of a deeper engagement with other tools (rhizomatic use of links, creation of connections with other web sites external to the museum web site) reveals their incompatibility with some conceptual key elements, whose absence would undermine the reason of existence of the museum.

The contrast museum/Internet cannot be limited only to the operation of translation from the real into the virtual space, but it is implicit in the concept of the museum itself. This conceptual contrast is confirmed by all the museums on line. In the first category of virtual museums one can

notice a special care to use the Internet in a way that doesn't disrupt the authority and the prominence of its real site. The need to establish linear patterns and the correspondence of its visual interface with the appearance and the structure of its real site could be in part justified by its derivation and its dependency from the physical site: in fact, as observed before, the first category of virtual museums constitute an addition or an integration of the original institution. However this dependency doesn't completely explain their behaviour. In fact, in the second category of virtual museums, which seem to be freed from the ties with the real museums, one can observe an identical tendency: they take other museums as a model or use the same methods one could observe in the first category. Although their content is completely on line, their relation with an hypothetical real museum seems unavoidable.

When the virtual museum tries to constrain the navigation within a predefined path, it is perpetuating the traditional museum experience as participation to an iconographic programme and a ritual process²¹. The absence of these fundamental paths would prevent the institution from offering a leading structure, undermining its basic ceremonial function. In the museum, objects are not left to the free interpretation of the viewer, but they are inserted in a specific programme accordingly studied: if the viewer is given too much freedom, she may have a misleading understanding of its content. The virtual museum cannot avoid including this element in its space. The interface design has a key importance in the establishment of paths and in its function to lead the viewer through its content in the same way as its physical architecture participates in the creation of a ritual: in fact in the museum *the totality of art and architectural form organizes the visitor's experience as a script organizes a performance. Individuals respond according to their education, culture and class. But the architecture is a given and imposes the same underlying structure on everyone. By following the architectural script the visitor engages in [the] ritual*²²

The ceremonial aspect of the museum resembles a temple. When the virtual museum refuses to insert any reference or links to other similar museums, it strives to consolidate this idea: it presents itself as a single space, thus preserving the separation of the institution from the rest of the other spaces; it performs a not yet abandoned idea of the museum as a mysterious and autonomous entity, hidden behind its thick walls. In the virtual space, like in the real space, the museum cannot renounce to communicate its formal authority, also by means of visual messages such as the photographic images, the facade, the gates. It is as if it re-proposed these elements to tell its visitors that, although the content may have undergone some slight changes, its core still remains the same as before. If the references to the physical museum or any sign contributing to create a ceremonial resemblance (either real, as in the case of the first category of museums, or imaginary, as in the other cases) were missing, the recognition of the web site as a virtual museum would be very difficult. The museum would have two solutions: relying on textual messages which substitute the entire symbolic construction or renounce its ceremonial appearance. However, is this last solution possible?

The reestablishment on line of the concept of the museum as a temple stands in contradiction with the apparent open approach with its public it is striving to achieve. This tendency seems to be an old dilemma for the museum. In 1971 Duncan Cameron wrote that the museum is affected

by a sort of schizophrenic tendency between being a temple or becoming a forum: *The idea of bringing the forum, a place for confrontation and experimentation, inside the temple is to inhibit and in effect to castrate the performance in the forum*³

He ascribed the unsuccessful attempt to insert the forum component into the museum to the fact that any possible introduction of controversial, radical or experimental activities was welcomed with a paternalistic attitude, sign of a lack of acceptance and indecision on the part of the institution to start any effective transformation. In the case of the Internet a recurrent and not yet overcome scepticism on the part of many museum curators and operators work together to impede the development of a virtual museum, which may present the institution with an appearance too dissimilar from the way the physical museum is traditionally conceived, and consequently may be able to modify the actual configuration of the institution. The scenario described by Cameron is very similar to the situation presented by the virtual museum. In both cases the concept of the museum as a temple and its traditional configuration constitute elements of incompatibility with any new approach the museum would undertake. With the traditional museum maintaining the old instances, the virtual museum is prevented from representing an image which would differ from and even contradict its physical counterpart. An operation of radical transformation enacted on line by the virtual museum would invalidate its privilege of being considered a museum: as Stephen E. Weil argues, *the metaphors we elect to use in speaking about our museums can directly influence what our visitors expect. Call a museum a treasure house, and their expectation may be of carefully chosen objects of great rarity and value*.⁴

Although old rules constrain the virtual museum and force it to maintain a fairly conventional facade, its appearance is forced to change fairly quickly to conform with the development of new technologies, to satisfy an audience who increasingly approaches its on line space, or to try and experiment new modes of display and exhibition techniques.

In order to fully exploit the Internet, the museum should renounce to most of its basic principles (authority, ceremonial aspects, its resemblance to a temple, its isolation from the rest of the sites), but by undergoing this radical change, would it be still recognised as a museum?

¹ [Http://www.moma.org](http://www.moma.org).

² [Http://www.stmoma.org](http://www.stmoma.org).

³ [Http://www.guggenheim.org](http://www.guggenheim.org).

⁴ <http://www.walkerart.org/gallery9/>

⁵ <http://www3.diarloelpais.com/muva2/#>

⁶ <http://www3.diarloelpais.com/muva2/#>, *The Making of the MUVAO*

⁷ Manovich, Lev, *The Language of New Media*. (Cambridge, MA, 2001), 220

- ⁹ Claire Simard, *La musographie multimedias: Option du Mus e de la Civilisation*. *62 congres de l'ACFAS, Les musographies multimedias: metamorphose du Muse. Mus e de la Civilisation* (Quebec, 1995), 49
- ¹⁰ Bolter, Jay D., and Richard Grusin. *Remediation* (Cambridge, MA, 1999), 44-46.
- ¹¹ Duncan, Carol and Alan Wallach, *The Universal Survey Museum*. *Art History*, III, 4 (1980)
- ¹² Duncan, *Civilizing Rituals*, 12.
- ¹³ Mitchell, William J. *City of Bits, Space, Place, and the Infobahn* (Cambridge, MA, 1995), 49
- ¹⁴ Lunenfeld, Peter. *Infinished Business*, *The Digital Dialectic*, ed. Peter Lunenfeld. (Cambridge, MA, 2000), 8-9
- ¹⁵ Vanevar Bush. *As We May Think* *The Atlantic Monthly*, CLXXVI, 1 (1945)
- ¹⁶ Deleuze, Gilles, Guattari, Felix. *Rhizome*. *A Thousand Plateaus, Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Trans. Brian Massumi (London, 1987), 3-26.
- ¹⁷ Borysewicz, Stephen. *Networked Media: The Experience is Closer than You Think* *The Virtual and the Real: Media in the Museum*, ed. Thomas, Selma and Ann Mintz, (Washington, DC, 1998), 114
- ¹⁸ Borysewicz, *The Virtual and the Real*, 114
- ¹⁹ [Http://www.ago.net](http://www.ago.net)
- ²⁰ Simard, *62 congres de l'ACFAS*, 44
- ²¹ Duncan, and Wallach, *The Universal Survey Museum*, 449-450
- ²² Duncan, and Wallach, *The Universal Survey Museum*, 450
- ²³ Cameron, Duncan *The Museum, a Temple or the Forum*, *Curator*, 1971, XIV, 1: 11-24
- ²⁴ Weil, Stephen E., *A Cabinet of Curiosities, Inquiries into museums and other prospects* (Washington, DC, 1995), 8