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ENGAGING THE PUBLIC: PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE

Going Virtual: The Rise of the Post-Internet Museum

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Abstract: As a result of the coronavirus pandemic and social distancing restrictions, many museums and institutions were forced to close their doors and had to think of new ways in which to engage the public. A new age has risen, dubbed the era of the ‘post-Internet art museum’ by Walsh (2007: 20). This paper examines the impact of virtual exhibitions and how they will shape the future of curatorship and museums. This paper also analyses how visitors engage with the virtual platforms used by museums and other institutions such as blogging sites, social media networks and Omeka. Using the author’s own virtual exhibition as a case study, this essay will open discussions regarding the future of physical exhibition spaces.

Keywords: museum studies, post-Internet, public engagement, digital exhibitions, virtual



1 Introduction

A new age has risen, dubbed the era of the ‘post-Internet art museum’ by Walsh (2007: 20). For the purpose of this paper, I shall be primarily referring to objects from the University of Aberdeen’s George Washington Wilson photographic collection. As part of my PhD, I am curating an online exhibition showcasing Wilson’s cityscapes of Edinburgh and Aberdeen. The exhibition, entitled *Two Panoptic Perspectives on George Washington Wilson*, will examine these images within the context of panopticism. The University of Aberdeen’s George Washington Wilson collection has been digitised and is available online via Primo. According to Posner & Brett (2016), what differentiates an online exhibition from a list of objects –commonly called a collection – is that an exhibit “is a guided tour through your items, complete with descriptive text and customised layout.”

Sontag (1977: 110) mentions three forms of acquisition in relation to photography. In its most basic form, a photograph can be a “surrogate possession of a cherished person or thing”, thereby giving the photograph “some of the character of unique objects.” Through the making of images and the ability to duplicate them, “we can acquire something as information rather than experience.” Exhibitions come in several different forms: virtual, physical, permanent, and temporary. According to Lord et al (2012: 104) an exhibition can be defined as a “comprehensive grouping of elements-artefacts, art, ideas (...) that form a complete presentation for the public to enjoy and learn from.” One of the central features of exhibitions is that they allow the public to get closer to the collections and view them in a way that is both educational and accessible.

2 Virtual vs Physical

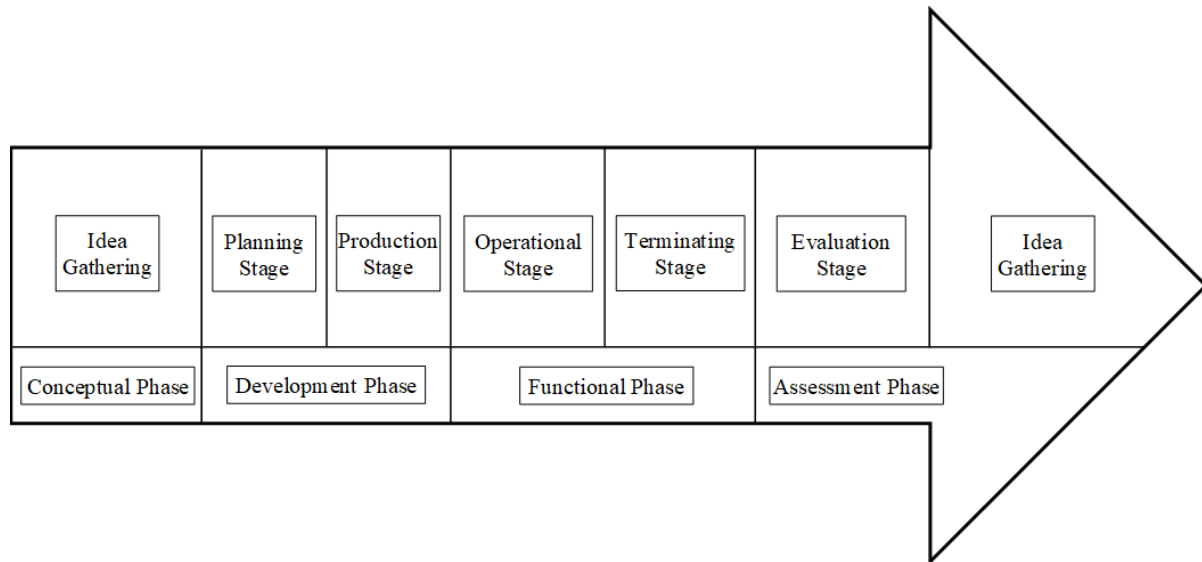
Some of the key advantages of a virtual exhibition is the ability to easily add new material, refurbish existing material, and delete any objects or text that does not fit with the overall theme. Furthermore, the site can be updated more regularly than a physical space. Unlike physical exhibitions, virtual exhibitions are not restricted in the same way by time, distance, and space. More significantly, virtual exhibitions do not need to



display the original object in the traditional sense. The original object can be scanned or photographed and then displayed online without the risk of detriment to the object itself.

Despite some of the obvious differences between physical and virtual exhibitions, they also share some commonalities. According to Dean (1994: 32) they both involve the “art and science of arranging the visual, spatial, and material elements of an environment into a composition that visitors move through.” Dean suggests an exhibition project model which begins with the conceptual phase involving the brainstorming of ideas, followed by the development phase, the functional phase, and finally the assessment phase (see Fig I).

Figure I. Dean’s Exhibition Project Model



A number of questions have been raised in academic discussions in relation to the virtual exhibition or the virtual museum. One question that comes to the author’s mind: do virtual museums undermine the physical museum in the sense that visitors may be less likely to visit the physical museum when they can view exhibitions and galleries from the comfort of their own homes? After all, virtual galleries encourage visitors to “transgress the physical barriers of traditional museums”, and the online visitor is not obliged to take any one path through the museum (McTavish 2006: 233). Another advantage is that virtual visitors can avoid crowds, limited hours, and the worry that a particular gallery may not be open.



3 Photographs as Art

Berger & Mohr (1995: 91) argue that photographs are ambiguous, because they have all have been taken out of a continuity. In this sense, a continuity equates to a sequence of photographs taken within the same timeframe. In the context of time, photography can be understood within a quasi-Heraclitan model of historical time (Baer 2005: 3). Greek philosopher, Heraclitus, recognised the changing nature of objects with the flow of time. Nirenberg (1996) explained that Heraclitus understood the cyclical nature of time not as a ‘process’, rather an ever-changing transformation moving forwards. The camera can be understood as a device capable of freezing portions of time that is always moving onwards. Baer (2005: 3) argues that because the Heraclitan concept of the world “holds time to be always continuous,” photography therefore reveals “a world in which time is splintered, fractured, blown apart”. However, by sewing together Wilson’s photographs with those which depict the same space a century apart, the shock of discontinuity is lessened.

In contrast to the works of the Old Masters and Romantic landscape artists such as Alexander Nasmyth, the photographs of George Washington Wilson depict a built environment made by humans rather than the natural landscapes sculpted by Nature. This can be termed a human landscape, and in this context can be further defined as a city or cityscape. In relation to photography, the human landscape is thusly summarised by Sontag (1977: 68): “we have our paper phantoms, transistorised landscapes.” The city provides a living stage for the comings and goings of daily life.

My exhibition planning process began with choosing the photographs for display from the University of Aberdeen’s George Washington Wilson photographic collection. The photographs that were chosen were cityscapes and street-level images with particular focus on Aberdeen and Edinburgh. I chose to focus on Wilson’s cityscapes because they complemented my research subject of the concept of panopticism. Also, this is an area of the collection that has not had as much focus in comparison to Wilson’s photographs of Queen Victoria and his commissions at Balmoral Castle. Due to restrictions posed by the coronavirus pandemic, I had to reposition my exhibition from what was originally envisaged to be a physical show to what has now taken a virtual form.



I decided to use Omeka as my platform, a free open-source content management system for digital collections utilised by museums and libraries for displaying collections and building online exhibitions. Omeka provides the user with two options: Omeka.org, which permits the user to construct their own website, and Omeka.net which provides the user with a skeleton site for development and is usually subscription-based.

My exhibition structure as seen in Fig. V was my guideline for starting to develop a framework which would complement the virtual platform. I then began to think about how I could create an original contribution with my work. My first thought was to display my photographs of Aberdeen, in particular Castle Street, alongside Wilson's as a then-and-now comparison. Using this foundational idea, I became inspired by the work of artist David Hockney, particularly his 1985 photo-collage *Place Furstenberg, Paris, August 7, 8, 9*. I wanted to create artworks which would fuse together the past and the present, and I came up with a layered collage effect (see Fig. II).

Market Cross was taken by George Washington Wilson in the 1870s. According to Black (1928: 16), the Market or 'Mercat Cross' is regarded as a local landmark in Scotland. They were usually placed in the main market area of any high street and subsequently became "a natural focus for public events" such as announcements, proclamations, markets, and even executions (Mair 1988:52). Originally located outside the Tolbooth and Court Houses, the Market cross now stands in the Castlegate and was once the hub of the city of Aberdeen.

(continued overleaf)



Figure II. First draft of patchwork effect photograph using my own photograph and George Washington Wilson's Market Cross Aberdeen, c.1870s, University of Aberdeen Special Collections (MS3792/F0506)- Image by Ashleigh Black



Figure III. Market Cross Aberdeen (Original) by George Washington Wilson, c.1870s, University of Aberdeen Special Collections (MS3792/F0506)





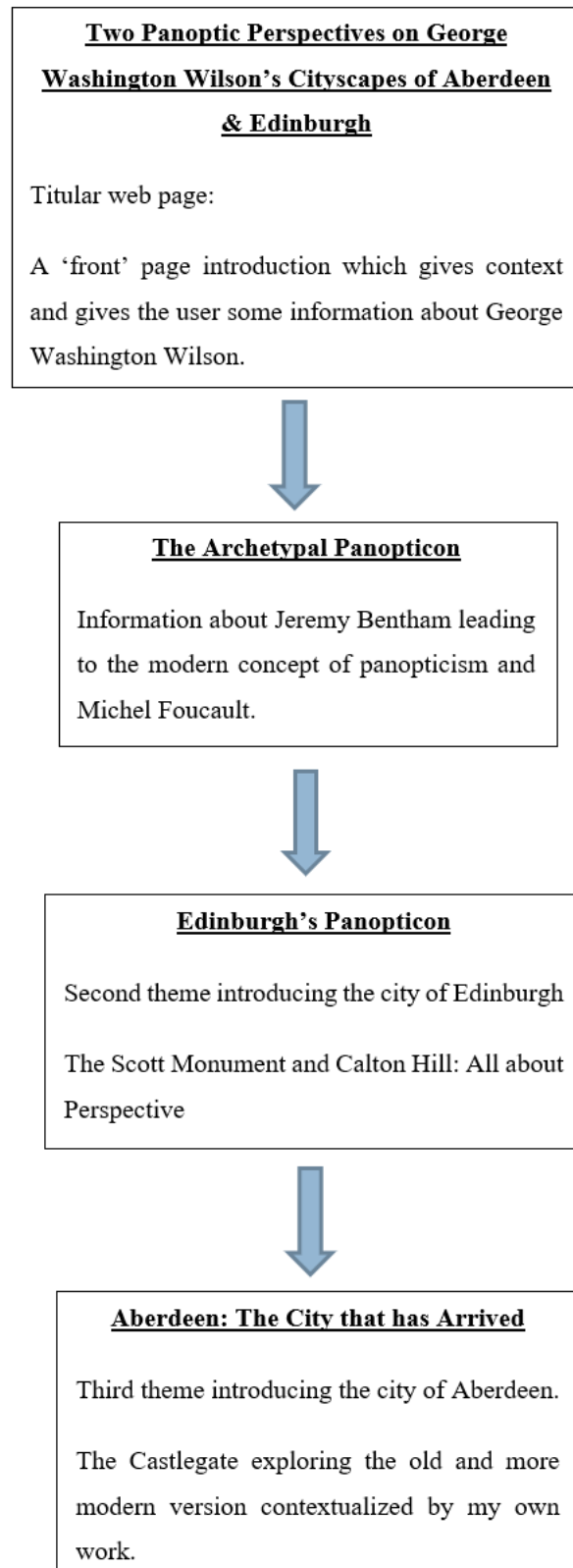
Figure IV. The Mercat Cross & Castlegate by Ashleigh Black, 2020.



(continued overleaf)



Figure V. Author's Exhibition Structure





4 Visitor Experience

Visitor experience and how visitors engage with the exhibition was a key consideration in the planning process. According to Kalfatovic (2002: 3), there are five types of exhibition effects: *aesthetic*, which is organised around the beauty of the objects, *emotive*, which is designed to illicit an emotion in the viewer, the *evocative* effect designed to create an atmosphere, *didactic* to teach about something specific, and, finally, the *entertaining* effect, which brings some fun into the process. When organising an exhibition site, Kalfatovic suggests five aspects of organisation to take into consideration. The first is *object-oriented organisation*, which holds the objects and their description central to the overall exhibition. Secondly, *systematic organisation* which is chronological. Thirdly, Kalfatovic touches upon *thematic organisation*, which is structured around themes and tells a story. Also, *organisation by the material type* which uses a system of classification such as; images, text, and film. Lastly, there is *organisation by multiple schemes* which comprises of multiple methods of organisation (Kalfatovic 2002: 25).

Bearing in mind that virtual exhibitions are not generally perceived in three-dimensional space (unless they have been created by software which allows a 3-D rendering of a gallery), the web experience “is an interesting blend of the passive and the interactive” (Kalfatovic 2002: 73). So, how does the virtual affect the display and arrangement of objects online? (Dean 1994: 56) explains that every museum object has certain intrinsic visual characteristics that affect how they may be arranged.

As well as the concept of visitor experience there was also another factor to bear in mind: the visual impact of the photographic objects, particularly in a virtual setting. Dean argues that there are five visual elements to consider when arranging objects; visual impact, visual weight, visual direction, visual balance, and visual mass (Dean 1994: 56). Following Kalfatovic’s five aspects of organisation and Dean’s exhibition project model as a guide, I was able to map out the structure of my exhibition (see Fig. V).



5 Conclusion

Undeniably, “we now live in an era where networks, links, sharing, access, format, and virtuality are part of our everyday experience and language” (Gens 2017: 14). As countries across the globe locked down one by one, people took to the Internet to connect with others via zoom calls, online gaming, and social media platforms. The Internet provided a way of reaching out and breaking the barrier of isolation and loneliness. Eventually, museums followed suit and had to think of more creative ways in which to engage their audiences on a virtual platform. Turning with the tide of the ‘digital turn’, the way forward appears to conform with the notion of the post-Internet museum. Sontag (1977: 110) proposed that photography’s main aim is to convert the world into ‘a museum-without walls.’ The concept of ‘a museum-without walls’ was first proposed by Andre Malraux. Malraux’s 1947 essay entitled *Le Musée Imaginaire*, ‘the imaginary museum’ or ‘the museum without walls’ defines the concept as a collection of significant works of art characterised by our imagination. The virtual exhibition that I curated has been created with this concept in mind. My virtual exhibition is a museum without walls, permitting the visitor to fully observe each section of the display and view each photograph as closely as they can. My Hockney-inspired photographs sew together the past and the present with Cubist shifting perspectives so that the viewer is given a heightened perception of the moment as one continuous frame encapsulating ‘living time.’

6 References

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