Art Museums Online: Using Interactive Websites to Build Cultural Capital

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Abstract: Much has been written about art museums as shrines (Duncan, 1995) art museums as temples (Marstine, 2006), art museums as "social and symbolic spaces" or as ideological [state] apparatuses (by implication Bourdieu, Darbel & Schnapper, 2004; Gans, 1999; Bourdieu, 1981; DiMaggio, 1979, for example). Even more has been written about the need for changes within the art museum complex: the need for art museums to become more inclusive, more democratic (Nussbaum 2010, Deitch 2010, Mouffe 2009; Bennett, 2005; Dana, 2004, for example). Nonetheless, despite many new practices over the last 40 years, art museums remain, to a large extent, elitist. My paper examines ways in which interactive websites can be, and are being, used to open up the art museum to new and more diverse audiences. Using a mix of critical discourse analysis (CDA) and multimodal discourse analysis/semiotics, I examine the websites of four art museums (The National Gallery of Canada in Ottawa, The Boston Museum of Fine Arts, The Museum of Modern Art in New York and Tate Modern in London) to show that art museum websites not only offer unprecedented access to information about art and artists, but also provide a new and different kind of Habitas for developing, or increasing, cultural capital. While recognizing the limitations presented by this kind of research—the problem of boundaries due to an excess of information, for example, and the complexity of trying to interpret such multi-layered, self-mediated data—I look for answers to two main questions: 1) Do art museum websites continue to perpetuate the same elitist discourses that many other aspects of the art museum do? and 2) Can art museum websites help to open up the art museum experience to wider audiences and attract people who would not usually enter the art museum complex?

Keywords: Inclusion, Exclusion, Art Museums, Websites, Cultural Capital, Habitas, Shrines, Temples, Ideological State Apparatuses

INTRODUCTION

This paper analyses the websites of four public art museums[1] (The National Gallery of Canada in Ottawa (NGC), The Boston Museum of Fine Arts (MFA), The Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York and Tate Modern in London) to determine how well they speak to their prospective audiences. It examines the ways in which information is disseminated, images are juxtaposed and messages are written, and it tries to determine what part, if any, these art museum websites play in opening up their institutions and empowering their users. Bourdieu, Gans and others, for example, have argued that to enjoy the art museum experience individuals require a large amount of cultural capital, obtained during childhood through family experiences and education and usually (according to Bourdieu)

[1] By public art museum, I mean any art museum or art gallery open to the general public which may or may not be funded with public money and where people go to view art rather than to buy it.

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restricted to the middle- and upper-classes [2]. Bourdieu's studies on art museums and galleries (Bourdieu 1984, 2002, Bourdieu, P, Darbel, A & Schnapper, D 2004) have shown that many working class people not only do not like the art shown in contemporary art museums but also feel uncomfortable in such environments. And while other theorists (DiMaggio 1979, Lamont and Lareau 1992, Rosengren 1995, Boltanski and Thévenot 1999, for example) have shown this to be not strictly true, we still do not see a full spectrum of citizens participating in the art museum experience. That said, I wish to argue that since the introduction of the World Wide Web (www) in the early 1990s, more and more people regardless of education, social background and/or income[3] have access to more and more different kinds of information—including information about art and art museum activities.

In their book, *Official Tourist Websites: A Discourse Analysis Perspective*, Hallet and Kaplan-Weinger (2010) suggest that websites serve both as "a setting for the initiation and incitement of social action" *and* as sites for the "construction of identities" (Hallet and Kaplan-Weinger 2010). If this is true, we might argue that websites could contribute greatly towards helping art museums become more inclusive, not only by allowing individuals to construct subjectivities for themselves as knowledgeable lovers of art but also by encouraging them to take the steps necessary to participate in the *real* as well as the *virtual* art museum experience. Thus, in this paper, I look for messages (overt or hidden) of inclusion and/or exclusion by examining the different ways in which these websites speak to their real or potential audiences—my purpose to determine to what extent, if any, they serve to increase the cultural capital of less knowledgeable and/or less socially sophisticated publics.

Website analysis is not unproblematic, however. Many communication theorists have identified obstacles and methodological challenges facing researchers as they try to wade through the mass of information most websites provide (Gunter 2000, Kim and Weaver 2002, Stempel and Stewart 2000). For example, the fluid nature of a website means that content is constantly changing, making it difficult to focus on any kind of quantitative analysis. In fact, Kim and Weaver have reported that most early web analysts avoided quantitative analysis altogether. Richard Hallett and Judith Kaplan-Weinger (2010) suggest that qualitative methods such as social constructionism, critical discourse analysis (Wodak et al. 1999), mediated discourse analysis (Scollon 2001) and multimodal discourse analysis (Kress and van Leeuven 2001) all provide excellent methods for examining websites (Hallett and Kaplan-Weiner 2010, 6).

My approach in this paper includes a mix of multimodal discourse analysis and semiotics. It draws particularly on the work of Kress and van Leeuven (1996, 2001) who argue in favour of the multimodal approach: "websites," they claim, "make meanings in multiple articulations" (Kress and van Leeuven 1996, 4). That is to say, they make the same meanings over and over again using different modes of communication (language, images, sound, video, etc.) to emphasize their messages. Thus visitors with verbal, visual *or* aural literacy can enter these sites at multiple points and navigate their own routes in, through and/or around them.

That said I recognize the limitations presented by this kind of research: the problem of boundaries, for example, due to an excess of information, and the complexity of trying to interpret such multi-layered, self-mediated data. Nonetheless, within the confines of my research, I look for answers to two main questions: 1) Do art museum websites continue to perpetuate the same elitist discourses that other aspects of the art museum do?, and 2) Can art museum websites help to open up the art museum experience to wider audiences? That is, can art museum

[2] Class distinctions, says Bourdieu, are reflected in a person's taste—especially in arts and culture—and stem from what he calls the person's *habitus*. The term *habitus* can be understood as those aspects of a person's culture that contain something from his or her past which functions within their present, shaping perception, thought and action and moulding social practices. (The *habitus* is responsible for forming what Bourdieu calls an individual's or a family's "cultural capital."

[3] Although not everyone may be able to afford to buy a computer, many public libraries, schools and other institutions provide free access to, and free instruction on, the Internet.

websites attract people who would not usually enter the art museum complex by helping them to build cultural capital? During my research and throughout this paper, I take the position that participating in the arts in general, and visiting art museums in particular, is an enriching experience.

Home Pages

My analysis begins with an examination of the four home pages from my chosen websites. Home pages, because they are normally the first encounter a user has with a site, have been called the most expensive real estate on the planet (Nielsen and Tahir 2001). The home page is the "anchor" (Djonov 2007). It articulates the mission and mandate of the organization and it reflects its values and ethical proclivities. It also sets the tone for the entire site; its layout, color and content will either attract or repel a potential viewer from the start. If it is too sophisticated it will exclude possible users, likewise if it is too simple. If the language is too advanced, or if it is too rudimentary, it will do the same. Its navigability will keep people interested if it is effortless or frustrate them if it is complicated. Users must feel that a website speaks to them and, in the case of an art museum website, that it addresses their own personal social, cultural and educational needs. If a home page is not enticing, viewers will lose interest.

All four of my selected websites have vibrant home pages with visually engaging mastheads at the top of their screens. Information is disseminated either through dynamic links on the mastheads themselves and/or by hyperlinks on a side-bar menu. The MoMA and the MFA also use horizontal links across the page. These links make it easy for users to find facts about current and future exhibitions, past exhibitions, permanent collections, educational programs, research resources, opening and closing times, museum services and other museum activities. They present clear, uncomplicated information that can be easily understood. Hyperlinks for further navigation are clearly labelled.

That said, mastheads picturing unidentified artists on two of the sites in the summer of 2010 (Warhol, Haring and Koons on the NGC home page to advertise "*Pop Life*" and Chaplin on the MoMA home page to advertise an "*Auteurist History of Film*," for example), might be considered exclusionary—with web designers or museum professionals assuming that viewers would have the cultural capital to recognise the art, the artists or the film-makers without having them identified. This is a similar approach to one often used in other art museum communication materials such as the NGC magazine, *Vernissage*, or the (former) *MOMA* magazine,[4] and it speaks to a knowing audience. Furthermore, calling the MoMA film event an "Auteurist History of Film" could itself be considered exclusionary as not all potential publics would be familiar with auteur theory or understand the meaning of the word "auteurist." These actions could constitute one of the social/cultural barriers discussed by Bourdieu, Gans and others (Bourdieu 1984, Gans 1999, Bennet 1995, for example) that deter some individuals from exploring the art museum experience.

At the time of this research (summer 2010), Tate Modern and the MFA website home pages were more accessible than the other two, providing the artists' names and information about the exhibitions on their mastheads.[5] For example, Tate Modern clearly states that for a certain period of time (September 2010–January 2011) Gauguin is the main event. That is, although it presents a picture of Gauguin's "Two Tahitian Women" on the masthead, it also clearly displays the artist's name. Likewise, the MFA site clearly articulates its upcoming exhibitions of Japanese prints and other selected artists.

[4] The MoMA ceased publication of its magazine, *MoMA*, in 2002, but back versions are available from the website.
[5] This is not to imply that Tate Modern or the MFA never follow the same practices as the other two museums. Neither does it suggest that the NGC and MoMA never identify the artists on their mastheads. This research examines a point in time–summer 2010.

Despite these small irregularities, however, content on these four home pages is helpful and readily accessible, although the NGC repeats information already on the side-bar menu on the main area of the page, making it somewhat redundant from a communication perspective. Also, the NGC home page is sparse, as much of the area is given over to hyperlinks to the embedded pages. This gives the screen a pleasing aesthetic but may not provide the services that users are looking for—many web users want information at their fingertips and dislike having to hyperlink for it. Furthermore, neither the masthead nor the images announcing upcoming exhibitions or activities on this site are dynamic—unlike those on the other three museum home pages.[6] In addition, this site sometimes breaches home-page usability guidelines by requiring users to click through two or even three pages to find the content they need.

In contrast to the NGC home page, content on both the MFA and MoMA home pages consists almost entirely of pictures—the only textual information being the dates of current and upcoming exhibitions. This makes these home pages seem especially user friendly and inclusive, particularly for individuals with limited reading skills. However, the pictures on the MFA home page appear to be random as there are many simultaneous exhibitions showing at the museum that are not featured here—forcing the viewer to search deeper inside the site for missing information and perhaps leaving him or her unaware of many events. Pictures on the MoMA home page show selections from all the current exhibitions; however, the arbitrary juxtaposition of these constantly changing images sometimes makes it seem cluttered.

Tate Modern home page consists almost entirely of links providing a lot of useful information with a *single* click of the mouse. A picture of the museum building as well as a detailed floor plan, for example, is available beneath the masthead, allowing visitors to plan their way around the building before they even arrive. This could be useful for dispelling the discomfort some visitors might have about arriving at an unknown destination—especially an art museum. Allowing them to get to "know" the building before entering—i.e. "where to go" and "what to do" (Boltanski and Thévenot 1999)—could help to increase their confidence and elicit a feeling of inclusion. In other words, it may help them to create an identity for themselves that depicts them as people comfortable within the art museum environment.

From a usability perspective, there are a number of anomalies on all four home pages.[7] The NGC website uses a "routing" page[8] in front of its home page although routing pages are discouraged in web-usability protocols; however, in this particular case routing pages seem acceptable, since the options here are for English or French, Canada's two official languages.[9] That said, the other sites offer information in a large variety of languages as well as English and French, including Chinese, German, Spanish, Portuguese, Italian, Arabic, Japanese and Russian—not available at the NGC.

Tate Modern website has a selection of national flags on its home page. Clicking on a flag changes the language—making it very easy for users to select their language-of-choice. This communicates a message of inclusion, i.e., that all nationalities are welcome. The MoMA website has a drop down "languages" menu, but it is entirely in English—perhaps making it difficult for some non-English speaking visitors. Users of the MFA website must click on "visit" to find their language options, and may miss it altogether if they decide to go straight to the exhibitions' page. These features can all contribute to feelings of inclusion or exclusion both on the site and beyond it. If users are unable to see themselves in the discourses of the website, they are less likely to feel welcome at the museum. It is important that web developers keep

[6] The NAC has since added a dynamic link to its masthead and to images announcing current exhibitions (summer 2012).

[7] For example, information located above the banner—which is not recommended, search boxes in hard-to-find places, horizontal scrolling, clicking through multiple pages to find information, broken or misdirected links, etc.

[8] A routing page is a page that provides users with alternative home pages.

[9] Since this research was conducted, the NGC site has been changed to remove the routing page, although information is still only presented in English or French.

these points in mind as they work to develop dynamic, interactive websites for increasingly diverse audiences.

Overall, however, these home pages provide an excellent series of dynamic points of entry into their sites. I say "points of entry" because a website, unlike more traditional modes of communication (a book or a journal, for example), offers users multiple ways of navigating or mining the information provided.[10] Some of these ways are explored below.

Embedded Information—Something for Everyone?

The amount of embedded information on these websites is prodigious. This section of the paper does not, and could not, attempt to analyze everything. Rather, it provides an overview of some of the main categories linked thematically (visits, exhibitions, children and teens) and focuses on representative samples of texts and images to try to determine whether or not there are overt and/or hidden messages of inclusion or exclusion on these pages. Keeping in mind Hallet and Kaplan-Weiner's observation that websites allow individuals to construct identities that lead to social action (Hallet and Kaplan-Weiner 2002), I examine these sections to determine just what kinds of identities are available to potential users and how constructing those identities might empower them to participate in the art museum experience.

Visits

If, as Bourdieu's and Gan's research claims, many individuals have feelings of discomfort inside cultural institutions such as art museums—which may even prevent them from visiting—perhaps art museum websites can help to dispel any unease they might feel by facilitating a sense of familiarity with the layout and services of the organization before they even visit. A look at the "visits" pages of the four case study museums selected shows how this might work. All four art museums have a "visit" or "plan your visit" link from their home pages that are very user friendly for potential visitors. They have secondary links to more tips for visiting—including: collection displays, past, present and future exhibitions, films, concerts and educational programs as well as museum-based shops, restaurants, bars and cafés. There are links to buying tickets online and to information for visitors with disabilities. These websites also provide street addresses, telephone numbers and email addresses as well as telephone phone numbers for the ticket office, for group bookings and for recorded information. They provide detailed instructions, including maps on how to get to the museums using both private and public (Tate Modern) transportation.

These are all features that deliver solid, useful information. And, if we consider this from a "multiple modes of communication" perspective, we might say that a potential visitor to Tate Modern, for example, could log on to the website, read about the museum, see a two-dimensional picture and a map or floor plan of the building, use the mouse roll-over feature to get more information about the floors and the works of art on each floor, take a three dimensional virtual tour of the museum and generally become familiar with the layout of the building. Links from some of the floors or works of art will take this visitor to a new page featuring written information about the artist, pictures of the works being exhibited and perhaps even a video of the artist discussing his or her work. Similar but less sophisticated virtual tours (NGC) and floor plans (MFA, MoMA) are offered by the other three museums. This composite approach speaks to inclusion and allows visitors to plan their visits before they arrive. More than that, though, it seems possible that by allowing unsure or timid[11] visitors to browse the museum facilities in the safety of their homes or schools or libraries (for example), museum website

[10] This is not to imply that a book or a journal is entirely linear as a reader can, of course, move back and forth between the pages.

[11] Bourdieu describes the timid person as "someone who is uneasy in his body (Bourdieu, 2002, 207).

"visit" pages can help them overcome any hesitation they might feel about participating in art museum activities.

Furthermore, if we accept Boltanski and Thévenot's theory that people are judged by "plural orders of worth"—that is, that a person's worth is constantly determined and re-determined by how he or she reacts in different situations, we might be able to argue that having a strong understanding of "where to go" and "what to do" in certain social and cultural situations (in this case in visiting art museums) might help reluctant visitors to walk through the door.[12] [13]

Exhibitions

If the "visits" pages on these sites can help apprehensive visitors develop a sense of familiarity with art museum layouts and services before actually visiting and give them a sense of confidence in their understanding of visit protocols, the "exhibition" pages can provide them with another kind of experience. All four sites provide detailed descriptions of upcoming and future exhibitions—dates, times, locations, etc.—but, in addition, they provide information about the artists and their works. For example, if during the summer of 2010, a potential visitor had wanted to find out about the *Pop Life* exhibition on display at the NGC, she or he could have gone to the website and found an almost unlimited amount of information about the exhibition. Not only were there written descriptions of the works on view, but there were also videos, music, artists' bios, pod casts and pop primers as well as a link to "*Pop Life* on YouTube" and, more importantly, a link back from YouTube to *Pop Life*.[14] In addition, a viewer could have visited a virtual version of the Pop-Shop [15] and bought *Pop Life* bric-a-brac on line.

This multimodal approach to communication was designed to speak across generations, reaching out not only to traditional gallery goers but also to young people of many different backgrounds and interests. Here we saw the National Gallery of Canada stepping out of its conventional role to capture a more diverse audience, first by staging this exhibition and then by using new technologies to attract a variety of different audiences. Reaching out and empowering people through its website worked very well for the NGC in this particular instance as the number of visitors reached more than 67,000 when gallery staff, themselves, were (optimistically) hoping to attract 45,000 (Shaughnessy, 2010).

Similar information can be gained by individuals using any of the other three websites. For example, *Gauguin* at Tate Modern (September 2010–August 2011) and *Toulouse Lautrec* at the MFA (November 2009–August 2010) and *Burton* at the MoMA (November 2009–April 2010), all provided large amounts of information about the artists and their work. The *Burton* exhibition, in particular, allowed its visitors to log on and watch films, (by *and* about Tim Burton), listen to music, and view Burton cartoons, sculptures, sketchbooks, posters, texts, etc.—all interactive and very empowering.

A visitor so inclined, then, could become quite knowledgeable about an artist or an exhibition before even going to the art museum—thus increasing his or her "feeling of worth" according to Boltansky and Thévenot's model or developing a keener sense of "agency" through "individually determined action" as per Rosengren's concept of choice based on individual values (Rosengren 1995). At this point we *may* also be able to say that this person has increased his

[12] I suggest that knowing "where to go" and "what to do" is itself a form of cultural capital.

[13] Although a formal audience survey has not been conducted, I contacted a number of people informally to determine whether or not they use art museum web-sites to increase their cultural capital (i.e. to get information about both the art and the art museum) ahead of visiting. For the most part, the answer was yes. One person in particular said that being able to study the layout and viewing protocols of a given museum before visiting—learning where to go and what to do—was especially useful.

[14] Many people who use YouTube may not think of going to the exhibition, but may be encouraged to do so once they are introduced to it through this link.

[15] Pop Artist Keith Haring opened the Pop-Shop in downtown Manhattan in 1986 as an extension of his work to ensure that his art "could be accessible to everyone" (Keith Haring Website). A replica of the original Pop-Shop was installed in the NGC for the duration of the exhibition.

or her cultural capital directly through the use of the website—even without former knowledge, education, wealth or social standing.

Children and Teens

One way to foster a love of art and a feeling of inclusion is to make art museum activities available to children from a very young age. Since searching the web for information is a popular pastime for many young people, this section examines how my four case study museums use their sites to keep young viewers engaged. The NGC, for example, uses its website to announce programs for children and teens. The MFA has "Art Connections" on its website and invites parents to share the site with their children to discover information and complete activity sheets on a variety of topics and approaches.

The MoMA website contains information about teen and children's programs; it also has a special multimedia site called "MoMA Audio: Modern Kids", which provides detailed information on paintings by a number of different artists and "Destination Modern Art: An Intergalactic Journey to MoMA and P.S 1", which takes children on an animated journey through the museum.

Tate Modern has an extensive array of activities for children on its Tate Kids' website. These include games, films, craft activities, colouring books, e-cards and a Tate kids online safety guide. These are all initiatives that can help children grow up with a sense of "comfort with" and "belonging to" the art museum world.

In addition, "Young Tate" is a dynamic website for teens that provides information on art, artists, design and museum projects as well as help with homework and exams. It, too, has games and "challenges." It also has information on careers. It is a site that brings the art world to its audience in an interesting and stimulating way. This is important because, of all age groups, teens have been found to be the most difficult group to attract—to museums in general, and to art museums in particular (Lemerise and Soucy 1999). Reaching out to them through a dynamic website might be one way of getting them interested in visiting the art museum and, as with older people, the knowledge and enjoyment they can gain through visiting these institutions can add value to their lives in many different ways (Deitch 2010, Nussbaum 2010).

Having a website dedicated specifically to teens sends them the important message that, as a cohort,[16] they are a vital part of the art museum family.

Images of People in Art Museums

This section of my paper discusses the images of people shown on the websites of each of the four case study museums. Its purpose is to determine whether or not the pictures depict diversity and to determine which art museum publics might be able to recognise themselves in these images. My analysis is based partly on Roland Barthes' work in semiology—especially that area of his work that deals with the interpretation of images. In his book, *Mythologies*, for example, he argues that images are a lot more than just pretty pictures. Images, he says, always have a sub-text, a second meaning—a "*what-goes-without-saying*"[17] (Barthes 2001). While Barthes used his theories to examine the "ideological abuse" of false consciousness (which he calls "myth") hidden in mass culture, I use them to suggest there are positive messages in these pictures from my chosen art museum websites. That is, I use them to suggest that if people can see "themselves" reflected in these images, they will feel more empowered to visit the museums and participate in their activities. I have found an excellent representation of diverse publics portrayed on all of these web sites.

[16] This is not to imply that we can put all teens together in one group, but merely to recognize that they do constitute a public for the art museum.
[17] Italics in the original

Conclusion

In this paper I have analysed the websites of four public art museums (The National Gallery of Canada in Ottawa, The Boston Museum of Fine Arts, The Museum of Modern Art in New York and Tate Modern in London) and I have looked for answers to two main questions: 1) Do art museum websites continue to perpetuate the same elitist discourses that other aspects of the art museum do and, 2) Can art museum websites help to open up the art museum experience to wider audiences? That is, can art museum websites attract people who would not usually enter the art museum complex by helping them to build cultural capital?

While there are traces of elitism to be found on all of these websites, I have found that, for the most part, they offer an unprecedented amount of information for a large number of diverse publics through their multimodal approach to communication (written language, images, film, video, sound, interactive activities, etc.). I have argued that this composite approach speaks to inclusion because it does not rely solely on written language to share information.[18] I have suggested (after Hallett and Kaplan-Weinger 2010) that individuals using these websites could construct identities for themselves that allow them to more fully participate in the art museum experience. In other words, I have said that art museum websites can be a source of cultural capital for many citizens who have never had the opportunity to develop it in more traditional ways. Art museum websites, I believe, can help to alleviate some of the barriers found in other aspects of the art museum experience.

[18] This is not to deny that these websites are still heavily slanted towards written language, but the fact that they use other communication tools makes them more accessible than other art museum communications materials and publications.

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