

DIGITAL RESIDENCE

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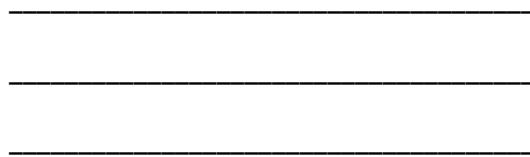
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## INTRODUCTION

“The digital, a form of inactuality, must be actualized.”

-Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual*

Recent attempts by gallery websites to exhibit work online, whether that work exists as a physical object or a digital file, have failed. Proposals and implementations have been sparse if they were allowed to exist past the planning stages at all. The fundamental flaw in the design of gallery websites, and the attempt to translate the traditional art space signifiers, is a failure to properly consider the utilization of online space by our digital bodies. This thesis represents a broader research into a concept that is reflected in my videos, installations, and drawings.

## A FORGETFUL SPACE

Early designers of theatres realized that in order for an audience member to completely engage with the performance she must forget her own body and become simply a ghostly observer. Extra-sensory deprivation techniques (in the form of dimmed light, sound buffering, and specialized seating) were used to focus the viewer's undivided attention on the stage, with the additional benefit of comfort. The proscenium arch was developed for the stage from the pictorial plane of a painting, a window in which the separate space is constructed entirely by an artist. Movie theatres later adopted these traditions, allowing a larger populace to benefit from an out of body experience, or more precisely, an "out of life" experience. The proscenium arch became a window that marked the temporary loss of one's ability to control reality. Televisions' later ubiquity in the home ensured that this proscenium signifier became universal.

The computer user, gazing through the proscenium, now suffers from a tradition of sensory removal. However, in contrast to the passive nature of the theatre and television viewer, the computer user possesses the ability to travel through and remake the digital space. As the terminology demonstrates, the viewer is now a user, and the passive is now active. This represents an unprecedented level of interaction wherein the critical ability of choice creates a new type of virtual reality, separate from the passive spectacles of theatre, television, and books. As these older forms of media adapt to a newly populated space, galleries and museums struggle to translate the physical viewing experience of a work of art to a form suitable for a digital realm.

## VIRTUAL WHITE CUBE

A recent study by Anthony Chemero, a cognitive scientist at Franklin & Marshall College, has shown that Martin Heidegger's concept of "ready-to-hand" applies to the use of computers (Keim). In the same way that one doesn't think about one's fingers when buttoning a shirt, familiar tools such as a hammer are "looked through" when in use, acting as an extension of the mind and body. Chemero found that computers are similarly looked through, fusing with the mind to perform a certain task. However, a computer doesn't simply carry out a physical duty. It encompasses the whole of the senses so much that this task that is carried out in the digital space becomes as real and routine as tying one's shoes. By extension, the digital space becomes the real space and the computer becomes the body, scanning and traversing the digital space with its one large eye (Virilio 45).

The translation of the gallery space to the digital space of the Internet suffers from the irrefutable connection that most forms of art have with the physical object. While the experience of visiting a gallery's website becomes an actual event for the viewer (the viewer has left her body for the computer and traveled to the representation of the gallery), the virtual space of the site is inadequate for its form when compared to the real space of the gallery.

Chemero's experiment measured minute hand patterns exhibited in his subjects' use of a computer mouse and found that they exhibited a repeating pattern known as "pink noise." This pattern has been shown to occur in many processes of the natural world, as well as being inextricably tied to our cognition.

When Chemero switched off the mouse, the subjects' subtle motions stopped following the pattern of pink noise while they confusedly tried to manipulate the broken tool (Keim). Similarly, when a viewer reaches a gallery website, the link between the mind of the viewer and the virtual space of the computer can be jarred by the presence of certain signifiers. These signifiers disrupt the generally natural flow of information that one takes in when browsing the Internet by calling explicit attention to the real space of the art gallery, forcing the user to see the website as a shadow space, a lesser representation of the real. The experience is akin to a breaking of the suspension of disbelief.

In his article *Inside the White Cube*, Brian O'Doherty explains that "the history of modern art can be correlated with changes in that space [the gallery] and in the way we see it" (O'Doherty). The changes that the gallery has made in its transition to digital space are simply concessions to the form of a webpage. In order to sustain a suspension of disbelief of the user, gallery websites must form a new kind of space, one that takes into account the way in which we interact with art through the Internet.

"An image comes to mind of a white, ideal space that, more than any single picture, may be the archetypal image of 20th-century art. And it clarifies itself through a process of historical inevitability usually attached to the art it contains"(O'Doherty).

The most conspicuous element of gallery architecture is the white cube format: white walls, 90-degree angles, and simple floor plans. These same elements have been carried over to the gallery website, with the vast, flat white background being the first noticeable marker of art online. The white field is the context for the artwork hanging on it, whether real or digital, and it imparts the

work with a sense of history of the symbols associated with the white wall that have been cultivated since the gallery's reform through modernism. Online galleries exhibit this history, and as such we are trained to recognize the presence of art through large swaths of white negative space, but the transition from real to digital is comparable to the birth of modernism in its need for an extreme rethinking of the construction of gallery websites due to the changes in the work being produced.

Navigation issues arise when considering the space of the gallery, and the online art experience reflects the same cold, linear trudge through the space. Extra information is kept to an absolute minimum, comparable to what is found in the physical gallery. Titles, dimensions, materials, etc. are listed below and just to the right of each image. CVs are sometimes provided in a separate location, away from the images of artwork. Information regarding the gallery's next and previous show is linked on the title page of the site, as if sitting on the table in the lobby reserved for invitation cards and guestbooks. These conventions are a problem when information is so easily accessible for both the artist and viewer. More than ever before, contemporary artists use data and information for their work, as well as source material from the unfathomable repository of images found online. Viewers share this ease of access and possess the ability look up information about the artist while viewing her work online or to use their mobile phones while visiting the physical gallery space. Galleries have long separated themselves from the outside world, dispensing with windows and bringing only the barest of extraneous material to light (O'Doherty). In the same way, gallery



websites seem to refuse to hyperlink to outside sources, whether that is information about the featured artist or her work, or information about the gallery itself.

The minimal aesthetic in the past created an environment free from impositions and judgment. “The work is isolated from everything that would detract from its own evaluation of itself” (O’Doherty). But when viewing work online, there is no choice but to see the artwork in the context of the Internet. Distances, as we experience them, “have been abolished” by the Information Superhighway that carries us from one subject and edge of the universe to another (Baudrillard 58). The spaces between things, if there is still a distinction between objects and ideas online, are so minute that we are forced to consider our destination (the artwork) and the path we take to get there as a single entity that reaches a level of simultaneous understanding, in which the part is inseparable from the whole. The artwork, then, is potentially influenced by the entirety of the Internet, which becomes less of an anomaly as more of reality is given an online digital representation.

## EXPERIMENTS IN TRANSLATION

The Guggenheim Museum has taken the most ambitious, and high profile, step forward in creating an online gallery experience that approaches space in a new way while generating this space according to the needs of the artwork. It's unfortunate that no one was ever able to use it.

In 2000, The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum commissioned the architecture firm Asymptote to create an online exhibition space for curated works called the Guggenheim Virtual Museum. It was meant to be a three-year initiative to display digital artworks and provide virtual space to connect the 5 Guggenheim branches around the world. *Wired Magazine* described an early version of the museum as “a pear-shaped balloon filled with water, expanding and contracting, then splitting like reproducing cells” (Spingarn-Koff). The large, constantly undulating shape contained many rooms and pathways; each designed to house a particular piece of digital, or digitally converted, artwork. Upon entering the museum, the user donned a first-person viewpoint and began to navigate through the hallways at a break-neck speed until she reached her desired destination. Asymptote's principal, Hani Rashid, said of the state of online exhibitions:

“Right now if you go into an actual museum -- a physical 'first reality' museum -- all you really get to do is browse a computer screen, which basically allows you to have the experience you could have at home. Why not, in fact, (create) an entirely new experience given this content that's already emerging, and try to push the content further?”

Rashid was clearly passionate about creating this new type of space, and had just finished the fully functional Virtual Trading Floor for the New York Stock Exchange, along with a string of commissions from the Guggenheim for other virtual installations. Artnet.com reported that the museum set aside a one million dollar acquisition budget for the virtual project, and then the timeline abruptly ended (Pollack). There are no reviews of the finished virtual museum, and no mention of a version, working or not, ever being accessible online. In 2006, *Metropolis Magazine* stated that the “Guggenheim Virtual Museum was a dazzlingly expensive piece of pixel-pushing that never opened its doors” (Hall).

The Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, and ZKM in Germany all traffic in online exhibitions regularly, but don't seem interested in remaking the digital space for the benefit of the artists' works. Granted, many artists who make online work, like JODI, Vuk Cosic, and Heath Bunting, create their own types of space and methods of navigation, which leads the majority of these “online exhibitions” to consist of a simple webpage with a list of links to the participants' websites. This is a practical danger, in that many artists' websites are deleted, domains lapse, or pages are moved. This also creates a disruption of cohesiveness that can diminish our consideration of the online works to the level of checking email or scanning newspaper headlines.

Asymptote's Virtual Museum was the most high profile example of a fate that seemed to befall many other attempts at creating an online-

integrated virtual art space. It is unclear as to why the project was never completed, but the dangers associated with translating real world to virtual spaces has been the common factor. Usability becomes an issue when traversing digital space. Humans, as physical beings, have spent the entirety of their lives negotiating real space, and feel comfortable in it. Digital space is still a relatively new concept, and many have to learn how to operate within this new form of space. The fundamental difference in negotiating online space versus real world space is the displacement of movement and sensation. A body “moves and feels, and feels itself moving, creating an intrinsic connection between movement and sensation whereby each immediately summons the other” (Massumi 28). When even a slight displacement occurs between these two determinants, a difference is noted by the mind, causing an invocation of a third factor: feeling. Feelings have a way of “interfering with each other, mutually intensifying, often unpredictably” (Massumi 29). Our expectation that the digital space will “feel” the same as the real world space, that is, having no separation between movement and sensation, has sunk all previous attempts at the virtual gallery space.

A way to effect a smoother transition for the majority who do not yet feel comfortable with the digital is to integrate the physical with the virtual online space. The San Francisco Museum of Art released the first handheld multimedia gallery tour in 2001, and in 2010, released an interactive Rooftop Garden Application for mobile phones. The program contains views of the

garden from all angles, along with supplemental information about each work and interviews with persons involved in the making. Mobile phones represent a median between the computer and us, in that our bodies are not forgotten through the LCD screen. Our movement is not displaced from sensation because we are free to move about while accessing information on our phone. What we'll call the mobile online exhibition becomes a training course, allowing us, in some cases, to compare a virtual with a real exhibition in the physical space of the gallery. We can then access the virtual without the added element of being faced with the real artworks, first training our bodies to act in conjunction with the virtual space, then feeling a displacement from them (Massumi 30).

Baudrillard writes about the spectator and the separation of the stage and the auditorium: "everything today conspires to abolish that separation: the spectator being brought into a user-friendly, interactive immersion. When all are actors, there is no action any longer, no scene" (Baudrillard 177). This might be true of forced performances, but when interacting with the larger online world, we are actors as consumers (and the majority of online activity is consuming, rather than producing). The role of a consumer creates a separation from the "action," like the separation that exists between the stage and the auditorium (Ranciere 8). The interaction through the computer screen is the step we must take in order to become the spectator, in order to consume the materials that others have produced.

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