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CHALLENGES FOR A UBIQUITOUS
IDENTITY**

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**There can be no interactive art
without interactive Museums**

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The Museum of Ubiquitous Art

The public as curators

There can be no interactive art without interactive museums.

During the past five years there has been a trend toward redefining basic concepts in art. This has been largely due to new advances in technology and to the dead end that Western culture keeps encountering. But the new advances in each domain of art reflect the techniques that are adopted, regardless of when the latter were discovered.

After the decline of the video festivals, gallery owners discovered video art. Museums discovered works using new technologies that have been presented at major art and technology festivals for the past few years; on the other hand, the Internet pioneers are showing signs of fatigue and taking actions that resemble the behavior of the traditional museum world.

It is a process strongly reminiscent of the old simulating the new and vice-versa, but evolving without taking sufficiently into account the very important factor of the new situation, which is participation by the public and above all the possibility of their intervention.

The public, and in particular members of the young generation who operate through the culture of interactive games and SMS, will not easily accept a culture in which artistic added value remains arbitrarily in the hands of a few people who manage it without dialogue.

If these young people ever become seriously involved in contemporary art as consumers, the results may perhaps be completely new and will be of particular interest.

For the time being, however, there is a lot of work to be done, mainly by the generation that will hand over the torch to the upcoming one, and this is where the great difficulty lies, because total confusion reigns here.

In my view, the confusion is due to the lack of an “interpretation”.

The process of “interpretation” manifests itself as a need whenever a new situation emerges, a situation that changes production and communication data, thus generating new values and a new way of life, and redefining evolution or revolution, while art is then called upon to represent the new data.

The museum is in some way related to the pattern above, because it either records elements or objects which, owing to the new situation, have become socially useless, or it validates or justifies this new situation.

Thus, “interpretation” describes what is coming and the museum describes what is leaving.

A careful study of the dates when museums were established leads to the conclusion that the creation of new forms of museums is associated with social changes or other decisive events. Many of the museums in Europe are associated with world’s fairs and new technological achievements. The first museum, the Victoria and Albert, was set up at the World’s Fair in England in 1851. At the corresponding fair in 1937, the first technological museum, called the “Palace of Discovery” was established. In addition to colonialism, the spread of Western civilization to other continents created ethnographic museums; reforms in the industrial revolution created folklore museums that preserve old customs and methods that are falling into disuse. It is not accidental that, in the early globalisation age, a number of museums of contemporary art were created, which are tending to become multinational.

The digital and then the techno-biological revolution that followed, even though they appear to be far more radical than the industrial revolution, have not been accompanied by a comprehensive interpretation. At the same time the museum of contemporary art, having the ability to do this easily, instead of showing “objects of art” that are detached from their “social status”, promotes and imposes art that is about to acquire social status. In this way, the role of the museum of contemporary art is changing. It no longer keeps records but predetermines.

This situation raises questions that have not yet been answered. Does the contemporary art system, focused on the modern type of museum, ultimately have room to evolve and above all to be overruled (one of the main features of contemporary art from impressionism on), rather like apples in cellophane packages in the supermarket? Does this type of museum cover the needs of the new age? And what are these needs?

Serota, in his excellent speech “Experience or Interpretation – the dilemma of museums of contemporary art”, placed the issue in the way in which works are presented and in the intervention of the artist or curator in shaping the museum. He concluded that “the museum-encyclopedia or museum-dictionary is neither feasible nor desirable”, that “the gallery or the museum is thus transformed into a artist’s workshop” and that “the traditional relationship between the artist, the work of art and the museum is very important.”

This trend, which has prevailed in virtually all museums, is certainly a step forward. But does it cover the needs of the 21st century, the century with dynamic data banks, with the capability of the public to select or even to “participate” in the creation of an artist’s work?

In other words, does the museum of contemporary art constitute for the artist a place of action, or archiving or does the artist himself create works of art ready to be recorded and classified?

And finally which artists are selected and in what way? Is the museum a seedbed of contemporary art in which new ideas are cultivated, or does it play the role of the 19th century salon, which impressionism eliminated in order to impose a new order that revolved around the galleries brought forth by this process?

Is there finally a distinct role to be played by the museum? Does it cover the needs of this particular era and especially on-going developments?

Are the changes it has made – in terms of either structure (emphasis on adjoining spaces such as cafeterias, conference halls, and other venues), form (the museum itself as a work of art), or administration (parallel commercial activities such as fashion shows, automobile exhibitions, etc.) – sufficient to guarantee its successful passage into the 21st century?

At this point, social development leaves theory behind; it also leaves behind my melancholy analysis, and has a more direct control of processes. We should not forget that we are living in an age of interactive experience.

Interactive experience has a direct bearing on our way of life, and changes all everyday activities radically (the computer as a home appliance, mobile phones, electronic games, and e-life in general). With regard to art, various fields have played a significant role in the development, promotion and exchange of ideas, such as specialized festivals, research centers, university faculties with the new post-graduate departments, and the Internet.

On the other hand, the stock market system in art that focused on the museum has “discovered” this new situation, recognizing the exploitable features of the “virtual” (easy transportation, multiple disposal, global representation) and appropriates this structure and concept in its own way.

But two characteristics will play the most important role in developments: space and the public's ability to choose.

First of all, as regards the space, we are in a period of a big change, constantly evolving, as the speed in the Internet also evolves. Events that used to take place in a square, in a theatre, in places of social gathering, invade directly into each home's living-room all over the world.

More and more information, entertainment, universities, shopping centers, as well as the Museum itself, reach as far as each person's home, providing him for the first time with the "absolute right" of choice.

It is the first time the "subjectivity" of the receiver is juxtaposed with that of the artist and the curator in such a decisive way.

However, the question raised is: does the receiver's "subjectivity" have any value? How can it be defined and does it ultimately exist?

I could answer that yes, it exists, and indeed it exists in every one of us from a very early age. Every child builds its own Museum from the moment he begins to perceive the world and can reproduce forms in his own way.

A little later on, his parents first and then his teachers at school destroy his world by teaching him to read and write, and then by teaching him what is right and what is wrong. Each one of us, as we enter into society, have been subjected to the destruction of the personal Museum of our childhood.

This is the conclusion I came to while working with my son on a major project that I was striving to finish before my son started school (it is a project based on the child's point of view before he learns the alphabet). The project is called "Helicopter-house" (Paris-Athens 2000) it began from an idea of my son's and was developed in real space, on the Internet and in Virtual Reality.

On the occasion of this project a dialogue was inevitably established between me and my son on different subjects concerning Art.

During this dialogue, I never managed to explain to my son why works that he might have created were exhibited in Museums, while works that he had in fact created were no value whatsoever.

And finally I wasn't able to provide a serious answer to the question: "If you become famous and the works I produced also sell, which one of us is going to get the money?"

This kind of question would not have been asked some years ago, at the time when a work anticipated a special capability on the part of the artist.

Today, however, everything is permitted, since the Museum allows it. The Museum today is obliged to “propose”, to constantly create “new values”. These values are frequently based on avant-garde, extreme situations, shock situations or provocatively unworthy works.

Does the Museum, however, apart from this demonstration of today’s reality, cover future needs? And what could be a future solution?

One example of a solution could be the exact opposite, which is instead of the museum-palace proposing an viewpoint, there will be a micro-museum that will give the visitor an opportunity to select works himself or even to take part in creating them.

This was the proposal by the Mediaterra 2001 festival: the creation of a mikro-Museum.

The mikro-Museum is a small mobile construction containing a large number of contemporary digital art works that every visitor could retrieve, thanks to modern technology.

During the festival, the " mikro-Museum " started on a journey from Athens, then settled in Lavrion for a while, after which it traveled to Sofia, Belgrade, and Maribor and ended up in Frankfurt.

In every place it was presented, it stimulated various artistic events around it and developed a dialogue on the subject of globalization.

Parallel events via the Internet transmitted the experience of the trip on a larger scale.

In this sense, the mikro-Museum was also a “micro-scope” recording audience response and sending it to the network.

The micro-Museum is a product of the entire movement of artists on the subject of filing and recording the work of art, such as Marcel Duchamp, Daniel Spoerri, Claes Oldenburg etc.

Nevertheless there is a great difference between the proposal of the mikro-Museum and the movement mentioned above that can be seen on two points: first, the small mikro-Museum structure can contain as many works as a normal museum, thus reversing the notion of space, and secondly the mikro-Museum can cause events by its audience, whether it specialised or not, and it can record these events and then distribute them all over the world.

Then, maybe the next stage of the museum is not the Museum-Temple of Art that invites the visitor to stand in awe in front of the building and its protected works, but a museum that follows the next stage of technology, i.e. hidden and scattered network technology.

In other words, a few years from now somebody could stand in a village outside of Bilbao and receive a message on his mobile phone with pictures and video, informing him that the first kiosk he will come to is a museum that contains 2000 works of art that he can see, hear, interact with, and even download the catalogue or the music pieces, and charging them on his credit card.

I don't know how much we adult visitors or the protected artists will like it, but younger visitors and children will certainly like to leave a museum with their MP3s filled with songs and sound installations...

And hence, I will finish with children, because although we may be discussing the Museum, the future belongs to the children.

A fairly original event was set up by the Municipality of Athens for the 2004 New Years' celebration. Instead of showing different works of art, a big studio was set up called "Santa Claus's Workshop" where children were invited to build their own city or their own museum in a city of the future. More than 10.000 children participated in this event and created works.

This huge collection, which contains some remarkable works, gave an indication of the world as children imagine it, and made me reflect on some issues, particularly on some of the works that are considered masterpieces but that cannot communicate with children.

Many museums also contain signs saying that children are not allowed to enter the exhibition.

Is it possible that society does not function well when it cannot communicate with its members who communicate with "pictures" and especially with "innocent pictures", such as children, and when this situation comes from archives of art, which are museums?

Can this be due to the lack of dialogue between the museum and its public? Has it lost its way and become isolated, and dragging the artist along with it?

I believe that the public itself will answer these questions within a few years.

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