

# Brave New Museum. A Conversation about Museums in the Digital Age

By Michiel van Iersel and  
Juha van 't Zelfde

*Michiel van Iersel* is a cultural advisor working with LAGroup Leisure & Arts Consulting in Amsterdam. Together they launched MuseumLab.org, a website that explores the boundaries of museums in our age.

*Juha van 't Zelfde* is a DJ and curator, and organizes the Amsterdam Museum Night (Museumnacht).

**Michiel Van Iersel** Until very recently it was simply unthinkable that something could ever challenge the solid triangular relationship between the artist, art institutions and their audience. Only after the advent of film, and still later video, and with the subsequent introduction of storage media such as video and DVD, both the artist and his audience were liberated from the necessity to physically engage with the work by either attending a performance or visiting a museum. Thanks to the laptop and mp3 player people can now experience art whenever and wherever they want. At the same time many artists have moved away from classic institutions and out onto the streets, offering their audience an unmediated experience. But even avant-garde theatre and radical art experiments cannot counterweigh the dominant role of the producer in exposing people to art. After thousands of years of linear development, from the wall paintings in the caves of Lascaux to Olafur Eliasson's 'Setting Sun' in Tate Modern's vast Turbine Hall, cultural production still remains centered around the bipolar paradigm of authorship and authority. In fact, artistic or cultural objects are traditionally more highly valued by the public if a real connoisseur, such as a professional curator or art critic has first approved them.

As yet there is no sign of something that might fundamentally destabilize good old Culture 1.0, but over the last few years there has been a gradual shift in power. Since the emergence of new media and unlimited communication flows, people can now intervene directly in the relationship between the sender and the receiver of the artistic message. According to some, these recent developments will radically alter the structure that currently controls cultural production, forcing it to evolve into a more democratic system that will allow ordinary people to consume, create, curate or criticize works of art as they wish; unrestricted, on demand, peer to peer and in real time. It remains to be seen if all this will lead to a type of cultural expression that is distinctively different from the ones we are already accustomed to and, if so, whether traditional institutions such as museums will be able to respond spontaneously and accordingly to these changes. But before we go into that, can you recall the moment when you first encountered an example of cultural production or presentation that gave you a glimpse of the ultimate possibilities that new media has to offer in terms of democratizing the arts?

**Juha van 't Zelfde** Coming from a music background, I would have to say that both Napster and Discogs introduced me to this new level of cultural exchange. Napster was a peer-to-peer file-sharing service, created in 1999 by two students who were looking for

an easier method to search and find music online. Discogs came about in 2000 as a database of a private record collection that was started by an American DJ. Today it is one of the largest online databases on music releases.

As a DJ, I use Discogs to do research on artists and labels, to see what records they have released, with whom they have collaborated, and who else has released on that label. I then search Napster to download the actual music. From the outset it was quite an astonishing experience and it (in combination with the digitization of music) changed the music industry completely. The interesting thing about Discogs is that it was built from the bottom up. Anyone could contribute to the site by adding releases of local artists and by editing existing information. In that sense it was a music Wikipedia *avant la lettre*.

Looking back at that period it was the network of peers and the transparency of the information that was groundbreaking. So to answer your question, I would say that this leveling of the playing field, opening up the options and choices and taking out the traditional filters of the record labels, radio DJs and record stores, did in fact democratize music. It changed the business model of music distribution. Steve Jobs understood this very early on and introduced the iPod and iTunes. Since digital data can be duplicated easily and since storage costs are low, iTunes can offer a much broader selection of music than your average Virgin Megastore, making it a true 'Long Tail'<sup>1</sup> company.

- MI It's interesting that you mention the online distribution of music as your point of reference because it shows both the possibilities and limitations of the Internet as a means of exposing culture. The web turned out to be a very efficient and democratic tool for sharing music. Apart from the copyright infringement that might be caused by exchanging existing music online, record labels can nowadays surpass physical outlets and reach audiences directly by making music available on their own website or through online stores. Even the Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra started experimenting with live webcasts last year when they launched RCO Livecast together with media partner and Dutch broadcasting company AVRO. And Fabchannel provides one of the biggest online concert archives in the world that consists of hundreds of full-length concerts, festivals, performances, debates and lectures that can be freely experienced through an on demand video archive.

The intangible nature of sound (music) and moving images (film) makes information easily transferable to a variety of online formats, such as mpeg, mp3 and other techniques for narrowcasting on the web 2.0. But what opportunities do such Internet applications offer museums and visual arts institutions who mostly deal with physical artefacts that are much harder to digitize? Can you give some good examples of museums that have shown an ability to engage their audience in new ways by adopting the idea of web 2.0?

- JZ One example is the Powerhouse Museum in Sydney, a museum focused on science, design and history. Tens of thousands of objects can be searched and tagged on its website. The museum has embedded its own curatorial and archival information in the digital collection ('taxonomies'), but visitors of the site are asked to add information in the form of keywords and tags ('folksonomies') "to help others locate material more easily." A second example is the Brooklyn Museum.

<sup>1</sup> This refers to the book *The Long Tail: Why the Future of Business is Selling Less of More*, by Wired editor-in-chief Chris Anderson. In his book Anderson argues that products that are in low demand or have low sales volume can collectively make up a market share that rivals or exceeds the relatively few current bestsellers and blockbusters, if the store or distribution channel is large enough.

This museum is using social media such as blogs, podcasts and video submissions, and it actively invites the visitor to contribute to the website. For this goal it uses social networks like MySpace, Facebook and Flickr.

One of the best examples is Tate Online, which uses all kinds of feeds and interactive applications. The museum embraced the Internet at an early stage as an interactive cultural tool. Although most of its content is still proprietary, the dissemination of it is not. Visitors can subscribe to podcasts (Tate Shots, Tate Tracks, Tate Etc.), create and print their own tours through the gallery, and there is a platform for young people called Young Tate, with ample interactive opportunities. Interestingly, Tate also offers online courses about modern and contemporary art.

- MI The Web-based applications that you describe are all examples of what can be called the online 'infrastructure of participation' in which users increasingly generate, share, and curate (their own) content. The traditional Internet consists of Web sites that primarily act as authoritative content providers, comparable to some traditional museums. With the introduction of web 2.0, control will slowly shift from the content provider to the user. Taken to its extremes this development could eventually lead to a user generated museum website or perhaps even the first real Wikimuseum where visitors select, edit or even add information to online exhibitions and presentations of the collection.

However, in the foreseeable future their influence is not expected to reach beyond the virtual world as museum curators will not allow the audience to decide what will actually be on display in the museum itself, let alone what works of art and other artefacts will be acquired for the collection. Institutional power and top down curatorial decisions will continue to separate the sphere of public participation from the world of art production. But that doesn't stop artists from 'going 2.0'. Although most artists still work offline and remain largely unaffected by recent new media events, experiencing neither threat nor thrill from the idea of the Wikimuseum, the pending 2.0 revolution does have an effect on the artistic practice of some. A growing number of artists and art organizations are reflecting on the aesthetic and moral consequences of the Internet while others use Internet applications to express their own ideas virtually.

- JZ One example of an artwork you could label '2.0' is 'Endless Forrest' by Auriea Harvey and Michaël Samyn, that was recently shown at Mediamatic in Amsterdam. In this online game you are a deer, roaming in an endless forest. Just like in any Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Game ('MMORPG'), this is a real time virtual space with multiple players. But unlike popular examples such as World of Warcraft and Habbo Hotel, there are no challenges to be overcome, or points to be earned. You are really lost in space.

"The Endless Forest is probably one of the first steps towards a 'jeu d'auteur', a much needed evolution of games towards a medium with the artistic expressiveness of cinema and literature", explains Harvey and Samyn. "We claim the game space as an area where art can be made. Not the hip and oh so conveniently ironic art that we find in elitist galleries or museums. But a much more traditional and modest art. An art that is not afraid of making a statement. Or of pleasing the audience."

A more critical approach is taken on by renowned new media artist Brody Condon. His works 'Suicide Solution' and 'Karma Physics Elvis' are imaginary video games (by their nature interactive media), with alienating and mesmerizing effects. His latest work consists of a website (tmpspace.com) that shows four rocks in a meadow under fog. The image looks as if it is computer generated. Underneath

is an e-mail from artist Sam Sanford titled 'fascism' and states: "Large-scale and important historical facts you are now living through will be forgotten, misrecorded, falsified and otherwise obliterated, causing future generations to repeat our tragedies, and you are complicit in this process." Condon's reply is titled 'websites are bad for you', and merely states "I quit".

Institutions that use the web to find talent and spur creativity are no longer just the netizens and hackers of the technosphere. With the launch of 'Your Gallery', art mogul Saatchi created a social platform for new artists to show their work and interact. In a recent interview with the New Yorker magazine, Saatchi said he spends three hours a day pecking away at his gallery's rapidly expanding website. "I'm hoping that the site is encouraging to people who find the art world a little daunting", he said knowingly.

MI The online possibilities you mention have indeed enabled both artists and members of the audience to expand their artistic horizons in an ever-changing imaginary landscape. But at the same time the rapid growth of such applications has turned the worlds of art and cultural production upside down, leaving curators and critics centred around one pole that is gradually vanishing from sight while consumers are pushed to the centre of gravity in this brave new world. There they are left on their own to navigate an ocean of artistic expressions without any fixed beacons. In this bottom-up world art enthusiasts are confronted with an almost paralysing amount of art to choose from. To digest all the artist portfolios on Saatchi's Your Gallery alone would take a lifetime of web-browsing (and the wealth of many nations to acquire). Those without proper education or a strong inner guidance will increasingly have to rely on the invisible hand that shapes the online world with an alluring combination of cybernomics and the 'wisdom of crowds'.

But what if this invisible hand proves inept for the job of guiding audiences towards experimental art? And who will intervene when user generated content becomes a vicious circle that recycles popular demand and ignores truly creative forces? When we consider your example of 'Endless Forest' you could argue that the two artists were criticizing the whole idea of unlimited choice and opportunities that the Internet misleadingly promises us. Whereas a museum visit enables you to concentrate and reflect, the web constantly forces you to move on and constantly look beyond the horizon for new opportunities that are only a hyperlink or mouse-click away. Just like the deer in 'Endless Forest', you are haunted by your own restless mind.

Coincidentally or not, 2.0 critic Andrew Keen describes the scenario in which the Internet kills our culture as "an endless digital forest of mediocrity", suggesting that we still need to make a clear distinction between author and audience and that we should even be ready to defend a system in which editors, curators and other experts are authorized to find and refine artistic talent. How do you envision the role of museums and curators with regard to their ability to help bridge the widening gap between artistic output and consumer preferences in a 2.0 world?

JZ Museums should embrace the new tools the web has given them. They could add spheres to the collection, consisting of layers of data and meta-data that contextualize the works and the artists. This would augment the user experience and make the museum a more accessible destination. Museums could also reveal how users are browsing the collection, supplying information on the preferences and behaviour of other visitors, just like Amazon ("visitors viewing Warhol may be interested in Basquiat"); introducing folksonomies and tags that visitors associate with objects; having visitors rate and review objects, and so on. Museum 1.0 and

web 2.0 can coexist without either of them losing their intrinsic quality. Cultural organizations are already learning from YouTube and are launching their own channels like Tate Shots and Ted. And the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum has used Google Earth to show the genocide that is now unfolding in Darfur, Sudan, with photographs, data and eyewitness reports from a number of sources, including their own collection. This is the right way to move forward.

One important aspect of the museum needs to be emphasized: its physical, tangible nature. The web cannot compete with that. No matter how exciting it is to see the Notre Dame with Microsoft's Photosynth, it does not compare to actually standing in front of it and seeing it. No matter how nice it is to zoom in on the Night Watch and read about its context, actually experiencing the size, texture and colours is incomparable.

- MI While being faced with a seemingly inevitable and partially beneficial rise of web-based communication technology and human interaction, museums can and should offer an alternative for the exchange of artistic expressions on the web if only to maintain a much needed balance between the quantity and quality of art. Paradoxically, as public institutions, the best way for museums to act in a socially responsible way is to meet public demand for unlimited creativity with clear guidance and a claim of authority. Coming from a 1.0 situation in which the artist and curator were almighty, the least museums can do is to launch a website that entices people to go offline in order to visit their exhibitions. But decades ago museum director Alexander Dorner already said that "the museum only makes sense as a pioneer". So how far should a museum go in pursuing a true 2.0 status, if at all? Will they survive in this new virtual 'land'?
- JZ The definition of a museum by the International Council of Museums focuses on "the tangible and intangible evidence of people and their environment." According to Wikipedia, The term web 2.0 refers to "Web-based communities and hosted services (...) that facilitate collaboration and sharing between users." You can see that the traditional definition of the museum is not fully compatible with web 2.0. As long as there are tangible objects to display, a physical space – an institution, city square, container – is needed. Everything else can be mediated and put online. In response to Alexander Dorner, curator Hans Ulrich Obrist said: "The museum of the 21st century exists as a flexible structure and establishes the form in which it appears directly in media space." Web 2.0 can introduce new forms of acquisition, conservation, research, communication and exhibition. Look at Pierre Huyghe's exhibition 'Celebration Park' at Tate Online, the collection of sound at UbuWeb, or 'Turning the Pages' at the British Library as examples of instrumental innovation. One step further is the Smithsonian's 'Encyclopedia of Life', which has the ambition to document the world's 1.8 million named species. This project will be subject to the same kind of public editing process that is also practised on the Wikipedia site, which is based on so-called 'radical trust'.

It is very likely that 'the wisdom of crowds' and 'radical trust' will increasingly affect museums, but I believe that as long as there are moral, economic and legal incentives to conserve our heritage, there will be agents – curators, programmers, critics – who will be rewarded for their expertise. The swift adoption of new media techniques will allow experts to deploy the same strategies as the crowds, enabling them to fight for attention with their own superior weapons.

In the end it is not just a matter of what web 2.0 will mean for the museum, it is also about what the museum can do for web 2.0. And that, ironically, demands a 'radical trust' in Culture 1.0 and also in heritage that we can touch, hold and hand over to future generations.