

Virtual Memory: Art Museums and the Internet

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The digitization of museum collections offers an excellent example of the merging of virtual and material reality. After all, actual artefacts are stripped from their material qualities and removed from their physical exhibition spaces, to pop up on the Internet as virtual, hyperlinked objects. It has been often argued that our sense of reality is divided into the 'real' reality of everyday life and the virtual reality of cyberspace. According to Virilio (1995), this split causes a schizoid experience of perception that will eventually lead to a fundamental loss of orientation. Baudrillard laments the supposed disappearance of our physical reality, observing the sudden emergence of the virtual through digital technologies, which "gives us the sense that it now marks the vanishing or end of the real" (Baudrillard 2003: 39). In this paper, I will contend that the digitization of art works forces us to rethink conventional ideas of virtual reality. Focusing on Tate Online, I will argue that the virtual domain of cyberspace is not, in fact, opposed to the physical space of the museum.

Tate is a group of four British galleries, keeping more than 60,000 works of art. The museum includes an additional storage facility and an exhibition space on the Internet, aptly called Tate Online. Launched in 1998 the website was conceived as a concise catalogue of Tate's vast collection of paintings, sculptures and sketches, which has gradually grown into a self-supporting organization. It now presents an overwhelming compilation of images and texts to a diversity of audiences, ranging from scholars to children. Tate Online also hosts a unique collection of net art, mostly commissioned by the museum itself.

Every object in the Tate collection has its own page within the website, consisting of a digitized picture and an overview of technical details, such as title, size, materials, artist's name and year of acquisition. Additionally, all works are described by a set of key words, which can be used as entry points into the online database. For instance, a visitor of the website may want to look for a particular painting by way of typing in its title or the name of the artist, but she can

also search the collection more randomly by entering an art-historical notion or the name of a specific technique. This means that the painting *Yellow Attenuation* by Peter Sedgley can not only be found through its title or the artist's name. It will also be presented to visitors looking for *colour*, *Optical Art*, *geometric*, *musical analogy* and *sequence*, as well as the years 1930 and 1945, the number T00739, and the medium of painting. Furthermore, innovative visualization techniques allow visitors of Tate Online to glance underneath a statue, to 'feel' the texture of a painting or to walk around a piece of installation art. These practices of looking amount to a shift of perspective from the supposedly detached involvement of the viewer towards the domain of 'haptic visuality' (Marks 2002, 2004).

Some may say that the factual list of attributes used to describe *Yellow Attenuation* does not reveal any relevant information about the painting itself, as it neglects the sensuous aspects of the material object or the effects of its presence in the gallery space. The digital representation is, in other words, no more than a poor substitute for the original work of art. Nonetheless, these seemingly meaningless details denote specific, interrelated qualities of the painting. Taken together, they constitute a concrete work, evoking its presence in cyberspace. In addition, they connect this specific painting to other works of art in Tate's online database. The key word *musical analogy*, for instance, creates a passage from Sedgley's canvas to the sculpture *Song of Songs* from 1946, which in turn is connected to an anonymous nineteenth-century drawing. Linking together divergent works of art by creating various relationships between words, images, numbers and colours, Tate Online does not follow the strategies of display that are typical of more conventional gallery spaces. If the traditional museum can be understood as an institutionalized form of cultural memory, by presenting paintings and sculptures in the logical, fixed order of art history, then Tate Online should be interpreted as an "intensive, zigzagging, cyclical and messy type of remembering [that] does not even aim at retrieving information in a linear manner" (Braidotti 2006: 167).

Stirring the visitors' imagination, Tate Online's unexpected couplings create "a space of affinity and correlation of elements" (p. 170). This particular space is opened up by a shift towards haptic visuality. The notion of haptic visuality implies a look that acknowledges the materiality of the object, although it does not involve any actual touching. By coining this term, Laura Marks intended "to restore the flow between the haptic and the optical that our culture is currently lacking" (2002: xiii). After all, the Western tradition of linear perspective has forced a clear division between objects and their beholders, causing the object to be seen "as distinct, distant, and identifiable, existing in illusionary three-dimensional space" (Marks 2004). This way of looking can be conceptualized as 'optic visuality'. Haptic visuality, on the contrary, is not limited by the narrow view of linear perspective. Vision should rather be understood as a form of contact, instead of being a disembodied experience. These considerations correspond to Virilio's writings on the sensory effects of digital space, for he claims that cyberspace is a tactile perspective, meaning that feeling or reaching at a distance "amounts to shifting the perspective towards a domain [...] of contact-at-a-distance" (Virilio 1995).

Tate Online's haptic or tactile dimensions are best expressed by its first net art commission, *Uncomfortable Proximity*, for which rogue artist Harwood photographed some famous paintings in close-up. These pictures were fed into a computer and combined with other images, such as detailed illustrations of inflamed skin, resulting in a series of disturbing collages. The extreme close-ups transform the smoothness of Tate's digital imagery into

a landscape of cuts, pores and bulges, as "[t]he digital camera allows a proximity to material, to skin, to the surface of paint that excels the eye's trained ability to sort and recognise" (Fuller 2000). The blown-up pictures of white, reddish and yellow scabs may cause feelings of disgust, but they also tempt the viewer to pick and scratch, demonstrating "the very real effects of virtuality" (Grosz 2001: 81). Like the intuitive or affective browsing through Tate's digitized collection, this touchy-feeliness is characteristic of haptic visuality. Opening up an endless space of affinity, connectivity and presence, Tate Online shows that the virtual domain of cyberspace does not ignore the sensory qualities of physical reality.

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