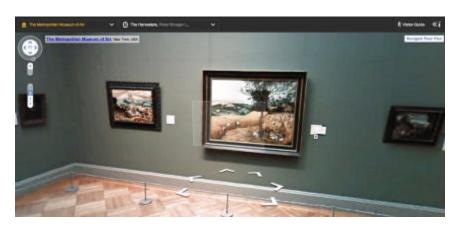# THE ELECTRONIC REPRESENTATION OF INFORMATION: NEW RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN THE VIRTUAL ARCHIVE AND ITS (POSSIBLE) REFERENT

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Screenshot: http://www.googleartproject.com/museums/met

The present work focuses on the new relationship generated by electronic information between the virtual archive (the Web in a broad sense, certain specialized archives in particular) and its referent (material reality in general, museums, inter-art practices, and artworks in particular).

What Nam June Paik conceived as a shift from the telecommunications network to a "multilevel digital communication network" is now taking place at a highly accelerated pace with vast unexpected consequences and possibilities for the artistic field. Moreover, it has also a close relationship to what Manuel Castells [1] defined as the "space of flows" or "real virtuality".

"The space of flows**"** is the abstraction of time and space and their dynamic interactions within digital age society. Castells developed this idea to "re-conceptualize new forms of spatial arrangements under the new technological paradigm"; a new type of space that allows distant synchronous, real-time interaction.

"The space of flows**"** can be experienced right now, a "multilevel electronic communication network" in which anyone can access from home not just of a website, but also the 3D photographic representation of a certain place, the street view of her/his house, of a friend's house, of a possible place to rent, or of a museum. This access is also making the distance between remote places seem inexistent in a certain way.

This concept opens several questions, for example: how is this representation presented? How is this possibility of accessing a physically distant place in all its details, without actually being physically there, affecting the ways in which this space is perceived?

In this regard, the electronic elaboration of the representation of information suggests following new paths, not only to deal with massive amounts of data, but also to better penetrate the domain of knowledge that every person should possess [2].

Moreover, the forms this representation of information takes are closely related to the ways in which its perception is structured and shaped. As Manovich [3] puts it "by organizing computer data in different ways, the interface provides different visions of the world". Therefore, the relationship between information, its representation and the referent (or in other words, the relation between reality and the conceptual construction of reality) has to be re-thought.

As many theorists advanced, this representation does not need to be-in-the-place-of a 'physically existent' entity, and that is why the referent is only 'possible'. Postman (1985) defines *virtual* as being so in practice though not strictly or in name; and *real* as actually existing, and advances that

"We don't see reality as it is but as our languages are. Our languages are our media. Our media are metaphors. Our metaphors create the content of our culture." "There is no separation between "reality" and symbolic representation. In a way, all reality is virtually perceived." [4]

Virtual or real, this digitalization is changing the status of the digitalized works, at the same time that influences our perception of them. In the same way language and metaphors build our 'reality' or structure our perception of the world, the Net as a text influences our perception of material reality, and the ambiguous nature of language has to be taken into account in this respect.

Thus reality, as experienced, has always been virtual because it is always perceived through symbols that frame practice with some meaning that escapes their strict semantic definition.

"A system that generates real virtuality is a system where reality itself (people's material/symbolic existence) is entirely captured, fully immersed in a virtual image setting [...] in which appearances are not just on the screen through which experience is communicated, but they become the experience." [5]

In this sense, a virtual presence is not less real than a material one, so where does the difference reside?

Following Levi-Strauss' [6] statement that the inadequacy between the signifier and the signified is the cause of every mythic and aesthetic invention that were aimed to cover this flaw, or this unfitness; it is possible to think about the inadequacy between the virtual archive and its (possible) referent in these terms. It is necessary to try to understand what is happening with this non-fit, or overspill, and accordingly, what is happening in the gap, in the "inadequacy" between the virtual archive and the physical museum. This overspill can be considered the intrinsic ambiguity of symbolic production. Moreover, the very well known impossibility to 'translate' symbolic productions is what generates the change of the ontological status of digitized work.

In his article "The Archive Without Museums," Hal Foster [7] advances the hypothesis that photographic reproduction allowed a new "dialectics of seeing," represented by the positions of Walter Benjamin: namely, that photographic reproduction strips art of context and aura, and therefore its cult value and exhibition value are lost forever. In contrast, André Malraux claimed that the museum guarantees art as such, and photographic reproduction offers the means to put together "the bits and pieces" into the meta-tradition of "style".

If the museum guarantees the status of art and photographic reproduction permits stylistic affinities, what might a digital reordering encourage?

It is possible then that electronic information and digitalization establish new dialectics in which a museum's legitimating function is replaced by the virtual archive and/or museum/gallery websites.

It could be also said that some artworks are being produced solely to exist for the virtual archive? Moreover, has the time come when on-line documentation of exhibitions that never happened are created and presented?

At the same time, as Bolter and Grusin [8] advanced about the process of *remediation*, the influence goes both directions: from the virtual to the material, in the ways artworks are documented, affecting the processes of legitimization and probably also of production; and from the material to the virtual, when the virtual is anchored to reality in the imitation, or realistic representation of it (specially three-dimensional space).

Without falling into *modernists* positions about 'the intrinsic' possibilities of each medium, could we find a way in which the new archive can deal with art without imitating physical reality in the display? By taking the most profit of the hyperlink logic, and thus of the "overspill" and of ambiguity, can we create a non-linear, more experimental and open archive in which each user could ideally build her/his own path through it? It has been discussed if this 'freedom' of choice provided by the hyperlink logic and the virtual database is only an illusion or an utopist idealization of the medium. Even if not unlimited, this possibility exists and the medium undoubtedly offers a considerable degree of "personalization" in the paths to follow through a certain database or archive.

The shift Foster talks about is from the perception of the world as an image, to the codification of the world, and these images included, that result into pure information.

"[…] the humanism of the world-become-picture may reverse into the inhumanism of the world-become-information. For in the virtuality of the archive […] what is real is not what appears at any moment, but what is conserved in memory […]" [9]

In the same way the object is digitized in the archive, the medium loses its original materiality to be converted into a pure image. By being absorbed and re-generated in the virtual database, its status changes to the one of an "image-text", or of an "info-pixel".

This is the reason why the virtual archive no longer needs a physical referent. It doesn't mean that it has been removed from all physical support, only that the support of the information (memory and database), which constitutes the object's new "materiality", does not coincide with the support that presents it to be seen and apprehended (a screen). Therefore, even if the referential relation is not completely annulated, it becomes weaker and fragmental [10]. The iconic sign, in Peirce's terms, still maintains its relationship of resemblance with the object, but the medium has been converted into an image-text, and info-pixel [11]; its materiality has been 'translated' into information, into a code.

This new database is generating a dematerialization of memory and its record. However, this dematerialization is not the same proposed by the Conceptual Art of the '60, this is a somehow 'new' dematerialization, which does not imply an annihilation of the object, but just a change in its ontological status.

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