7

AN OVERVIEW OF VIRTUAL EXHIBITION AND THE GLOBALIZATION OF ART SHOWS

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Abstract
The word "virtual" suggests events simulated with the computer and hosted on the internet, although it is not all virtual contents that are hosted on net; this is for the purpose of accessibility and wide audience that one can reach within a short period and at a reasonable cost as compared to other media outlets. To preserve cultural heritage as it relates to art and artifacts, online or virtual exhibitions are a good option. Apart from the preservation of our cultural heritage, virtual exhibition also plays a pivotal role in bridging the communication gap between cherished art collections and the rest of the world. This paper provides an overview of virtual exhibitions, their necessity, types, importance and pitfalls. It also treats various accompanying and related tools to create user interfaces of such virtual exhibitions. Some of the historical virtual exhibitions are also discussed. The paper concludes that, virtual curatorship and exhibition have significantly reduced the gap between visitors and exhibits as the demand for original pieces has increased because of continuous and wide reaching exposure on the World Wide Web.

Key Words: Virtual Exhibitions, Communication, Curatorship, Globalization.

Introduction

We live in a visual world and are surrounded by increasing sophisticated visual images but unless we know how to read them, we stand the risk of remaining virtually illiterate. This is something that none of us can afford in this modern world; so posits Howells (2008).

Globalization suggests making information known to everybody in all parts of the world. The Microsoft Encarta (2009) sees globalization as a term for the emergence of a global society in which economic, political, environmental, scientific and cultural events in one part of the world quickly come to have significance for people in other parts of the world.

Stating further, it says that:

> Globalization is the result of advances in communication, transportation, and information technologies. It describes the growing economic, political, technological, and cultural linkages that connect individuals, communities, businesses, and governments around the world. (Microsoft Encarta, 2009)

In this era of digital revolution, advancements in technology are rapidly altering the environment we live in. The effects of these technological advancements can be felt in so many ways, one of which is information dissemination. Nowadays, an immeasurable majority of people grow up in cities where old and culturally relevant architectural buildings often give way to modern buildings due to increasing scarcity of land especially in ancient cities like Benin, Nigeria. The disappearance of these heritage sites, symbols and fast dwindling communication between young children and older parents who spend long hours at work, has culminated in most children not being well informed about the rich cultural heritage of their ancestors and their accompanying significance to them as members of that society and culture. This is very worrisome, because the history and making of a nation in many societies is often cemented brought about by the plethora of interesting, dynamic and significant events that had or are still occurring. Such events form an important part of a society's cultural heritage. Such information should be passed to children even yet unborn, so that they can better understand and appreciate the hard work and sacrifices of the people who built the societies they currently live in, understand the cultural diversity in modern societies and contribute positively in fostering unity.

This is where exhibitions probably come into the picture. Long ago, new and promising educational roles of art galleries and museums were introduced into the cultural art space. Khoon and Ramaiah (2008) feels that, such establishments hold carefully developed information resources of immense breadth and depth, which is continuously refreshed by ongoing research studies and that they have some vital role to play as communications links between their highly valuable collections and the general public, in sharing and propagating the knowledge in their collections.

For the purpose of this paper, Online and virtual are keywords which will be used interchangeably; although the difference is very trivial, both are simulated by computer and hosted on the web/internet. In the words of Jacobs (2004):

> Virtual exhibition is the collection of digital replicas of real events or objects developed with the help of multimedia and virtual reality tools which produce a simulated environment in a computer, and delivered through web so that users will get the same satisfaction as they are seeing or using the physical objects in different areas.

Normally all virtual exhibitions would provide a simulated, real environment using virtual reality tools which are a bit difficult, expensive and time consuming to develop than the simple online exhibition. Unlike traditional exhibitions, these exhibitions could be viewed free of charge, at one's own convenience and in the time zone of the viewer. Globalization, in this context is about making the world know about what we have to showcase and make public.

Overview of Art Exhibitions

Whereas Palmer (2016), describes art exhibition as a forum where an artist or group of artists showcase their artistic productions for public consumption and enjoyment for a specific duration of time, Khoon and Ramaiah (2008), both see exhibitions as public displays of art products or artifacts; Dudley (1990), however defines an exhibition as essentially a promotional event that is designed to communicate with the targeted audiences, some form of information, products or services. Generally, an exhibition revolves round the exhibiting artist, the exhibits and the general public or the target audience. The primary objective of any art exhibition is to provide a communication opportunity for achieving academic and economic goals, mostly involving viewer or buyer to exhibitor experiences.

People attend exhibitions for various reasons. Some go there for social reasons such as recreation and meeting new friends, others attend to buy art works, while others go to acquire new experiences and knowledge / data regarding the styles and techniques of the exhibiting artist. Dudley (1990) thinks, exhibitions serve to maximally exploit events and occasions. For instance, an artist can use the opportunity of a conference to organize an exhibition within the time frame of such conference for instance the art exhibition organized in the university of Benin as part of the University's Annual Research Day and Conference. This exhibition was able to reach-out to the desired audience; create a dialogue with its target audiences on an interpersonal basis; and achieve set communications objectives for a wide range of organizations.

Physical exhibitions are found in traditional museums, galleries and other designated spaces wherein the line of communication is direct and the curator communicates directly with the audience. These exhibitions have to employ much more clever means to attract a significant number of visitors. Physical museums have been a source of traditional information; drawing and interpreting their collections in carefully designed architectural spaces for their visitors like schools, hotels, foreign missions, tourists and their likes.

According to Teather (2000), there are a number of factors normally considered in actual traditional exhibitions. These include international boundaries, customs procedures for the movement of works of art, design of exhibition space, loan agreements, insurance policies, conservation, preservation, transportation time and methods for works of art, fixed hours of operation, and number of visitors that can be accommodated simultaneously. Other issues to be considered include the protective style of display that hinders accidents from happening, the target audience: how to reach them as well as some sort of entertainment that usually accompanies such physical exhibitions. Physical museums tend to carry out a range of activities and produce a variety of resources. The purpose is to make visitors aware of what is available in the collections, to guide visitors through the collections in diverse ways, boost their understanding and enjoyment of these collections. Physical museums give visitors a real sense of the artifacts on display. People visit museums and galleries to enjoy, explore and understand cultural backgrounds of the physical exhibitions that operate on the real space that can communicate directly with the public. However, physical exhibitions are not without their own attendant limitations for instance, even though they have some freedom of mobility as in the case of travelling exhibitions, they are more often than not, fixed and this hinders the reach of most people who ordinarily would have loved to attend such shows and this means that people would have to wait while the exhibition train moves from one place to the other. This in no small measure involves time, space and cost; moreover, physical exhibitions do not provide sufficient information as that of virtual exhibition.

Added to the above, virtual exhibition do not have the bottlenecks inherent in the organization of physical exhibition. Palmer (2016), outlined the different stages in the organization of physical exhibition as follows:

1. Planning,
2. Collection of artworks and jury process,
3. Sponsorship drive,
4. Space search and organization,
5. Display of art pieces and categorization,
6. Cataloguing,
7. Publicity and promotion and
8. Opening ceremony, entertainment and speeches and closing.

With the above outlines, it is obvious that physical exhibitions are more capital and manpower intensive than virtual exhibitions. In the light of the above, one raises the question. How is virtual exhibition a better alternative to physical exhibition?

Virtual exhibitions present a practical and cost-effective answer to the bottlenecks of physical exhibitions. There are no limits in time, distance and space. Instead of being open to the public at a particular time, they are available all time via the World Wide Web. Another advantage is that people need not travel long distances to the exhibition venues. The exhibition is delivered to their homes, offices, classrooms, studios and other venues via the Internet on the various apps and appliances the target audiences have access to. The storage of art works in digital format also helps in reducing maintenance costs. There is no need to dismantle and re-build the exhibition space to make it available to new audiences. New materials could be easily added, while existing material could be updated with minimal effort. This, in no small measure reduces the time and eliminates expensive physical space required to organize an exhibition.

The moment an exhibition is hosted on-line, it becomes immediately available to people the world over, thereby, forming part of the global cultural exchange process. Everybody finds it easy to download the digital content for whatever use they might need it for. Students could use the online information for their projects to create new information products. This provides a different kind of learning experience, as students gather information, organize them, make meaning, reach insight and present their findings via online studies thereby inviting a global audience to share in their experience. Online exhibitions also offer better flexibility, enhances experimentation and dynamism compared to physical exhibitions. Visitors can select the level of information they wish to consult, thereby offering something to audiences of all ages, cultural and religious persuasions and experiences. The fact that online exhibitions can link to relevant and complementary information available at other websites further underscores the flexibility and possibilities of this new online medium.

Design and Development of user Interfaces

The user interface of online exhibitions refers to the web browser; therefore, interface considerations for online exhibitions are similar to those of a website. Kalfatovic (2002) harped on the need to completely eliminate horizontal scrolling of the screen layout. Horizontal scrolling is caused by monitor resolution, the size of images used on the site, the tiling of images and tables. These can be minimized with the use of style sheets and the careful resizing of images.

Colour is an essential design element and a major consideration in the design of user interface for the web. The colours that can be displayed on a computer screen depend on the video display card, the monitor and the processor of the computer. Although millions of colours are available for any particular design, only 216 "browser-safe" colours have been identified by Weinman (1999) that could be displayed accurately by most browsers on various types of computers. While this limitation does not seriously affect photographs and other bitmap images, it is recommended that these 216 colours be used for simple graphics such as decorative titles and backgrounds, so as to achieve a consistent design across browsers.

When displaying text on-screen, the two main factors are typeface and size. Miller (2014) opines that, due to the landscape orientation and the lower resolution of computer screens, reading web page is about forty per cent slower than reading printed pages. Hence, tiny fonts are not advised for use in online exhibitions.

Also, since most readers prefer to scan or copy rather than read, and the retention is about half that of reading the printed page, so text should be of appropriate length to avoid tiredness. Kalfatovic (2002) recommends the use of style sheets to achieve consistency in font and size. Sans serif fonts are preferred over serif fonts for accessibility reasons, while bold formatting should be used appropriately and italics formatting should be used sparingly as it is difficult to read on screen. Underlining text is not commonly used on web pages to avoid confusion with hyperlinks which are displayed by browsers as underlined text. Colours can be used creatively for text, with proper contrast with the background colour for readability.

Shobukonla (2012) notes that, web design is akin to traditional print publishing where every website is an information display board just like a book and every web page is like a page in a book. He went further to state that a website typically consists of texts and images, the first page of the website being the home page, index or welcome page as the case may be. Each web page within a website is in Hyper Text Mark Language (HTML) file which has its original Universal Resource Locator (URL) also known as the Web Address. After web pages are created, they get linked together using a navigational menu consisting of hyperlinks in text format, icons or graphics as buttons. Websites must be published on completion so as to make the site viewable via the net and this is achievable using the File Transfer Protocol (FTP) software. Designing a website of this nature requires more than just one tool or technique. In 1989, Berners-Lee authored the Hyper Text Markup Language (HTML); this marked the first approach to website building as noted by Wikipedia, (2009). HTML is a universal language in publishing information for world-wide dissemination. Soon afterwards more sophisticated software which were more user friendly were produced, they entailed encoding and were supported by tutorials and manuals for the aid of new users and for easy learning. Amongst this software are:

Macromedia Dreamweaver

This is a professional HTML editor, used for designing, encoding and for website building. This application comes with tutorials that non-professionals could use satisfactorily until they become conversant with it. The editing features in Macromedia Dreamweaver allow users to create web pages without the stress of encoding as a result of the simplicity and the friendly nature of the software. Flash animations are also possible to be added to web pages. This software comes with features that allow the development of websites without necessarily going into much technical details. It also allows users to design powerful database-driven web application with the use of server technology.

Macromedia Flash

It is an animation tool used for the creation of presentations, applications and other content which support user's interaction with his web pages. This software is very suitable in virtual exhibition cases because it supports animation and video displays. The added advantage of this software is its small size on disk because it supports vector graphics which requires less memory and space as compared to bitmap images. A flash application could be created using the flash drawing tools and additional multi-media elements could be imported into the design. All flash documents have file extensions of flash.

Plate 1: A virtual art exhibition web page designed with macromedia Dreamweaver. Source: Shobukonla, 2012

Macromedia Fireworks

This software resolves most problems that web designers and developers encounters in the course of building a website. It can be used to build, edit, animate and add advanced interactive images. The problems and bottlenecks inherent in most other software are minimized in fireworks. It is an advance version of the first two (Dreamweaver and Flash). The most interesting aspect of macromedia fireworks software is that it can be used offline, meaning it is not solely dependent on the internet. Some websites are custom built by the owners of Macromedia such as yahoo, Google etc.

Staging a virtual exhibition is also possible using other social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram and so on. This means that an exhibitor does not necessarily have to create a website for the purpose of virtual exhibition but special websites becomes important because most menus and tools that are custom built in the website might not be available on these social media platforms.

Plate 2: A typical example of virtual art exhibition web page, Source: Shobukonla, 2012

The most important aspect of a web design is the ability to be creatively innovative to give the web pages some distinctive feel and look. In the light of this, it is imperative that that good graphics be done with software like Adobe Photoshop, Harvard Graphics, Adobe Illustrator and Fireworks

Follow-up to the design processes

To make the site available to the world, after the design, it is important to register a domain name known as the website address to make the site accessible to the public. For instance, if the writer is hosting a virtual exhibition whose theme is *Interactive Pen and Ink Drawing Outcomes*, then the domain name could flow like this - www.interactivepenandinkexhibition.com. Suffice it to say here that domain names are written without spaces in-between the letters and always begin with www. (this means World Wide Web).

After the domain name has been registered, there is a need to host the site to make it finally accessible and viewable to the public. This is an internet-based service that permits web designers to make their websites accessible via the World Wide Web. The hosts are specialized companies that provide spaces on the internet server they own or lease for use by their clients. These companies also provide interfaces for the management of the web server and updating web content and installation of scripts and other services like

electronic mail administration. After these, the websites are constantly maintained and managed by these companies and articles and contents can be updated periodically by the owners and these companies have the right to close the site should the owners not meet up with the financial obligation set by these companies.

Types of Virtual Exhibitions

Meggs and Purvis (2010) classify online exhibitions into the following:

1. **Notable events:** Major events are good topics for virtual exhibitions. Libraries and archives often hold substantial materials related to significant, interesting, or entertaining events. An event- centered exhibition allows the library or archives to draw on a range of materials and collaborate with other institutions such as historical societies, museums, or businesses to develop this type of exhibition. One such example is The Great Chicago Fire that is put up by the Chicago Historical Society in collaboration with the Northwestern University.
2. **Anniversaries:** Centennials, bicentennials, triennials and jubilees can be the impetus for an online exhibition. An exhibition created around an anniversary will allow visitors to revisit the past, highlight current collections or programs, and look forward to the next few years.
3. **Themes:** Perhaps the most common exhibition idea is a theme. Themes can include individuals, professions, poetry, social movements or phenomena, collections, and media. Dr Seuss Went to War: A Catalogue of Political Cartoons by Dr Seuss from the Mandeville Special Collections Library, University of California, San Diego, is an example of a specific theme-based exhibition.

Pitfalls of Virtual Exhibition

In spite of the attractiveness and great potential of virtual exhibitions, there are a few pitfalls in terms of visitor experience:

1. It is not a real life experience;
2. Virtual exhibitions do not allow hands-on manipulations, which is very important for the kinaesthetic learner, who may not feel like he/she really knows what is going on;
3. Effective exhibits are strongly "experiential", that means when a visitor walks through them, he/she also sees, hears, and sometimes touches the exhibits (if allowed) When all these experiential senses are taken away in virtual exhibitions, the experience is not tremendous anymore;
4. Poor representation of objects-textures, fine detail, mass and exact colour cannot be authentically translated when displayed on the web;
5. Electronic images of historical photographs are definitely inferior to the actual objects, due to the need for smaller sizes needed for online viewing. Image quality is still quite poor as they get pixelated when compared to real art objects;
6. They are sometimes expensive and time-consuming to produce (same as a physical exhibition);
7. Users must be connected to the Internet (for web-based exhibitions); and
8. Internet connection speeds also affect the experience of the visitors (users with a slow connection will not have an enjoyable visit, especially if the site contains media-rich resources that take time to download and display).

Myers (2010) also found the following potential pitfalls of web-based exhibitions in education:

9. **Reduced critical thinking skills-** The ease of downloading information from the internet may result in thoughtless information harvesting without attention to the critical issues of bias, accuracy and quality control.
10. **Reduced development in reading skills -** Especially among the impressionable younger population, since the web is primarily an image-based medium.
11. **Diminished writing skills-** Students cut and paste information into impressive first drafts and resist the need to refine their work. Research skills will be neglected as students take the easy path, preferring to point and click rather than plan and think.
12. **Distortion of teaching curricula-** Some teachers may change their curriculum to fit widely and readily available resources on the Internet, when faced with time schedule pressures.
13. **Lack of real life experience -** Most of what the students know or understand come as files downloaded from the web

The Future

As technology becomes vibrant, reliable, cheap, readily accessible and easier to maintain, more people are expected to exploit them in to provide information for a better service and content especially for researchers, academics and museum information seekers.

Multi-modal and multimedia systems integrate a number of modes and media such as hypertext, audio, video and so on into higher-bandwidth communication interfaces. These are used for virtual reality, interfaces for users with special needs. Virtual reality is an example of non-command based interface, which can submerge the user in a simulated highly interactive world where the user can move about in the same way as in the physical world. Visitors are immersed in a virtual environment through the use of 3-D and recently, 7-D real-time computer graphics and advanced display devices such as head mounted displays. Visitors can learn by active participation in performing some tasks with the system, such as manipulating objects in a scene. This way, the subject being taught will be better absorbed by the learners since they have played an active role in acquiring it.

Speech-based interfaces that apply non-speech objects (such as auditory and ear icons), gesture recognition, and eye tracking technology are some of the scientific advances that may also be used by technology to focus on users with special needs. Eye tracking has traditionally been considered an esoteric and very expensive technique, but is now becoming more affordable and practical. Embedded help is another area that next generation interfaces are focusing on that may provide true embedded help via the use of animated and auditory icons, making the computer interface easier to use.

Wireless computing and handheld devices are other technologies that have penetrated into the internet gallery space. Tools such as electronic guidebooks (portable devices that use a wireless web-based network) help to extend the museum experience. As these devices become smaller, more affordable and more capable, users will soon be able to rely on them to facilitate the delivery of complex multimedia information to their visitors.

Conclusion

The future of virtual exhibition appears bright because more and more interfaces are brought into the picture. Galani and Chalmers (2002) note that the number of digital visitors is steadily growing and in some cases, outnumbering the number of visitors to the corresponding physical exhibitions. This helps to encourage a distant digital visitor to become a physical visitor, and encourage physical visitors to maintain a relationship with the exhibitions.

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