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In Real Life – A Reflection on the “Online Exhibition”

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- 1 Is the move to exhibit online really defined by a distinction of space – “IRL” [In Real Life] physical space vs. the Internet?¹ At the time of writing, almost a year into the pandemic, the way we access museums and galleries begs questions of this supposed divide between digital and physical worlds. What is more, what has become, at an impressive speed, an almost compulsory generalised drive to deliver online projects has resulted in a variable explosion of “content” – virtual renderings of actual shows, curated web-specific initiatives, digital viewing booths, video festivals, discursive programmes, and so on – a situation that also, at its core, calls into question the nature and definition of exhibition.
- 2 Let us start with the “online exhibition”. To try and gain some perspective, it might be helpful to flash back to some of its prehistories. Art as a form of telematics has long been articulated in various ways: in the late 1960s, curator Gerry Schum founded a Television Gallery, using TV broadcasting for artists’ film and video to question the relationship between the work of art and the artistic process; and in 1984, with *Good Morning Mr. Orwell*, Nam June Paik made what is considered the first international “satellite installation” aired live via the Bright Star Satellite in several countries.² Similarly internationalist are the early experiments in exhibition cybernetics and computer art emerging in the 1960s including *Cybernetic Serendipity* in London; Centro de Arte y Comunicación (CAyC) in Buenos Aires; Nova tendencija (New Tendencies) in Zagreb – to name just three nodes in an expansive transnational network. In a more recent phase, Rhizome.org’s valuable “Net Art Anthology” (<https://anthology.rhizome.org/>) offers historical perspective on the emergence of ‘Net art’, tracing a timeline between 1984 and 2016, which also serves as a timely reminder that Internet art is one specific tendency from a much wider shift in cultural life; or to put it another way, *all* art produced since the mid-80s is post-internet art.
- 3 An alternative approach to understand the notion of “online exhibition” may be to zoom out to some more general considerations: What do exhibitions do? What are they

for? Who are they for? The approach of many practitioners in the field of exhibition studies is to approach exhibitions in terms of audiences encountering artworks, through publics that gather in and through them: rather than an individuated, object-based encounter an exhibition is understood primarily as a collective experience. The most fundamental operation of the exhibition is perhaps one of modulation. It modulates the multiple mediations between objects, viewers, institutions and the sensibility of the visitor. Understood in such terms, it is clear that an “online exhibition” could be many things, and take diverse forms which are not indexed on the model of the white cube. It is clear that there is no reason that online exhibitions should follow the parameters of their “offline” counterparts; and furthermore, that this binary between “on-“ and “offline” is neither descriptive nor particularly useful for thinking through these questions.

- 4 At the suggestion of the editors of *Critique d’art*, we look up an example of the kind of “360 degree online exhibition” offered by many large-scale cultural institutions. Via the Google Arts & Culture platform, we click into an image of the lobby of the MAXXI National Museum of XXI Century Arts in Rome. In the top left corner, an overlaid text tells us where we are. In the bottom right, there is a compass and other navigation symbols. More symbols appear at the tip of the cursor as it is moved across the image; when an arrow appears we click and fade into a new image, giving the impression of movement across the lobby. The text on the wall for a temporary exhibition reveals that we are navigating the museum as it was in mid-2013. The interface is that of Google Street View; using it we are able to navigate around three large-scale sculptures from the collection (Giuseppe Penone, Maurizio Mochetti, Anish Kapoor), as well as the extent of the lobby area, including a wall work by Sol LeWitt, the ticket desk and *café* – an encounter bounded by the kind of ‘invisible wall’ familiar from three dimensional video game environments.³
- 5 Is this experience emblematic of a particular dominant approach to the “online exhibition”? It is tempting to dismiss it in simple terms, as a crude digital rendering of the experience of visiting a museum or exhibition “in real life” – its crudeness only amplified by its rigid fixity in space and time (we are stuck in an experiential space of the museum lobby and three works as they were nearly a decade ago). But it is worth paying more careful attention to how such an encounter is historically constructed, and how it functions. What, for example, are we to make of its deployment of Google Street View as a technology of exhibition? Street View produces interactive panoramas from stitched images as an augmentation of GPS and mapping technologies, and forms one small part of a multinational data-capital empire with a corporate mission “to organise the world’s information and make it universally accessible and useful”.⁴ This particular conception of the online exhibition can thus be read as the expression of a universalist desire to collect and render the world as information.
- 6 As such, rather than being a crude distortion of “in real life” exhibitions, the exhibition as rendered by the Google Street View museum might be seen as a logical end-point of one dominant lineage of modern exhibition practice. It echoes the much older universalisms to be found in the history of exhibition-making (from nineteenth century World Fairs to the colonial formation of the modern museum). It is unsurprising that visuality and spatiality are the key exhibition characteristics produced by such technologies – and that these are the primary sources of information to be collected – given the prioritisation of visual and object-based practice (painting and sculpture)

within this same tradition. It is unsurprising too that the original research project that became Street View positions itself in the tradition of linear perspective visualisations in Western art, upgrading the floating-eye vision of modern subjectivity to a car-mount webcam.⁵ And it is worth noting the insatiable expansion and accumulation embedded in these logics: the technologies and renderings will improve, no doubt, and with them new forms of capture and extraction.

- 7 But if this is one dominant mode of “online exhibition”, there are many alternative variations. Among the first exhibitions to be launched online in the wake of the pandemic was *Art Is Still Here: A Hypothetical Show for a Closed Museum*, curated by Victor Wang and hosted by Beijing institution M WOODS. We visited this exhibition as part of a group Zoom session with students from the MRes Art: Exhibition Studies programme at Central Saint Martins, University of the Arts London. The idea of gathering a group together online to visit some shows emerged from an observation that such experiences tend more often to happen in solitary, atomised, asynchronous ways – each visitor alone with their browser, attention spread across windows and tabs. It is more rare, perhaps anachronistic, to come together as a group to experience an online show in shared time. We entered the M WOODS show from different locations and time zones (London, Beijing, and several points in between) via the institution’s main website; the show is listed as “ongoing”, and at the time of writing consists of nine weekly “rooms”, each of which contains a 30–60 minutes showreel of moving image works. Each showreel begins with a minute or so of intense advertising – video games, apps, films and tv shows – before a short sequence panning through a three-dimensional rendering of the museum, leading us to the virtual location of the screenings we are about to see. Elsewhere on the page are other works and contributions as well as artist biographies and work synopses, overlapping with decontextualised images, gifs, three-dimensional site maps and other elements.
- 8 The experience is disorientating and overwhelming. As a group we quickly realised that a main point of mediation was the museum’s social media – Weibo, WeChat, Instagram and Facebook – and that these weekly updates, if we had been following, could offer more thematic flow and rhythm as well embedding the exhibition’s presentations of works with already existing social spaces online (however good or bad or non-existent the critical art discourse on such platforms may be). Some works resonate with these surroundings: in ‘room 4’, video games ads segue into Lawrence Lek’s “*Unreal Estate*” (*The Royal Academy*) (2015), a digital 3D tour of the Royal Academy of Arts in London, presented as sold “to a Chinese billionaire as a luxury private mansion”. The general feel of chaos and information overload also mirrors the day-to-day surreality of moving through the Web, and indeed the everyday texture of life in current times – the extreme juxtapositions of content, cognitive dissonances, and total saturation of commerce that characterises lives lived across multiple spaces, browser tabs and for-profit social platforms.
- 9 It may be then that “online exhibition” is merely a symptom of the myriad overlapping crises facing contemporary art institutions at the present time. The global pandemic has served to exacerbate and bring into focus longstanding regressive social patterns and exclusions that existing systems and structures uphold. If one answer is to close things down, this is again something that artists and exhibition-makers have long experimented with; confronting the audience with obstructed spaces, such gestures have questioned our desires to encounter art as well as shifting attention to the

(im)possibility of the exhibition by triggering more playful conceptual (with the idea of the exhibition) or material (with the concreteness of the exhibition space) engagements of the exhibition-form.⁶ Another answer may lie in the demands of mutual care and social justice that a pandemic underlines – what if care for life was the institutional priority? To some extent, online exhibitions and their counterparts in the Zoom room or webinar might be seen as the failed realisations of earlier avant-gardist (tech-)utopias. But if, as these examples suggest, one’s encounter with art was always one with the (im)possible, it is reasonable to say that online exhibitions have yet to happen.

NOTES

1. The term “IRL” – in real life – has been rightly called into question for the implication that “real life” does also not take place online. An alternative is “AFK” (“away from keyboard”), although this is also somewhat outdated now given the wide use of non-keyboard based devices.
2. *Good Morning Mr. Orwell* was a broadcast shared between the USA (WNET TV), Germany (Westdeutsche Fernsehen) and France (Pompidou Centre).
3. One cannot, for instance, enter into the exhibitions or exit out into the street. “Invisible wall” is a video gaming term: “Invisible walls can create discrepancies between a game’s systemic logic and its fictional logic, as a game’s rules dictate that one cannot continue past the wall, while the fictional setting cannot explain why this is.” https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Invisible_wall
4. https://www.google.com/intl/en_uk/search/howsearchworks/mission/
5. <http://graphics.stanford.edu/projects/cityblock/>
6. See the exhibition *A Retrospective of Closed Exhibition*, 5 August–19 November 2016, Fri-Art/Fribourg Kunsthalle, curated by Mathieu Copeland.