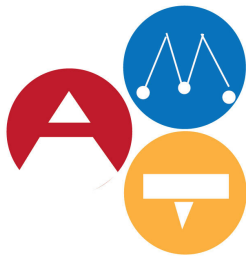# Bridging the Gap Between Digital Native Modes of Learning and the Traditional Museum Ritual

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Introduction

According to a [2015 National Center for Arts Research (NCAR) Report](#), from 2010 to 2013, total in-person engagement with art museums increased by less than 1%, whereas digital engagement with art museums increased by about 24%, mentioning art museums "engage far more people through digital offerings than they do on-site."[1] These numbers have likely shifted especially since the Covid-19 pandemic. Changed attendance patterns and audience behaviors demonstrate that visitors, especially younger ones, may be turning away from in-person engagement.

Digital engagement opportunities that reflect the shifting landscape of digital lives and spaces may be crucial for the future of museums. Despite the evidence that digital engagement is maintaining museum relevancy, a [2020 Knight Foundation study](#) found that less than 50% of art museums

"reported museum leadership is knowledgeable and supportive of digital projects."[2] There is a gap between how museums can be reaching people, and what they are doing to reach them. This article attempts to break down why that gap exists, and how museums can re-situate our role in order to bridge it.

The art museum aims to be a site of curious exploration, critical reflection, and personal transformation. Traditionally, these qualities of the museum are thought to only be possible should the visitor experience it first-hand, in person. This article will discuss how museums might start reconceptualizing the "ritual" of the museum to open more doors to a larger variety of experiences, which is suited for the mass transformation of society vis-a-vis our digital lives. Our world and our relationship with technology have changed tremendously (as discussed in a previous article), as have the demands and

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[1] "2015 Earned Revenue, Marketing and Engagement Report" (National Center for Arts Research, 2015), https://www.smu.edu/~/media/Site/Meadows/NCAR/NCAR2015Report.

[2] "Digital Readiness and Innovation in Museums," Knight Foundation, accessed December 9, 2022, https://knightfoundation.org/reports/digital-readiness-and-innovation-in-museums/.

habits of digitally native generations. While museums currently, in their digital initiatives, attempt to replicate the *physical ritual* of the museum experience, for example with 360-degree tours, it is important to recognize a different ritual in the digital space in order to accommodate such changes.

There is overlooked value in terms of museum online offerings. To understand the future of how museums interact with and are perceived by the public, it is useful to understand the trends of younger generations and digitally-savvy citizens–what new rituals of learning and curiosity have developed with the increased interconnectivity of physical and digital lives?

This article focuses on the theoretical frameworks of ritual (Turner, 1995 & Duncan, 1995), and authenticity (Benjamin, 1968). Additionally, this work provides suggestions and case studies drawn from interviews with industry professionals, as well as patterns of observation across 65 contemporary art museums. Though most of

this work is applicable to museums as a whole, the focus is specifically on the work of contemporary art museums, which, due to its conceptual framework, holds the possibility of ritual transformation more than classical or encyclopedic museums in particular due to "the opennature of the meanings constructed in the context of contemporary art exhibitions that allows for a more flexible type of narrative."[3]

This article does not attempt to devalue in-person exploration of museums but rather attempts to demonstrate that there has been a shift in the fundamental practices that inform museum-goers' attitudes that museums must both address and accommodate in order to remain relevant and fulfill their missions in the future. Additionally, this article does not aim to claim a complete absence of digital offerings but assesses gaps in the character of such offerings. The previous part of this article analyzes and highlights the kind of digital offerings common to current contemporary art museum websites.

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[3] "Narrative Theories and Learning in Contemporary Art Museums: A Theoretical Exploration - Stedelijk Studies," June 9, 2016,

https://stedelijkstudies.com/journal/narrative-theories-learning-contemporary-art-museums-theoretical-exploration/.

Theoretical Frameworks: Museums as Ritual Sites

The traditional model of experiencing museum exhibitions is ritualistic. As Victor Turner notes in *The Ritual Process*, "Rituals reveal values at the deepest level…men express in ritual what moves them most, and since the form of expression is conventionalized and obligatory, it is the values of the group that are revealed."[4] The way that audiences are called to act within the boundaries of the museum walls is certainly conventionalized and obligatory–you do not act at a museum the way you would in a shopping mall, restaurant, or living room. Such obliged performances inform the values that those spaces hold–reverence, intellectualism, and aesthetics. Carol Duncan mentions, "I see the totality of the museum as a stage setting that prompts visitors to enact a performance of some kind, whether or not actual visitors would describe it as such

(and whether or not they are prepared to do so)."[5]

The museum is designed for contemplation and learning and is designed so in a very particular way. As museums have shifted from the character of temple to that of a forum, "a place for confrontation, experimentation, and debate"[6], remaining still is the architecture and deeply embedded spirit of spiritual reverence ("a man who concentrates before a work of art is absorbed by it"[7])–which largely informs the ritual process of the museum. Additionally, the ritual of the museum is informed by a sense of liminality, in which the physical context exists outside the bounds of everyday societal constraints, thereby allowing a heightened sense of connection and transformation[8]. There is, of course, much value in this ritual–it provides visitors the potential "to move beyond the psychic constraints of mundane existence, step out

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[4] Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Transaction Publishers, 1995).

[5] Carol Duncan, *Civilizing Rituals: Inside Public Art Museums* (London ; Routledge, 1995).

[6] Ivan Karp and Steven Levine, *Exhibiting Cultures* (Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991).

[7] Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Illuminations* (New York, NY: Schocken Books, 1968).

[8] Duncan, *Civilizing Rituals*.

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of time, and attain new, larger perspectives."[9]

Much of the museum ritual is imbued with the concept of authenticity. For many, the idea of digitization, or digital replication, of the physical objects in museum collections, means inauthenticity. However, inauthentic should not be equated with invaluable. Walter Benjamin's seminal essay "Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction"[10], discusses authenticity and the "aura"--an inherent quality in a work of art that cannot be reproduced and does not carry through its reproductions. In Benjamin's terms, "that which withers in the age of mechanical reproduction is the aura of a work of art."[11] This concept, in my assertion, largely dominates the museum field, informing (in part) a hesitancy to reproduce the physical for enjoyment online.

Benjamin discusses that the "unique value of the 'authentic' work of art has its basis in ritual."[12] The aura is informed by such a ritual and vice versa. We might consider how the online realm may "reactivate the object reproduced" in Benjamin's own terms, changing the aura within the replication's context–as well as the ritual. Again, the basis of critically examining the potentials of physical collections in the digital realm falls into a re-examination of ritualism online– is increasingly appropriate given how interwoven our day-to-day lives are with an online presence.
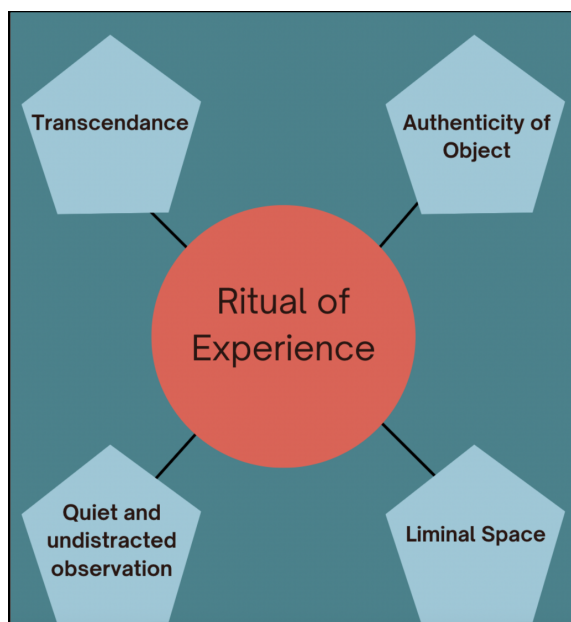
[9] Ibid.
[10] Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction."

[11] Ibid.
[12] Ibid.

Online Contexts and Learning

> *"But it's, it's not like it's going to go away, right? We're not going to say, 'all right, we tried the internet and it didn't work', it's just going to become more and more prevalent."* *Philip Leers, Associate Director of Digital Initiatives at the Hammer Museum*

As digital worlds have become more deeply embedded in our psyches and social lives, they have developed a distinct sense of place. Edward Relph mentioned that the components of place rest on the physical setting or landscape, activities or what happens in the place, and the "territories of meaning" that those who occupy the place ascribe to it.[13] For this reason, "a sense of virtual place...should not be unlike a sense of real place."[14]

Considering a sense of place as a fundamental aspect of ritual, it may be worth considering how online behaviors are ritualized.

Individuals spend increasingly large portions of their days in virtual places. The movement through these places is quite distinct from movement through physical ones. Think of a typical user circuit on Google (Which is, for digital natives, the preferred platform for research).[15] A thought or external prompt provokes a question. Then, one asks Google the question. The user browses headlines to find the most appropriate or compelling answer to that question. Along the way, they may delve into other virtual places via hyperlinks, references, images, etc. Their primary question easily bleeds into further ones. With a baseline technological skillset, internet browsers flow seamlessly through countless virtual boundaries of information at an incredible speed. What is so notably unique about this present style of learning is the amount of authority, agency, and participation *the user* has in the circuit of

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[13] Edward Relph, "Spirit of Place and Sense of Place in Virtual Realities," *Techné: Research in Philosophy and Technology (Philosophy Documentation Center)* 10, no. 3 (Spring 2007): 17–35, https://doi.org/10.5840/techne20071039.
[14] Ibid.

[15] Kristen Purcell, "How Teens Do Research in the Digital World" (Pew Research Center, November 1, 2012), https://www.pewinternet.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/9/media/Files/Reports/2012/PIP_TeacherSurveyReportWithMethodology110112.pdf.

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information. For this reason, Relph asserts, "Virtual places don't have readers or viewers–they have participants."[16]

Styles of learning are rapidly changing, especially with the increase in individuals who are "digital natives", born into an era of mobile and ever-present technology. For Gen Z, also known as the"iGeneration"[17], "Technology is not a tool...it is an ordinary part of life."[18] One study of Gen Z learning habits mentions, "...perhaps the most significant forms of Internet-based education are the completely informal instances of learning that occur in the course of everyday Internet use. In this sense, the Internet's implicit support regarding various forms of informal learning could be seen as its most substantial educational impact."[19] Rather than being told externally what and how to learn something, the researcher/browser/user has total control over how knowledge is gained. Understanding this paradigm of learning may also help us to understand what museum audiences' needs are. Consider how starkly different this method of informal learning from the museum setting–in which one's path through space, as well as how much and what information can be gained, is already prescribed. Learning about as well as experiencing art in the traditional museum setting largely represents an older, pre-digital native, model of learning where the museum itself is the ultimate agency on how the work is understood. Authority is an important factor here. Sadiya Akasha, writing on the resistance of Gen Z to the "cult of the curator."[20]

[16] Relph, "Spirit of Place and Sense of Place in Virtual Realities."

[17] Thomas Philip and Antero D. Garcia, "The Importance of Still Teaching the IGeneration:New Technologies Nad the Centrality of Pedagogy," *Harvard Education Review* 83, no. 2 (July 2013): 300–319, https://doi.org/10.17763/haer.83.2.w221368g1554u158.

[18] Arlene Nicholas, "Preferred Learning Methods of Generation Z," *Faculty and Staff - Articles & Papers*, January 10, 2020, https://digitalcommons.salve.edu/fac_staff_pub/74.

[19] Andrzej Szymkowiak et al., "Information Technology and Gen Z: The Role of Teachers, the Internet, and Technology in the Education of Young People," *Technology in Society* 65 (May 1, 2021): 101565, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.techsoc.2021.101565.

[20] Sadiya Akasha, "Want to Appeal to Gen Z? Lose the 'Cult of Curator' Mindset," *Museum-ID* (blog), January 6, 2022, https://museum-id.com/want-to-appeal-to-the-gen-z-demographic-lose-the-cult-of-curator-mindset/.

Gen Z has an entirely different set of expectations that are shaped by having grown up in an information-dense world. Not surprisingly, the result is a generation that has learned to be critical of any information presented to them and thoroughly scrutinize every source. But rather than cynical, this generation has actually become both global and critical thinkers and intensely curious, as the plethora of online micro-communities that exist even about the most esoteric subjects clearly suggests.
Sadiya Akasha

The intense curiosity, and unwillingness to accept a singular authoritarian voice, may inform how museums move forward with providing digital content to their viewers. Where former modes of art learning prioritize the authenticity of the object (as discussed previously), newer modes emphasize the authenticity of the authority–the institutional voice, and its ethical implications. As mentioned briefly, the contemporary art museum may be uniquely situated to succeed on this front–a multitude of interpretations and contestations largely inform the spirit of a contemporary art discussion. "The curator...experiments with different formats, different ways of experiencing the art, and creating different meanings. Like an artist, the contemporary curator tests old formats and invents new ones."[21]

Another aspect of a new model of learning is collective participation and feedback.[22] "Presently, we are witnessing the emergence of an unprecedented form of social practices and collective learning."[23] The micro-communities mentioned by Akasha largely inform such collective learning.

Contesting and highly critical of singular narratives, digital natives utilize forums to gather multitudes of

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[21] "Trends in Contemporary Curating," *Sotheby's Institute of Art* (blog), https://www.sothebysinstitute.com/trends-in-contemporary-curating.
[22] Penny Thompson, "How Digital Native Learners Describe Themselves," *Education and Information*

Technologies 20, no. 3 (September 1, 2015): 467–84, https://doi.org/10.1007/s10639-013-9295-3.
[23] "Virtual Hybrid Communities Show That You Don't Have to Meet Face-to-Face to Advance Great Ideas. USAPP. \https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/usappblog/2014/03/20/virtual-hybrid-communities/.

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interpretations on a subject[24]. The Reddit Community r/contemporaryart has over 37,000 members–individuals utilize this platform to debate and discuss particular works, learn about different contemporary art styles and movements, as well as gather advice as artists.
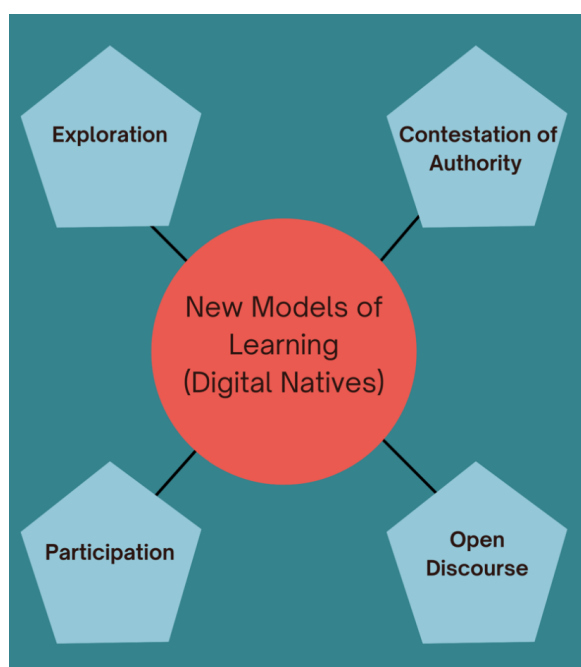
Rather than building a digital museum model that replicates older traditions of learning and exploring, the online presence of contemporary art museums can, to museums' great benefit, utilize these changes in learning and behavior to bring in younger generations. With digital platforms, contemporary art museums have the potential to make their work not only relevant but transformative to the art audiences of the future. Mackenna and Jansen note, "The normal conventions of gallery and museum sites are increasingly open to interrogation and intervention by contemporary artists.[25]

Imbuing a critical sense of authority (self-reflection and transparency), explorable interaction, participation, and communal discourse into their digital programming may enable individuals to explore their work via their own rituals of digital places. Providing this opportunity only increases the chances of those individuals coming through your doors, and experiencing the physical museum ritual as well.

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[24] Binti Muchsini et al., "Exploring Perceived Fits, Attitudes, and Self-Efficacy: A Case of Digital Natives' Online Learning Behavior," *Journal of Physics: Conference Series* 1842, no. 1 (March 2021): 012013.

[25] Tracy Mackenna and Edwin Janssen, *Artist-Led Curatorial Practice: Mediating Knowledge, Experience and Opinion*, *Museums and Higher Education Working Together* (Routledge, 2016), https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315596471-12.

Case Studies on Digital Offerings Within New Modes of Learning

What might these digital offerings include? To begin, it is worth noting that there is no singular vision of what a digital offering might look like and how it might be interacted with. There is much potential in terms of considering digital offerings from an institutionally-specific perspective, based on mission, goals, and imagined audiences. Different opportunities arise for contemporary art museums that aim to support and uplift living artists, for example. Additionally, collecting versus non-collecting contemporary art museums may have very different outputs. However, building on the previous discussion of online "rituals of learning", there are key aspects to be included in building such offerings that may create better experiences for digital visitors. The following is an assessment of possible characteristics of digital offerings, along with case studies that exemplify them, and interviews with industry professionals that contribute to the discussion.

Stand-Alone Digital Engagement with Art–Portal

Stand-alone digital portals offer enhanced navigation and promote curious exploration–an inherent quality of new modes of learning as discussed previously. When information and digital experiences are disjointed and buried in the noise of a website (as discussed in Part One), users will likely give up on trying to find them. Allowing digital engagement to flow through paths of relevant material may create an enhanced experience for visitors–consider how users follow the information on Youtube via suggested videos. It is important to note that Youtube is one of Gen Z's preferred learning platforms.[26] The site provides them with easy access to further interpretations and discourse on a similar topic. Though Youtube suggestions are algorithm-based, content tags and sections can achieve clickable navigation through content related to "abstract art", for example.

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[26] Ryan Duffy, "Gen Z Strongly Favors Learning through YouTube and Video, Report Says," EdScoop, August 9, 2018, https://edscoop.com/generation-z-learning-youtube-video-pearson-study/.

Many museums are already achieving something similar via "audio and video" sections of their websites. However, one example of a fully stand-alone portal is [Hammer Channel][27], a digital initiative of the [Hammer Museum][28], an affiliate museum of UCLA. Hammer Channel, a project funded by a grant from the Mellon Foundation, is a stand-alone website (existing outside the actual museum website). It "lets you watch, search, clip, and share videos from the Hammer Museum's programs and exhibitions, from 2005 to the present." The videos are broken up into sections such as "music" "performance" "art" "film & TV" and "social justice". Videos include artist talks, poetry and book readings, recordings of performances, installation walk-throughs, and more. While everything that makes up Hammer Channel takes the form of only one medium (video), it serves as an example of what to do with *all that stuff* museums have in digital format, which is most often buried in the recesses of the website, accessible only by highly-specific search.

The case of Hammer Channel is useful because it demonstrates that digital initiatives do not have to be incredibly out-of-the-box, never before seen experiences. They might simply be more informed of larger trends of experiencing and learning. The digital team at the Hammer Museum (part of the overall communications department) is relatively small but was able to create this project, especially with the aid of contracted web developers.

In an interview with Philip Leers, Associate Director of Digital Initiatives at the Hammer Museum, he explained the differences and purposes of the digital versus live experience.

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[27] "Hammer Channel. Hammer Museum," https://channel.hammer.ucla.edu.
[28] "Hammer Museum", Hammer Museum" https://hammer.ucla.edu/?gclid=Cj0KCQiA1sucBhDgAR IsAFoytUuIEqiqnWtT_IBW1PAg58179dTKXobSRjjE24lg h0j0GK0mu1Ykn3kaAgCxEALw_wcB.

"Our digital projects are like another way of entering the museum . . . this is the digital door to the museum, right? So it's not saying, 'come here instead of coming to the museum', it's saying, 'come here, and then see all the amazing thigs we have, and then be drawn to, you know, to come in and see it.' So if anything, we think of it as a way of expanding our audiences. Our local audience is really important, but we also aim to be on an international stage." *Philip Leers*

Engaging with Hammer Channel is similar to other video platforms such as Youtube. Using the "related" feature next to a video allows you to see other content from the same artist or content surrounding a similar topic. It is exploratory in nature. It also presents many voices at once, without a singular defining voice of authority–the curatorial voice is somewhat in the background, running through the themes of the works and exhibitions.

Participative and in Dialogue with Audiences

As mentioned previously, the shift from temple to public forum has created a dynamic in which museums increasingly invite public participation and dialogue. This change, however, is not reflected in online offerings– but it is a core component of digital places in general. Participative digital engagement is not only a way to enable enhanced dialogue and discourse, but also to make audiences feel emotionally and socially engaged with and connected to a museum and its works. It can also be an incredibly valuable opportunity to receive audience feedback, key data for the longevity and success of any organization.

An example of such participation is the Museum of Futures,[29] a component of The Observatory on Latin America's project "2084: Imagined Futures from the South" at The New School. The project aims to create a collective imagination of Latin American cities in the year 2084 – "The future has no owner, it belongs to those who imagine it. The program 2084 Imagined Futures from the
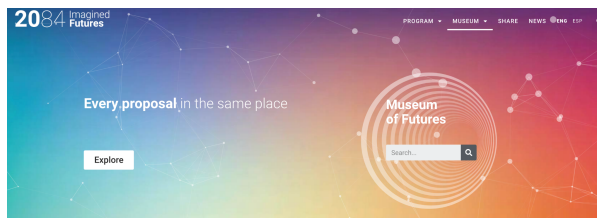
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[29] "Museo," 2084, accessed December 9, 2022, https://2084futurosimaginados.org/en/museo/.

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South invites you to occupy the future of Latin American cities. It convokes imaginations and amplifies the voices of those that usually go unheard."[30] The Museum of Futures is a fully digital museum built on submissions from anyone about the imaginations of 2084.

"The Museum of Futures opens a series of local public calls for the creative production of imagined futures and invites the sharing of speculative, creative, collective experiences. It is a laboratory of shared futures."[31] Largely, it has created a visual digital archive of imagined futures of Latin American cities. Included in the submissions are collages, paintings, photographs, Youtube videos, and digital art–each with a description of 2084 that accompanies the work. Within the portal, participants can explore and discover, as well as search or filter by topic such as "social justice", "energy", or "daily life."

The Museum of Futures is a distinct example of participatory digital archiving. It is "perpetually under construction", as with each submission the museum collection grows. Much like Hammer Channel, it is built to be continually updated and added onto. Not only does this invite the audience as an authoritative voice, but lends to participative engagement and exploration. Users can browse through hundreds of submissions at their leisure.

Integrated with Artist Input

An especially valuable potential for museums that aim to support living artists (an increasingly present aim in the contemporary art sphere) is bringing the artist in on creative approaches to digital content. there are numerous ways that artists might aid in

[30] "2084 Imagined Futures," OLA, accessed December 9, 2022, https://observatorylatinamerica.org/programs/imagined-futures-2084/.

[31] "Program Presentation: 2084 Imagined Futures from the South," OLA, June 3, 2021, https://observatorylatinamerica.org/program-presentation-2084%e2%80%8b-imagined-futures-from-the-south/.

creative and innovative digital experiences that impact and educate audiences, as well as potentially benefit the artist's career. Artists lean on their digital presences for exposure in the field, and museums can serve living artists by integrating their own personal presences and work in the online realm. One interviewee, an Assistant Director of an art consultancy company mentioned, "Having a web presence, having any kind of connection to institutional, digital presences is super helpful...web presence is almost like proof of your existence, as an artist anymore." While artists often have a say in how their work is presented in physical exhibitions, they rarely are in the loop in terms of how images of their work are displayed on the site.

One example of the artist being present in digital projects is again from the Hammer Museum. As part of the 2016 exhibition Made in L.A. 2016[32]: a, the, though, only, artist Guthrie Lonergan's piece, rather than in the museum, was hosted on its

website. Lonergan created a character similar to Microsoft's "Clippy", which appeared in the corner of the Hammer Museum Website as odd renditions of M&Ms. The M&M characters, when scrolled over, give somewhat odd and disjointed artist statements. Lonergan "sourced text from just over one thousand artists' statements, automatically culled en masse from self-managed artists' sites.."[31] in order to feed the responses from the M&M avatars.

There was a large audience response to this–both positive and negative. Many website visitors thought the museum had been hacked. Others were upset with the "juvenile" aspect of the characters[33]. Still, many visitors greatly enjoyed the absurdity of the project, calling the pop-ups "awesome and addictive."

This project, which Leers described as a positive and creative example of "letting artists under the hood" shows how creative museums may get when considering the

[32] "Guthrie Lonergan, Hammer Museum," accessed December 9, 2022, https://hammer.ucla.edu/exhibitions/2016/made-in-la-2016/guthrie-lonergan.

[33] "'Have You Been Hacked?' The Artist Behind the M&M's Responds | Hammer Museum," accessed December 9, 2022, https://hammer.ucla.edu/blog/2016/07/have-you-been-hacked-the-artist-behind-the-mms-responds.

digital realm as a site of visitor interaction with art itself.

Possibilities for Discourse

Aside from the cases presented previously, there is a wealth of possibilities when it comes to resituating how contemporary art museums conceptualize their digital presence. As mentioned, the heightened emphasis on discourse in the new modes of learning poses an opportunity. How can we allow visitors to discuss their experiences, thoughts, and questions with one another and the museum? The potential of online museum forums to open-up and aid to the experience of art can't be understated. It would also be an opportunity for overlap between the physical and digital realms. Visitors who saw a piece may come away from their experience wanting to discuss it, but find they must wait for an artist talk event. Perhaps they post about it on forums like Reddit in hopes someone else can contribute. Giving the space for open conversation around art can create an enhanced sense of community amongst your audience, as well as spark interest in your programming. Of course, with any open online discourse comes the need for moderation and ensuring that it is a safe place for communication.

Conclusion

Contemporary art museums are not currently meeting new modes of learning that have emerged as the public's relationship with technology has changed. They can meet this challenge readily via their digital offerings, which "offer the opportunity to do more–offer deeper, different, or competing interpretations; avenues to explore further; chances to look and think in ways not conducive to a linear gallery setting."[34] As audiences shift, museums must reconceptualize what their relationship with the public will be, and how the ritual of the museum experience may change. Flexibility in this ritual will allow museums to reach wider audiences through their work.

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[34] Sheila K. Hoffman, "Online Exhibitions during the COVID-19 Pandemic," *Museum Worlds* 8, no. 1 (2020): 210–15, https://doi.org/10.3167/armw.2020.080115.

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