

WHAT DO WE WANT FROM THE CYBERMUSEUM?

Toronto speech draft (8-30-02)

Intro: Stanley in Cultureland. I want to talk about the approach of a non-specialist to the problem of the relation of cultural institutions (museums among them) to cultural life.

Personal experience with museums and other cultural institutions (always including schools, of course) has defined who I am.

a. Chicago

Art Institute of Chicago—re-hanging the collection and Girl at Half

Window

Field Museum

Rosenwald Museum— the coal mine; U-505

Chicago Historical Society

Chicago Public Library system

Chicago Symphony Orchestra

The Goodman Theater

Lyric Opera

Music of the Baroque

Cubs, Bears and Blackhawks
Anshe Emet and N.S. Cong. Israel
Chestnut Court Bookshop in Winnetka
The Glencoe Public Library
Marshall Field's book section
Northwestern and U. of Chicago Libraries

b. Always New York:

Museum of Modern Art
Frick Collection
Metropolitan Museum
Whitney Museum
Morgan Library
57th St. galleries and beyond
NYPL
N-YHS
Metropolitan Opera
Bookshops

c. Later, the cultural institutions of Boston

Museum of Fine Arts
Gardner Museum

DeCordova Museum

Boston Symphony Orchestra

Jordan Hall and Sanders Theater

Harvard theater before the Loeb

Harvard University Library

Cambridge bookshops; Blackwells in Oxford

d. A year in London

Covent Garden

Sadler's Wells

Wigmore Hall

Festival Hall

National Gallery

The Tate

British Museum (including the British Library)

Public Record Office

Bookshops

e. And Madison, Wisconsin

U. music series

Elvejem Gallery

University of Pennsylvania Library

Bookshops

f. Princeton, N.J.

NY, NY, NY – MOMA less frequently

Philadelphia – University museum and Museum of Art

American Philosophical Society

Historical Society of Pennsylvania

Library Company of Philadelphia

Philadelphia Orchestra

University of Pennsylvania Library

McCarter Theater – mostly music

For the past year, the Princeton U. Art Museum (Susan Taylor)

Mostly the Princeton University Library

Micawbers, finally!

Why was all of this so important to me?:

Second generation Jewish-American acculturation (my Mom and me)

Getting hooked on culture

Becoming an intellectual – of a certain kind

The world of culture was and is my real world

Does the real world have to be real? I was always attracted to the virtual world, even in the 1930s and 1940s

a. Radio

The Lone Ranger

The Green Hornet

Jack Benny

Edgar Bergen and Charlie McCarthy

Fibber McGee and Molly

Walter Winchell

Joe Louis and prize fights

The Wiz Kids (?)

War news

Toscanini and the NBC Symphony

b. Print:

Life Magazine and WWII

Chicago Newspapers: News and Sun

Time Magazine

Saturday Evening Post

Comic books

The whole world of imaginative literature

My parents' library

The Glencoe Public Library

c. Movies:

Saturday double features – cowboy serials

d. Music recordings:

Mother's both sides machine: 78s

My own 45 r.p.m. machine

e. My wire recorder

f. TV – not until about 1950

g. Cubs games Always the Cubs, and always a virtual experience (why else do I believe that I will live to see them win the World Series?)

In some ways I lived much more in the virtual world in the 1930s and 1940s than I did in the “real” world, culturally. Even now, the distinction is not always very important to me. But it depends on the sort of culture I am experiencing.

a. Music in the concert hall vs. recorded music

My love for and commitment to recorded music:

Hear long dead performers and performances

Accessibility – on demand performances and performers

Capacity for hearing exactly what one wants

The Glenn Gould argument that recording is superior to
live performance

Still, for me, nothing beats the best live performances

b. Theater, print and film

And yet, photoreproductions of works of art while important for me, do not work in the same way as sound reproductions of music. Are museums different from concert halls or theaters? Yes. There are doubtless many reasons, but for me the most compelling one is that recently given by Paul Griffiths in the (8/27/02) NYT: “museums are places to which you can return, picking up a conversation with a favorite painting where it was left off last time. Or you can find such a painting again by surprise, lent elsewhere.” Until it was unfortunately rehung in a foreign corner of a new gallery, I carried on such a conversation with Rembrandt’s “Girl at the Half-Door” for nearly forty years; I carried on such a conversation with “Guernica” at MoMA for about twenty years, and I likewise communed with the two Holbein portraits on either side of a fireplace at the Frick Collection every morning during two summers of research in Manhattan. Most of you will have done precisely the same thing with some tangible work of art.

What then is so different about “performance art”? There are surely many things, but think about the variation in performances (part of their attraction, to be sure. Even the best symphony orchestras schedule unattractive programs and, more than occasionally, play badly. “Guernica” never disappoints, though I have reacted to it very differently in different moods and at different points in time. Another way to think about the problem is through Andre Malraux’s conception of the “musee imaginaire.”

In The Voices of Silence, Malraux argued that the modern western museum was an entirely arbitrary construct: “A Romanesque crucifix was not regarded by its contemporaries as a work of sculpture; nor Cimabue’s Madonna as a picture.” The museum (he is thinking of the 19th century) has “imposed on the spectator a wholly new attitude towards the work of art. For they have tended to estrange the works they bring together from their original functions and to transform even portraits into ‘pictures’.” “Until the nineteenth century a work of art was essentially a representation of something real or imaginary. . . . The effect of the museum was to suppress the model in almost every portrait. . . . Each exhibit is a representation of something, differing from the thing itself, this specific difference being its *raison d’etre*.” “For over a century our approach to art has been growing more and more intellectualized. The art museum invites criticism of each of the expressions of the world it brings together: and a query as to what they have in common.” (Andre Malraux, The Voices of Silence, New York, 1953, pp. 13-15)

But Malraux understood that by the middle of the last century the development of color photography and high quality printing was creating yet another level of self-conscious representation of works of art:

“Nowadays an art student can examine color reproductions of most of the world’s great paintings. . . .Hitherto the connoisseur duly visited the Louvre and some subsidiary galleries, and memorized what he saw, as best he could. [But now] a ‘Museum without Walls’ is coming into being, and (now that the plastic arts have invented their own printing-press) it ;will carry infinitely farther that revelation of the world of art, limited perforce, which the ‘real’ museums offer us within their walls.” (p.16) “Indeed reproduction (like the art of fiction, which subdues reality to the imagination) has created what might be called ‘fictitious’ arts, by systematically falsifying the scale of objects . . .” (p.24)

We ought to acknowledge, with Malraux, that the 20th century museum and art books already represented two distinct levels of “artistic” unreality – the museum itself and the museum without walls. How is the cybermuseum to be different? Is it a third level of unreality? How? Why?

Compare to libraries and the Internet (Letter to NYT, 26 August 2002):

“Re: “Tax Revolt Takes Aim at Rural County’s Libraries”:

It is clear that many people are at least asking if the Internet will make libraries obsolete.

People use the Internet in very different ways from the way they use libraries; most significantly, perhaps, in a public library one has the chance to borrow a book at no charge.

Librarians have been eager to provide the most up-to-date technology and Internet access for patrons. And yet many people are using the library as a cyber-cafe. As one librarian told me wistfully, there are often times when the computers are packed and the rest of the Library is empty.

The Internet may have a magnetic fascination for us, but it is so consumer-oriented it is beginning to look increasingly like network TV. A public library has much more to offer, but the public seems not to be making the distinction.

David King (Brookline, Mass.)”

In many ways, libraries are comparable to museums as cultural institutions, and it may even be that in a few of their patrons are spending more time on your computers than actually viewing the “real” objects in your galleries. Certainly many of your patrons are spending a lot of time in your cafes and shops. The biggest difference, I would think, is that just about everyone comes to the museum to view actual objects – whereas many Americans, not least college students, have decided that it is easier and better to find information on the Web rather than in the library. The students, in particular, seem not to realize that libraries have analog information that is simply not available on the Internet. For them, information is, no more and no less, data available on the Internet. But the

Huntington, the Newberry and the Folger Libraries, to name a few I know well, are perhaps more like museums than libraries from this point of view

I assume that among other things, all of you are actively digitizing your collections, organizing them, presenting portions on your websites, and collaborating with one another to develop virtual collections that never have and never will inhabit the same physical space. Is there any chance that your patrons will begin to react to your images as college students have to physical books and serials, preferring the image to the object? Perhaps, but I doubt it, for the reason I have already suggested – at least for the near term, few will mistake an image for the “real” thing. At any rate, I will not. I spent a portion of every lunch hour during the year I spent in the British Museum in looking at the Elgin Marbles. I doubt that I have spent a total of two hours looking at reproductions of those magnificent objects. I also got a thrill from seeing the Rosetta Stone that no photograph could instill.

So where does the cybermuseum fit into the larger culture?

The NINCH meeting in DC on 23 July – brought together 10 CIOs and other museum personnel to discuss how the National Initiative for a Networked Cultural Heritage could most appropriately serve museums’ needs in the digital arena. I was not able to attend the meeting, but I have had the opportunity to read the minutes, and I am fascinated to see what those responsible for managing technology in major museums had to say about their concerns.

Perhaps the area of greatest agreement was that IT could facilitate “communication with the wider community.” One participant asked how technology could “put museums in the center of the communities of the future?” Another commented that the Internet could “successfully extend museums’ assets in productive engagement with local communities.” A third asserted that “the key issues were not about technology but rather how to reach, connect with and retain the attention of communities.” At a later point in the conversation it was suggested that technology (such as distance learning) could connect museums with “nursing homes, community colleges, mental health facilities” in a way that would go beyond “art education content” to increase social action and intellectual stimulation.

But other voices were more focused on the internal needs of their institutions. One participant said that the purpose of networking the assets of his museum was to draw more visitors into the museum – in the words of another, to “raise walk-in attendance.” The first person expanded on the point was saying that “we don’t want to get good at marketing our websites so much as drawing more visitors in[to the museum]”. And there was interesting discussion of the potential of distance learning and many other existing and potential uses of networked technology.

To an outsider, the discussion seemed to pivot around a pretty obvious tension between the use of websites as marketing devices for museum attendance and museum products, and their use as ends in themselves. I know most of the people involved, and I would

guess that their positions reflect both the self-definition of the institutions they represent and their own personal instincts about the uses of technology – frequently, I would guess, based on their own cultural personae.

The problems are intriguing and the possibilities incredible. One participant argued that “sometimes objects can be more ‘authentic’ in the digital mode,” and that of course the Internet provided a vastly larger audience than any physical site. Another responded that “technology should never obstruct but always enhance the communion between visitor and art object; technology should assist in our ‘being profound.’” Later, someone commented that “technological augmentation of the visitor experience should never get in the way of one’s ability to have personal, undisturbed, communion with a work of art.” I am, by the way, quite sensitive to this last point. While I am on the whole a technophile, I have never been willing to subject myself to an audio-tour of a museum. I do not need or want Phillippe de Montebello yammering into my ear while I view the exhibition. There are far too many people and voices interrupting my conversation with the objects as it is.

I suppose that what most intrigued me about the NINCH discussion was what it disclosed both the range of cultural attitudes among the participants, and the ways in which those attitudes seemed engaged (or in tension) with the expressed policies of their institutions. I understand, after all, that you are not free agents. You work for institutions, some of them quite large, and I assume that only a rather narrow range of policy decisions is actually within your control as technologists. The Director, the business managers, the

curators, the Education Department and others control particular decisions and determine macro policies. IT serves many purposes in any cultural institution, and it is not surprising that your jobs involve serving many masters whose needs will frequently conflict with one another.

I was also intrigued by the loose and unspecific sense in which the idea of “community” was used by the participants. Does the term mean the local community in which the institution is located? Or a more regional community? Or a still larger community? Does the term refer to a mass of individuals linked together by geographical propinquity? Or by shared cultural interest? Is the community composed of other institutions within the same geographical area? Is the community real or virtual? These are crucially important distinctions when trying to understand how civil society functions. Alas, the role of culture and cultural institutions has yet to be successfully addressed by analysts of civil society.

The NINCH conversation was very rich. It was carried on by an exceptional and extraordinary group of people who doubtless have thought about everything I have to say this morning. What few people even in the cultural sector appreciate, however, is that IT is not a discreet phenomenon in a cultural institution with its own turf to mind. Rather, increasingly it is the context in which much of the institution’s activity is expressed. Technology is not a thing, but a process – and a culture. Nevertheless, I know of very few cultural institutions that have responded organizationally to this fact. Technology is almost always an add-on to the table of organization. Our linear notions of management

work against the integration and interpenetration of organizational functions. And yet such interactivity underlies the long-term promise of cyberfunctionality. What can be done to develop broader and more profound cultural cyberpolicy for individual institutions? It seems to me that we require both innovative structures and revolutionary paradigmatic stratagems to realize the promise of cyber reality.

I am most familiar with the tensions attendant to IT management within universities. The CIO of a large university is generally thought primarily responsible for administrative computing – satisfying the business managers, the registrar, the human resources people and so forth. But he or she must also be responsive to the high pressure science community, the library (though, alas, librarians do not have much clout), the admissions office (though it ill-behooves a Princeton professor to mention websites and admissions; the distance education people and many others. In some institutions, one person serves as both librarian and CIO, and there is great promise in this development. A Princeton colleague argues that what we want in a CIO is a brilliant technologist with the DNA of a scholar.

In some lucky universities, but only in a few, the CIO is also expected to devote time and resources to non-computational research computing and even to instructional computing. Ironically, this relatively neglected area of university technology is probably that closest to what museum technologists do as their most culturally creative tasks. We are now training PhDs in humanities computing, though this is further developed in the U.K. than it is in North America. I think that our future progress along the lines I advocate will

depend upon recruitment and training of content-oriented technologists. It is not enough for intelligent techies to try to implement the half-formed IT notions of scholars and field specialists – at least some of them will have to be scholars and specialists themselves. How are we to find, train and nourish such individuals? Can we create career tracks for them?

My point in this talk is quite simple. It is that museums, like universities, must devote as much effort as possible to freely conceptualizing what it might mean to have a cyber-presence. There is nothing wrong with using a website for marketing a museum or a university. But if museums and universities have a telos, a reason for being, that goes beyond the bottom line, technology must be a means of achieving that goal. Perhaps some of you are focused on that challenge. I know that many of you are thinking about it. But even if you are, it must be difficult for you to create an institutional process that facilitates your vision and those of your colleagues.

And it is that process that I know little about, but it seems to me essential to institutional self-fulfillment at the highest level. Where does the vision of the role of technology come from within the museum, and how is it to be developed and implemented? Again, the analogy to universities makes me wonder if our technological creativity does not run athwart powerful institutional constraints and resistance that limit its potential. For us in the universities the challenge is to pair the most thoughtful and talented faculty, usually younger faculty, with the most talented technologists, and to provide them with the institutional space and resources necessary develop new approaches to learning – both

instructional and research learning. A handful of universities are doing just that, but they are, alas, a tiny minority of the larger institutional universe.

Who are the appropriate collaborators in developing the cyber-cultural vision of museums? I recognize, of course, that the Museum Computer Network contains a wide variety of very different sorts of institutions, and that neither organization nor purpose is uniform throughout the Network. Still, the commonalities must be considerable. To what extent do your Directors understand the potential of technology and work with you to develop locally optimal uses of IT? To what extent do Trustees appreciate what the museum might do with technology in extending mission? What about your curators? Are they so wed to the objects and to traditional scholarly norms and forms that they see technology as a threat to the purity of the institutional purpose? What about your Education Department – can it get beyond soliciting buses full of school kids? I am sure that in each of your institutions some of the players I have mentioned are alive to the creative possibilities of the technology. Perhaps many of them are. If so, do you have the administrative structure in which you can maximize the vision and energy within the institution? Can you get the considerable resources required to do the job? If not, what can you do to improve the situation? Or, dare I ask, are you part of the problem?

Coming back to where I started, I am simply trying to make the case that what you as museum technologists do is absolutely essential to the fulfillment of our national (indeed international) cultural life. While it may not be the case that all democratic citizens are as

deeply immersed in cultural institutions as I am, an increasing and incredible proportion of the society is involved.

And the day is long past that we can think of major cultural organizations as exclusive. Many of our museums were originally intended to be just that, and the history of the museum in the twentieth century is of its opening up to the larger public. There have been both political and financial reasons for this trend, but it is undoubtedly with us for the long term. It has had, so far as I am concerned, as many negative as positive impacts for the quality of the museum experience, but it is now a fact of our cultural life.

But I would argue that the combination of the new information technology with the telecommunications revolution is what will determine the potential of our institutions in this century. Thanks to your efforts and imagination, we have already made great strides in digitizing collections and making them available online. The problems have been substantial (legal, financial, technological), but I am tremendously impressed by what is being done. My concern is whether we have not thus far been more driven by technology than by a thoughtful consideration of what technology can do to realize and transform the purpose of the museum. Technology is a means, not an end. Or, to repeat the title of a talk I gave several years ago, let's not "confuse a tool with a goal." What is the goal? Clearly it is important for a host of reasons to make images of objects available to scholars, students and the general public. That is the easy part. But what is the cyber-analogy to the musee imaginaire?

For myself, I can imagine a larger cultural cyberworld of interacting websites, multi-media, multi-tasking, multi-purposing serving diverse constituencies around the world. It would be a world in which a child would not have to be as lucky as I to grow up in a cultural megopolis, or to live in or near to great cultural centers. It would be a world in which virtual reality would not substitute for cultural objects, but extend, enhance and transform them. It is the sort of world many of us are trying to imagine. I think our chances of creating it depend upon developing the sorts of coalitions in which creative individuals, scholars, managers and technologists and others can interact fruitfully.

Let me return to where I started. I sketched for you the multitude of institutions that shaped me culturally when I was young, and that have served my cultural needs as I have lived my life. I really do think that I can specify the major influences on me, both in my formal education and in my cultural self-education. The process has been reciprocal, of course – I learned from and was stimulated by discrete institutional objects and experiences, but I also internalized them in combinations that were culturally useful to me. I was constantly connecting and rearranging the dots that constituted and reconstituted my cultural life. For the most part, however, the institutions and experiences were determinedly separate and distinct. There were few attempts, even in very good education institutions, to enhance or direct these snapshot exposures. I recognize that the effort required to be a self-synergizer may have been necessary and sufficient. But is it for everyone? I do not know, but I doubt it.

In all of this I am conscious of the fact that I have been lucky enough to live in or near cities all my life, or at least until I was quite mature. Most of the great cultural institutions are located in or near cities. Except for tourists, they are not readily (and certainly not constantly) available to those who live in smaller or remote communities – although the incredible spread of institutions across the country was probably the most important cultural fact of the last half of the last century. Even in Princeton, mid-way between two of the America's greatest cultural cities, the combination of local arts institutions is not enough to provide real stimulation for young people.

But now we have the opportunity to create new institutions, virtual institutions, that are accessible and affordable for people everywhere around the world. We have, that is, the chance to create a genuinely networked cultural heritage. The challenge is partly technical, but even more it is intellectual and political – it is to define what culture means in a universal sense, or, better, to find a way to link the diverse cultures of countries, regions and the world. We can create a universal cultural jukebox if we have the will.

This is a challenge that goes far beyond museums, and clearly technologists like yourselves are only one type of player in the process. But at the moment you are the people who best understand the limitations and potential of the technology, and you are the essential partner of those of us who care deeply about both the individual institutional mission and the larger vision. You need not only to be collaborators in this process, but I think you are going to have to try to be instigators, or even, perhaps, provocateurs. And I would urge you to think beyond your museum. The most obvious advantage of

networking is that it by definition transcends institutional borders. Through MCN, AMICO, NINCH and other instrumentalities you are already doing just that. But you need to think beyond the art world to the wide variety of cultural institutions around to the world to ask how you can enhance the cultural experience of the people of the world. If not you, then who?