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Virtual Art in a Time of Crisis

Ideology, Familiarity, and the Digital White Cube

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Over the past year, galleries, museums and art institutions worldwide have turned to virtual spaces as a means of continuing their activities during lockdowns. Many have hosted active websites for years, if not decades, but the coronavirus pandemic has prompted flurries of activity as sites became the only, rather than an additional point of contact with visitors.

In this post, I consider some of the aesthetic and curatorial trends emerging from this period of rapid 'online exhibition' growth, and consider them in relation to the ways in which cultural theorists have analysed historical shifts in how we display, see, and understand art. I focus on two particular questions arising, the first of meaning, ownership and access, and the second of spatiality and recognition. Both questions touch on the important ongoing debate about how, and how far it is possible, to 'decolonise' the museum – a conversation to which I hope these brief reflections might usefully contribute.

Ownership, access and art in the age of digital reproduction

John Berger, reworking Walter Benjamin, explains that the advent of the camera has changed the ways in which audiences understand 'classical' works of art. Berger (2008: 20) argued:

When the camera reproduces a painting, it destroys the uniqueness of this image. [...] it's meaning multiplies and fragments into many meanings. This is vividly illustrated by what happens when a painting is shown on the television screen. The painting enters each viewer's house. There it is surrounded by his wallpaper, his furniture, his mementos. [...] At the same time it enters one million other houses and, in each of them, is seen in a different context. Because of the camera, the painting now travels to the spectator rather than the spectator to the painting.

Berger, following Benjamin, notes that this process deepens the aura, and therefore the value, of the original. I return to this point below. First, I want to note how the argument made above in relation to television broadcasts must be revised for the internet age. Reproductions of famous artworks may still enter homes, framed by a screen against the backdrop of our own home's walls. But they can also be mobile – viewed on a bus, foregrounded against a street. They may be multiply framed, within and by a browser window, with a digital desktop providing further, bespoke, surrounds. We can dwell on the image; zoom in or out; rework it into memes; use it as 'wallpaper' – whereby it provides a backdrop to other images on screen.

Viewership is not bound by producers' decisions, or a fixed television broadcast schedule. In this sense, we can no longer say that 'the painting is travelling to the spectator rather than the spectator to the painting'. We are more often meeting halfway: typing out search terms and clicking through on a journey to the image, or exhibition, we set out to find, or stumble into. That journey is not, however, autonomous.

Algorithms – and the SEO, cookies, AI, adverts, language settings and other internet structures that shape them – are loaded with racial, gender and other biases (Noble, 2018). Online content is overwhelmingly created in wealthy countries, even though 75 percent of the world's 3 billion internet users live in the 'global South' (Graham & Sengupta, 2017). Online, as off, male European and North American perspectives predominate.

On Google Arts & Culture [<https://artsandculture.google.com/>] (GA&C), the Western canon does likewise. GA&C aims for global 'reach', however, and has tried to shake off accusations of cultural bias, and digital colonialism (Kizhner et al., 2020). Now, it is 'partnered' with over 2,000 institutions internationally and offers access to over 100,000 artworks. The platform offers a 'personalised' experience, recommending art and activities based on visitors' browsing history and preferences. Given the structures of the web, these are always already shaped by dominant ways of seeing, and further 'strengthened by the pre-digital selection biases of contributing institutions' (Kizhner et al., 2020) – which on GA&C skew towards major institutions with resources sufficient to digitize collections.



Curator

**Congratulations! You have created
your own user gallery using artworks
and images.**

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The Curator badge awarded to users of GA&C who create their own gallery

There may be a glimmer of subversive possibility found on GA&C, however, with regards to ownership and curatorial power. Here, the beholder of digital reproduction not only ascribes new meanings to them, but can present those meanings to others in their own Gallery. Moreover, in GC&A, even the

custodians of the original must make do with an image of it, relying on metadata, captions and logos to assert ownership of a pictured object that sits, simultaneously, in others' collections.

So you may, for example, admire the *Queen Idia Mask*. From the collection of *The Centennial Project* at the Pan-Atlantic University in Lagos and, separately, the *Queen Mother Pendant Mask: Iyoba*. From *The Metropolitan Museum of Art* in New York. Only one of these institutions possesses the physical object, stolen from Benin by British colonialists, that is pictured in both images. But on GA&C, it belongs to both collections.



Queen Idia Mask



The Centenary Project
Lagos, Nigeria

From The Centenary Collection, GA&C.



Queen Mother Pendant Mask: Iyoba


[View in Street View](#)
**THE
MET**

 The Metropolitan Museum of Art
 New York City, United States

From The Met, GA&C.

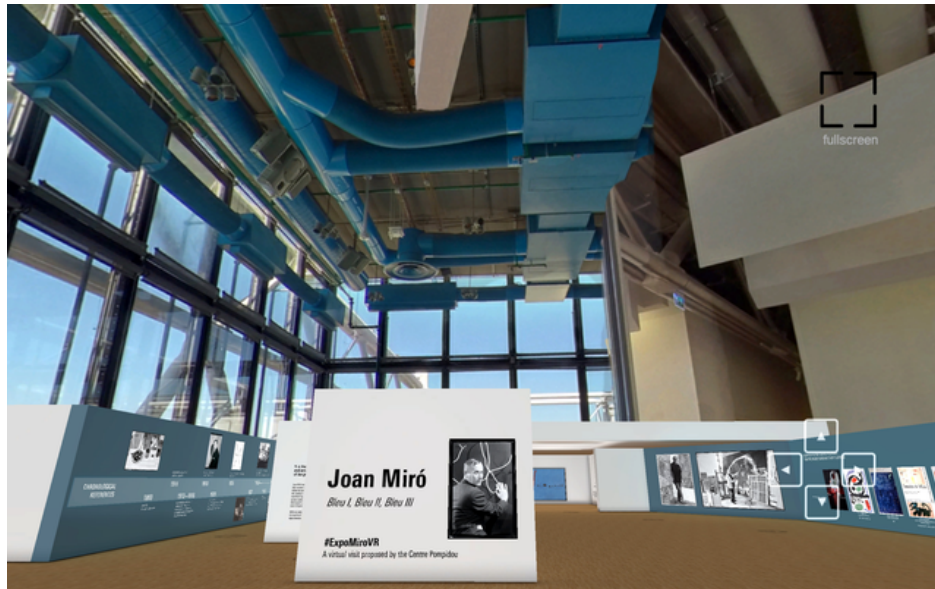
Such moves do not make material interventions to repatriation efforts. The Centenary Project nonetheless challenges The Met's authoritative claim to, and description of the artwork. It asserts a different way of seeing. It is just a glimmer of possibility, however. Behind it lies another possessive claim. On every GA&C page, one logo always remains. The platform is legally a non-profit enterprise. But the 'investment logic' (Pfanner, 2011) behind it undoubtedly sees the value of clicks, traffic, and data in disseminating art according to Google.

(Re)imagining the white cube

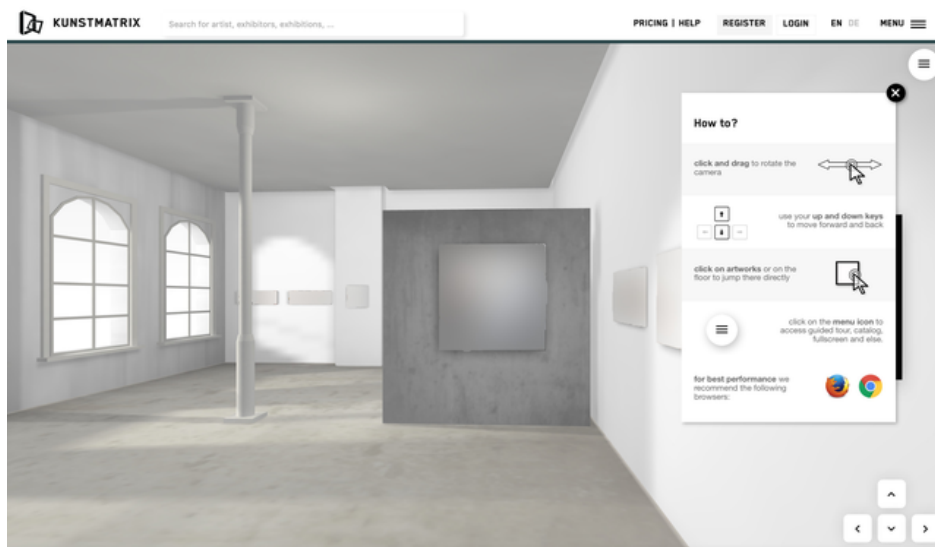
Echoing Berger (2008, p. 23), Brian O'Doherty (1986) argues that the framing of the gallery imbues originals with a sacred aura; the gallery itself a space of worship and statement of shared, elite sensibility concerning what counts as art. Since the advent of the modernist era, the aesthetic of the art gallery has been the white cube.

Digital replication of the white cube is an established norm of museum website design. Compare the stripped down aesthetic of the Tate (UK), MoMa (US) and Guggenheim Bilbao (Spain) websites, for

example. GA&C looks much the same. As museums have sought to move entire exhibitions online during lockdowns, the urge to recreate the spatiality of dominant traditional forms has become even more apparent.



3D gallery of the Miro exhibition at Centre Pompidou.
Screenshot of a 3D computer model of an exhibition display inside a large room with wall to ceiling windows.



Kunstmatrix exhibition space (artworks blurred).

There are logistical facets to these 3D gallery tours, not least that documenting an already-in-situ exhibition is more straightforward than curating a new, virtual space from scratch. But what about exhibitions that do not already exist in a physical space?

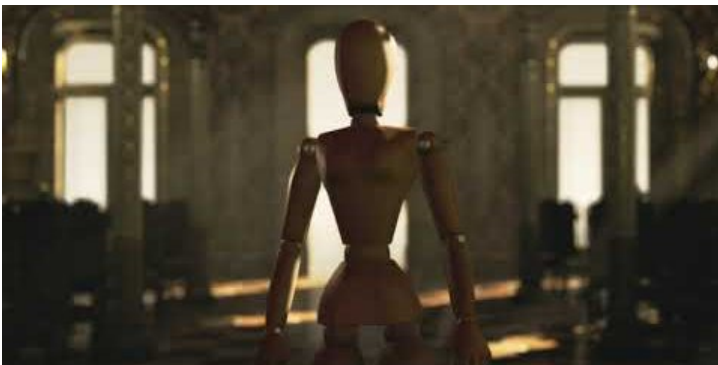
Kunstmatrix [<https://www.kunstmatrix.com/en>] is one of a few specialist 3D platforms that have proliferated over the past year which recreates the spatiality of imagined galleries – including ceilings, floors, windows, even furniture and columns – for artists and curators to present their work. Here, an image that does not exist in physical form can be mounted, framed and ‘hung’ on the wall.

Considering the way of seeing idealised by and for the (physical) white cube that sustains its aura, O’Doherty (1986, p. 15) writes:

... the presence of that odd piece of furniture, your own body, seems superfluous, an intrusion. The space offers the thought that while eyes and lines are welcome, space occupying bodies are not – or are tolerated only as kinaesthetic manikins for further study. [...] Here at last the spectator, oneself, is eliminated.

Thus, in Kunstmatrix, visitors ‘see’ the gallery from a simulated point of view: ‘looking’ around the space or moving sideways, forwards or backwards by mouse clicks or arrow key taps. There is no ‘body’ within the space; only the eye.

Occupy White Walls [<https://www.oww.io/>], (OWW) an AI-based massively multiplayer online platform (MOO), combines features of GA&C and Kunstmatrix. In OWW, users/players build galleries and fill them with favourite works. Despite the anti-establishment promise of its title, OWW players (and its marketing team) have gravitated towards ‘classical’ architectures and established art. Here, too, biases built into internet structures, and a user-base primarily situated in the ‘global North’, has meant already-esteemed works and styles abound. Though they are rarely white in colour, OWW insists: ‘Walls are essential for art hanging!’



Click to View Third-Party Content. Please note you may be tracked.

View media on original website [<https://youtu.be/2rkK-q5l1r8>]

Cinematic Trailer Year One

Film: Occupy White Walls

OWW, while embracing a punk aesthetic and allowing for more experimental creations of place, is similarly anchored in body-in-space ideals – and not just any body. Here, users’ avatars are the very

kinaesthetic manikin O'Doherty evokes. Ostensibly a blank slate, each and every one is a replica of a somatic ideal: pale, male- and able-bodied. 'Personalisation' comes later – another glimmer of subversive possibility – but this body is the original. To avoid any doubt, OWW interpellates all users: 'You: A tall, handsome, stranger and Architect of your own gallery.'

In OWW, however, the screen is not fixed as the eye's point-of-view, but sits behind the avatar so that placements of art – even in unexpected places – are always in relation to it. This 'everyman'; O'Doherty's 'Spectator' with no face (1976, 39), is the imagined, appropriate beholder of art.

Making the strange familiar

The trends and tropes highlighted here suggest that Western, elite ways of seeing are being entrenched, not challenged, amid recent – potentially temporary – shifts to 'everything online'. The urge to recreate the familiar – to tour gilded institutions or to build 'walls' from pixels and to 'hang' reproductions of grandmasters – may reveal the limits of imagination in an ever-expanding digital realm. Or, perhaps, in this extended, unnerving period of isolation, it points rather towards our desire for reassuring familiarity; spaces and visions reproduced in the digital because they are physically out of bounds. In any case, and despite subversions glimpsed, the recreation of particular aesthetics, spaces, frames and perspectives as indexing *art* suggests that capitalist, colonial perspectives are echoing into virtual worlds.

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