The Museum and the Web: Three Case Studies

Issues of Interpretation

In her groundbreaking article regarding museums and the World Wide Web, Cody addressed the tendency of both the physical and the virtual museum environments to ignore "unpleasant aspects of history." She raised the question, "Can the Web improve a museum's ability to display controversial, disturbing, or even unpleasant material on the Web?"

Potentially, all three of the museums I visited could address the issue Cody raised. The United States Holocaust Memorial and Museum deals with the subject of genocide; the National Museum of the American Indian has the option to deal with the subject of genocide; and the Anacostia Museum and Center for African American History and Culture could and has tackled slavery and civil rights. (And some historians, notably Fath Davis Ruffins, consider the treatment of African Americans as genocide.) Examining current issues of museum interpretation will provide a critical foundation for understanding the complexity of presenting artifacts—controversial or not—to the public.

One primary issue is whether the museums should take a populist or authoritative view toward exhibitions. Populism challenges the notion that there is a singular view of how change occurs throughout history, whereas an authoritative view takes the opposite position. Didactic exhibits are construed as authoritative, while interactive exhibits might be considered populist if they invite multiple interpretations. Further, one intent of a populist view is to shift the role of the viewer/museum-goer from a passive participant to an active conversationalist in the process of understanding the past.

The Web is an especially adept vehicle for showing a multiplicity of views; a museum might expand its ideological approach simply by utilizing this aspect of the Web. To tell the stories of American Indian and African American history without offending or alienating the museum-goer (for a host of contrary reasons) begs a careful approach, and arguments can be made for supporting a linear, multiplistic, or relativistic framework in both museum and website. On the other hand, as a specific event the Holocaust seems less open to interpretation but similarly suitable for developing via one of these stances or a combination thereof. A pertinent question is whether these museums approached such issues in the same way for both the virtual and physical experiences. For example, oftentimes a museum's curator will sign exhibit statements to signify that an individual is offering a point of view. Do websites likewise make a distinction between the individual and authoritative voice?

All three museums also address aspects of contemporary culture; whether they handle current culture with the same approach as past culture is another issue relevant to the physical versus the virtual museum experience. In "Museums as Contact Zones," James Clifford asserts that:

When museums are seen as contact zones, their organizing structure as a collection becomes an ongoing historical, political, moral relationship—a powercharged set of exchanges, of push and pull.

Neither community 'experience' nor cultural 'authority' has an automatic right to the contextualization of collections or to the narration of contact histories. The
solution is inevitably contingent and political; a matter of mobilized power, of
negotiation, of representation constrained by specific audiences.⁴

The three museums worked collaboratively with their individual constituencies to
design and build their spaces and exhibits, thereby addressing the problems Clifford
raises. Nevertheless, given the difficulties that museums (and especially the Smithsonian)
have encountered over the last decade with brokering culture among the museum, its
constituents, and the peoples whose stories are being told, whether the Web truly works
as another contact zone (and if so, how) is a compelling question.

In his article, Clifford also proposes "a decentralization and circulation of collections
in a multiplex public sphere, an expansion of more diverse arts, cultures, and traditions in
large, established institutions as necessary but not as the only or primary point of
intervention."⁵ It could be argued that the Web is a vital means for such decentralization,
for the Web makes it possible to view exhibit and research materials at any time of day
and anywhere throughout the world. Whether these three museums use the Web for
"decentralization and circulation" seemed an extension of the question about a populist
vs. an authoritative approach.

On the other hand, Clifford's suggestions for "more diverse arts, cultures, and
traditions," as well as decontextualization, raises the specter of entertainment–or
edutainment–tainting the authenticity of the museum's content. The "Disneyfication" of
history, as described by Mike Wallace in Mickey Mouse History and Other Essays on
American Memory, as well as in Vinyl Leaves: Walt Disney World and America by
Stephen M. Fjellman, is the retelling of history to make it fit a particular political (i.e.,
whitewashed) view. It is also to make it fun and marketable. As Fjellman notes:

One of the ways people try to make sense out of their lives is to locate their
activities in some sort of context. [. . .] By pulling meanings out of their contexts
and repackaging them in bounded informational packets, decontextualization
makes it difficult for people to maintain a coherent understanding about how
things work. Meanings become all jumbled together–separate in that they all are
abstracted from their different environments and equal in that their packaging
destroys any sense of scale by which they could be measured against each other.
Differences are glossed over, and 'differences that make a difference,' as Gregory
Bateson has put it, are neutralized. Disconnected information passes in front of us
at high speed.⁶

Exhibits in both the physical and the virtual space run the danger of being presented
as artifacts or activities isolated from meaning, or of being presented with so little
information and so much leeway for interpretation that they are ultimately without
meaning. The Web, especially, has the capacity to contain so much information
distributed at such a high speed that it can be overwhelming if not organized relationally.
It is also rife with efforts to "edutain" and offers sound bytes of information pegged to
animations (via Macromedia Flash or similar software) and trivial games. The
intersection between virtual and physical presentations with interpretation seems
particularly critical in considering how museums and their websites together teach
history.

Given the predominance of the three types of public history museum websites (Ad,
Brochure, and Catalogue), the question must be raised whether the museum's mission in
an Education-and-Research type of website is compromised in the need to make appeals
for memberships and donations. Does marketing overwhelm the museum's mission or its ability to address complex and politically charged issues in either space?

A final ideological consideration combines two related issues. First, is the museum to be viewed as a sacred space or a democratic, public space? Second, is the impact of the museum meant to be one of emotional resonance or intellectual stimulation? How can or does the museum website reflect and actively replicate—if at all—the poetic sensibilities of the museum experience?

Much has been written both for and against museums as shrines or sources of wonder. Stephen Greenblatt, discussing the State Jewish Museum in Prague, recognizes a distinction between viewing and remembering—history as removed from emotion and history as memory, the latter being tied to the effect of resonance. *Resonance* he defines as:

[..] awakening in the viewer a sense of the cultural and historically contingent construction of art objects, the negotiations, exchanges, swerves, and exclusions by which certain representational practices come to be set apart from other representational practices they partially resemble.7

This resonance depends not upon visual stimulation but upon a felt intensity of names, and behind the names, as the very term *resonance* suggests, of voices; the voices of those who chanted, studied, muttered their prayers, wept, and then were forever silenced.8

Can this awe or wonder be communicated in a virtual space?

The sense of museums as "temples of hushed reverence, where children have to be kept in order, where things must not be touched [..]"9 is achieved partly by arrangement of the artifacts themselves and by the content of curatorial statements. It is also achieved by the effects of architecture. Both the National Museum of the American Indian and the U. S. Holocaust Memorial and Museum were designed to make a powerful architectural statement. The Anacostia Museum, however, began with former Smithsonian Secretary S. Dillon Ripley's notion to establish "a sort of storefront museum, a drop-in place without the fluted columns and grand staircases, an approachable place with hands-on exhibits."10 The original building was a "former dance hall, skating rink and church"—in other words, a place for a broad rather than a select audience. The current building honors the same philosophy, albeit in a space specifically designed for the museum. How the physical space reflects ideology is, then, another issue that might be raised about the design of the virtual space. Does it, too, reflect an ideal of resonance or of "an approachable place"?

Issues of cultural interpretation may be seen as irrelevant to a museum website, but I suggest that integrating the experience of the virtual space with that of the real-time space cannot be accomplished if these issues are not considered and a position consciously adopted and applied to the website.

2 Ibid., p. 40.
4 Ibid., p. 449.
5 Ibid., p. 452.


8 Ibid., p. 47.


10 Kernan, Michael. "Around the Mall and Beyond." (Student Packet, assembled by Phyllis Leffler, University of Virginia, p. 315).