

Dancing about Architecture: Arts Resources Online

by Axel Bruns

Art can touch us deeply, in ways which cannot be fully explained through intellectual, rational analysis. So what is the point in writing about it, creating Websites and online resources for it? We may safely expand the old line, variously attributed to Edgard Varèse, Laurie Anderson, and Frank Zappa, that talking about music is like dancing about architecture – unable to express its true essence – to encompass not just music but all forms of art. Yet we continue to do it, online, offline, attempting to analyse our experience or simply to capture the moment itself, compiling histories of artists and art movements and developing arts news and resources services like fineArt forum itself. As we enter the information economy, the network society, it has become even more pressing to ensure that our aesthetic pursuits are represented online just as well as our commercial and political interests. The arts have moved into the online world, and fAf as an early adopter now has been joined by a multitude of other sites. Yet still, how do they dance about architecture?

When we speak about presenting the arts online, we are really often speaking of presenting *online arts* – artworks created specifically for the context of the new electronic media, from hypertext and hypermedia writing to streaming media to interactive and virtual 3D spaces. Perhaps this contraction of focus from ‘the arts as such’ to the online arts is almost unavoidable: the medium of exhibition will always affect the range of artworks which can be presented effectively. The often awkward solutions employed by traditional arts spaces in their attempts to effectively display electronic artworks demonstrate that museums and art galleries struggle no less with the exhibition of new media art than do online arts spaces with their coverage of ‘offline’ art.

In the same way that much new art has explored hybrid forms, combining live and mediated experience, then, arts *spaces* are also moving in this direction – from museums developing ever more extensive Websites which mirror their physical exhibition space through virtual galleries to online resources staging regular offline exhibitions. The aim here cannot be to arrive at some form of stable equilibrium between on- and offline elements – some art forms will always need to be experienced live, while others cannot work as public or even private performances. Rather, on- and offline components can work to complement one another: the performance of a Stelarc, say, can’t possibly be conveyed adequately through mediated means, but can gain an extra dimension through an online coverage which details the motivations and techniques behind this art.

(In fact, there is no clean break between ‘live’ and ‘mediated’, of course: witness the multitude of live recordings and broadcasts which provide an experience that is not at all like being there in the flesh, but rather a more or less carefully edited, mediated ‘live’ experience that is nonetheless more live than, say, studio performances. Some people will even claim that watching a delayed telecast is less ‘live’ than watching the ‘live’ broadcast. And on the other hand, how live are major rock concerts

or sporting events where large video screens dwarf the real performers while displaying their every move – where the mediated version out-‘lives’ the live?)

Of course this addition of further material to the primary artworks also carries with it the danger of overexplanation, of deauratising art through excessive rational analysis. This, however, is a problem inherent in all arts commentary, and not limited to the electronic media alone. Fundamentally, as the well-known ‘dancing about architecture’ quip points to, there is (and arguably must be) a dimension to the arts which cannot be explained (or explained away). Given this, then, perhaps the online medium is in fact particularly well suited to this kind of arts commentary which accompanies the artworks themselves: many writers have remarked that the Internet is a space of information, not reflection, that in its non-linear structure it can provide the tools for meaning-making, but not the meaning itself. Far more so than when reading weighty monographs on the meaning of modern art, therefore, users browsing the online arts resources may be encouraged to come up with their own interpretations, their own explanations – based on, but just as much questioning the information they may find in these sites. Where this takes place in interactive fora such as discussion groups, blogs, or other sites which are open for commentary, users might even contribute their thoughts to the multitude of views. The very fragmentational, informational, and sometimes downright dis- and misinformational nature of Internet content, in this view, helps preserve the aura, the mystery of art.

What remains is the question of how we *find* these online arts resources in the first place. Googling for the term ‘art’ yields some 90 million hits at a first glance – but what’s more, these hits will point us, at best, to sites which write *about* art, not to actual artworks themselves: these, which will frequently take the form of image, sound and video files, won’t have been recognised as art by today’s search engine technologies. Creating online arts resources is a profoundly human activity which cannot be automated beyond a very basic level. This in turn cannot help but introduce some form of editorial bias: even a resource as established and respected as fineArt forum will reflect in the composition of the resources it offers the collective editorial choices of its staff. On a smaller scale, this becomes even more obvious, where specialist sites covering, say, the New York-based performance artists of the 1960s will no doubt end up being influenced by their editors’ preferences and highlight some artists over others. Towards the end of the scale, there are fan sites dedicated to specific artists or movements, and of course artists’ own sites, which quite openly declare their bias for their objects of attention.

Let us not make the mistake of discounting these resources because of their clearly partisan nature, in favour of the more ‘balanced’ sites set up by the major public galleries and museums. Biased they may be, but the fan sites in their dedication to specific artists also often provide the most in-depth information about this art – and Web users can be expected to recognise any instances of gushing fanboyism and fangirlism for what it is, and to move past this to the actual content; users of these sites will make their own meaning, think their own part in response to what they read.

And fan sites as well as the artists' own sites are also key drivers in the ongoing process of opening up the arts, away from the purely contemplative model still prevalent in the most traditional of exhibition spaces (where we are expected to shuffle our way through in a quiet and inobtrusive manner showing no outward sign of any effect this art may have on us) and towards a direct, interactive and communicative engagement with art and artists, as well as with our fellow art lovers. Fan sites can bring together virtual communities and enable them to interact through mailing-lists and other communicative fora, and they and the artists' sites may also be able to put us in touch with the artists themselves, furthering the disintermediation between creators and audience. Sometimes, of course, this continues even to the point of involving the audience as co-creators themselves, as is the case in many new media arts projects from the small and private scale of hypermedia writing (where each individual user may see a different text depending on the course of their interaction with the possibilities inherent in the work) all the way to the massive and very public scale of projects like Rafael Lozano-Hemmer's *Vectorial Elevation* installation over the Zócalo square in Mexico City (which allowed Web users to direct 18 giant searchlights to build a roof of light over this immense civic space).

Clearly, not all art forms lend themselves to this direct involvement of audiences as co-creators, and not all art must be about exchanging individual expression for communally produced work. However, at a time where there remains some degree of public suspicion of what is seen as the 'high' arts, and where some emerging art forms indeed seek to distance themselves from the term 'art' altogether, for fear of losing their street cred, the disintermediation which fan and artist sites can effect is highly beneficial in allowing audiences to engage with the arts who are otherwise reluctant to enter the mediated spaces of galleries and museums. The increase of public involvement in the arts (high or otherwise) that such disintermediation brings about may even be at least partly responsible for the fact that museums and galleries *are* doing quite well these days.

There remains the problem of finding such specialist sites, a problem which is heightened by the drive towards disintermediation: disintermediation, after all, requires as its starting point an existing *mediated* relationship between audiences and creators which it can then short-circuit. There cannot be *disintermediation* without the prior existence of intermediation.

This, then, is why the more generalist online arts resources such as fineArt forum remain crucial: for anyone searching the Web for information on the arts in general, or on specific fields within the arts, these sites provide the first port of call, offer (ideally) a well-structured overview of the whole range of current artistic practices with some background information, commentary, and online samples, as well as the latest news from the arts world. In addition, and just as importantly, they must *also* function as portals into more specific areas, as intermediators pointing their users to the more specific fan and artist sites which serve to disintermediate the artist-audience relation. Fan and artist sites, on the other hand, also need to remember to look beyond their own specific field and direct their

users to the more generalist sites which may also be of interest to them: they must provide an opportunity for, pointers towards, *reintermediation*.

In other words, intermediation and disintermediation should not be seen as opposing forces out to destroy one another. Rather, they should work together and complement one another in helping those interested in the arts to find the information they are looking for. Only if intermediators and disintermediators *do* work together in this fashion, by identifying their shared interests and delegating the tasks of arts coverage and resources provision to the better-suited of the two sides, will they be able to be effective in their task to sustain, inform, and enhance the online public's interest in and engagement with the arts. They are partners in this dance.