L’accès aux collections d’art avec le Google Art Project : démocratisation de l’art ou idéologie de la transparence ?

The Google Art Project: Democratisation of art or ideology of transparency?

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Abstract

This article examines the relations between techne and social change resulting from a practice that modifies the reception of artworks, namely the digital reproduction of artworks and the possibility to both look at them quite closely and appreciate them as an integral exhibit. Google Art Project has given impetus to a process already underway by favouring certain technological tools. This project claims to democratize art, affording access to the world’s greatest art collections to anyone wishing to visit them. Google Art Project, it is argued, recreates some of the museum’s traditional functions, but in doing so raises a series of issues concerning as much the interactive aspect of the tour as the possibility it gives the user to acquire knowledge of especially complex cultural objects.

Keywords: semiotics; museum; digitization; Art Project; Google; Internet; democratization

1 SEEING MUSEUMS

Objects in museums and art collections are, according to Pomian (1978), withdrawn from use in order to be looked at: their intended usage is replaced by a scopic drive directed at aesthetic contemplation or scientific inquiry. In an article that seeks to define the characteristics of a collection, Pomian asks whether ornaments and offerings to the dead or to the gods can be classified as a collection. Because these objects exist for potential viewers located in another space or time, he replies in the affirmative. There always remains an element of sight, not human, but that of the divine or the deceased.

The extreme and apparently paradoxical case of offerings found in a temple or in a tomb to accompany the deceased to the afterlife sheds light on one of the more specific characteristics of a collection and a museum: that of the relationship between the object and the viewer. Museums are based on a grammar of sight that hinges on the relationship between that which is seen and the viewer, and which establishes the respective positions of these two sources of communicative exchange: the work of art and the person who is viewing it. We assume that the viewpoint is controlled by a communicative measure that defines...
the position that the viewer must take (more on this in Section 5). We can now ask how Google Art Project (GAP) builds its grammar and how such viewing is staged in this museum of museums.

GAP was launched in 2011 when the collections of 17 museums were put online. The number of collections that have been digitalized has since grown dramatically. As of 2012, Google had signed agreements with 151 museums in 40 countries. The two technologies used are street view, which allows visitors to stroll virtually through a museum’s galleries, and microscope view, which lets viewers examine paintings in close detail.

The thoughts of Krauss (1986) are very useful in understanding GAP’s theoretical and practical implications. He distinguishes at least two kinds of art museums, traditional and postmodern. The first is based on a pedagogical relationship with the visitor: the chronological progression of artworks and styles is presented in strict correlation with the succession of adjoining galleries that guide the visitor along a linear path of discoveries and knowledge. In an entirely different approach, the postmodern museum addresses visitors who are already capable of choosing their own circuit: the modular layout of its galleries imposes no predetermined direction.

Starting from the difference between an architecture that imposes its presence through the layout of adjoining galleries and an architecture that opens a “free” and “flexible” space, Zunzunegui (2003) used semiotic tools to elaborate on the dichotomy between traditional and postmodern museums. More recently, Pezzini (2013) looked at GAP from the perspective of this reformulation. He concluded that Google’s initiative so profoundly alters the relationship between the museum and the visitor that we cannot include this platform in a conventional museum classification. Here are some of the characteristics of GAP that shed light on the primary semiotic transformations between the (digitized) museum and the tour that the project imposes.

Practically all museums offer visitors the opportunity of taking a virtual tour and of viewing their collections before they come. Likewise, web platforms such as Europeana archive a portion of Europe’s cultural heritage, including documentation on temporary exhibitions. The creation of GAP has given impetus to a process already underway thanks to innovative techniques that radically change the ways artworks are seen. Street view technology, which opens the halls and galleries of a museum, immerses visitors in a simulated tour of the collections. We see the paintings of the chosen museum, the successive placement of the artworks, the transitions from one gallery to the next and their spatial layout.

The Wikipedia page on GAP notes that one of the goals of this project is to help democratize art by giving access to the world’s greatest art collections to anyone wishing to see them. Once a work of art has been chosen, it can be examined quite closely using microscope view. This gives the viewer an intimate perception of the painter’s work. GAP is more than a digital archive. It attempts to simulate a museum tour taken by at least two “model” audiences, the “average visitor” and the “art expert”. Taking the notion of “model reader” proposed by Eco (1979) and as applied to the museum context by Violi (2014), a “model visitor” refers not to empirical users but rather to the interpretative positions that the text – or the computer platform in this instance – provides for model clienteles. GAP is therefore designed for at least two clienteles: while the “average visitor” lacks specific skills, the art expert examines each brushstroke to evaluate or authenticate a work of art. Street view and microscope view correspond to the way each type of clientele views art.

2 THE STREET VIEW TOUR

We will first consider the theoretical and practical implications of street view. The subjective camera through which we see the paintings plunges the visitor into the atmosphere of the museum, its architecture, its walls and framed works of art. Unlike digital archives, where the format of the artwork
...coincides with that of the computer screen (minus the actual frame), GAP immerses users in the museum’s galleries, thereby ideally retaining its sacred aura. It is thus primordial to see the paintings in their frames, because the frame, by separating the artwork from everything else, fulfills one of the most important functions in the definition of art. If the museum represents the space for art par excellence, the frame delimits the space of its representation; it defines and creates a distance from the viewer, even as it reiterates the difference between a digitalized document and a work of art. The frame is therefore the ‘guardian’ of a separation – never fully established – between two different spaces: the “profane” space of the visitor, and the “sacred” space of art, whose aura it helps maintain.

Damisch (2000) has developed a very interesting view of the relation between the exhibition value and the cultural value of works of art. Following Benjamin’s (1955 [1936]) analysis of Raphael’s Sistine Madonna, he argues that exhibition value had not yet replaced cultural value in museums. While the exhibition is no longer used in worship, he says, it has taken on this appearance. Museums have now become places of pilgrimage that clearly confirm the sacred value of the exhibition of art:

> What has changed in our relation with art is not so much that its exhibition value has taken the place of its cultural value. It’s rather that their relation seems to have been inverted, even as the very idea of the exhibition of art – if not that of worship – has radically altered in meaning. Today, art exhibition is no longer used in worship; but its success – and that of museums, having become pilgrimage sites – is seen in the fact that they have taken on every appearance of places of worship. (Damisch 2000:48)

The virtual tour is made possible by a user interface. This creates a distance between the user and the work of art by providing browser, search and display tools. In every instance, the museum is shown in its architectural reality, such that a visit to London’s National Gallery is completely different from a visit to the Musée d’Orsay in Paris (Figures 1–2). The National Gallery’s adjoining galleries are nothing like the architecture of the former train station that is now the Musée d’Orsay.

With regards to the interpretation of artworks, note that seeing paintings arranged on a wall leads the visitor into the area of hermeneutics. Stoichita (1993), already observed the extent of the...
“intertextual mechanism” derived from the arrangement of paintings on a wall: this arrangement creates a sort of “uber frame”, in that the space that the collection occupies adds meaning to the importance of the painting taken on its own. Thürlemann (2011) elaborated on this idea by recognizing the creation of a ‘hyper-image’ from the arrangement of paintings on a wall: its sequence constitutes an implicit “metadiscourse”, because the relation between the different paintings informs viewers how to read them. Each image – in relation with the others – suggests interpretative categories beyond that of the artwork on its own. Using the idea of a hyper-image, the author points to the presence of a hermeneutic system that directs the eye and that results from the arrangement of the paintings on a museum’s walls. For example, an arrangement en pendent – where two paintings frame a third larger painting – is one of the most commonly encountered. The three paintings making up the arrangement can be seen as a unit: the two smaller complement the larger, giving it meaning. Through the sequence of artworks displayed, the museum imposes its presence as enunciator and underscores its educational role and the asymmetry of its skills in relation to the general public. At this level, the hermeneutics derived from close analysis leans toward the decorative due to its detached view and synthetic perspective, in which the arrangement en pendent is seen in terms of an architectural structure.

GAP shows this type of arrangement (Figure 3), but fails to interpret it, as the display does not enable the viewer to relate one artwork to the others. The distance at which we observe the three paintings en pendent doesn’t allow a full understanding of the subjects portrayed. It is obviously possible to zoom in on each painting, move back, then move in again. But the virtual tour tools do not encourage this method, on the contrary, after viewing the display, microscope view zooms into a close look at the painting, which means we must give up street view.

In our opinion, street view only allows for a decorative approach. We can see the paintings in the gallery, but imperfectly. An integral view of the artworks displayed would allow us to relate them with the adjacent paintings. But in this instance, because the integral view is synthetic, it does not lead to the same richer understanding of the artworks as hermeneutics does. Furthermore, detailed exploration of the gallery is only possible once the technique of using the tool has been mastered: the cursor that directs the camera often shows the floor or the ceiling, corners or empty spaces on the walls, leaving the visitor at a loss. Street view’s subjective camera favours body movement (up and down, right to left) as if projected via body and eye movement, but this experience does not immerse the viewer in the ambiance of the museum. Observation of the artworks lacks the same display conditions found in the museum,
such as the lighting or the “atmosphere” (Bertrand 2012) that a masterpiece creates. The resulting vision is “detached”, and does not encourage ‘contemplation’ of the paintings (Gombrich 1977).

Echoing Bolter and Grusin (1999) on the remediation of what GAP achieves, we would say that the user interface is always present, it never gives way to a mimetic illusion. User interface tools remain visible, they “frame” what the street view camera films and allow the visitor to continue on the tour. For the user, the technical aspect is omnipresent, making a mimetic effect hard to achieve. Not only are the GAP icons highly visible, they are indispensable links. GAP follows a “hyper mediation” logic, which underscores the function of this platform as a mediator between the museums and the user. It styles itself as the Sender: the interface is designed to build the platform’s image as the “brand” of the enunciator who manages the user’s browsing, a constant reminder that access to collections is made possible by Google. In this regard, we found some of the videos quite remarkable. How to use the site, for example, uses humour to draw attention to the various sections of the webpage, in the form of a DIY kit. Each element is treated like the piece of a puzzle, connecting the interface to the museums’ thumbnails. The video shows how fun and easy it is to use the platform.

3 TOURS AND ORIENTATION

Zununegüi (2003) differentiates between two aspects of museums: the exhibition aspect, which refers to the museum’s layout (the “showcase”), and the tour aspect, which is specific to the visitor’s individual tour. The two can coincide in a traditional museum (as defined in Section 1 of this article) if the visitor follows the museum’s directions. However, some of these elements change once an exhibition and a tour are transposed to the web. The exhibition aspect retains most of its characteristics – even though it loses the architectural features between floors and the barriers that set the proper distance between the public and the artworks – but the tour aspect changes to a much greater extent.

Empiric analysis gives us new elements with which to define the tour. We can’t help but notice the sense of disorientation that occurs when entering an art gallery using GAP. A guide to the collection,
which would give the visitor a chronological, thematic or other layout of the works at a glance, is not provided. Visitors can decide which floor to start on, but without knowing what lies ahead, they proceed at random. From the outset, the tour is a sort of treasure hunt, and the “discovery” of the artworks, rather than being a question of choice or a quest for knowledge, becomes the reward. To the left of the screen is a floor plan. A brightly-coloured sign tells us where we are, but this doesn’t compensate for the disorientation caused by the absence of a plan of the exhibition itself (which is not provided).

Street view technology gives a broad view of the artworks, but doesn’t allow us to recognize them individually. For some of the paintings, a small square takes us to a link that gives the artist’s name and the title of the work and lets us enlarge its image. This is the only indication in indoor view mode that partially directs the visitor. Enlarging the image completely alters the display because the camera switches from street view to microscope view. The only other structured element of the tour is the slideshow of artworks at the bottom of the page (Figure 4). In the absence of a plan of the exhibition and arrows to point us in the right direction, this series of images suggests a circuit to follow. Note that the platform has chosen these images in advance, and the user initially has no idea of the pertinence of this selection. Only after having explored the gallery does he realize that these are the most famous paintings displayed on the floor, those that he is given the chance to examine more closely. This slideshow corresponds to the museum gallery shown in the centre of the screen, but GAP chooses the works in the slideshow. In the final analysis, the virtual tour is conducted through a filter created by GAP and by the random selections made by the visitor himself.

4 MICROSCOPE VIEW

GAP microscope view zooms closely into the artworks. Because the digitized images have very high resolution, the user almost has the impression of penetrating the painting, as shown in the teaser, in
which a montage of images takes us on a visual tour of Hieronymus Bosch’s fantastical and monstrous creatures. Being able to enlarge the paintings to brushstroke level totally changes our way of seeing up to now, since street view mode had put the gallery and its spaces in the forefront. The ‘model’ user changes as well. If in the first instance this was an average museum visitor, microscope view simulates the role of an art expert who examines each brushstroke to, ideally, appraise the painting (Figure 5). This close-up vision thus alters the status of the work, which is no longer a painting that we contemplate, but a document that we examine to achieve close understanding.

The challenge of GAP is to offer platform users the possibility to see both details not visible to the naked eye and to discover certain features of the work that could not be grasped during a museum visit. There is a sacred connotation to this investigative approach to that which is hidden and secret. The challenge touches on certain beliefs relative to artistic production, such as the elusive essence of genius. It calls on the historiographic tradition surrounding the artist himself as a figure and as an alter deus.10 While this tradition is still very much alive today, GAP microscope view will give it new impetus, and ideally reveal the locus of the artistic spirit.

5 COMMUNICATIVE EXCHANGE

Microscope view inverts the communicative exchange relative to street view. It gives us the experience of a visitor who is “dominated” by the technological infrastructure; there exists an asymmetry of skills, and the eye of the visitor (transposed by GAP’s camera) remains a certain distance from the artwork, a distance that he cannot ‘profane’ in that he is obliged to respect the distance imposed by both the camera and the frame. Conversely, in microscope view the eye “dominates” the painting; it can enter into it, the distance being totally annihilated, and it is – ideally – the viewpoint of an expert who gives meaning to images and not the opposite (where the visitor learns from the museum). This way of seeing thus transforms our aesthetic perception of art (in the acceptance of aisthesis, or perception through the

Figure 5. Detail of Vincent van Gogh’s Autoportrait (1889) at the National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C. (Google Art Project, screen capture, June 16, 2014)
senses); this technology reformulates the relation between body and perception; it is a prosthesis that lets us see more and differently.

We no longer have an “optical” vision of the whole, but, according to Hildebrand (1893), a haptische vision, in other words a tactile vision, where the eye inspects the surface of the painting as would the palm of the hand. In the plastic arts, detailed vision results in a better understanding of the work and of the painting itself. The details constitute ‘traces’ from which a connoisseur can identify the author of the work and can make deductions concerning the work itself. Following a different logic in GAP, microscope view in no way increases the knowledge of the person looking at the painting and provides no expert tool to enhance his vision. All cognitive and pedagogical aspects are lost in a tactile vision that satisfies in a solely perceptive manner, resulting in what seems to be a mere spectacularization of art.

6 WHAT MUSEUM OF MUSEUMS?

The web completely changes the way we approach artworks. They cease to be objects of contemplation, because the communicative aspect is pushed to the extreme. The major new feature introduced by the digitalization of images concerns the transformation of their status: they become documents in potential relationship with millions of other documents. Moreover, digitalization makes an artwork reproducible, thereby shrinking the gap between the work of art and the viewer: the “technical exposability” value of the artwork reaches one of the highest levels of achievement. The image of the painting is not the unique object that it is in the museum. It is but one of many different images. In turn, these millions of hyperlinks also change the prevailing attitude of the user, who isn’t immersed in the careful observation of an individual work, but is incited to look at numerous different images, to seek additional information, to follow hyperlinks from one page to another. These characteristics raise a number of questions, among which: is GAP a ‘museum of museums’ as defined by André Malraux in The Voices of Silence (1951)?

Like Malraux’s imaginary museum, GAP decontextualizes artworks by changing the scale of their format, by their democratization or, as we have already seen, by removing them from the ritual function for which they were displayed. But there are even greater differences, as Coggins (2014) has recently shown. One of the most remarkable concerns the development of a critical review process leading to the creation of an imaginary museum. For Malraux, the creation of an imaginary museum is a process that calls for considerable individual skills and experience. Conversely, GAP lets the visitor create his own gallery in just a few clicks without needing to know what he’s doing or needing to have any knowledge of the art world. What’s more, the system predetermines the juxtaposition of images; the user does not control them, even though he can make some choices from a limited list. We are therefore in the presence of a ‘representation’ of the creation of an imaginary museum, the difference being that the cognitive aspect is essentially overridden by the game aspect that prevails in the content of the descriptive information provided.

On the subject of this lack of content, Lafont (2014) clearly demonstrates how GAP falls short of its encyclopaedic goal. The platform does not explore any new horizons, because the database search categories remain static (author, artist, work, etc.). Moreover, the “Details” heading, which includes “Description”, is succinct and not referenced:

The scant content of these fact sheets and the absence of references make these images, despite their quality, not very usable. We know just how important the wall cards, panels and theme sheets provided in museum galleries are to the amateur and expert visitor alike. In this respect, Google has not assumed its editorial role, which consists of defining the nature and the form of the texts that accompany the image. (Lafont 2014:556)
It must be added that unlike other computer platforms, GAP doesn’t allow images to be downloaded, consequently, they remain the property of Google.\textsuperscript{15}

Referring back to Coggins (2014), we can say that as an imaginary museum, GAP is not a subjective creation of the visitor (in that it gives him the tools to build his own museum), but rather a synthesis of the imaginary museums that are presented, an “imaginary museum of imaginary museums”. Or, as Welger-Barboza (2001) observed, “an auto-anthropological perspective on culture.” If each museum represents a standpoint on the cultural imagination that it embodies, the digitalization of artworks and their reproduction in GAP involves an ulterior distance, the stereotyping of the concept of culture, of what must be taken into account as such. As we have seen, the visitor cannot build his own museum, because each choice is limited and predetermined by the platform. This simplification leads to a distance, a second degree of discourse on the concept of culture.

It is noteworthy that the platform has made use of some art history research tools. For example, the possibility of comparing two images thanks to photography, whose importance Malraux underscores, has been a part of plastic arts studies to the present day, the use of pairs of slides being a regular teaching practice (see also Thürlemann 2011). GAP puts the “Compare” button clearly visible beneath the main image (Figures 1 to 4). Using it is child’s play. Yet the action is not applicable to plastic arts research, because GAP doesn’t prove the clarifications needed to derive a cognitive evaluation from such a comparison.

7 CONCLUSION: THE POWER OF IMAGES OR POWER THROUGH IMAGES?

Along with libraries and cemeteries, museums are “heterotopias”, as Michel Foucault famously labelled them in “Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias” (2009 [1966]). They make up “other” spaces within their society, spaces governed by their own rules. Specifically, museums and libraries are “heterochronies”, because they concentrate an accumulation of objects and books from all ages. The museum is a general archive where all times, all forms and all styles are brought together, a place of all times that “is itself outside of time”. That which is kept here escapes the ravages of time. The museum, Foucault says, is the project of organizing a sort of perpetual and indefinite accumulation of time in an immobile place. GAP seems to push the “heterochronic” that has characterized museums since the 19th century to the limit. It presents itself, in our view, as the “heterochronie of heterochronies”, or if you will, as the hub of places of accumulation.

According to Zunzunegui (2003), we can also view the museum as a Panopticon. If, to paraphrase Foucault (1975), this gives you an immediate view of a group of individuals (without being seen yourself), the museum creates the illusion of total accessibility to art, if not at a single glance (as in a Panopticon), at least in a single visit. It goes without saying that while the museum and the prison pursue different purposes, they share certain basic features, among which centrality of observation is not the least. Observation, for the Panopticon, is the function that ensures domination and subjugation due to an asymmetry between the observer and that which is observed, the first having complete control over the second.\textsuperscript{16}

In museums, as we saw earlier, seeing is vital to the definition of one of its basic characteristics. What’s more, as a place where the accumulation of artworks is offered to the visitor and is, therefore subject to be looked at, the museum creates the illusion of total accessibility to art. GAP accentuates this illusion by proposing a virtual tour of the world’s greatest museums that mimics a direct, “transparent” relationship between the visitor and the object of knowledge.

At this juncture, we would like to reiterate the distinction between the traditional museum and the postmodern museum, as each stem from different conceptions of power. Again referring to Zunzunegui (2003), we can say that the traditional museum results from a humanist and illuminist concept of
knowledge. It reflects a pedagogical organization of knowledge that is clearly seen in its spatial layout, and it is precisely this spatial arrangement that expresses the asymmetric relation of power between museum and visitor.

Conversely, the postmodern museum substitutes the pedagogical tour by freedom of choice. The relation between museum spaces and the tour is no longer directed, but “free”. If, as Zunzunegui tells us, the presence of a suggested tour aims for the “cognitive success” of the visitor, the absence of such a tour questions the very possibility of democratic access to art, since there is no longer any way to ensure the cognitive and aesthetic comprehension of the artworks.

We believe that GAP will reformulate and accentuate certain aspects of the postmodern museum by making full use of the structure we have delineated so far. We also believe that we can see in GAP an ideology of the democratization of art which, however, does not correspond to any possibility of direct access to art. Unless the visitor is already skilled, GAP does not provide sufficient background information to build a well-structured tour. The concept of the democratization of art does not carry over to a context that insists on its pedagogical aspect: while the artworks digitalized by GAP satisfy our drive to see close details of the painting, visible over and above the painting itself, this scopic drive fails to meet a cognitive need. Some expert tools are available, but are devoid of their original purpose: they remain simply a “representation” of actual tools. Such is the case, as we saw, of the “compare” function: though presented as a practice used by art historians, it lacks the analytical and cultural scope of such an operation. It is merely a “portrayal” of the “transparency” of art, in other words, of direct, democratic and unrestricted access to artworks.

NOTES

1 For an overview, particularly historical, of the various experiments in the digitalization of works of art by museums and by GAP, see Chapelain (2011) and Terrisse (2013).

2 The author makes a crucial distinction between the Gallery and the Rotonda, from which he suggests considering these two different architectural spaces as likely to influence the quality of seeing (one by one or all at once) and thus give rise to two kinds of museums that we feel coincide with the distinction proposed by Krauss (1986). The proposed opposition between the traditional museum and the postmodern museum (which he calls “modern”) in the semiotic square gives four different possibilities (traditional/modern and non traditional/non modern). For a semiotic view of museums, see also Pezzini (2011).


4 Both senses of frame are to be understood: as the limit of the format of an artwork and as a physical object. These two meanings of the frame take us to its theoretical dimensions. From the considerable literature on this, see, e.g., Schapiro (1969), Marin (1982, 1994), Goodman (1984), Stoichita (1993) and Lebensztejn (1999).

5 Concerning the various web “spaces”, and in particular in relation to the ‘programs of action’ that these spaces can contain, see Volli (2003).

6 We refer to the concept of Greimasian semiotics (Paris School), where the Sender is one of the agents in the communicative process, it is the subject who manages the values in play, who is ultimately responsible for the communicative exchange and who endorses the success (see Greimas and Courtès 1979, ad vocem).


8 On pre-set links in hypertexts, see Manovich (2001).


10 Concerning the figure of the artist as constructed by historiographic tradition and by the social history of art, see Wittkover (1963), Damisch (1981) and Castelnuovo (1985, 2005).


12 See Arasse (1992) on the value of detail in the plastic arts and Ginzburg (1986) on details as ‘traces’ in art, but also in other areas (for example, the index method of identifying criminals). For a discussion of details as a transversal aesthetic strategy with the other arts, see instead Calabrese (2013).

Concerning the relationship between reproducibility and the digitalization of art, see Welger-Barboza (2001), who re-elaborates Benjamin’s formulations (1955 [1936]).

There is one aspect that concerns the economic impact of this project, but that we do not cover: if it is true that no non-profit purpose is stated, Google’s advertising rates are nevertheless strictly tied to traffic rates (Lafont 2014).

Control assumed by the controlled: “He who is subject to a field of vision and who knows it assumes the constraints of power; he spontaneously applies them to himself; he internalizes the balance of power in which he simultaneously plays both roles; he becomes the object of his own subjugation.” (Foucault 1975:204)

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