Kunsthalle Wien

Museumsquartier

IMAGINAIRE

L'EXPOSITION

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Booklet #Imaginaire

www.kunsthallewien.at

L´Exposition Imaginaire

Imagine a museum – made up of artworks that are located all over the world – that takes its shape through photographic reproductions from 1947 onwards. André Malraux indeed compiled such an imaginary museum from pictures of sculptures. Rather than providing encyclopaedic completeness, his book series *Le Musée imaginaire de la sculpture mondiale* promised an encounter between works from different epochs and countries in the form of a visual dialogue. A comparative view, the discovery of motifs throughout art history and the differentiation of visual language were the main objectives of this project, which sought to liberate art appreciation from its confinement to a specific location: everything was to be available at any time and any place as a reproduction. Italian busts, Greek statues, works from the hands of German Medieval sculptors, and modern statues came together on pages arranged according to the principle of comparative viewing. They were supposed to eliminate the "zone of uncertainty" which arises when comparing image and remembered image. Malraux believed that "comparisons between things (which are per se separate) generate a certain affinity between representational objects, regardless of the actual distance between them."[1], and that this visual availability of all works turns art history into an "art of fiction."[2]

Malraux collected art as a reproduction, unified in black and white photographs of the same size. This ambitious project was his response to Walter Benjamin who had asked the more fundamental question of "whether the invention of photography had not transformed the entire character of art."[3] A famous photograph taken for the magazine *Paris Match* shows him posing in his study among double pages from his books laid out on the floor, thus presenting himself as the director of a museum on paper in which personal taste and art historical ambition are combined in equal measure.

Separated from the book, the composition of the pages, the way in which the sculptures are positioned in relation to one another and sometimes almost seem to be speaking to each other, becomes particularly apparent. It is not about the individual picture but about the ensemble. Often Malraux trimmed and manipulated photographs in order to present universal comparability, thereby politely ignoring art historical considerations of genre.

He found inspiration in contemporary museums, which also incorporated the artwork into a collection in order to show it together with other works to establish new affinities, instead of presenting it as an individual piece. The modern art museum combines artworks from different contexts, frees them from these, and thereby enforces a predominantly formal perception. The individual work becomes part of a bigger picture, the narrative developed by the museum. However, the museum is limited by its premises. The virtual museum in the shape of a book, on the other hand, enables any number of new combinations when turning pages replaces the spatial course. It is an archive and a knowledge repository, but above all, it is a cabinet of wonders featuring a conglomeration of things that would never come into contact in the real world. Another "imaginary museum" Malraux conceived was "L'Univers des formes", a 42-volume series of publications with about 23,000 reproductions which appeared between 1960 and 1997 – thus ending when the internet era began.

Today it is the World Wide Web that provides reproductions of artworks at any time and any place. With its help practically anyone can become a museum director and compile their own virtual collection. Furthermore, the idea of the "imaginary museum" was until now limited to the reproducibility of art by the medium of photography – and its presentation and comparability in the medium of the book can be expanded considerably in the digital world. Every museum, every art institution, has an internet presence. In fact most museums also digitalise their collections in order to make them available to an international community of researchers, as well as an interested public. In practice, not even 5% of a collection is exhibited; the rest is hidden in the depot, invisible to the public. Digitalisation projects provide access to these unseen works. The internet platform *Europeana* connects different databases in the cultural field and makes their information available. Ambitious internet applications such as the *Google Arts Project* go even further: not only the artwork, but also the visit to a museum can be experienced on a virtual tour of things most museumgoers never get to see. The high-resolution reproductions of the paintings shown by the *Google Art Project* enable users sitting at their computers to zoom in and examine the smallest details, even the quality of a brushstroke. Online users can get much closer to the pictures than to the originals, which nowadays are usually protected by cordons. The project makes it possible to see the works in the context of the museum displaying them, but also to compare them with other works of the same period, and to archive them in a personal digital collection.

Modern rendering programs enable visits to real, planned, or fictitious exhibitions, museums, and collections. While sitting in front of the computer screen the viewer can be alone with Leonardo da Vinci's *Mona Lisa* in the otherwise chronically overcrowded Louvre hall, or can visit famous picture galleries without ever having been there. One can penetrate the surface of a canvas and stroll through the fictitious worlds of a Van Gogh painting, or photograph and reconstruct existing sculptures as 3D models in order to arrange them in one's own museum.

Art enthusiasts that visit real exhibitions no longer restrict their appreciation to the physical encounter in a museum or gallery but also use online platforms to inform themselves, such as *Contemporary Art Daily* (www.contemporaryartdaily.com), *Vimeo* (www.vimeo.com), *YouTube* (www.youtube.com) or *UbuWeb* (www.ubuweb.com). However the experience of an artwork via secondary media is not new. Long before the introduction of the internet: books, magazines, guidebooks, and later on television, all such formats served the purpose of spreading art to a broader audience. Entire television series brought masterpieces from the museums of the world to the screen and thus to the sitting rooms of the TV audience. Since the dawning of the age of technical reproducibility, the artwork has often been removed from its original material and hence unique status, and has also become available and accessible to an audience which rarely visits exhibitions.

In his BBC series from 1971*, Ways of Seeing*, John Berger referred to Walter Benjamin's essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* and pointed out that the reproduction removed the work from the context of its origination, thus enabling new perceptions in the manner of a democratisation. According to him, its unique physical presence is the only thing that still makes a work unique today. Its significance, he went on to explain, has more to do with its value as an original than with its artistic quality. As an example, Berger mentioned two almost identical pictures of Leonardo da Vinci's *Virgin of the Rocks* in the National Gallery in London and the Louvre in Paris. In both museums the art historians' main aim

was to prove that their picture was the original and the other the copy. But it is in fact the reproduction that opens the work for numerous observations and interpretations. An excerpt from an allegorical painting can for instance be turned into a portrait. Also the juxtaposition of word and image changes the meaning, contextualises the work, and enables an interpretational re-appropriation. In the shape of a postcard or poster it can decorate a wall, as a figure in a book it can become part of a study collection. Previously the artwork in its materiality was isolated in a collection. Today it is insubstantial and generally available for virtually innumerable modes of existence.

Benjamin's essay is regarded as one of the central texts of modern culture and media theory. "The age of technical reproduction" not only leads to a new circulation and accessibility of art, but also has a deciding influence on the way in which it is perceived.

Technical reproducibility leads to the decline of an "aura" – meaning the cult value of an artwork, its singularity and permanence. Mass reproduction, which started with the invention of photography, is the end of the idea of geniality, originality, and provenance, as "to ask for the 'authentic' print makes no sense."[4] The invitation to contemplate an artwork is reversed by the confrontation with photographic pictures: "Free-floating contemplation is no longer appropriate to them. They unsettle the viewer; he feels challenged to find a particular way to approach them." [5] The effect is even more extreme in film where images invade the viewer only to be whisked away in the next moment. This generates a new kind of perception defined by ephemerality and repeatability, but ideally, also an emancipated viewer who is aware of the different forms of contextualisation and their influence on perception.

The digitalisation of the present we have been experiencing for some years changes this fluid reception of art anew. Today views of exhibitions by museums and galleries are always available on websites and the physical presence of an artwork at a particular location is losing significance in the face of the worldwide circulation of reproductions. But how are exhibition venues dealing with this tendency towards digitalisation? Does the transferal of an exhibition to a virtual archive really do justice to it? Are the possibilities provided by digitalisation and virtual realities the beginning of the end of the exhibition? Or are we witnessing the birth of a completely new format? Is it still possible to cater only to the visitors physically present at an exhibition, or should there also be options which make the contents available to those who are not on site? Which chances does the idea of the "imaginary" exhibition offer, and to which traditions can it be linked?

In view of these developments, the Kunsthalle Wien – as an institution without a permanent collection of its own, dedicated to the conception of exhibitions and festivals in a variety of discursive formats – asks itself whether, and if so how, the exhibition format has changed, and to what extent the institution itself is obliged to adapt accordingly.

L´Exposition Imaginaire presents lectures, talks, and discussions with artists, art historians, architects, and academics, partly on site, and partly via video stream connected to the exhibition room.

Aspects of the discussion on the dematerialisation of art and its reception will be presented in a filmic collage. A selection of excerpts from the discussions and lectures will be included in this projection as a means to expand on this issue and to explore the chances and limitations of digitalisation with regard to art.

The "museum without walls" as imagined by Malraux is no longer a mere idea.

1 André Malraux, *Das imaginäre Museum*, Geneva 1947, p. 16. In contradistinction to a reprint from 1987, the first German edition includes the photographs from the French original edition.

2 André Malraux, *Das imaginäre Museum*, p. 19.

3 Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility*, Edited by Michael W. Jennings, Brigid Doherty, and Thomas Y. Levin, Translated by Edmund Jephcott, Rodney Livingstone, Howard Eiland, and Others, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, London, England 2008, p. 28.

4 Ibid., p. 25.

5 Ibid., p. 27.

Lectures and discussions

by/with (amongst others):

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