

THE BODILY ABSENCE: HOW VIEWERS EXPERIENCE TWO-DIMENSIONAL WORKS OF ART IN VIRTUAL EXHIBITIONS

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ABSTRACT

As restrictions due to the Covid-19 pandemic shaped a new reality in March 2020, virtual exhibitions became a powerful tool for museums and galleries to continue their public role and an excellent platform for artists to communicate their work to audiences. This paper examines how the viewer's physical absence could add a factor to the loss of aesthetics and the experience of two-dimensional artworks when digitally delivered. The viewer's body is analysed through philosophical theories of perception through movement as a contributing factor in experiencing two-dimensional artworks. The paper examines space, movement, and distance, which connect perception to one's body in designing and delivering the most common 2D and 3D-360° virtual exhibition presentations. The paper examines participants' interaction with the artworks based on recent research about how audiences experience online exhibitions during the pandemic. It discusses how the role of the viewer-visitor may change to that of just a user.

Keywords: body, virtual exhibition, art perception, two-dimensional aesthetic experience.

INTRODUCTION

The restrictions due to the Covid-19 pandemic introduced a new reality to most sectors in March 2020. UNESCO's report in May 2020 mentions that 90% of museums closed their doors during the Covid-19 crisis. The pandemic restrictions forced art spaces and museums to respond rapidly to the new reality and safety demands, and 'museums have emphasised their role as comforting cultural institutions, this time in a virtual space' (King et al., 2021, p.492). The new reality of displaying during the pandemic encouraged further research on aesthetic losses compared to traditional exhibitions. For museums, the aspect of embodiment in creating (if this is still unclear, please delete and use 'creation' as you suggested)

virtual exhibitions is of primary consideration. During the pandemic, they 'made a significant attempt to make the online exhibition experience more than just browsing a website' (King et al., 2021, p.496).

Considering aesthetic loss, virtual presentations of 2D artworks seem to comply with: a) the flat computer screen which delivers flat 2D artwork surfaces with less risk of quality loss, and b) the traditional way of viewing a 2D artwork by standing still in front of it. Researchers in experimental aesthetics, however, note the body as a study factor and accept that 'cognition relies heavily on bodily states—that is, cognitive representations and operations are intimately tied to the relevant sensory-motor processes required to interact with the environment' (Locher, 2011, p. 701). They have monitored the slightest movements of participants viewing 2D artworks using computerised dynamic posturography, 'a technique with great untapped potential to measure physiologically a viewer's reaction to art during an aesthetic experience' (Locher, 2011, p. 700).

THE BODILY FACTOR

The viewer's body has been strongly connected with sculpture rather than painting. O'Toole (1994, p. 32) introduced the 'bodily perceptions' related to the third dimension and sculpture. He stated that 3D artworks make us 'immediately aware of our body creating an instant relation to works of sculpture' and that 'the very category of animacy (...) becomes a critical factor in our response to sculpture to a far greater degree than in painting'. Decades ago, Finn (1989, p.11) mentioned that 'a work of sculpture is quite a different reality from a painting. A sculpture exists in space like a human being'.

This comparison also resonates when examining installation art. Rebentisch (2012) described a new conception of aesthetic experience with

installation art, again because of the connection to the viewer's physical aspect. For installation art, the interaction between the viewer-subject and the object is a process that 'comprehends the subject as well as the object of this experience to the same degree and equiprimordially, and which therefore cannot be attributed to either of these entities alone' (p. 11).

What the above authors describe as experience is connected to perception through movement and space theories. Suppose that the body interacts with the space and the encountered objects. In that case, the enhanced powers are not necessarily delivered from the three dimensions but rather the subject's actual movement towards the meeting objects.

As Massumi (1992) noted when summarising Deleuze's and Guattari's concerns about perception:

The thinking-perceiving body moves out to its outermost edge, where it meets another body and draws it into an interaction in the course of which it locks onto that body's effects (capacities for acting and being acted upon) and translates them into a form that is functional for it (qualities it can recall)' (p.36).

This interaction is succeeded by meeting another body and contains the action of movement. Merleau-Ponty indicated that our bodily experience of movement is not a particular case of knowledge; it provides us with a way of accessing the world and the object. Casey (1998, p. 229) explained that it is not the objective displacement of one's own body that is spatiogenetic, but the very experience of such movement. We are aware of our spatial existence through movement, which, according to Merleau-Ponty, is the primary condition of all living perceptions.

Terms such as space, movement, and distance could be examined as contributors to aesthetic experience for both 3D and 2D artworks. The gallery space is an environment where various display criteria such as length, texture, and colour of walls, choice of frames and pedestals, labelling, lighting, the scale of the space, and how the works are placed next to each other can cause a different effect on the visitor's experience (Newhouse, 2005, p. 214). Visitor routes, guidance, and restraints that protect the artworks and collections could prevent visitors from moving freely in the space and interacting with the artworks as they wish. The viewer's body interacts with the space and the exhibits while being a visitor and not just a viewer. The ability to come physically closer to "meet" any artwork could lead to a more meaningful experience.

THE SHOW MUST GO ON

With lockdown restrictions and the shift to virtual exhibitions, the audience lost their characteristic of being visitors to an exhibition and, therefore, their empirical physical interaction with the gallery space

and the exhibits. How can the absence of the viewer's body affect the aesthetic experience when viewing art virtually?

During the pandemic, UNESCO (2020) identified 800 individual actions by museums and galleries worldwide, 'with a large part of the actions promoting virtual museums building on investments made before the pandemic' (p. 5). King et al. (2021) noted that museums in the UK aimed to provide a digital experience comparable to the physical one visitors would have if it were not for the lockdown, and to make the digital exhibition experience 'more than just scrolling down a page' (p. 496).

For such an attempt, we should examine how the artworks are displayed digitally compared to physical exhibitions, because the final presentation of the artworks changes according to the virtual space and the virtual presentations. The most common presentations in the virtual exhibition are the 2D and 3D-360° tours. The differences between these two ways of presenting artworks or collections relate to the virtual space and how one navigates through this space.

2D exhibitions usually have a specific structure for providing clear images of the artworks and related information on one main page. It is common to see the artworks in a linear layout, alongside text context, to include all the artwork information. 2D artworks can be viewed clearly; most of the time, one can zoom in on the picture to look at the details. 2D exhibitions are easy to navigate, and viewers can individually click on sub-sections and select information according to their needs.

It is an excellent way to deliver an exhibition's full content, and 2D visual exhibitions are a great tool to cover the educational aspect of an exhibition (Kim, & Hong, two authors 2020; Widjono, 2020). The structure of this design, however, does not allow any comparison to a real visiting experience. Therefore, terms such as space, movement, and distance, which are examined as contributors to aesthetic experience, are being used very differently. In 2D visual exhibitions, the freedom to navigate is discussed in relation to how solutions of the 'hub and spoke' model of presentation could offer 'a more free-flowing approach, with visitors moving back and forth to access content from the main page of the exhibition' (King et al., 2021, p. 495).

On the other hand, 3D exhibitions aim to provide a closer-to-reality visiting experience. This virtual space as a stimulator of an actual space claims to be more interactive and interesting for designers and visitors (Pinandita, Shabiriani, & Nofrizaldi, 2021). In 3D virtual approaches, the space seems to be considered in terms of "reality", as the main goal is to stimulate the actual museum or gallery space and achieve the sensation of an actual visit.

Perhaps the most common approach to designing 3D exhibitions is the 360° tour, where viewers enter a virtual gallery. This presentation is a '3D visual representation of the physical exhibition space, which allows users to move through a 3D environment as if walking

through a physical exhibition and to interact with digital collections or information' (Kim, & Hong, 2020, p. 3). In this way, 2D artworks are displayed side by side as if they were hanging on the wall of a real gallery room. The artworks can be seen from various angles and perspectives as the web visitor moves around the digital space. The viewer may have the option to click on the works individually, have an isolated view of the artwork, and perhaps zoom in, as in 2D presentations.

In both cases, however, the viewer is in front of a screen; there is no physical interaction and almost no physical movement. Interestingly, the organisations chose to refer to the viewers' physical aspect in promoting their visual exhibitions during the pandemic. King et al. (2021) detected that most of the virtual exhibitions held in the UK during lockdowns used the terms 'visit', 'explore', or 'enter' to describe viewing the exhibition content. This choice of vocabulary offered the audience the sense that they were not just viewers but visitors: 'they are given a sense of movement and an active journey through the use of these terms as if they are going somewhere when they enter the exhibition pages. It has a sense of physicality, in that visitors are not simply sat at computers reading about the exhibition but have been transported to the museum' (p. 496).

VIEWER, VISITOR, OR USER?

Museums and galleries approached the physical aspect of visiting an exhibition in their online exhibitions during the pandemic crisis. How does the audience respond, however, to virtual visits and the different presentations of 2D and 3D-360° tours? From a comparative experiment (Kim & Hong, 2020) about how viewers experience 2D and 3D presentations, the same exhibition was designed in both ways. Participants were asked to navigate one of the two presentations to compare how their experiences could differ regarding the presentation and not the context.

The participants structured their visit and evaluated the virtual space differently in both cases. Navigating the exhibition was straightforward for 2D (a header and a left-hand menu bar) presentation visitors. They had all the information in front of them, and they could choose how to access it according to their needs and interests. This navigation led to spending most of their time 'directly acquiring information' (Kim, & Hong, 2020, p. 10). The 2D virtual space, however, did not offer them a vivid sensation of visiting an exhibition; according to their comments, 'the experience was similar to reading textbooks' and was not 'much different from viewing a general website or blog' (p. 11).

The virtual space was of great interest to 3D (360-degree panoramic images of the physical exhibition) presentation visitors. They spent most of their time exploring it, which, according to the study, 'allowed them to remotely experience an actual physical exhibition' (pp. 10-11). Navigation using the mouse and keyboard gave them the sensation

of walking through the physical space. The presentation also had a teleporting from place to place option, but participants found these irregular movements disorientating.

The authors mentioned that Bowman, Koller, and Hodges (1997) also reported that visitors became disoriented and lost spatial awareness when they instantly jumped to another part of the virtual exhibition. In another study (Widjono, 2020), participants also highlighted lacking a sense of analogy when navigating virtual exhibitions. According to their comments, they could not perceive and respond to the exhibition atmosphere, as this experience does not involve the five senses. They felt a 'lack of interaction and physical experience as the only interaction that occurs is a 'click' or tap on the screen' (pp. 97-98).

It seems inevitable to distinguish the physical aspect of the experience when examining a virtual one, and a comparison of these two aspects is present in participants' responses. And even though we might believe that the comparison would mainly be in favour of the physical exhibitions, it is interesting that the participants commented on the 'extra experience' a virtual exhibition could offer compared to a physical one. These comments focus on the exhibits, the participants' interaction with them, and how they would like to come closer to the exhibits in a way they cannot do in physical exhibitions.

They asked to move closer to the collection 'over the barriers or enlarging an image to observe details' (Kim, & Hong, 2020, p. 12). Participants wished to enter parts of the exhibition digitally, knowing from their physical experience that this was not allowed in many gallery spaces. They argued that "entering the space virtually will not damage the collection" and asked to be able to enlarge the collection, even though it is impossible in a physical exhibition' (p. 12).

Participants also found the computer screen to be a boundary between them and the artworks. They felt it limited the observation of artworks and that 'the artwork's details (shape, texture, colours, etc.) decreased' (Widjono, 2020, p.97). They thought of zooming in as equivalent to the ability they have in physical exhibitions to come closer to the artworks: 'Instead of opening up new windows for collection observation, they preferred zooming in directly for a closer look at the collection, as they would in a physical exhibition' (Kim & Hong, 2020, p.11).

The distance between the exhibits and the viewers is registered as a drawback in viewers' experience both in physical and virtual exhibitions. It is very interesting how the viewers' responses illustrate a practical aspect of the perception theories through movement. An audience, not necessarily an 'art expert', asks for a way to gain the most when viewing art by interacting with the exhibits in a physical and 'closer' relationship. The extra experience they ask for highlights their restrictions in a physical exhibition and even a physical world. The studies above revealed great material for further discussion about what a virtual exhibition should offer as an extra experience.

The idea of a virtual exhibition in a video game format to offer an additional experience has already been studied and applied (Pinandita, Shabiriani, & Nofrizaldi, 2021). Widjono (2020, pp. 95-96) mentioned one exhibition held in Indonesia during the lockdown, where the audience could download the exhibition game and install it on a PC. In this game, visitors entered an empty 3D space and had to complete the task of finding and placing works in the space provided. An advanced technological experience similar to that of video games was also described by participants in their 20s and 30s who asked for 'more active control and for updated technology' (Kim, & Hong, 2020, p.13).

This aspect of exhibiting raises, however, the question of the computer literacy one should have in order to visit a virtual exhibition, and how the audience's role as a visitor could change to that of a user or even a gamer. As a factor for designers to consider, the learnability of a virtual exhibition is connected to the audience's skills to operate all the features in a virtual exhibition (Widjono, 2020, p.94), as well as the equipment most people own. A very advanced and sophisticated programme could demand upgraded software and devices with special features. In such a case, there is a fear of virtual exhibitions losing their greatest advantage: that of everyone having access from everywhere to culture, art, and education.

CONCLUSION

During the Covid-19 crisis and lockdowns, museums and gallery spaces turned to virtual exhibitions to continue communicating with the audience. This shift offered extra data related to the audience's experience when visiting online exhibitions. The physical aspect is present when designing exhibitions and when the audience evaluates their experience. Concerning the aesthetic experience of 2D artworks in relation to movement and distance, coming closer to the artworks seems to contribute to the experience. In recent studies, participants noted the physical absence in virtual exhibitions, and their comments approached the idea of an extra experience that allowed them to view the exhibits even more closely than they could in real life. This approach can further contribute to how a virtual exhibition could approach the digital experience and offer additional visiting motivation to a greater audience.

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