

A background image of the New York City skyline, featuring the Empire State Building prominently on the right side. The sky is blue with some white clouds.

Museums and Digital Engagement: A New York Perspective

**Winston Churchill Memorial Trust Art
History Education Fellowship 2012**

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The public needs art, and it is the responsibility of a “self proclaimed artist” to realize the public needs art, and not to make bourgeois art for a few and ignore the masses... If the public is afraid of art, should we [artists] be afraid of what we have done to make the public afraid of art?

Keith Haring, journal entry, October 14, 1978

Thanks

Acknowledgments

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I would also like to thank all the people I met on my trip, from the people that took time out of their busy schedules to meet me, to the people I met at events, and at the two conferences I attended. Thank you! It was you that made my trip so successful.

Finally I would like to thank the Winston Churchill Memorial Trust for providing me with this opportunity. It has been a real pleasure working with the Trust in planning my trip, and the support they offered from application through to departure date has allowed me to develop a really comprehensive and challenging travelling fellowship.



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Introduction

There is nothing wrong with change, If it is in the right direction.

(Winston Churchill)

As a PhD student at the University of Ulster I have spent the last couple of years researching the impact of digital culture on museum practice. I am interested in how small museums are tackling the dilemma of responding to audiences who no longer want to solely read and listen, but instead influenced by an increasingly social, web 2.0 world, want to participate, challenge, engage and enter into a conversation during their visit to the museum.

Why New York?

The Churchill Fellowship provided the opportunity to understanding how large international museums are embracing digital culture and utilising new technologies to extend the relationship they have with visitors. My awareness of the importance of museums in New York, in relation to how they could influence museum practice in Northern Ireland, was sparked at the 2011 MuseumNext conference in Edinburgh. At this conference Nora Semel and Francesca Merlino, presented a paper on Youtube Play, the first biennale of creative video. Working in partnership with YouTube, Guggenheim launched an open call for submissions to their Biennale. Each submission was viewed by a Guggenheim curator and they hoped for about 6,000 submissions in reality they got closer to 30,000 submissions. The finalists were chosen, and an awards ceremony was held at Guggenheim New York and streamed live on the internet. You could say the project was successful because of the Guggenheim brand, and yes that is true, however in terms of format and resources there is no reason why even the smallest museum couldn't run a similarly engaging, participatory and innovative open competition. A smaller museum may get a couple of hundred applications, rather than the nearly 30,000 received by Guggenheim, but if we take success as a scalable concept then a couple of hundred applications is in relative terms a successful outcome for a small museum. Consider then that each video application will take from a day to a week to produce and create, and you have an incredible level of visitor engagement.

Aim of my trip

Wishing to build upon my interest in the scalability of technologies, projects and processes, I applied to the Winston Churchill Memorial Trust for a travel fellowship to visit New York. As world-leaders in the use of digital media, museums in New York would provide a better understanding of the core components required to develop and manage a successful digital project within a museum. This project was also a means to identify how museums in Northern Ireland could scale successful project models up or indeed down.

From the outset I was keen to inspire those that work in museums locally to engage with digital technologies and digital culture to help not only fulfil their organisations mission but also to put Northern Ireland on the international map. In essence I wanted to demonstrate that you don't need to be the size of, or have the resources of Tate, or MoMA to be an international leader in innovative digital practice. To steal the slogan of a local music festival, I wanted to learn how museums in Northern Ireland could be 'Small but Massive'.

My Trip

The original focus of the project was to consider four museums, The Met, MoMA, Guggenheim, Brooklyn Museum. However as the project developed the focus turned to surveying approaches to digital engagement across a broad spectrum of museums in New York, looking at research, development and innovation with a view to identifying key trends and transferable practices.

The first stage of the project was to get a sense of visitor experience, such as accessing museums WiFi, downloading an app, and attending a workshop or special event. The second stage was consulting with museum staff to gain a better insight into the making of my experience. Within this report I have identified four key trends emerging from those interviews and have selected case studies to highlight these trends.

In recognition of the time people took to meet me, and share their experience and knowledge, I have listed below all those with whom I had formal meetings. Other professionals I met, at the two conferences I attended, provided a global perspective to this research.



People I Met

Julia Kaganskiy
Rosanna Flouty
Seb Chan
Katie Shelly
Micah Walter
Francesca Merlino
Jennifer Yee
Sarah Anne Hughes
Molly MacFadden
Colleen Brogan
Allegra Burnette
Carrie McGee
Rebecca Taylor
Ben Vershbow

Kim Robledo-Diga
Man Bartlett
Sebastien Sanz de
Santamaria
Ryan Donahue

Don Undeen

Paco Link

Dina Helal

Gretchen Scott

#ArtsTech

Art 21

Cooper-Hewitt

Cooper-Hewitt

Cooper-Hewitt

Guggenheim

Guggenheim

Invest NI

MAD Museum

MoMA

MoMA

MoMA

MoMA PS1

New York Public

Library

Newark Museum

Residencies Unlimited

Residencies Unlimited

The Metropolitan
Museum

The Metropolitan
Museum

The Metropolitan
Museum

Whitney Museum of
American Art

Whitney Museum of
American Art

Museums evaluated as part of this project

American Museum of Natural History, Brooklyn Botanic Gardens, Brooklyn Museum, Cooper-Hewitt (exhibition on Governor's Island), Eyebeam Art + Technology Center, Guggenheim, Irish Historical Society, MAD Museum, MoMA, MoMA PS1, Morgan Library, Museum of Moving Image, Neue Gallery, New Museum, New York Hall of Science, New York Historical Society, New York Public Library, Newark Museum, Residencies Unlimited, Rubin Museum of Art, Tenement Museum, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, The Whitney Museum of American Art.

Conferences I attended

Communicating the Museum: 27th-29th June 2012, The Metropolitan Museum of Art
Games for Change: 18th- 20th June 2012, New York University



Key Trends

Many of the successful projects witnessed during this research visit were not 'digital' projects per se, but were instead digitally mediated solutions, solutions that were developed in response to real issues, faced by real museums, and real visitors. Some increased access to collections, others provided new ways to learn in gallery and online, and some projects enabled curators to disseminate research about their collections in new ways. The discussion that follows focuses on those examples which best portray the ground-breaking work being carried out by museums in New York. For the purpose of this report, these examples are discussed in relation to four key trends:

- 1) Embracing contemporary culture to develop new audiences**
- 2) The museum as a place for experimentation and innovation by visitors**
- 3) Peer learning, collaboration & networking**
- 4) The museum as an innovative, agile, mission lead institution**

What follows is an introduction to each of these trends and a number of short case studies which demonstrate how each trend is realised in practical terms.





ART OF AN
OTHER KIND

Abstractism, Abstraction and the "Supremacy" 1970-1980



Key Trend 01

Embracing contemporary culture to develop new audiences

Collections provide us with a unique link to the past, but to be interesting to the average visitor, they must also provide a link to the present. Visitors want to know how a museum and its collection are relevant to them today. While in New York I came across a number of interesting events, programmes and exhibitions that demonstrated the contemporary relevance of museums and their collections, for this report I have selected three case studies which demonstrate that this approach requires vision rather than infinite resources.

Without tradition, art is a flock of sheep without a shepherd. Without innovation, it is a corpse.

Winston Churchill

New York Public Library - What's On The Menu

‘The mission of The New York Public Library is to inspire lifelong learning, advance knowledge, and strengthen our communities’

New York Public Library has 87 branches; its main branch is the iconic Stephen A. Schwarzman Building on 5th Avenue. Like all libraries, NYPL is responding to and changing with the increasing demand for digital access and resources, whilst seeking to maintain and open up its physical collection.

NYPL's commitment to research & development is evident through the creation of New York Public Library Labs, which was set up in autumn 2011. The Labs main purpose is to work closely ‘with curators to develop projects that push the envelope of library practice, engaging new audiences through user collaboration and crowdsourcing, and accelerating the flow of cultural heritage content, data and code into the digital commons’.

A project that started before NYPL Labs was put together, and indeed was instrumental in making a case for the Lab is: What's on the Menu? A crowd sourcing project that asks members of the public to help transcribe the 10,000 digitised menus from the library's collection. By transcribing the menus which are digitised in image format, visitors are helping the library create valuable Metadata which will allow the library to create a fully searchable database. The project will allow researchers, chefs and enthusiasts to search recipes for specific ingredients, or to trace the development of everyday recipes. The library hoped that over a number of years the entire digitised menu collection would be transcribed. However it only took three months, such was the enthusiasm

from the public.

Ben Vershbow, NYPL Labs manager described What's on the Menu? as an ephemeral project. He explained that the website will come and go, but as volunteers lose interest in transcribing the menus, the Metadata they created will be left behind – and it is this data that will stand the test of time. ‘The user facing layer is temporal and you need to embrace that, the menus website will have served its purpose, but the data will remain’

What can we learn from this case study?

Ephemeral projects can have both an immediate impact and a lasting legacy. Engaging with contemporary trends in this case food blogging and photography is a good way to find audiences that will be interested in working with your museum and your collection in a relevant and engaging way that adds long term value to your collection.

Two questions that NYPL Labs asks when it is starting a new project are an excellent starting point for any digital engagement project: Does this matter internally? Does this matter externally?

As pointed out by Vershbow: ‘The challenge is to get curators thinking like technologists and technologists thinking like curators’

NYPL: <http://www.nypl.org/>

NYPL Labs: <http://www.nypl.org/collections/labs>

What's on The Menu? : <http://menus.nypl.org/>

Engaging new audiences through contemporary trends



MOMA PS1

PS1: Warm Up

MoMA PS1 is a contemporary art museum which is located in Long Island City, and can be reached by subway from Manhattan, Queens and Brooklyn. As PS1 is located beyond the cultural hubs of Manhattan and Brooklyn it has an event driven audience, people plan to visit rather than just stopping by because they are in the area.

Warm Up , PS1's successful event series has been running for 15 years and not only drives audiences but is also a key fundraiser for the museum. Warm Up is a dance party, which takes place each Saturday afternoon of July and August in the courtyard of PS1. Each event attracts about 5,000 people, with queues that stretch around the block; these events are described by many that attend as having a painfully cool vibe.

More than simply a big party in the museums courtyard, it is in fact a strategic programme that seeks to help MoMA PS1 fulfil its institutional mission, which is to be:

'A true artistic laboratory, MoMA PS1 aspires to maintain its diverse and innovative activities to continue to bring contemporary art to international audiences'.

Curated by a panel of music industry insiders and staff from PS1, in addition to the music programme, The Young Architects Programme provides an opportunity for a selected architect to develop an experimental structure which forms the back drop to Warm Up and receive international recognition for their work. This year's installation 'Wendy' designed by HWKN a New York architectural design firm, filters

the air around PS1 and produces fresh, pollutant free air.

What can we learn from this case study?

Events are a good way to attract a new audiences, and big crowds. If the event is targeted well, and has a large engaged following it can be a good way to generate income for a museum. PS1 isn't begging people to come and 'hang out' instead it is fighting of crowds, crowds that are willing to queue in 40 degrees heat to join. Indeed the popularity of PS1 during Warm Up compared to the much lower visitor numbers it receives on non event days, demonstrates the power of events to challenge people's perceptions of what a museum experience is and can be. Temporary events recontextualise the museum experience from one that is always available, to one that is time limited, this time constraint acts as a motivating factor for casual visitors, and is valuable way to drive visitors to attend multiple times.

Events drive social media buzz, the people that attend Warm Up are active social media users, and the amount of social media content generated during Warm Up is invaluable to PS1. Quite simply PS1 could not pay for the amount of good press they get on social media channels during and after Warm up.

Events bring people to Museums. During Warm Up, PS1's galleries are open, but it's often too busy to see the work. Whilst some visitors may find this annoying, most came for the music. If they stumble into the galleries and they are too busy, they are likely to come back on a non event day, and thus the event drives new audiences, and encourages repeat visits.

Event driven engagement

Event driven engagement

Warm Up is successful because it is a community driven event. This isn't an event dreamt up in a board room with a view to make PS1 cool, or to raise money through a fundraiser, this is an event that is strategically managed by PS1 but curated and delivered in partnership with a wide range of professionals and communities.

MoMA PS1: <http://momaps1.org/>

Warm Up: <http://www.momaps1.org/warmup>



Australian National Maritime Museum 'How To' Videos

'The Museum works to illustrate for everyone the importance of the sea, ships, time and the stars and their relationship with people'

The Australian National Maritime Museum, which first opened in 1991, is a relatively new museum. It has a collection of over 40,000 objects including full size Naval vessels and smaller maritime objects, and attracts 500,000 visitors per year. Whilst the museum is located in Sydney it strives to be 'a museum for all Australians' and has a range of touring exhibitions and extensive online resources.

Keen to develop their existing online resources the team at the National Maritime Museum spoke to Google about what type of videos received the most views on YouTube. Google told the museum that 'How To' videos were the fastest growing content stream. The museum researched the 'How To' market and decided that they wanted to become the international market leader in 'How To' videos relating to maritime history.

The museum has now produced seven 'How To' videos, which are both entertaining and informative focussing on subjects, such as preserving family photographs, cleaning your ship, or submarine, and sailmaking.

Views on each of the videos vary greatly, with the most popular receiving over 62,000 views, and the least popular receiving only 150 views (as of August 2012)

What can we learn from this case study?

Museums are trusted sources of information, but to be successful online museums need to interpret their collections and expertise in a way that relates to contemporary culture and digital trends, in this instance 'How To' videos. Prefacing videos with these two words made the museums content more appealing to a wider audience, and challenged viewer's perceptions about the museum, the work it does, and the relevance of that work to individual viewers. In order for people to find museum content through general web surfing museums need to offer their content on accessible and relevant platforms, such as YouTube.

The ANMM asked its receptionists what do people ask when they ring the museum offices. These answers helped shape the topics, the most common question was, 'what do I do if I have found a marine artefact?' so 'How to deal with a maritime artefact' was one of the first videos they produced. The videos provide an open channel for communication; comments and questions are responded to by the marketing department on behalf of relevant curators.

Online visitors are valuable in their own right. The museum hopes that these videos will convert non museum goers into virtual visitors, and then hopefully into museum visitors.

Australian National Maritime Museum: <http://www.anmm.gov.au/site/page.cfm>

'How To' YouTube Channel: <http://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLF71FB33D9431DAD6&feature=plcp>

Key Trend 2:

The museum as a place for experimentation and innovation by visitors

New Technologies are beginning to shift the way visitors are learning. A new model of collaborative learning is beginning to emerge. Whilst museum educators continue to teach visitors about the museum's collections, increasingly museum visitors are providing museums themselves with new ways to view their collection. Whilst still a relatively new phenomena this trend marks a radical shift away from educator workshops with a defined, pre planned outcome.

The farther back you can look, the farther forward you are likely to see.

Winston Churchill

MAKERSPACE

AT THE NEWARK MUSEUM



MADE POSSIBLE THROUGH
COGNIZANT'S MAKING THE FUTURE PROGRAM



Curriculum led engagement

Newark Museum: Makerspace

‘The Newark Museum operates, as it has since its founding, in the public trust as a museum of service, and a leader in connecting objects and ideas to the needs and wishes of its constituencies. We believe that our art and science collections have the power to educate, inspire and transform individuals of all ages, and the local, regional, national and international communities that we serve. In the words of founding Director John Cotton Dana, “A good museum attracts, entertains, arouses curiosity, leads to questioning—and thus promotes learning.”

Newark is an economical deprived area, and as a result the Newark Museum has a very different visitor base than museums in Manhattan. Newark Museum was founded by John Cotton Dana, the author of the 1920’s book ‘The New Museum’ and as such its education department is arguably more famous than the museum itself. Recognising that the museum ‘hadn’t done anything like its founder in a while’ and was in part ‘living off its reputation’, a new post, Director of Innovation and Learning was created. This role was taken up by Kim Robledo-Diga (formerly of Cooper-Hewitt) in September 2012.

During her first year Robledo-Diga has overseen the introduction of a Makerspace. The concept of Makerspaces, or Fab Labs come from Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and are seen as a way to open up fabrication and product development facilities to a broader range of people, with the view that this will facilitate innovation, drive small businesses and have a positive economic impact. A key feature of these spaces in recent years has been Makerbots 3D-printers, which are easy to use and at about

£1200 cheap to buy.

Newark museum was originally contacted by a technology firm Cognizant and asked if they could hire a space to run a programme for young people from a local school to come in and learn a range of technology related skills. The museum asked Cognizant if they would be willing to work with the museum rather than just hire a space. As a result the museum now has enough equipment to run a basic Makerspace. The Makerspace provides a foundation from which the museum can bring art and science closer together in a logical way.

During the first Maker Space programme Students came to the museum 2 days a week for fourteen weeks. During this time they took part in a programme which saw them develop their own computer game, design and using a 3D printer, print their own computer controller and develop functioning buttons using arduino. Newark museum is now keen to roll out the Maker Space to family visitors at weekend and more schools in the coming year. Robledo-Diga pointed out that the Makerspace fits perfectly with the museums mission;

In terms of developing the Makerspace as a way to increase community engagement, Newark museum are keen to engage with the Makerbot community in Newark, this includes a number of prominent artists, and the two local universities one of which has a Fab Lab, whilst the other is opening a Makerspace. Future iterations of Newark Museums Makerspace programme will place a greater emphasis on the museum collection; this will be an important step in

demonstrating how a Makerspace can help Newark museum fulfil its institutional mission.

The children that took part in the first programme got really engaged with it, and there was evidence that it helped raise their overall academic scores, as they had to maintain good grades to be allowed to attend. The challenge now is to encourage these children to return, to start to really use the museum and see it as a place for them, their friends and families.

What can we take from this Case Study?

Making provides an opportunity for those that don't normally visit museums to develop a deeper more engaged understanding of a museum and its collection. Rather than being intimidated by being told don't touch, don't shout, don't run – participants learnt about the museum and its collection by discussing, making and experimenting. By the end of the process both students and the museum had a new found respect and understanding for each other.

Working in partnership with private companies can be a good way for a museum to learn how to use new technologies and provides staff with professional development opportunities.

An agile approach allows museums to seize opportunities as they arise.

You don't need a lot of money, space or physical resources to create a Makerspace. Newark Museum had between £10,000- £15,000 to spend on equipment, this provided enough equipment to create a functioning maker space (including 3D printers, computers and materials). The Makerspace

is itself an unremarkable, rather small classroom proving that with big ideas and some equipment any corner of a museum can host something really extraordinary.

The biggest overhead after the initial outlay for any such programme is the instructor, you don't go to school to learn how to run a Makerspace, so an emphasis needs to be placed on finding external facilitators. In recognition of a skills shortage Cognizant are developing 'Making the Future', a strategic training programme that provides opportunities for students to progress to facilitators. This is a new approach but one that could potentially be adopted and tailored internationally.

Newark Museum: <http://www.newarkmuseum.org/>

Newark Museum Makerspace (newspaper article): http://www.nj.com/news/index.ssf/2012/05/art_and_science_meet_in_newark.html



Curriculum led engagement

Artist led engagement

Met 3D Hackathon

‘The mission of The Metropolitan Museum of Art is to collect, preserve, study, exhibit, and stimulate appreciation for and advance knowledge of works of art that collectively represent the broadest spectrum of human achievement at the highest level of quality, all in the service of the public and in accordance with the highest professional standards. ’

The Metropolitan Museum of Art held a two day Hackathon in partnership with MakerBot in June 2012. MakerBot are a Brooklyn based company that revolutionised 3D printing by creating an affordable model, which is powered by open source technology.

As well as developing the technology MakerBot has a strong community base of artists and entrepreneurs who use 3D technology in their work. The community places objects and 3D Caches of objects they make on a website called thingiverse, this allows others to print the same object, or to make amendments to the design.

The Met provided access to their collection, curators and a workspace for the event. As with any encyclopaedic museum, The Met has items which are politically and culturally sensitive, so artists were steered towards a select number of collections, and the curators of these collections provided tours, and one to one information at the event. Makerbot provided 3D printers, catering and selected 25 artists and programmers to take part.

Some of the participating artists copied objects from the Met’s collection and printed small replicas. A handful of artists played, hacked and mashed up the

collection to create their own work by reappropriating elements of collection objects. Arguably the most successful piece produced during the Hackathon was a piece inspired by a ‘standing female Deity, probably Durga’ which was on display in the Asian art gallery. The success of this piece is judged by the interesting approach the artist took, on the one hand she conserved and restored a damaged object through a replica 3D object, and on the other changed the function of the replica, from to statue to puppet.

The sculpture was missing its arms, so two of the participating artists worked together to create a 3D Model puppet with moving arms. On the Thingaverse website the artists said ‘We felt so bad for the “Standing Female Deity, possibly Durga” without her arms- now she is definitely Durga!’

The invite only Hackathon provided the Met with the opportunity to explore how this technology could be used to engage audiences and assist curators who work with unique and delicate objects. The insight they gained in these two days means that they can now move conversations about this technology forward by using museum specific examples.

What can we take from this Case Study?

Working in partnership has speed up the research and development process, but it has also provided an external perspective on the potential for visitor initiated appropriation.

The event provides a strong foundation for future work, and helped the Media Lab get curators really

involved and interested in their work.

The Hackathon generated significant media interest (with top technology titles covering it)

The Hackathon changed what a tight knit community (of MakerBot artists and enthusiasts) thought of the Met. Since the hackathon some of the participating artists have visited other museums, taken photos in gallery, and went home to create a 3D cache and printed object. This self initiated follow up demonstrates how the experience has changed how these artists view museums and their collections.

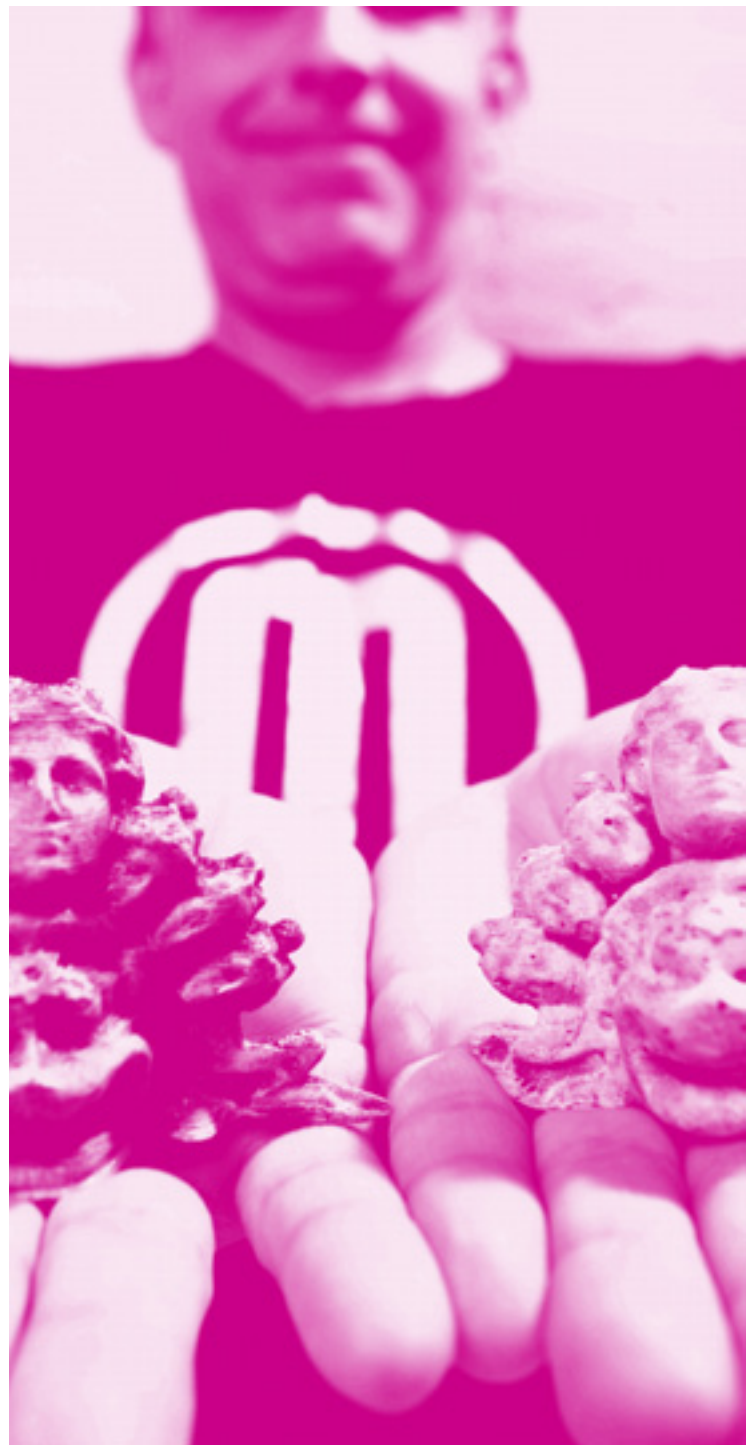
By working with artists and curators the Met was able to provide artists with an insight into curatorial practices, so if they return to create their own 3D models they understand why the museum has certain rules, and will have a greater respect for the museum institution and its objects.

The Met: <http://www.metmuseum.org/>

3D Hackathon (Met Blog post): <http://www.metmuseum.org/about-the-museum/now-at-the-met/features/2012/hackathon>

MakerBot: <http://www.makerbot.com/>

MakerBot 3D Hackathon: <http://www.makerbot.com/blog/2012/07/19/exciting-words-from-the-met-about-3d-hackathon/>



Artist led engagement

Key Trend 3: Skill sharing and reflective practice

Agile thinking and practices are somewhat at odds with museum culture, museums have reputation for being slow, often bureaucratic institutions. While I was in New York I was excited to see a range of digital education, marketing, collections and web teams tackle this legacy of bureaucracy by forming their own informal professional skill sharing networks. These new networks support museum technologists as they seek to create a new more agile and reflective environment that is conducive to and facilitates the development of emerging practice. These networks can be divided into three categories, informal events, conferences and social networks.

Courage is what it takes to stand up and speak; courage is also what it takes to sit down and listen.

Winston Churchill

#ARTSTECH

Arts Tech, emerged out of Meetup a social network that allows like minded people to arrange events for people with mutual interests. The Meetup which takes place monthly has been sponsored by a range of influential backers including Tumblr, AOL and The New York Times. Now based at Eyebeam Art + Technology centre, Arts Tech events take a different theme each month and draw speakers from within its own community. This is a not for profit event, with people attending for free, venues donating space and speakers, speaking for free. Sponsorship covers refreshments. What started out as a small community of like minded people has turned into a powerful group of creative, prominent arts and cultural influencers that work at a range of top museums and tech companies.

What is really interesting about Arts Tech is that whilst it attracts a number of key players, anyone can attend, the event democratises the conversation about art and innovation and provides a way into conversations that normally happened behind the closed doors of the 5th Avenue museums.

What can we take from this case study?

Facilitating networking events with other museums, or relevant commercial companies such as digital companies can be a cost effective way to develop skills and ideas.

Informal, social events can be a great way to learn, however as these events happen after traditional working hours only those who have more than a purely 9-5 interest would find such events relevant

or indeed interesting to attend. A number of similar events have taken place in Northern Ireland, from open coffee mornings, to digital meet ups, the majority of people that attend such events in Northern Ireland are freelancers who value the networking opportunity. Arguably the different funding models in the United States and Northern Ireland creates a different working culture, and as such attending networking events after hours is more common in the United States than it is in Northern Ireland. The philanthropic, private investment model of funding drives staff to attend more evening functions, and social networking events than is common in Northern Ireland. Tailoring informal meet ups to reflect the working culture of the museum sector in Northern Ireland such as holding events at lunchtimes, or on Friday afternoons could increase participation in these type of events.

Arts Tech: <http://www.artstechmeetup.com/>

Conferences

While I was in New York I attended two conferences, Games for Change and Communicating the Museum. Both of these conferences provided an opportunity to meet a wide range of people working in museums and digital learning.

Games for Change

Games for Change was attended by a mix of teachers and game design companies; however museum staff from MoMA and Tate were also in attendance. This conference provided the opportunity to explore digital learning in a broader context, and provided me with the opportunity to understand where the approach to digital learning taken by museums sits within the broader digital learning landscape. This is an annual conference that takes place in New York.

Communicating the Museum

Communicating the Museum attracted Senior Managers, marketing and PR staff along with a number of high end corporate sponsors. Attending this conference provided me with a valuable insight into the business of the global museum, and the impact of the global economy on museum practice now and the potential impact it will have in the next five years. I attended these conferences because they coincided with my time in New York, I probably wouldn't have travelled to attend either one as they are slightly outside my research area. However by attending both of these conferences I gained a better understanding of the internal and external pressures on museums something that will be valuable when developing future projects. This is an annual conference that takes place in a different city each year, traditionally the conference is held in Europe,

this was the first time it has been held in America.

Other conferences of interest

Two conferences that I did not have the opportunity to attend while I was in America are Museums and the Web, and The Museum Computer Network conferences. Both of these conferences were cited as being invaluable by many of the people I met during my fellowship

What can we learn from these case studies?

Attending relevant conferences is an essential way for those working with emerging technologies to keep up to date with developments in both museum practice and appropriate technologies.

Conferences provide valuable professional development opportunities, presenting papers and speaking to international colleagues provides opportunities to reflect upon how emerging practice and technologies will impact their work in the coming year.

Games for Change: <http://www.gamesforchange.org/>

Communicating the Museum: http://agendacom.com/en/communicating_the_museum/ctm/

Museums on the Web: <http://www.archimuse.com/conferences/mw.html>

Museum Computer Network: <http://www.mcn.edu/>

Social Networks

Social networks provide a useful everyday professional platform from which to develop conversations started in person at informal events and conferences. They also provide a useful platform from which to survey existing practice. Indeed many of the people I met while I was in New York were people I had been following on twitter for a number of years, or were people that I was introduced to on twitter by colleagues both in the UK and the US. (In this instance I am referring to social networks as a platform for professional networking, rather than as a means to engage with visitors)

Twitter

Many of the people I met during my time in New York regularly use Twitter to keep up to date with new technologies, platforms and museum practice. Twitter is also used to ask fellow museum professionals for help and advice on current projects, often a question on Twitter will spark a link to an answer within a few minutes. This open approach not only facilitates the creation of a community of practice, but also makes museums appear more human and responsive.

Blogging

Many of the people I met during my time in New York blog both professionally and in a personal capacity. These blogs provide a greater insight into the work of museum departments, and offers a way for fellow professionals to keep track of interesting projects as they develop. Sharing what works and what doesn't is a useful way for other museums to gauge how to approach a similar project in the future. Blogs are

often written in an open, honest and helpful manner. We are all learning together and the museums that are truly succeeding in terms of digital engagement are those that share their successes alongside their failures. This open approach facilitates interesting collaborations and conversations, and welcomes the input of interested 'outsiders' be they academics, professionals, or keen visitors. Blogs help museums appear relevant and engaged, and help to demystify the hidden workings of museums from collections care, to website development.

What can we learn from these case studies?

Social networks provide a valuable platform for professional development and networking, they also provide a cost effective way for staff to keep up to date with international best practice.

Social networks provide a useful sounding board when developing new projects, and are a quick and efficient channel for seeking answers to unexpected problems.

Like traditional professional networks, social networks are only valuable if the person leading them is both well connected and respected. Attending informal events and conferences is a good way to begin to develop a strong and connected social network. Sharing projects and examples of best practices and lessons learnt on blogs is another way to develop a strong and engaged professional social network.

Using Social Networking

Key Trend 4:

The museum as an innovative, agile, mission lead institution

It was clear that museums in New York are invested in the future. The old argument 'if we put everything online people won't visit' has been blown out of the water and many museums in New York now recognise that to succeed now and in the future they must develop a culture of research and development that responds to, challenges and works with contemporary culture and technological advancements.

It was interesting to see how museums in New York are beginning to recognise that throwing money at singular digital projects is not enough. Instead it was evident that a number of key international museums have begun to see digital technologies and research and development as a key strategic priority and as such are creating departments staffed with people from a range of backgrounds and skill sets to work with the museum as a whole. This strategic approach of creating departments tasked with R&D, emerging technologies, and creating sustainable practices, demonstrates an interesting human resource approach to joined up thinking that will allow museums to use their historical and contemporary collections in a way that is relevant and engaging to visitors both today and tomorrow.

If we set up a quarrel between past and present, we will find that we have lost the future.

Winston Churchill

Labs

The Met, Cooper-Hewitt and New York Public Library all have digital media Labs. Each has a different remit but all are only a year or so old. Some are made up of newly recruited staff and others are new departments that have a mix of staff that already worked in that museum alongside new staff.

The Met's New Media Lab

The Met's Media Lab is about a year old, and is tasked with all the programming that isn't the website. They split their resources and time between data management and developing new approaches to in gallery experience. The Lab was responsible for the 3D Hackathon, and is currently playing with Kinect technology to see what potential it has for use in gallery. Over the coming year they are looking to develop more work with public programmes and education.

New York Public Library Lab's

NYPL was started in Autumn 2011, and was developed as a response to a number of successful projects including What's on the Menu? (a project that is featured in this report). The Lab uses new technologies to make the library's collection more accessible and relevant, and works with curators and library visitors to create new ways to interpret the library's collection. The library has successfully utilised Crowdsourcing in a number of projects and is seeking to develop collection Metadata as a means to lay the foundation for future digital projects. In addition to calling on visitors to help the lab with basic transcription, increasingly the lab is also working with

visitors providing them with new more specialist skills as a means to develop the skills of those interested in participating in current and future crowd sourcing projects.

An extensive list of the Labs projects can be found at: <http://www.nypl.org/collections/labs>

Cooper-Hewitt Labs

Slightly different than New York Public Library Labs, and The Met's New Media Lab in that it is not a museum department, Cooper Hewitt Labs is the blog name for the Cooper Hewitt's Digital and Emerging Media Department. The blog provides a behind the scenes look at the work of the Digital and Emerging Media Department and features interviews with staff, and analysis on new projects and developments. Seb Chan director of the Digital and Emerging Media department explained that 'Lab is just a term that lets you publish unfinished work'. This is a really useful way to think about developing and presenting new practices, museums are often concerned with presenting visitors with the finished product, but by repositioning how we present emerging practices then even the most conservative museums can begin to communicate what they are doing and why, before delivering the finished product be that on the exhibition floor or museum website.

Cooper-Hewitt Labs: <http://labs.cooperhewitt.org/>

What can we learn from these case studies?

What might be surprising when you look at the high levels of output from these three departments is

Research, development and innovation hubs within museums

Research, development and innovation hubs within museums

that they are quite small, ranging from 3 to about 8 people. (The departments are growing and two of the three were recruiting staff while I was in New York). What is great about all of these labs is that they are not only researching and developing in house they are also sharing their findings. So whilst many small museums may not have the funding to set up a new department, following the work of these departments on their blogs, twitter and at conferences the museum community as a whole can learn what works and adapt these successful models. These successful models might be new approaches to responsive web design, or Kinect Hacking to create interesting in gallery experiences.

Whilst all of these 'labs' might be different in size, scale and format the key trend that unites them is that each of the museums labs highlighted in this report are strategically driven, their aim is to further their individual museums mission. They are not doing shiny research because its new, or because a pot of money have become available, their entire departments have been created because senior management have recognised that strategically driven engagement with digital technologies is key to the future success of their museum. The work they produce is not an add on, it is core business.



Google 20 Percent Time

Whilst smaller museums may have less money, people and resources, a strategic recognition of the value of research and development and a culture that embraces innovation can be just as valuable as money and resources. Google provides staff with 20 percent time, in this time they are free to work on projects outside of their job description. This provides staff with time to research, develop, play and experiment. For the most part the projects stay in house but many of Google's well known products from Gmail to Google Sky (street map of the sky) started out as 20 percent time projects. Google art project which features many of the world's leading museums was also speed up with the help of generous Google employers who donated their 20 percent time to the project.

One day a week may seem like a lot of time to give over to research and development for many senior managers, but if coordinated well this could provide staff with opportunities to learn new skills, collaborate with other departments, open up new conversations with external partners. The outcome of one 20 percent day for one member staff could range from a collection specific blog, a new interactive mobile tour, a new approach to social media management, or perhaps even a ground breaking new education programme.

In short R&D time can produce valuable new ways of working, collaborations and innovative projects. It is after all this type of work that funders want to fund, so what at first might seem like a resource heavy idea, 20 percent time has the potential to increase productivity, collaboration, innovation and funding

opportunities. (Guibert Englebienne Founder & CTO, Globant and James Davis , Google Art Project, USA both spoke about 20 percent time and innovation at the Communicating the Museum Conference)

What can we take from these case studies?

Research, development and innovation should be mission lead. If 20 percent time or a similar model was to be successful in a museum, then staff should be loosely tasked with creating new ways to address the museums mission.

20 percent time can be piloted and tailored by museums of any size. Some small companies have adapted 20 percent time and hold organisation wide play days, during which time they turn off email and phones, and crack on with little projects they don't normally, get time to develop.

20 percent isn't right for every organisation, but the rationale behind 20 percent time, which is to recognise, value and facilitate research and development to create exciting and relevant new products could be adapted and adopted by any museum.

Research, development and innovation when you have no money but great people

Conclusion

The examples discussed in this report demonstrate that museums can be exciting, engaging, challenging, busy & loud, quiet & contemplative places. Contemporary culture can be engaged with in a way that respects the curatorial values of a museum, whilst helping it further its mission and develop its audience. Digital engagement is not about taking over gallery spaces so that you can't see the painting because you have to fight through rows of interactive touch screens, nor should be about creating digital content that leads to visitors standing in front of a work of art staring at their phone.

Digital engagement should be about adding a layer of context, about providing visitors with the opportunity to choose how they want to engage with a museum, be that for entertainment or education. Digital technology provides museums with the opportunity to develop and create an engaged visitor base, a visitor base that acknowledges that their local museum is a unique, valuable and relevant cultural institutions.

This report refers to a small portion of the projects evaluated, and people consulted; I hope that it, alongside the blog posts which follow in the appendix, will encourage experimentation, and the desire to play, test, learn, share, research and develop new ways to engage visitors. Northern Ireland has both the skills and resources required to facilitate creative, innovative, mission lead museum practice. The only thing required to make such work possible is joined up thinking, a willingness to collaborate with new partners, and a culture that values research and development.



Appendix 1

Blog posts

While I was in New York I wrote a number of blog posts which I have included in this report. To view these posts with videos and links visit oonaghmurphy.com

Brooklyn Museum June 8, 2012

Brooklyn museum has developed a reputation as a world leader in digital engagement and community outreach. I remember hearing Shelley Bernstein speak at MuseumNext last year and thinking wow, that's my kind of museum. Yesterday I got to visit Brooklyn Museum for the first time, I was delighted not only did Brooklyn Museum live up to my expectations – it far exceeded them.

I was tweeting while in the museum, and got lots of tweets asking for more information about my visit so as promised here are a couple of reasons why I loved Brooklyn Museum:

1: Brooklyn Museum is curatorially ambitious

The first exhibition that I walked into at Brooklyn Museum was 'Connecting Cultures' an exhibition that:

"is organized around three main themes: "Connecting Places," "Connecting People," and "Connecting Things." In viewing the juxtaposition of thematically linked works, visitors are invited to consider the importance of place, of self-representation in art, and of the role that objects play in supporting personal and cultural identity"

In this exhibition visitors are encouraged to put the museum collection into a context which they can relate to. Interpretation plaques make reference to contemporary culture from Bjork, to celebrity body image.

When visitors walk in the door, they see a collection that reflects them, whoever they maybe.

The entrance has a couple of nice Rodin sculptures, alongside a contemporary painting by Kehinde Wiley 'Napoleon Leading the Army over The Alps'. A piece which challenges traditionally white context of portrait painting. In a plaque beside the piece he says

'Painting is about the world we live in. Black men live in this world. My choice is to include them. This is my way of saying yes to us.'

Context and relevance are 2 things that make a museum collection come alive – for everyone ... not just the initiated, educated few! Brooklyn museums curatorial approach creates a strong context and allows visitors to discover the individual relevance of the museum's collection for themselves.

2: Brooklyn Museum uses technology in gallery to add a valuable layer to visitor experience.

You won't find lots of shiny interactive touch screens

at Brooklyn. What you will find however are subtle interactive displays using iPads. I hate when you walk into a museum and you can barely see the collection through all of the massive touch screens, but at the Brooklyn museum in gallery technology has a really pervasive feel to it.

From comment booths, to the iPad display that lets you flick through Keith Haring's journal, each interactive piece added a layer to visitor experience. The museum also uses QR codes. When a visitor first arrives they get given a ticket with a large QR code on it, this means that they can ask questions about what it is before they even enter their first gallery. In gallery visitors can find information about QR codes and a leaflet on 'Brooklyn Museum Mobile' was available throughout the museum.

Explaining what a QR code is, and getting them to work (lighting and WiFi access) are two common issues. I scanned lots of QR codes at Brooklyn, effortless and seamless are two words that come to mind.

In terms of content, some QR codes acted as wiki links, others provided visitors with information about artists or installation photographs. Each QR I scanned provided a really interesting behind the scenes look at the collection or current exhibition.

Just like iPads you won't find QR codes everywhere at the Brooklyn Museum, instead they are on a few carefully selected objects. All too often we use technology for technologies sake, I really felt that a Brooklyn technology was carefully considered and added a valuable layer to visitor experience. (This a very short overview, I'll write more about this specific point in a future blog post)

3: Brooklyn Museum is open, accountable & explains curatorial processes

In the connecting cultures exhibition, there is a nice flip board which documents the museum's history. In the 'playing house' an information leaflet tells visitors that the museum has invited artists to create an 'activation'. The leaflet explains that this is a new approach, and discusses why they have asked artists to activate a response to the museum's collection and the curatorial thinking behind the new approach. In some of the galleries 'alternative voices are represented', these are on plaques placed beside the curators' interpretation panel.

In most museums the majority of exhibits are hidden away in storage. The Brooklyn Museum has an open storage area which allows visitors to come into storage and learn more about museum collections, conservation and collection policies.

Even when asking visitors not to touch the paintings, rather than saying don't do it! Brooklyn Museum explains why:

'Please do not touch the artworks. Oils and salts on your hands can damage metal, marble and wood. Many of the artworks in this gallery are not behind glass, and even the gentlest touch can be damaging. Security staff will remind visitors not to touch the art'.

4: Brooklyn Museum is a community hub

Ok so admittedly I only spent one day at the Museum but on the day I visited I saw a really diverse visitor demographic. Young people, old people, white people, black people, hispanic people. It really felt like the visitors I saw in the gallery reflected the community I saw on the streets of Brooklyn.

The cafe was affordable, and was filled with lots of friends catching up (this is one of the first museum cafes I have actually eaten in, the Manhattan museum cafes are all aimed at people who aren't struggling PhD students!)

There was free wifi in the public promenade at the front of the museum, which was filled with people playing on their i-pads, or skating with friends.

Price is an issue. I'm not used to paying into museums, and the entrance fee is no doubt a barrier but the museums Target First Saturday provides a monthly opportunity for visitors to come in for free.

The Living Room Candidate

June 8, 2012

I visited the Museum of The Moving Image earlier today. I was really impressed by one of their online resources, an online archive of presidential campaign videos from 1952-2008. What struck me about this archive was that it provided a fascinating, at times captivating insight into social, political and media history.

I was particularly interested in looking at the first web campaign videos. You can see a real difference between Obama's videos which demonstrate a real insight into digital culture and McCain's videos which feel like a home video made by your dad, trying to be cool but not quite getting it!

Social Media As Creative Practice

June 14, 2012

Who are RU?

Residency Unlimited is an organisation that creates tailored individual artist residencies. Recognising that residencies can be quite insular experiences, RU creates residencies which see artists partnered with arts organisations throughout New York.

What are they doing that's so interesting?

Recently they launched a new residency, the Social Media Artist in Residence (S+M for short). Earlier this week I went along to meet RU Director Sebastian Sanz de Santamaria and the first S+M artist Man Bartlett.

Other organisations have invited artists, and celebrities to take over their official twitter channel to mark a special occasion or as a temporary intervention. The S+M artist in residence marks a shift towards recognising social media as both a creative platform and artistic medium, rather than solely a novelty platform for temporary intervention. Why was the residency developed?

I asked Sebastian about the residency, and why they decided they wanted to develop a residency that recognized S+M as a platform and medium. I was surprised by his response.

Sebastian explained that as an arts organisation RU, like most arts organisations felt they needed to use social media channels. They are a small organisation with only a handful of staff, so they didn't have much time to post interesting content on their Facebook and Twitter feeds.

They tried to get interns to manage social media channels but they just didn't get it. The Interns posted links to mainstream arts sources, this curated content did not align with RU, or the artists that they

represent.

For a number of years RU have posted artist residency opportunities from around the world on their website. They have just over 17,000 Facebook fans and about 1,000 Twitter followers. When RU posts a residency opportunity on their website it automatically posts to their Facebook and Twitter feeds.

As they had a large online following due to their residencies listings service, and were struggling with time to create and curate content on their social media channels they took a step back and thought: People like our social media channels for the listings they provide, so rather than add to our workload and feel the need to do cool stuff on Twitter and Facebook because everybody else is, what else could we do? So the S+M residency was born, part artist opportunity, part strategic response to RU's dilemma of how to effectively use social media.

Who is the first artist in Residence?

Man Bartlett had been using Social Media for a couple of years before starting the residency, and was instrumental in the development of the residency. In January 2010 a few months after joining Twitter he took over Brooklyn Museums Twitter art feed a very early example of artists and museums collaborating to use social media channels.

As RU creates individual, tailored residencies the first S+M residency feels like a really exciting dialogue, with both RU and Man testing new ways of working, pushing boundaries, experimenting and playing. Man has taken over RU's Facebook and Twitter, and has started a Tumblr blog, on these channels he is playfully responding to digital culture and social media practice in unusual, subtle and intriguing ways.

Will Man have an exhibition at the end? What form will the exhibition take? How long will the residency last? are all questions that have yet to be answered but that is what makes this residency really interesting.

What can we learn from this?

I have no doubt that in a few months or perhaps even weeks, such is the pace of digital practice that more organisations will begin exploring how they can engage artists in new ways through social media. The RU example is particularly interesting because it has been developed in response to a genuine institutional /organisational problem. What should we do with our social media channels? Rather than doing what everyone else is doing, RU took a step back and looked at the opportunities this problem offered.

Is this the first dedicated Social Media Artist Residency?

I haven't come across any others, but if you know of any @ me on twitter @OonaghTweets , or leave a comment here.

Old Phones And New Thinking June 25, 2012

Half the Sky is a social change movement that seeks to challenge gender inequality in developing countries.

Half the Sky started out as a book, but has now grown into a huge transmedia project, and documentary series to be shown on PBS in the Autumn. With celebrity advocates including George Clooney and Meg Ryan, and a prime time TV slot you would expect this project to be doing something quirky

and new.... and yes they are (facebook games that prompt giving etc)

But the most interesting thing for me is that the team are doing something innovative and exciting using old technologies: very basic mobile phones.

The games are aimed at teaching children in developing countries basic, but ultimately life saving health advice. The challenge for developers was to build games that could be played on really old phones.

Presenting at Games for Change this week the team suggested that the mobile phone has been a much bigger deal than computers or land lines ever were in developing countries. Recognising the educational potential of games the team have developed 3 games that can be played on a wide range of mobile phones.

Each of the games has a different educational purpose:

Worm attack : teaches about intestinal worms- a tower defence game

9 minutes: teaches about healthy choices for women when they are pregnant – the aim is to give birth to a healthy baby in 9 minutes

family choices: is a decision based comic book story, and allows players to see how decisions they make shape their life chances.

How many people will these games reach? How many lives will these games change? are two questions that have yet to be answered ...

My key take away from this project is that the Half the Sky team didn't complained about the lack of wifi in New Delhi, or the poor reception in Africa – instead they embraced the economic context of their brief and developed games that would work on the devices available to their target audience. These games have the potential to change lives, and life chances through the educational content they will deliver.

So in short, and very much a note to self.

Stop complaining about what you don't have, and start asking what can you do with what you do have?

**Mad Museum: A Compelling Way To Look At Digitised Collections In Gallery
July 5, 2012**

As part of the Communicating the Museum conference I went on a tour of MAD museum (Museum of Art and Design). It's a really interesting, contemporary building right beside central park. One of the museums current exhibitions is 'Swept Away' which looks at dust, ashes and dirt in contemporary art and design – it's always nice to see something new, and around every corner of this exhibition I was intrigued and curious, even compelled to look closer to examine and question the process of making.

Tangible artifacts have that appeal, they make you want to look closer, to reach out and touch them, the fact that you can't perhaps even makes them more appealing. The challenge we have all been struggling with is how can we make our online collections have a similar appeal, not to replace the tangible object, but instead create a way for visitors to use online collections to enhance their in gallery experience.

Creating an in gallery interactive that makes an online collection both engaging & compelling

MAD Museum had one of the most captivating in gallery collections interactives I have seen in a long time. A large screen beside the lift (elevator for you Americans) looked like it was displaying lots of shiny jewels from a distance, but when you got up close it was actually lots and lots of tiny images of the museums collection.

No text, just objects – this was refreshing, it was nice just to click on things that looked nice. When you did the screen zoomed in, and collection information was displayed. The visual layout, and swipe and zoom features created a captivating experience. I know any time I watch CSI or any number of crime dramas I'm always impressed by the swishing and zooming of their large scale interactive tables and MAD Museum has certainly incorporated the joy of swishing, zooming, skim reading and visual search into this interactive.

(You could also search by a number of text sub categories such as material, or type of object -but swiping through the collection proved much more appealing to me).

It's important to remember that not everyone that visits a museums is an academic, and sometimes people, normal people, not museum people just want to look at shiny things because they look nice. Flicking through a collection like you do a fashion magazine is a refreshing change from text heavy collection searches, or the clunky click through pages of in gallery interactives.

I think MAD museum may actually win the award for the longest time I've ever spent looking at a museums

online collection whilst standing in the gallery, and considering I was standing at the lift about to leave that is pretty impressive.

In conclusion more swishing and zooming, and flicking and visual search please ... if I really wanted to do an academic collection search let's be honest I'd probably do it from the comfort of more own home on website not while I'm standing in a gallery!

Digital painting, what's possible?

June 11, 2012

MoMA's Material lab is an interactive space for visitors young (and old) to make, play, create and respond to MoMA's collection.

In the lab children can learn about materials and textures through looking, touching, reading and making. Alongside a range of physical materials the lab has a number of computers with a new piece of software by Microsoft that allows users to use a real paint brush as a stylus to select colours, paint and draw on the screen.

I really liked the mix of traditional, tangible arts and crafts materials and the digital painting option in the lab. The digital painting software has real potential to be developed for educational use in gallery, were normal painting is for obvious reasons not permitted. The much talked about David Hockney Exhibition at Royal Academy in early 2012 really raised the profile of digital painting. Whilst MoMA has specially created Microsoft software, the painting app used by David Hockney costs a mere £5.49 and is a perhaps a more accessible and immediate tool for smaller museum institutions to experiment with during school visits and in adult workshops.

Translating the lab into an app

The painting app used by Hockney is essentially just a digital canvas and some paints, it doesn't provide inspiration or education activities. Last week MoMA released Art Lab an iPad app that blends the traditional arts and crafts activities of collage, cutting and painting into a series of artist inspired activities. Whilst primarily aimed at children the app has a number of features that make it appealing to all ages. David Gauntlett talks about 'the social nature of creativity' , and the Art Lab seems to both acknowledge and respond to our desire to be creative, in a socially rewarding and meaningful way. The app embeds a number of social elements including group drawings. For children, making and creating is a dialogue between materials and adults, they learn by observing, and playing. Unlike some apps aimed at small children, the Art Lab app contains information for parents that they can use to form discussion while using the app, such as art historical context, and artist biographies.

Grown up users can tweet or email an image of the work that they create to friends and, or to MoMA. The app also lets users save any work they create to use as the home or lock screen on their iPad. Adult colouring in and doodle books have over the last couple of years become increasingly popular, and the Art Lab app fills a nice gap in the iPad market; allowing adults to doodle, paint make and create in response to MoMA's collection.

Digital painting: What's next?

Children with scissors, glue and crayons never mix well with expensive and delicate pieces of art. On the other hand children with ipads, painting on specially created apps could lead to some really exciting, and

engaged responses to museum collections. Digital painting is fast becoming both an accessible and respected medium, it will be exciting to see how MoMA and other museums, both big and small adopt and develop this technology as a means to engage audiences in art history education, and creative practice.

New York public library labs July 6, 2012

One of the things I'm really interested in is the idea of innovation and R&D labs within cultural institutions. Are they a good idea? Do they ring fence creativity? Are they good test beds? Can they influence wider institutional culture?

I've met with quite a few people running and working in a digital labs while I've been in New York. I thought I should share some insights from at least one of these meetings on my blog. So for this post I've picked my meeting with Ben Vershbow, manager of NYPL Labs.

New York Public Library Labs is a small team of 5 people. The idea for the labs came about in April 2011, and the Labs team was officially created in Fall 2011. They might be a small, and relatively new team but you just need to look at the list of projects on their website to see the huge impact they have already made (I'll talk more about impact in a minute).

A project that started before the Lab was put together, and indeed was instrumental in making a case for the Lab is 'What's on the Menu?'. A crowd sourcing project that asks members of the public to help transcribe the 10,000 digitised menus from the Libraries collection. The library hoped that over a

number of years the entire digital menu collection would be transcribed. It only took 3 months! such was the enthusiasm from the public.

Ephemeral projects, lasting legacy and immediate impact

The menu project made a splash, a big splash at that. It was timely, it seems everyone has a food blog these days, and you can't meet a friend for lunch without one of you taking a photo of your food and instagramming it. Ben pointed out that the timely nature of this project is what made them know it would be successful when they started it, however even he admitted they were surprised by just how successful it had been. What's on the Menu is what Ben describes as an ephemeral project, the website will come and go, we all lose interest in food blogging and taking photos of food some time in the not too distant future. However when we have all moved on, and volunteers lost interest in menus, the meta data they created will be left behind – and it is this data that will stand the test of time.

'The user facing layer is temporal and you need to embrace that, the menu website will have served its purpose, but the data will remain'

This is a really interesting way of thinking about digital projects. Engaging in contemporary trends and thinking ok so what's 'cool' now and how can we utilise this to add long term value to our collection? Another interesting project which Ben described as 'super temporal' is Direct Me NYC: 1940. This project's user interface was only really relevant for a couple of months, but its lasting legacy is strong external partnerships (with New York Times Labs), and increased curatorial participation and increased buy in, and interest in the work of the lab from across

the library.

Direct Me NYC: 1940 was created to coincide with the April 2nd 2012 release of census data from 1940. The census data wasn't searchable. The project brought together phone records (which included names and addresses), census data and tied this information into headlines from the New York times. This approach filled a stop gap, when the census data was released it wasn't searchable, NYPL Labs knew that within a few months online paid sites such as ancestry.com and familysearch.org would have transcribed the census and made it available in searchable format.

So why bother with 'Direct Me NYC: 1940' ?

The project helped curators to think about their collections in new ways, it allowed curators to experiment with linked data using a language that they understood (genealogy). The hands on nature of the project facilitated an entry point into evolving curatorial practice, and changed curatorial thinking. It allowed the Labs team to experiment with new digitisation tools.

A starting point for all of the labs work is:

Does this matter internally?

This project laid the foundation for developing new projects with new curators. A valuable legacy that will really shape how NYPL and NYPL Labs continues to develop its online offering and digital engagement opportunities for the public.

Does this matter externally?

For Direct Me NYC: 1940, there was a real hunger

among the genealogy community for census data. They wanted it on its release date, but it wasn't searchable. Their first point of call may have been paid for search sites, but with this project NYPL Labs has been able to raise the profile of the library as a key genealogical research centre.

'The challenge is to get curators thinking like technologists and technologists thinking like curators.'

There are heaps of other really interesting projects on the NYPL Lab site, one of my favourites is the stereogramator fans of gif's will love this one, and after my meeting with Ben I am now the proud owner of some branded 3D glasses. [Click here](#) to go check out all the other things NYPL are up to.

When I first found out that I had been awarded a Churchill Fellowship Anne Peoples tweeted me telling me I should visit NYPL Labs while I was in New York. So thanks Anne, it was a great tip!



I am interested in making art to be experienced and explored by as many individuals as possible with as many different individual ideas about the given piece with no final meaning attached. The viewer creates the reality, the meaning, the conception of the piece. I am merely a middleman trying to bring together idea.

Keith Haring, Journal entry, October 14, 1978
(Brooklyn Museum, Keith Haring Exhibition, wall text)

I welcome feedback and comments on my fellowship report, contact me via my website, by email or twitter
www.oonaghmurphy.com
hello@oonaghmurphy.com
[@OonaghTweets](https://twitter.com/OonaghTweets)

