The art museum in code: display strategies of the National Gallery of Canada

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Abstract

This thesis explores the ways in which the art museum as a powerful cultural medium shapes the public understanding of artworks and how this work is affected by digital media when the museum displays art online. In an analysis of the National Gallery of Canada (NGC) I focus on how the artwork is encountered and understood in physical and digital contexts through the examination of three modes of museum practice: memory, information, and narrative. I compare each mode’s manifestation in the physical museum space to its digital translation, revealing that the NGC largely reproduces its objective, highly authored, and one-way communicative practices in digital space. Other online interfaces such as the steve.museum project and the Art Matters blog of the Art Gallery of Ontario are examined as possible alternatives to the NGC’s approach through their use of more open, collaborative, and social practices made possible by digital media.

La présente thèse examine l’influence du musée d’art en tant que milieu culturel important sur la compréhension des objets d’art par le public et les répercussions des médias numériques sur ces œuvres quand le musée les affiche en ligne. Pendant l’analyse du Musée des beaux-arts du Canada (MBAC), je cherche à déterminer comment les objets d’art sont rencontrés et perçus dans leurs contextes physique et numérique en examinant trois contextes pertinents au musée : la mémoire, les renseignements et la narration. Je compare la manifestation des trois contextes dans l’espace physique du musée à leur
traduction numérique, ce qui révèle que le MBAC reproduit de très près ses pratiques à communication unilatérale objectives et consignées dans l’espace numérique. J’examine également d’autres interfaces en ligne, notamment le projet steve.museum et le blog Art Matters du Musée des beaux-arts de l’Ontario, comme autres options à l’approche du MBAC pour leur usage plus ouvert, plus collaboratif et plus social rendu possible par les médias numériques.
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Introduction

If the walls of the museum were to vanish, and with them their labels, what would happen to the works of art that the walls contain, the labels describe? Would these objects of aesthetic contemplation be liberated to a freedom they have lost, or would they become so much meaningless lumber?

Jonah Siegel, Desire and Excess: The Nineteenth-Century Culture of Art (xv).

In his "Archi(ve)textures of Museology," Wolfgang Ernst writes that by "mapping memory museographically, that is, by collecting, inventorying, storing, processing and transferring data, the museum has become a part of an epistemological grid that turns museology into a field of research extending far beyond the limits of the museum walls" (17) He envisions an understanding of museology that orients to technology to understand how "meaning is produced through the medium of the museum” (17). Following Ernst, I would like to propose an understanding of the art museum as a medium that acts as a kind of mechanism of cultural memory, storage, retrieval and rehearsal.

Focusing on an epistemological as opposed to ontological perspective on the art object in the museum, I undertake a critical project that explores how several institutional modes: memory, information and narrative, come to shape the public understanding of cultural artifacts. Technology has been at the forefront of transformations of the museum institution and the artwork – the Internet and the opportunity to digitize collections are no exception to this rule. Focusing on the
Internet, I would like to explore how the production of meaning of the artwork by the art museum in these three modes is affected by the digital medium. How does the museal practice of art display transition into digital space? Does the Internet provide new opportunities to transcend the authoritative walls of the institution? By conducting this examination I will necessarily undertake a critique of the museum but also work towards an understanding about it and an exploration of what it means to the museum to recreate itself in digital space. In these discussions the core is to develop an understanding of how the work of art is encountered and understood. What happens to the artwork (or referential art image) in a museum without walls? How do we reconcile in these contexts of art display the dual needs of addressing aesthetics and historicity? Themes that will emerge from the treatment of these questions include the relationship of art to technology, the status of digital representation and mediation, the role of the visitor, the publicity of the art museum, and the status, role and responsibility of the art museum in light of the opportunities and challenges represented by digital networks. These themes suggest that the display of art works is not only an art historical question, but also a question that raises issues of communication and mediation more broadly.

My main object of study is the National Gallery of Canada (NGC) in its physical architectural presence in Ottawa, Canada and its web presence Cybermuse. As one of the largest national institutions devoted to the display of art within both a nationalist and international framework and with its arms-length position in relation to the Canadian government, the NGC is undoubtedly a powerful force in art culture. In analyzing its web presence in relation to its
physical spaces of exhibition, I hypothesize that I will find that the NGC attempts
to reproduce its traditional authoritative structures of display in digital space and
does not fully engage in providing new means for visitors to encounter these
artworks differently, a possibility raised by the qualities of digital media. I will be
introducing two digital museum projects that provide alternatives to this
approach: the steve.museum collective approach to organizing museum
collections through folksonomic tagging, and the *Art Matters* blog produced by
the Art Gallery of Ontario.

*Literature Review*

Setting aside the more practical and supportive texts designed for museum
professionals, I will focus on key research that has emerged in the more theory-
based discussions at the intersection of the subjects of museums, works of art, and
digital media. This field has evolved along with the changing practices of the
Internet, so that naturally the most recent texts are the most proximate and
relevant to the digital medium as it stands for my analysis. I have excluded from
this review, for reasons of relevance, texts that address the exhibition of new
media artworks or digital artworks. I am not interested in how digital media
forms are used within museums, but how the museum uses the Internet interface
as an external tool that incorporates digitized works of art. Since there is a lot of
repetition in this research, especially in texts that address an audience of museum
professionals, I draw greater attention through a thematic overview to those
studies that distinguish themselves as influential through their introduction of new or especially interesting perspectives.

As a means to learn lessons from the past in order to understand the present landscape of museums and digital media, writers have recounted the history of computing in museums in different ways. Katherine Jones-Garmil in the landmark *The Wired Museum* writes a comprehensive history spanning from 1960 to 1995 with attention to the internal concerns of the museum and addressing practical reasons as to why the adoption of computer technologies may be difficult. Ross Parry in *Recoding the Museum* recounts his history through the framework of the problem of the perceived “incompatibility between the idea of the museum and the idea of the computer” (xi). He argues that in recent years this opposition appears to be resolving and leading to a future where museums are more engaged in the use of digital technologies. While he concludes on an optimistic note, I would argue that this conflict and perceived incompatibility is not fully resolved. I share the argument of Suzanne Keene, who writes that “going digital is for most museums driven by the availability of the technology, rather than by some urgent purpose for using it – by the feeling that we may miss opportunities in the future rather than by a burning need to do something new” (Becoming, 309).

Several writers express reservations about the digitization of the museum, seeing the possibility of the displacement of the “real” museum visit by the digital one, a prospect that challenges the museum’s relevance and importance as a traditional cultural institution. While MacDonald and Alsford suggest that museums may need to experiment with the use of more entertaining types of
museum displays to compete with other media forms such as television and film (308), Alice Goff sees this competition for relevance as extending into the digital sphere. She argues that the museum should explore new and dynamic ways to engage with online media but their approach should not be to haphazardly adopt every Internet trend simply to appear current, but instead to maintain their institutional integrity by “assert[ing] themselves as distinct and unique institutions” and “defin[ing] their own goals” (6). In “Museums of the Future,” Maxwell Anderson is nostalgic about the traditional museum experience and is not interested in promoting different ways for the museum to use the Internet, but seeks to safeguard the priority of the “real” visit over the digital through making the actual museum an exciting venue to visit. Another response to these fears is to assert that the physical museum and digital museum forms are entirely different. Ann Mintz argues that while the digital is useful as a supplement to the museum, “there will never be a ‘virtual museum’ in the full sense of the word” (28). She adds that “[a] virtual visit to a museum is fundamentally a media experience, not a museum experience” (28). Mintz’s explicit assumption – which is contrary to the one underlying this thesis – is that the museum is somehow not, itself, a medium.

Another common theme in the literature is a focus on the work of art, specifically the question of its digitization and issues surrounding authenticity and aesthetic experience. While they do not explicitly address the Internet medium, several texts have emerged as oft-cited predecessors to the discourses. André Malraux in his Museum Without Walls spoke of the expansion of the museum through the ensuing equalizing tendencies of photographic reproduction. Walter
Benjamin is even more often cited for his infamous “Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” and his concept of aura that is threatened by reproduction – theorists continue his ideas into the digital age and write of the threat to aura posed by digitization. One landmark study of the present drawing on these earlier contributions is W.J.T. Mitchell’s *The Reconfigured Eye*. Mitchell comprehensively accounts for the post-photographic era of digital imaging by drawing out issues of authenticity and ethics while explaining the entire technological process of digitization in great detail, opening up the ‘black box’ of digital imaging and demystifying its relation to earlier technological forms.

Facing the loss of the materiality of the work online, many writers follow Walter Benjamin in affirming that the aura of the work of art has disappeared in the present context. Anderson argues that the “appetite for the original will only deepen” as online users encounter digital copies (Introduction, 19). The term ‘virtual’ used as descriptor for the digital image is misleading, argues Klaus Müller, since it masks the similarities between works of art and their digital copies (n.pag). He asserts that reproduction should be understood as a process that has been historically part of the art world well before the digital, and in the art museum artworks are made virtual by their re-contextualization into a “virtual museum order” (n.pag). Also, “while the singularity and presence of the artifact fades in its duplication, most of its informational layers stay intact” (n.pag).

Conversely, Michele White in her landmark “Where is the Louvre?” interprets the typical ways in which museums create online spaces as failed attempts to recuperate or reproduce the aura of artworks online by replicating the framework of the museum walls (47).
One of the most dynamic themes in the literature concerns the possibilities of reconfiguring museum information and knowledge in the digital medium. As Michele Henning writes, digitization has the power to shift hierarchies of knowledge in the museum, to make available works of art in the collection that are not always visible in gallery display but are hidden in storage, and in this way reconnecting the “front and back regions” of the museum (303). Suzanne Keene sees a move away from the exhibition format to the opening up of the collection archives and knowledge about them as a means for the museum to become more postmodern (All, 185). Wolfgang Ernst shares this view and promotes the freeing of museum information through digitization as a reorganization that could transform the approach to museum objects from viewing them in the context of shallow narrativity to a more complex and archaeological encounter. In his landmark essay *The Archive Without Museums*, Hal Foster sees the digitization of art images as transformative of knowledge in the art world, causing larger shifts in scholarship from the paradigm of classical art history to discourses on visual culture studies. Other scholars argue that merely providing access to digitized collections is not sufficient for museums to guarantee knowledge and understanding. Dominique Langlais explores how “tacit knowledge” might be reproduced in digital space, the “process of making sense that is generally transmitted orally and through face-to-face experience” (74-75). She argues that this type of knowledge can be harnessed through the twin activities of interaction and communication online and these kinds of online participation will help to keep “heritage alive” (76, 77). George F. MacDonald and Stephen Alsford likewise argue that the role of museums in society more broadly can be seen as
promoting knowledge as a public good, and that the Internet may enable them to become even more effective ‘information utilities’ and to reach people more easily. Most studies agree, however, that museums have failed for the most part to embrace the possibilities for social collaboration, interactivity and participation in the digital medium. Diane M. Zorich points out that museums ironically remain alone and closed in the digital network while the Internet is “steeped in traditions of partnership, cooperation and community” as an inherently “collaborative medium” (172-3). As Langlais and Henning both point out, the hierarchical structures of the museum can remain powerful in digital museum practice. While online the museum has the opportunity to create new structures, it can still position viewers as consumers and passive receivers of information. While museums have the potential to turn their online spaces into ones featuring “dialogue and debate,” they are hampered as Lianne McTavish writes by multiple and conflicting goals that mirror those in the physical museum (226, 229).

My own analysis of the National Gallery of Canada online builds on the work of several scholars who see the museum walls remaining strong in digital space. Peter Walsh and Michele White both take the idea of an online museum space seriously for the ways in which it reflects choices on the part of the institution that have consequences for visitors. In her landmark essay “Where is the Louvre?” White recounts the efforts on the part of the Louvre to assert its gallery walls online. She views the online museum as naturally a “kind of critical work on the museum” in the ways it challenges traditional museum configurations and values (47). It does so through the efforts to seem real, ‘official,’ and unique online, but this is challenged by the nature of the digital medium exemplified by
the challenge of the earlier “Le Louvre” digital museum website produced by Nicolas Pioch and the different versions of the Louvre website in different language translations. White argues that the museum seeks institutional stability where there is none, and a recuperation of aura where this may not be possible. Peter Walsh, in his essay “The Web and the Unassailable Voice,” likewise points out that the museum attempts to replicate its traditional frameworks rather than choosing to transform them online. He cleverly identifies the objective, impersonal and disembodied Unassailable Voice of the museum as fundamentally at odds with the non-hierarchical, multi-vocal and distributed space of the Internet medium. Thus he argues that a new voice is needed in this context, one that exploits the Internet’s qualities (81). I take this a step further just as Wolfgang Ernst does, arguing that the museum as an institution of furthering public cultural knowledge may have new responsibilities with the Internet. As Selma Thomas aptly writes, “if we want visitors who are critical thinkers … we must help them to become more visually literate and teach them to become more accomplished consumers of the media that confronts them, both inside the museum and outside our walls” (xi).

Missing from the research I have reviewed are studies more attentive to the contexts of the United States and Canadian art worlds with their own unique and comparative challenges. Issues of copyright are largely not addressed in-depth but seem to be especially pertinent to the experience of art museums in the Canadian context. I am also interested to read more studies in museology that do not simply dismiss the possibility for aesthetic experience online completely (since they see the aura as absent) but explore whether or not it is possible and
under what conditions it might occur. Most studies also tend to generalize by referring to the museum as an institution without distinguishing between museum types, namely art or ethnographic. At times a text will speak of museums generically while meaning “art museums,” or vice versa. This is misleading since these two types of institutions have very different interests in the display of their objects and thus different display practices. In my study, I show how the distinction between these two institutional forms is important. For instance, since the art museum has a responsibility to set up spaces to enable the aesthetic experiences of works of art, this presents unique challenges in the digital medium.

In addition to drawing on the literature reviewed above, this thesis adopts an interdisciplinary approach using texts from fields such as museology, digital media studies, visual culture studies, philosophy, and art history, as needed. In terms of terminology, I have specifically avoided referring to the National Gallery of Canada’s website as a “virtual museum.” While this phrase has been used frequently in the literature, especially by early writers, I feel that the word ‘virtual’ has connotations of the unreal or imaginary. A “virtual world” or realm implies that it is discontinuous with the real one – instead, digital manifestations of museum institutions are accessed by real bodies in the real world and I would argue have real effects. “Virtual museums” can also refer to forms of online museums that transparently attempt to reproduce the museum experience online through the use of ‘virtual reality’ interactive tours – this is a different project than what my analysis addresses. Instead of using the phrase “virtual museum,” then, in my study I refer instead to the website of the art museum often as its web presence or online site.
Thesis Overview

Each chapter of the thesis addresses a different aspect of the art museum’s practice shaping the meaning of works of art in the physical institution and the effects of its translation into digital code.

In Chapter 1, I address issues of history and materiality in the mode of memory that pervades the art museum as an institution. The museum shapes cultural history and memory through its display of artworks and this practice is based on the physical materiality of art objects and their historical authentication by museum scholars. The Internet, with its digital spaces that render all objects such as works of art as fluid and malleable code, has been criticized in its digitization of works of art for diminishing their aura (following Walter Benjamin) and a degradation of trust in art images that are vulnerable to manipulation. I argue that these issues of authenticity in art experience can be understood as a threat to the memorial function of works of art. Aside from their dematerialization, digitized artworks can be produced and circulated by any Internet user and can become decoupled from their authenticating provenance details. In my interrogation of issues surrounding the integrity of digitized art, I ultimately conclude that if the museum is to maintain its work in the preservation and guardianship of the artworks in its collection, it may need to take on new and more active roles online.

In Chapter 2, I build on this focus on the work of art to explore issues of education and participation that concern the information practices or publicity of the art museum. I distinguish between the contradictory aesthetic and educational
aims of the museum. Online, the possibilities of aesthetics are more limited but there are more opportunities to pursue information-based knowledge about works of art. I conduct an analysis of the physical architectural space of the museum to reveal how it structures and positions the behaviours of visitors. In the same way I reveal how Internet sites are governed by the logics of code and software and deconstruct the Internet buzz-words of “interactivity,” “new media” and “participation.” I analyze the NGC targeted website Cybermuse in comparison to the steve.museum interface to explore how their sites enable or disable different behaviours. While Cybermuse may demonstrate a limited interactivity, I argue that it does not provide adequate synthesized information or the means for social participation or collaboration for its visitors, both elements that mirror the experience of the physical and architectural institution.

In Chapter 3, I explore the particular mode of structuring information known as narrative. Following Marie-Laure Ryan’s practice of transmedial narratology I point to the different “expressive resources” for narrative possessed by each medium in my analysis: the art museum, the work of art, and digital media interfaces (Myth, 594). The art museum is shown in this chapter to produce narratives that operate on two key levels: the ordering of rooms and exhibitions spaces that uses artworks as part of larger narrative trajectories and the narratives established about individual works on display. However, I argue that works of art inherently possess levels of narrativity or anti-narrativity that may not be easily understood by some visitors. In my analysis of the NGC, I argue that the chronological ordering of the exhibition rooms powerfully shapes narrative on one level, while individual works of art are narrativized in a manner that
demonstrates the museum’s preference to let the artwork ‘speak for itself,’ privileging autonomous aesthetic experience. The painting of the *Voice of Fire* by Barnett Newman is employed as an example of how a possible failure to narrate a challenging painting resulted in a heated controversy. In my examination of *Cybermuse* I explain how these narrative strategies are differentially reproduced online. I find that the site does not take advantage of the modularity of the Internet to present narratives hypertextually or embrace the kinds of sociality made possible by new social media sites. The Art Matters blog by the Art Gallery of Ontario is put forward as an alternative example of a museum taking narrative a step further in this direction using the properties of the blogging medium.
Chapter 1: Memory

Everyone will have noticed how much easier it is to grasp a painting ... in a photo than in reality. It is certainly tempting to blame this squarely on the decline of a feeling for art ... [b]ut contradicting such an interpretation is the knowledge of how ... the understanding of great works has changed along with the development of reproductive technologies. They can no longer be thought of as the products of individuals; they have become collective objects, so powerful that to assimilate them requires precisely their reduction in size. In the last analysis mechanical methods of reproduction are a technology of miniaturization and help people to achieve the degree of power over the works without which they could simply not make use of them.

Walter Benjamin, “Little History of Photography”
(trans. Haxthausen 49).

Every image of the past that is not recognized by the present as one of its own concerns threatens to disappear irretrievably.

Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History” (255).

The notion of collective memory, made popular by the French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs in the 1950s, identifies a type of memory formation based on cultural rather than purely biological mechanisms. To Halbwachs, individual memory is always necessarily a reconstruction of the past (69), but one dependent on collective memory derived from the individual’s membership in one or more social groups (23). To remember, in short, we need others. Since Halbwachs, active scholarship in what has come to be known as Memory Studies has used the
terms “social,” “popular”, “public” and “cultural” memory to indicate the collective creation, rehearsal and repetition of shared memories (Zelizer 214). Ideas about the past are repurposed for the needs of the present through collaborative memory practice (Hoskins 336). For Andreas Huyssen the work of such scholars and other societal trends indicate a larger cultural obsession with memory, a kind of museal sensibility preoccupied with rescuing a sense of the real in a society increasingly simulated (Twilight, 14). This trend to “musealize” is arguably a reaction to the acceleration of contemporary society where the speed of ubiquitous information technology “destroys space” and “erases temporal distance” (253). Under these new, increasingly technologically-mediated conditions, Huyssen argues, “a sense of historical continuity, or for that matter, discontinuity, both of which depend on a before and after, gives way to the simultaneity of all times and spaces readily accessible in the present (253). As a reaction, thus, the attention to  

\[m\]emory … represents the attempt to slow down information processing, to resist the dissolution of time in synchronicity of the archive, to recover a mode of contemplation outside the universe of simulation and fast-speed information and cable networks, to claim some anchoring space in a world of puzzling and often threatening heterogeneity, non-synchronicity, and information overload (7).  

The museum is a place within which Huyssen believes one can recover a sense of the past. The museum, with its insistence on a stable, controlled context where material works of art are viewed in physical space, presents a kind of secure anchor in an accelerated society (34). The museum and the act of musealization are cast, thus, as an antidote to the “obsolescence and disappearance” characteristic of the current age (Pasts, 38).
The museum “is a place and it places, which is essential to its power to mobilize memory” (Kirschenblatt-Gimblett 2). Through the controlled collection, storage, study and display of objects, the museum gives, as Didier Maleuvre wrote, “shape and presence to history, inventing it, in effect, by defining the space of a ritual encounter with the past” (1). Turning to the art museum in particular, at its core is the work of art estranged from its original context in order to be preserved and made public as part of a larger collection. As an institution, the museum defines the terms by which these objects are remembered. But the notion of the museum as a kind of static, utopian sanctuary from the contemporary trends of information technology is a fantasy. Like other large institutions devoted to archival organization, the museum is beholden to digital technology, and as more and more of the public are engaged in online networks, museums are being pressured as institutions to transform to keep up with technological developments and to display digital reproductions of works of art online to engage with an increasingly wired audience. Despite Huyssen’s claims, I would like to ask: can the past, in some sense, be experienced through digital sites? How does the role of the art museum as a guardian of historical objects translate into the digital media realm? I will focus on the work of art in order to understand how it acts as a focal point for collective memory and identity in the gallery space, and conversely how its digitization calls memory into question. How do we understand the authenticity and integrity of digital objects? My institutional focus is on the large-scale art museum type, specifically the National Gallery of Canada (NGC) located in Ottawa, Ontario. While its collection represents a survey of Western art, it is a museum closely tied to the nation and privileges the support of
national identity through the collection of Canadian artists of the past and present as part of a larger narrative of nationhood through artistic cultural achievements (Whitelaw 2). Thus it is an institution worth examining critically as one that is powerful but fraught with its own complexities.

On a recent visit to the Rideau Street branch of the Ottawa Public Library, I came across a promotional bookmark at the circulation desk created by the National Gallery. Its simple slogan proclaims “Where art happens,” and its feature photograph is a view of the gallery’s prominent outdoor sculpture, Louise Bourgeois’ *Maman* set against the high “crystalline rotunda” of the Great Hall, considered the “signature space” of the building’s architect, Moshe Safdie (Acland 73). Both the image and motto of the bookmark are representative of the gallery in the “Nation’s Capital.” *Maman* was the last of six bronze casts produced by Louise Bourgeois, the others owned by other prominent international galleries such as the Guggenheim Museum in Spain and the Rockefeller Center in New York (Hoedeman 2005). As an accomplished sculpture by a cutting-edge contemporary artist, its presence on the plaza demonstrates the National Gallery of Canada’s dedication to actively collect the work of living artists as well as those of the past. The gallery participates in the shaping of history as it thus unfolds, since “implicit in the acquisition of contemporary works [by the museum] is the process of historicization: of a tacit understanding of their eventual insertion within a broader historical frame” (Whitelaw 154). In her PhD Thesis at the University of Concordia entitled *Exhibiting Canada: Articulations of National Identity at the National Gallery of Canada*, Anne Whitelaw further describes the gallery as the “most symbolically important institution of high
culture in Canada” (1). This symbolism is embedded in both the architectural and geographical presence of the gallery. Situated along the “Mile of History” from the residences of the Governor General and Prime Minister to the Houses of Parliament (Ord 5), its position as at arm’s length from the federal government financially is mirrored in its physical prominence in the city (King 3). The monumentality of its rose granite and glass construction acts on “a symbolic level” to signify the gallery as “a visible monument to the nation” (Whitelaw 82). The building itself, thus, is a site of memory. The slogan, “Where art happens” can also be seen as a confident declarative statement about the gallery as a powerful institution in the Canadian art world, influencing the art market and public understanding of the respected canon of Canadian artists in history. In association with the Canada Council of the Arts, Canada’s prominent arts funding agency (also at arm’s length of the government), the National Gallery of Canada holds an exhibition annually featuring the Governor General’s Awards winners for Visual and Media Arts, individuals with extensive careers as Canadian artists. The NGC has also selected artists for attendance at international biennales to represent Canadian artistic achievement.

The mandate of the NGC is stated as an effort to:

develop, maintain, and make known, throughout Canada and internationally, a collection of works of art, both historic and contemporary, with special, but not exclusive, reference to Canada, and to further knowledge, understanding and enjoyment of art in general among all Canadians (“About the NGC”).

In my analysis of the National Gallery of Canada I would like to focus on its attention to the ongoing creation of a Canadian historical and contemporary
collection as what Anne Whitelaw calls a “developmental history of Canadian art, particularly seen in terms of the emergence of a distinct Canadian aesthetic” (281). The NGC contextualizes works of art in terms of collective memorialization, promoting identification with ideas of nationhood. As an institution it originated at a time in the early formation of Canada not long after its Confederation, when the establishment of a collective national identity was crucial to the developing nation. The National Gallery of Canada’s first art works in March of 1880 consisted of the diploma pieces of the Royal Canadian Academy (RCA), a national organization of Canadian artists (King 5-6). Thus the NGC originated not with a repurposed royal collection (characteristic of many museums in Europe), but instead with artists recognized as pioneers through their membership in the RCA and chosen to represent the nation through their talent. In its development as an institution, Martha King argues that the gallery has “essentially grown up with Canada; as an instrument of culture it has, over the years, reflected many of the preoccupations, passions and concerns of the country at large” (4). This is perhaps most evident in the art museum’s collection of works of art, overseen by many different gallery directors and thus revealing the changing shape of the institution.

I would like to turn to the work of art itself, the *raison d’être* of the gallery, which is more complex than merely a physical object being collected and also as one note seeming to serve a larger narrative. Defining art itself is a daunting if not impossible task that I will not attempt in this thesis. However, I would like to move forward with an exploration of some of the properties of artworks that contribute to their valued status. In Mieke Bal’s translation from the
French, Andrea Miller-Keller’s definition of a work of art is as an ethnographic object, “a man-made object charged with cultural meaning, which can, if studied carefully, offer us information on the society in which it has been created. It offers indications on a larger cultural situation, and it only has interest if we are able to ‘read’ it” (77). Works of art, for the most part, are material objects that as relics of the past “bear … witness to the passage of time, accumulating signs of decay and use” (Pelletier 6). Like objects in the purely ethnographic museum, artworks can be appreciated as synecdochic, standing for the larger whole of the cultural and historical context from which they originated (Bal 78). Martin Heidegger in his essay “The Origin of the Work of Art” also recognized the material quality of the artwork as a “thing,” but went a step further to recognize it as “something other than the mere thing itself” (376). As he elaborates, “the work makes public something other than itself; it manifests something other; it is an allegory … The work is a symbol … It seems as though the thingly element in the art work is like the substructure into and upon which the other, authentic element is built” (376). For Heidegger, that authentic element has the power to reveal the “‘actual nature’ or ‘being’ of things and serve to unveil ‘the truth of what is’” (Stulberg 260).

Artworks are at once, then, both embodied material objects and something more, something atemporal that is experienced affectively as an aesthetic. Of course to refer to an art object as object is not always accurate, since historically works of art have taken both material and immaterial forms, manifesting in ideas (as in conceptual art), sounds, performances, software programs, events, site-specific installations, and manipulation of the natural world (in the case of land
For the interests of this thesis, however, I will be focusing on works of art of traditional media that materialize as moveable discrete objects, in particular the painting on canvas. Paintings are interesting for this analysis since they present ideal candidates for digitization with their flat, two-dimensional pictorial surfaces and are thus provocative of questions of objecthood and simulation.

As I have argued, artworks act as both aesthetic objects provoking an affective experience and ethnographic objects provoking an intellectual and cognitive experience. These dual aspects are linked to their memory functions. The art gallery as an institution devoted to works of art in their complexity provides the context for this multi-dimensional experience. On the one hand it ensures that for aesthetic contemplation of artworks they are displayed with adequate spacing and against the purportedly neutral white walls, especially in the case of contemporary art displays, while on the other hand it provides information unobtrusively (in the form of text labels, panels and/or catalogues) to support the cognitive and historical component.

The special quality of works of art, however, is that their meaning is never finally resolved. As Gadamer argues, the discovery of the meaning of an artwork “is an infinite process” that “is never finished” (Truth, 298). This is key to the aesthetic and historical value artworks hold for museums and for history, since they provoke endless contemplation and dialogue. Once the artist has created the work of art and sold it into the gallery system, it takes on its own life. Newly embedded in a field of relations, the work of art initiates dialogue with, interpretation by, and affected reaction from, its viewers. The artist’s original intention in creating the work becomes merely one among many factors that
influence the works’ meaning in any given context. As Gadamer writes, “the work of art is the expression of a truth that cannot be reduced to what its creator actually thought in it” (Aesthetics, 181). The layers of interpretation and knowledge – those of the museum, the artist, and the public – seem to constitute the full life of this discrete object, and yet its meaning remains unfixed. In attempting to understand this enigmatic nature of art Huyssen proposes a view of the notion of aura, made famous by Walter Benjamin, as a kind of experiential quality between the viewer and the work of art. He asserts that:

> the irritation, the seduction, the secret [art objects] may hold is never only on the side of the object in some state of purity, as it were; it is always and intensely located on the side of the viewer and the present as well. It is the live gaze that endows the object with its aura, but this aura also depends on the object’s materiality and opaqueness (Twilight, 31).

Analyzing the mechanical reproductive media of photography and film in the famous essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” Walter Benjamin defined aura perhaps most succinctly as the “unique phenomenon of a distance, however close it may be” (222). The idea of distance is key here. In a footnote, Benjamin elaborates that this definition:

> represents nothing but the formulation of the cult value of the work of art in categories of space and time perception. Distance is the opposite of closeness. The essentially distant object is the unapproachable one. Unapproachability is indeed a major quality of the cult image. True to its nature, it remains ‘distant, however close it may be.’ The closeness which one may gain from its subject matter does not impair the distance which it retains in its appearance (243).

The work of art in the art museum has a sublime quality of being innately challenging, holding a secret from the viewer and being indeterminate.
Reproduction betrays a desire to bring the object closer, to make it more available. In this action, however, the presence of the original work of art, its “unique existence” in space and time is compromised (220). The work of art loses its “authority” as it is seen in new ways through the mechanical lens and made available perceptually in ways it was unavailable before, enabling the original work to in essence “meet the beholder halfway” (220). Thus there is a kind of tension between distance and proximity in the notion of aura, but one that Jay David Bolter and his collaborators in the essay “New Media and the Permanent Crisis of Aura” argued is a persistent condition to the experience of art, that “aura as our collective or individual reaction to art can never simply disappear, as Benjamin seems to have expected” (26). Instead, it is a dialectic that qualifies our experience of art even as digital reproduction with its own unique effects has surpassed the dominance of the mechanical. As they elaborate, “what Benjamin identified was not the end of aura, but rather an ongoing crisis, in which the experience of aura is alternately called into question and reaffirmed” (22).

It can also be argued that the aura is in a way an effect of the process of reproduction, that the aura and the reproductive are in fact reciprocal. As Peter Walsh writes, “mechanical reproduction … created the aura of the original, much as it was the machine that created, the handmade, the negative that created the positive, and the digital that gave birth to its opposite in analog” (Rise, 29). The more reproduced an artwork becomes, the more important the original. Thus the presence and uniqueness of the work of art in the gallery is made more powerful by the proliferation of immaterial images in its likeness. As Miezkowksi argues eloquently, “the authority of the ‘here’ and ‘now’ is realized only in when ‘here’
and ‘now’ are ‘then’ and ‘there’” (40). While this distinction between technological reproduction and the material work of art would seem to oppose art to technology however, I would argue that art is always-already technologically mediated. In Technics and Time Bernard Stiegler conceives of technology as intrinsically human – as the exteriorization of the human in a prosthetic relationship that has been present since humanity’s origins in the use of tools and other gestures (154). Technology, or technics to Stiegler, then, is any method of reaching away from the interior self into the exterior world and is a means of prosthetic memory. Works of art, as human expressions and exteriorizations are thus technological. Artists have always used technological tools to aid them in their compositions, and with the invention of the computer, software such as Photoshop is one of many applications the artist might take advantage of in the process of constructing their work of art. Thus, any reference to “genuine” art as somehow unmediated by technological devices is untenable. However, the process of the digitization of artworks is a technological mediation of the work of art worthy of investigation since it powerfully transforms the image in ways that surpass the mechanical and call memory into question.

William J. T. Mitchell conceives of the digitization of art images as part of the post-photographic era (Reconfigured, 10) in which digitization represents a “sudden crystallization of a new technology [which] provides the nucleus for new forms of social and cultural practice and marks the beginning of a new era of artistic exploration” (20). The digitization process reveals the new digital image as one inherently vulnerable. The work of art is photographed digitally and then uploaded, a process that transforms the photographic details into numerical code,
rendering the image as information. Projected as “patterns of points or pixels,” each part of the digitized work is coded to communicate to the computer the locations and colours of pictorial elements” (Bauer 51). Thus each appearance of the work of art online can be equated to a kind of textual performance, representing a “transition away from images realized as durable, individually valuable, physically rooted artifacts” (Mitchell Reconfigured, 78). In this way works of art online are “image-text[s],” or “info pixel[s]” (Foster Archive, 109), not merely images in the likeness of their originals but rather interpretations of the original work through the process of digital translation (Mandell 3). There is a kind of “‘infection’ of the stable analogue photographic image by an intrinsically fluid and malleable digital code” (Lister 259) that renders the digital image as unstable. Any change in the pixellation can be undetected at the minutest level – while it may have the appearance of its original, there is an inherent vulnerability in its reconstruction each time the image locally materializes on a screen.

Characterizing this post-photographic era, then, is the digital medium’s privileging of “fragmentation, indeterminacy and heterogeneity” and emphasis on “process and performance” (Mitchell Reconfigured, 7).

So in the digital realm of the circulation of images, how do we locate the art museum? Online, the museum is not the only gatekeeper through whom the public can access works of art, no longer necessarily the prime mediator between the viewer and the artwork. Instead it is merely one site among many where works of art in their referential form can be accessed. Likewise, images of artworks can have many origins not connected to the museum institution, yielding a range of images of varying qualities of colour and detail. Freed from the
institution and digitized, works of art are mobilized by their new form as images encoded as information – they can be linked to other artworks, allowing new connections to be made. They are accessible across distances, granting incomplete and yet newfound access to artworks by interested viewers or researchers across the globe that could not otherwise visit the galleries they originate from. And as in André Malraux’s vision in his short publication *Museum Without Walls*, works of art of different sizes and media are flattened and made equal in scale. To Malraux, however, the medium of photography that rendered all works of art as manipulable images enabled the ability to visualize the essences and styles of art movements (160). As Foster points out, Malraux saw the “indefinite expansion” of the museum through reproduction, an ability to “reassemble the broken bits of tradition into one meta-tradition of global styles” (Design, 78) and enable “possibilities of synchronic and diachronic orderings to a degree that would be impossible to achieve within the structural confines of the museum” (Whitelaw 95). His museum without walls, then, is an imaginary space where these photographic reproductions, as artistic essences or moments, are co-present in their satisfyingly encyclopedic completeness. The Internet in a fashion fulfills Malraux’s vision. Like in his imaginary realm, the web doesn’t have walls but has instead has intersecting spaces that cross rhizomatically through trails of hyperlinks and search portals to different sites of encounters. The work as image is made mobile both physically but also conceptually, permitting its insertion into new conversations with other works of art and ideas, conversations not always started or made publicly accessible by the museum but by interested viewers of any origin. As Mitchell writes, “we might best regard digital images … neither as
ritual objects (as religious paintings have served)… but as fragments of information that circulate in the high-speed networks now ringing the globe and that can be received, transformed and recombined like DNA to produce new intellectual structures having their own dynamics and value” (Reconfigured, 52).

The contexts and conditions under which one views a work of art are at least partially constitutive of the work itself. While public visitors to the museum are active interpreters, I would argue that the art museum as an institution functions powerfully as a framing device that shapes how they perceive the artworks they approach. This chapter has focused on the museum’s establishment or co-collaboration of ideas of collective memory, and as I have argued, context is important for the reception of works of art. I would like to turn to Donna Haraway and her essay “Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective” for her re-imagining of the object of knowledge and acute critiques of objectivity that relate to the social science of art history in the museum institution. Haraway is interested in defining an “embodied” feminist form of objectivity that is “complex, contradictory, structuring and structured” to challenge the universalizing form of objectivity that constitutes a “view from above, from nowhere, from simplicity” (589). A responsible objectivity is one, for Haraway, that originates from “partial perspective” and acknowledgment of the sources of knowledge creation as coming from somewhere, as the pre-requisite to rational knowledge. In the context of the museum, the situated knowledge of curators and museum experts is not always evident – while in the temporary exhibition and in catalogue publications this may be articulated more clearly, the experience of works of art in
the museum space is generally one of a segregated, ahistorical stage of contemplation where viewers “study works of art displayed as so many isolated specimens” (Wallach 209). The overarching narrative and intellectual structures that shape this display and contextualize the work of art are not presented as situated but as universal knowledge. Just as she revises the concept of objectivity, she also turns to the object of knowledge to see how it can be explored differently from the new perspectives of feminist objectivity. Celia Lury argues that Haraway’s account of objectivity counters the claim that the “development of technologies of visualization necessarily contribut[e] to the dematerialisation of reality,” as many believe, but suggests that, instead, “prosthetic culture can lead to a greater recognition of the active, generative capacity of the objects it makes visible” (153). As Haraway writes, “[b]oundaries are drawn by mapping practices; ‘objects’ do not pre-exist as such. Objects are boundary projects. But boundaries shift from within. What boundaries provisionally contain remains generative, productive of meaning and bodies” (595). Art objects do not pre-exist but are always-already formed by their context and mediated even as in the gallery space. The digitization of works of art can be viewed as a new opportunity to explore the exposed boundaries of the image and perhaps explore a new plethora of meanings enabling the object of knowledge, the artwork, to be “pictured as an actor or agent, not as a screen or a ground or a resource, never finally as a slave to the master that closes off the dialectic” (592). The digital image’s fundamental instability gives it its fluidity and indeterminacy that opens up its possibilities. Digital experimentation has the potential to “produce an object of knowledge that is neither a resource nor the fixed

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determination of what can count as objective knowledge ... but is rather an active, meaning-generating axis of production” (Lury 153). The dematerialization of the work of art as image requires a new critical vision but can lead to a new understanding. As Mitchell writes of the post-photographic era, “we must abandon the traditional conception of an art world populated by stable, enduring, finished works, and replace it with one that recognizes continual mutation and proliferation of variants – much as with epic oral poetry” (Reconfigured, 52). Each variant is a kind of translation and interpretation of the original work of art, with each context also providing its own structuring practices. But all reproduced variants of an original work of art are not created equal and there remains a common criticism that digitization’s effect on the work of art is to make copies fundamentally discontinuous with the original.

The problem, here, is one of trust. If manipulation of the image’s underlying textual code is possible, if copies of bad quality circulate, how can one trust the digital representation of the work of art? Bernard Stiegler, in his essay “The Discrete Image,” was interested in identifying the nature of the fear many have of the digital image. As he writes, while Barthes often referred to the indexicality of the photograph as being able to capture a sensation of “this really was,” a kind of presence that defined it as a medium, the digitally encoded photograph can no longer be trusted as having this effect:

And this possibility, which is essential to the digital photographic image, of not having been, inspires fear - for this image, at the same time that it is infinitely manipulable, remains a photo, it preserves something of the this was within itself, and the possibility of distinguishing the true from the false dwindles in proportion as the possibilities for the digital treatment of photos grow (150).
At the most fundamental level of the image, pixellation “renders transmission uncertain” and “introduces manipulation … into the spectrum” (153). Stiegler certainly points out that the authenticity of the analog image is also an illusion—they are also uncertain: vulnerable to framing operations, the influences of contexts, and their composition of “atomic grains” (155). Conversely, digitization introduces the possibility of “new knowledges of the image – artistic as well as theoretical and scientific” (157) and sparks an evolution of what he calls the “spectatorial synthesis” (161). The viewer of the image, now mistrusting the image’s truthfulness, is opened up to a new critical perspective, a new image literacy and analytics (161). While the analog image was always unstable, the digital image makes this fact of inescapable and provokes a new perspective.

Works of art in the museum are contextualized through the use of overall exhibition narratives, text panels, controlled display practices, and gallery publications written by curators and historians. The art museum acts as an authenticating body, safeguarding the identity of works and preserving them. However, online, each user who uses an image has an opportunity to identify and interpret the artwork within new contexts. In being circulated (as in a game of “telephone”), I would argue that the artwork is less beholden to the details of its material provenance that each web user may decide to include when they pass the artwork along in cyberspace, such as artist’s name, nationality, title, medium, year of production, and size. One example of this is the social networking media site FFFFOUND! (fffound.com) whose subtitle motto in the header reads: “image bookmarking.” As a primary site for accessing a plethora of images, it is a paltry one, since all images are stripped of their details and set against a white backdrop
reminiscent of the white cube gallery walls. As they enthusiastically describe the site on their “About” page, FFFFOUND! “is a web service that not only allows the users to post and share their favorite images found on the web, but also dynamically recommends each user's tastes and interests for an inspirational image-bookmarking experience!!” (n.p.). It is a kind of “shopping for images” free-for-all – once you identify an image you like, others are displayed alongside that you may also like. The link above the image takes you to its source, which may or may not be a full site with image provenance details. At times it links you directly to a url for the image file itself. The images themselves are of all different kinds including drawings, photographs, and advertisements, reflecting how the differences between works of art are blurred online as they become equal in scale and materiality to each other. The medium of each work is not always clear, nor is the artist’s name or the title of the image in question. These images are venerated purely for their visual qualities, for their content, and origins are ‘forgotten’. Krapp explains that: “forgetting is not the opposite of memory or recollection, but rather a mode of deficiency in the order of memory that Ernst Bloch calls a leaving, a betrayal, a lack of faith” (xxv). Through the proliferation of images online that are not fully attributed, details of the image as it belongs to a body of collective memory, thus, can be lost – leading to the cultural and aesthetic forgetting of the work of art. Digital images, Mitchell argues, “are the ultimate readymades – manufactured objects of little intrinsic value that are given meaning through appropriation and contextualization rather than inherent meaning from the expressive craft through which they are fashioned” (Reconfigured, 85).
The digitization of material works of art thus demands a new critical vision in order to assess their authenticity and the significance of contextual influences while appreciating that the full experience of a work’s original materiality is available only in the space where the work itself happens to be situated. How does one assess the authenticity of digital objects? For Walter Benjamin, authenticity is dependent on the presence of the original; he asserts that the “authenticity of a thing is the essence of all that is transmissible from its beginning, ranging from its substantive duration and its testimony to the history which it has experienced” (Work of Art, 220-221). The French literary theorist Gérard Genette, in his book “The Work of Art: Immanence in Transcendance,” argues that the artwork has several modes of existence and does not consist “exclusively and exhaustively in an object” (10). He points to the art object having two identities, one that is immanent – consisting of the material work in its embodied form, and the “awareness of its existence, experienced indirectly through everything that can provide more or less precise knowledge of a work, whenever the work itself is definitively or temporarily absent” (218). This explains how a work of art could persist in collective memory even as its material form could have decayed completely. I would also argue that in this way, the knowledge that is created about a work of art is important, especially to issues of collective remembering. The authenticity of digital objects, I am suggesting, can be found in the level of intellectual integrity employed in their contextualization. Authenticity is not “static,” but “contextual” (Ross 13). As Abby Smith elaborates:
Authenticity in recorded information connotes precise, yet disparate, things in different contexts and communities. It can mean being original but also being faithful to an original; it can mean uncorrupted but also of clear and known provenance, “corrupt” or not” (n.p.)

The anxiety about the digitization of works of art is closely linked to the sense of the loss of the object’s materiality, which Benjamin described as the “technique of reproduction’s” detachment of the “reproduced object from the domain of tradition” (Work of Art, 221). While the digital realm provides valid and interesting opportunities for re-envisioning the work of art, if it leads to it becoming indistinguishable in a morass of images, the consequences for collective memory are degradation.

I am arguing, therefore, for the importance of the historical aspects of the work of art that can be compromised by the digitization, the making ephemeral, of its material form. No longer limited to being displayed in a physical museum context, where responsibility for the historical situating of the art work is respected, digitized art images being used in a variety of digital contexts are not beholden to details of provenance. I share the sentiment thus of Andrew Hoskins, who wrote that “[o]ne may live with artificial memory but not … with artificial history” (338). To this end I would like to propose that the art museum, as a guardian and custodian of works of art, is needed to play a new role vis-à-vis art on the Internet. Wolfgang Ernst proposed that the “task of the postmodern museum is to teach the user how to cope with information” (Museology, 18). This is not necessarily possible through the kinds of static websites that art galleries tend to favour, with little to no social interaction or hyperlinkages to other websites. Instead, I agree with Ernst that museums could take on a new,
more mobile role as “flow-through and transformer station[s]” (25). When performing research on works of art or even when encountering them through a personal website, I often visit the official sites of museums and galleries to verify the identity of these works – to see a larger sized reproduction or to learn of their official provenance. Museum sites remain the trusted sources of information about works of art. But many users are less interested in visiting museum websites when they do not offer the same dynamism, interactivity, transparency and accessibility characteristic of the social networking sites they often frequent. Thus in this new, information-based realm, museums may become even more necessary in the preservation and perpetuation of the works of art they safeguard. This may be especially important in relation to collective memory since, for example, Canadian artists at times are displayed without proper identification alongside American artists and those of other nationalities, thus diluting the significance of Canadian contributions and ultimately detracting from Canadian heritage. As John Berger noted in his well known *Ways of Seeing*:

> A people or a class which is cut off from its own past is far less free to choose and to act as a people or class than one that has been able to situate itself in history. This is why - and this is the only reason why - the entire art of the past has now become a political issue. (33).

While the opportunities for new knowledge presented by the plethora of new voices interpreting artworks in different Internet contexts are undeniable, ultimately the voice of the art museum must remain audible in the conversation as a body of scholarship that authenticates the material object in its now referential form.
Chapter 2: Information

Think of making the art gallery a most untimely place. Think of making the lines break through and not settling for well established points. Think of all the lines which are involved. Rigid lines – sexual lines – institutional lines – supple lines – saddening lines – electric lines. Lines of prejudice but also vibrant lines. The lines involved within the formation of the gallery space can never be contained in just one local place.

Yve Lomax, Writing the Image: an Adventure with Art and Theory (52-53).

Information is about communication. It involves the exchange of symbols, ideas, messages, and meaning between people. As such, it’s characterized by ambiguity, redundancy, inefficiency, error, and indescribable beauty.

Peter Morville, Ambient Findability (46).

In 1971 Duncan F. Cameron famously asked whether the museum as a public institution is more akin to a forum or a temple (61). This question proves to be key to the identity crises faced by art museums, especially in the wake of challenges posed by the emergence of digital media. As opposed to an ethnographic museum, whose mandate is more transparently aligned with educating the public through the interactive display of artifacts, the art museum has evolved with two contradictory roles: to present works of art aesthetically through careful staging, and to democratically educate the public about the history and meaning of these works (Zeller 63). Education, for the National Gallery of Canada, is part of its mandate to “make known … a collection of works of art” and “to further knowledge, understanding and enjoyment of art” (“About the

1 I use the term loosely here via its general buzzword definition, but will return to it later to unpack it in more depth.
Indeed, as I will argue, the art museum is necessary as mediator in the process of education to facilitate a full understanding of the meaning of art works. However, the common means by which the art museum chooses to inform or educate, its mode of publicity, reveals a particular approach that may not fulfill its mandate as a democratic institution. Information is defined by Darin Barney as a “telling that shapes or forms,” the initiation of a circuit of interpretation and meaning that includes a viewer or audience (n.pag.). The art museum, with its trademark “Unassailable Voice,” creates the framework through which viewers experience artworks but does not always facilitate participatory engagement with the works and the generation of their meaning. Peter Walsh aptly coined the term “Unassailable Voice” to describe the inhuman voice or “bureaucratic composite” pervading “museum labels, brochures, exhibitions, catalogues, the guided tour, audio-visual presentations, and now [w]eb sites.” (Web, 77). This voice that is intended to educate, however, is not always easily heard. Labels are small, not always containing a description, and at times hard to locate. Brochures and catalogues are available usually at a cost. Exhibitions may contain wall texts, but the rest of the museum collection does not always get the same treatment. Textual interference with works of art is discouraged in favour of minimally designed, spacious rooms to prevent anything that would “take away” from the work of art. Above textual education, then, the museum privileges the experience of an individual’s contemplative or sensual encounter with a work of art. This comes from a kind of “conviction that placing objects on view [is] sufficient to ensure learning” (Hooper-Greenhill Interpretation, 2). The art museum is “object-oriented” rather than people-oriented. Its key institutional functions: “to collect,
preserve, study, exhibit, interpret – are all activities performed on museum artifacts or specimens” (Macdonald and Alsford 305). As a result, information in the art museum is produced for the people on behalf of the objects, but not with or by the people. As museums create websites participating in the greater sphere of the Internet, there is an opportunity to create new spaces that may be more flexible or fluid than those in the physical institution. As I described in Chapter 1, works of art online are mobilized conceptually in their malleable form as information, but without the full force of their challenging presence in real space, they are more vulnerable to contextualizing practices. Since aesthetic experiences of artworks are significantly limited on the Internet, the main opportunities in the display of art images is to further conceptual and intellectual knowledge about the original artworks. This involves some degree of imagination or memory about the original artworks displayed in the museum. While digital experiments involving online visitors may not translate back into larger changes within the physical institution, they are valid information and knowledge experiences with interested users online that can be beneficial to the heritage of the museum.

Suzanne Keene outlines some idealistic changes she sees as “required of museums” in the wake of digital technologies:

- From about things to for people
- From one classification system to many meanings brought by the beholder[s]
- From objects selected in exhibitions to the collections directly for people
- From place-based organizations to ideas and knowledge-based organizations
- From central to distributed
- From professional control of collections to democratization: the museum makes assets available for others to use creatively (Fragments, 140).
Her ambitious list outlines some interesting postmodern possibilities for the modern, and in this case, large national art museum type. In this chapter, I am interested in exploring the relationships at play in the knowledge system of the art museum experience. Who is speaking about works of art, and how is information about them staged within the museum? Moving to the online presence of the National Gallery of Canada (NGC) as my analytic focus, how are its structure and the availability of interactive features for visitors different or similar to those in its physical institutional framework? Just as code shapes the available actions for users on a given website on the Internet, so the physical and social structuring of the art museum space shapes how works of art are experienced by visitors. My hypothesis is that a detailed analysis of the National Gallery of Canada’s website will reveal that its information structure reflects closely the physical institutional structure with regards to the pedagogical framing of the meaning of works of art as objects of knowledge and the means of participation available to visitors. In comparing the NGC’s online information framework to the recent innovative web collaboration steve and their steve.museum tagging project, I seek to explore issues of public participation in relation to art on the Internet and whether or not this new avenue provides means to visitors to contribute to the knowledge system of the museum via the digital medium in ways that can be deemed meaningful.

As I have argued in Chapter 1, works of art are complex objects of knowledge that resonate on different levels. As Karin Knorr Cetina writes, they are “open, question-generating” and are “processes and projections rather than definitive things. Observation and inquiry reveals them by increasing rather than reducing their complexity (190).” In other words, their meanings are not
reducible to the text labels that often accompany them in museum displays. I will draw a distinction, however, between the factuality of certain historical details of provenance and the greater nuanced layers of the work of art’s meaning as an artwork (Weberman 58). The factual details of where and when the object originated, the artist who created it, and its medium are more or less fixed by the work of expert art historians who prove its historical artifactuality. But interpretations of the work of art’s meaning can be seen as both dialogic and relational (Hooper-Greenhill Shaping, 139). As Hooper-Greenhill elaborates, “words and objects become meaningful within contextual and generative frameworks” and meaning is developed in ways that are both “personal and social (139).” A plurality of different interpretations may be equally valid, and sometimes knowing several different perspectives can lead to a richer experience. But while there may be a plurality of supportable perspectives (including that of the artist’s intention), this is “not at the expense of criteria that distinguish right ones from wrong ones” (Weberman 45). Responding to the common critiques of anti-intentionalist hermeneutics seen as characterized by “anything goes” plurality, Hooper-Greenhill makes the distinction between “relational meaning and relative meaning” (Shaping, 139). In other words, meaning may be determined in relational ways socially and contextually but is not “entirely relative” (139). Interpretation in many ways, however, depends on prior knowledge. The difficulty, as Hooper-Greenhill identifies, is that “in order to know what to observe, elements or factors must be recognized. But to recognize something, it is necessary to have prior knowledge of it” (3). Pierre Bourdieu also describes how:
A work of art has meaning and interest only for someone who possesses the cultural competence, that is, the code into which it is encoded … A beholder who lacks the specific code feels lost in a chaos of sounds and rhythms, colours and lines, without rhyme or reason … Thus, the encounter with a work of art is not “love at first sight” as is generally supposed (2-3).

It is important to point out that the viewer in this scenario remains an active interpreter who makes connections and often has an interesting perspective on the work of art. But their perspective in this way is limited to their own experiences and may still benefit from the layers of information that constitute the artwork but which are not spontaneously accessible to them. Insofar as it is organized to provide access to some of these layers of information, the museum remains a crucial mediator of the experience of works of art. The art museum with its bevy of professionals trained to critically interpret works of art can be a facilitator or arbitrator of meaning in these instances, serving to authenticate both works and information about them, and to create situations in which different perspectives are allowed to emerge. But this is not typically what happens in the gallery space, where the dialogical process of establishing the meaning of work that is publicly viewed (on text labels or in other information) is a private one performed by museum academics in realms segregated from the austere space of the gallery displays.

Curators designing an exhibition typically have a complex view of the work of art derived from sources that range from in-depth documentary and historical research to meetings with artists themselves (at times in the artists’ own studios). This complex information and knowledge is often not directly represented in the physical exhibition space, where curatorial rationale is
concealed behind modalities of display that are presented as if they were objective and neutral and with diminutive text panels that purport to represent fully realized and authoritative knowledge about a given work. Lisa C. Roberts identifies this practice as problematic:

> By omitting any mention about the decisions behind the determination of an object’s meaning, museums exclude visitors not only from the awareness that knowledge is something that is produced but also from the possibility that they themselves may partake in its production (79).

This ‘objective’ performance of historical knowledge by the museum also “precludes the memories and cultural histories of viewers” (Garoian 237). I would argue that the space of the art gallery itself, with its system of displays and architectural program, as Carol Duncan and Alan Wallach describe, also “organize[s] the viewer’s experience as a script organizes a performance” (483).

The overall effect is to create an ambience of secular ritual in response to which the visitor may experience feelings of passivity and awe. In this way the “architect, the designers and the management of the museum … produce a space and a subjectivity for the spectator” (Patraka 99). As I will argue, visitors, as they move through the particular space of the NGC, are positioned as passive and pedestrian spectators rather than active interpreters or participants in the knowledge process. While spectatorship is not necessarily an undesirable behaviour for the museum, it is not ideal for learning in all cases and when this seems to be the only behaviour available.

In the National Gallery of Canada we can note this effect through several different characteristics of the space. After one has purchased their admission ticket at the front desk, as the architect Moshe Safdie writes, “you unburden
yourself of all your weights at the checkroom. And then you ascend” (Ord 19). He refers here to the long ramp leading up to the dramatic space of the Great Hall with its 143 foot tall glass domed ceiling (Acland 73). Acland describes the ramp as a ceremonial colonnade of 85 metres long and 19 metres high and notes that “representational links have been made between this colonnade and Bernini’s ramp at St. Peter’s [Cathedral]” (69-70). Upon entering the spaces of gallery display, it is evident that while objects in ethnographic museums are “adapted to instruct,” works of art displayed in the gallery are “adapted to impress” (Zeller 29-30). This is partly achieved through the large, white, spaces of exhibition with high ceilings and minimal decoration. The gallery is silent, with the only sounds being spillage from distant video installations. Guards are posted in nearly every space, standing and watching. Their role, as Trondsen described it, is as kind of “social control agent[s] … to prevent vandalism and disturbing behaviour” (113). Many rooms do not have seating, but if they do it is a low, backless and modern cushioned bench placed minimally at the very centre of the room. Seating is functional, only for necessary rest from the pedestrian pacing of the gallery route. In this way the needs of the body, for rest and sociality, are denied in favour of the cerebral contemplation of works of art. Spaces of sociality – for example, eating at the cafeteria or the activities set up for children – are always outside of the display areas. As they walk, self-conscious visitors move almost as “church goers,” in reverent silence as they consider artworks and their behaviour to others betrays a kind of “civil inattention” (108).

In this space, the communication of the museum takes place through the displays themselves and is a kind of one-way transmission. Labels are secondary
to the experience of the work of art and may not even have descriptions. Viewers are either briefly told about the work or are conversely left to their own devices to understand it, presumably to learn through “contemplative looking” (Hooper-Greenhill Education, 192). As NGC director Marc Mayer wrote in an article for the Ottawa Citizen, “of the over 400 works in our Canadian galleries, only about 24 have explanatory labels (n.pag.).” He added that “less than three per cent of our visitors take guided tours,” thus not taking advantage of this form of information provided by the gallery for a fee (n.pag.). Where the Unassailable Voice is heard, it is controlled and highly authored. Viewers are expected to have transformative experiences in front of works of art, but these experiences are assumed. In these ways, experiences of works of art by visitors are varied and not always adequately informed.

How does the web presence of the National Gallery of Canada, then, compare to this physical information system? I would stipulate that this is not a one-to-one comparison since the Internet presence and physical presence of the institution represent two very different realms for the display of artworks. While the physical institution as I have described it seems to struggle with its educational mandate in relation to its privileging of the aesthetic experience of artworks, the Internet presents a realm of limited aesthetics and thus one where the ends of information and education might be more readily pursued. But in examining these two public interfaces, it is worth interrogating whether or not the NGC has successfully made the transition from the aesthetic demands and aspirations that govern its approach to organizing the physical gallery to the educational possibilities opened up by the participatory pedagogies of emerging
media. First, it is important to understand how the Internet structures behaviour in different ways. The Internet is one component of what scholars and the general public has been calling “new media.” The word “new” in this catchphrase is misleading, however, since, as Jonathan Sterne points out, most “‘new’ technologies have been around for decades” (368). Using the term “new” to identify digital media is to “import the value-system of advertisement into scholarship, where ‘newness’ itself is an index of sociocultural significance and transformative power” (368). If we refer to the Internet, then, as ‘digital media,’ it is helpful to think of it as not a radical break from older media but rather a “process of reformulating, reformatting, recycling, returning and even remembering other media” (Hoskins 14). Lev Manovich refers to this as a revolutionary “shift of all culture to computer-mediated forms of production, distribution, and communication” (19). He describes the Internet itself as “one huge distributed media database” (35). But it is not merely a storage container remediating earlier forms of media – the Internet is also an immersive experience with different types of interactions available within it than earlier media forms provided. Lawrence Lessig in his book *Code* teases out the distinction between the Internet and what he calls cyberspace. For Lessig, people perform regular activities on the Internet, for example, online banking. But cyberspace is “a richer experience. Cyberspace is something you get pulled “into,” perhaps by the intimacy of instant message chat or the intricacy of ‘massively multiple online games’ (9). Cyberspace is the space one *inhabits* when immersively engaged in an online activity. The web is often conceived of as limitless, full of free unregulated spaces for expression and creation. However, Lessig describes how
The web is in fact subject to regulation: through the software and hardware that structures it. The law-like structure of coding shapes what behaviours become possible in online spaces. The “instructions embedded into the software or hardware … makes cyberspace what it is. This code is the ‘built environment’ of social life in cyberspace. It is its ‘architecture’ (121). As Mark Stefik elaborates:

Barriers within cyberspace – separate chat rooms, intranet gateways, digital envelopes, and other systems to limit access – resemble the effects of national borders, physical boundaries, and distance. Programming determines which people can access which digital objects and which digital objects can interact with other digital objects. How such programming regulates human interactions – and thus modulates change – depends on the choices made (14-15).

The choices made by site creators determine what behaviours are possible at a given site, determining the values of the spaces they create. As Lessig writes, “spaces have values … they manifest these values through the practices or lives that they enable or disable” (86). In analyzing the websites of the NGC and steve.museum, I will be teasing out these structuring elements and how they affect knowledge.

The National Gallery of Canada’s web presence is accessed through gallery.ca where the viewer is presented with a kind of splash screen offering three routes of access to content: the main NGC site containing general event information about the gallery, the Cybermuse section with the tagline “your art education research site,” and the online shop to purchase gallery memorabilia. My analysis will focus on Cybermuse, the gallery’s interface targeted for online learning. In my interview with Ashish Bhagrath, head of the web and new media
division of the gallery staff, he noted that Cybermuse is extremely popular based
on “industry standard.” The average time spent on the site is 38 minutes, and the
site itself achieves about 50-55 million visits per year. On the front page of
Cybermuse an overview of the options is displayed attractively with an animated
flash interface. The major sections are divided based on age and interest group
distinctions: kids, youth, teachers, and researchers. Other sections include a box
to “Search the collection,” the My Cybermuse application for users to create their
own exhibitions, Showcases featuring different themes and artists, and Gallery
Channels with extra audio and video features such as interviews with artists or
curators. The content in each section is dominated by two main information
interfaces: a searchable database of the collection, and multiple flash-based
modules available throughout. In Chapter 3, I will further elaborate on the
dynamic tension between database and narrative, but for the purposes of this
analysis I am interested in how these two structures affect the acquisition of
knowledge about works of art by the visitor.

The search interface is a main feature of the front page and remains at the
top right of the site for access while in any other space. It features both a
keyword search as well as an alphabetical artist index. The search proves to be
very comprehensive. Entering the keyword “Monet,” for example, yields multiple
results under the categories of Artworks, Artists, Media, Pages, and Educational.
While the search proclaims to comb the permanent collection, many results have
information about the artwork with an image icon reading, “image n/a.” These
represent images from the collection that have not yet been digitized. As
Bhagrath informed me, there are approximately 72 700 total works in the
collection and “out of that 26,000 have been digitized … approximately 28.3%.”

Copyright must be cleared for each image that is not in the public domain, a process that can take months and costs the gallery fees each time. Bhagrath asserts that though they are focused on putting as many images online as possible, the full collection will never be available, based on copyright complications and artists who do not wish to grant access to having their works digitized. The descriptions that are provided for some images are short paragraph explanations accompanied by the provenance details such as medium, size, and date acquired. Although works of art are not linked to others thematically through the search tool, on the side of each image are any media files linked to the artist.

The database tool here represents a powerful means for the visitor to quickly sift through the NGC’s vast collection to find what they are looking for. Manovich defines a database as “a structured collection of data … organized for fast search and retrieval by a computer” (218). Just as Manovich believes the database to be a “symbolic form of a computer age,” N. Katherine Hayles elaborates on this by explaining that databases have “become one of the most dominant forms of (re)presenting and organizing information in the era of new media” and are “one of the most powerful tools of gathering and ordering a vast amount of information and of executing a structured type of query repeatedly” (1604). The Internet in general is a massive database organized in a variety of ways but most commonly by virtue of search tools such as the popular Google.com site. In accessing the database the visitor employs self-directed actions such as searching, navigating and viewing the results of their queries. However, they are not able to browse the collection – only access it through
search commands, thus the viewer must know what he or she is searching for in advance in order to be able to access the collection. Upon reaching pages devoted to individual images through the search tool, the images of artworks available are at a very low resolution for copyright reasons and the descriptions, if present, are minimal. Likewise on these individual database pages, thematic connections to other works of art or artists to which a work is related by medium, period, movement or style are not made. With the fluidity of online information space, these categories could be made hyperlinked; accessible through the individual page to provide alternative means of sorting and accessing groups of images. In the physical museum, these kinds of overarching connections would be achieved through the proximity of gallery display in exhibition design. Thus while the search tool represents a powerful one for visitors, the lack of connectivity between parts of the collection and inability to browse through it in other ways result in its being a limited tool for understanding how works of art are organized historically and thematically by museum historians. As Trant et. al. write,

Collection databases present the characteristics of objects (such as creator, size, materials, use and provenance) without context, and in isolation from related works. This isolation is problematic because, typically, museum collections comprise very large numbers of objects that to the ‘untrained eye’ can seem very similar (84).

The medium through which stylistic, thematic and historical connections are made between artworks by the museum is via the second most common interface on the site: “interactive” flash applications that form thematic modules in the sections based on age or interest group. Since there are many such modules, I will focus on one located in the Youth section, entitled
“Deconstructing Art.” The Youth section is one of Cybermuse’s most popular access points (Bhagrath). From the entry flash page, this particular activity is described as follows: “Have you ever stood in front of an artwork and wondered how the artist made it? Here you will deconstruct 4 works of art.” At the main page, there are four choices of pictorial paintings. The default already chosen is by James Ensor, entitled *Skeletons in the Studio*. A prominent text to the right of the painting informs the viewer: “Deconstruct a work of art by using filters to find out how it was made.” At the bottom there are three tabs representing the different filters the visitor can select: Perspective, Planes, and Elements. Clicking on “Perspective” for the James Ensor painting causes the tab to expand over the image and contract, thus “filtering” the image as it returns to its earlier position to reveal white perspectival lines imposed on the painting’s image and new text to the side of the painting:

The line of sight of the large window creates a perspective further accentuated by the presence of the small window in the background of the painting. It should be noted that this work is a modern one; the use of perspective is therefore neither objective nor intentional.

This activity provides a rich example of the nuances of the art gallery’s approach to pedagogy. First, while the introduction to this module proclaims that “you” will deconstruct the painting, the way that the visitor acts is to merely click on pre-provided categories and pre-written information. The visitor is thus merely receiving a transmission in this scenario and follows a route planned in advance by the designer of the interface. Second, the information provided is unclear. The phrase, “the use of perspective is therefore neither objective nor intentional” is the
most complex here and does not seem to follow logic without a proper explanation of what the author means by “modern,” “objective,” and “intentional” in reference to this image. By using the word “therefore,” the writer of this text comes to a conclusion, but the reader is not necessarily following along. The Planes tab explains what the different “planes” in the image are, but it is not clear what Planes actually are, or how the anonymous author of the flash application determines them. The text here represents expert knowledge not always fully explained, and the process of the determination of meaning and knowledge is not clear to the visitor.

The NGC describes these flash applications as “interpretive and interactive games” (“About Cybermuse”). I want to focus on this term interactive, since as a commonly used term it can be misleading. As Manovich writes,

> Although it is relatively easy to specify ... interactive structures used in new media objects, it is much more difficult to deal theoretically with users' experiences of these structures. This aspect of interactivity remains one of the most difficult theoretical questions raised by new media (56).

Chris Crawford more explicitly describes interactivity as a “cyclic process in which two actors alternately listen, think and speak” (3). In this case, the computer application and museum discourse within it could be seen as one actor, while the user is another. Manovich claims that all art “is ‘interactive’ in a number of ways. Ellipses in literary narration, missing details of objects in visual art, and other representational ‘shortcuts’ require the user to fill in missing information” (56). Thus the actions of listening, thinking and speaking to Manovich can be internal dialogue on the part of the responding user. He
distinguishes between open and closed interactivity. In closed interactivity, the “user plays an active role in determining the order in which already generated elements are accessed … asked to follow ‘pre-programmed, objectively existing associations’” (40). But as he elaborates, “interactive interfaces foreground the paradigmatic dimensions … [y]et they are still organized along the syntagmatic dimension. Although the user is making choices at each new screen, the end result is a linear sequence of screens which she follows” (232). This notion of closed interactivity is apt at describing the flash-modules that the NGC provides. For Manovich, open interactivity is conversely a more complex kind “in which both the elements and the structure of the whole object are either moderated or generated on the fly in response to the user’s interaction with a program” (40). But other scholars suggest that a productive way of understanding interactivity is as part of a continuum, where, as Nathan Shedroff suggests, “[t]he difference that defines interactivity can include the amount of control the audience has over the tools, pace or content; the amount of choice this control offers; and the ability to use the tool or content to be productive or to create” (283). When examining an interface, one can ask, which elements “lead to a good, intense, or rewarding conversation” (Crawford 8)? Flash is an interesting medium chosen by the NGC in this situation, since it is a form of closed interactivity it is narrative technology that is highly authored and controlled – the designer of the application decides how the user’s selections fit into a larger plan for the activity. The user makes the choices as presented to him or her based on a schematic that the designer has planned in advance. Since their only action is selection and not creation, this level of interactivity is limited.
There are several other parts of the website that in different ways seem to invite visitor participation. The My Cybermuse interface proposes to the user: “Create your own and unique virtual exhibition and share it with other web users!” While this sounds promising, the actual interface is a private and individual one requiring registration. Images selected from the collection can only be shared with others selectively via email addresses rather than to a general public of participants as might be expected. While users have the option to annotate the works of art they select with their own text, the ‘exhibition’ is not laid out in a sequential fashion but is more akin to a storage space where images are held in no particular order. Thus it is a closed interface with limited possibilities for knowledge creation, sharing and participation with others. Also, as Cooper points out, “the final iteration of this online gallery does not include the word curator” (n.pag.). Visitors are empowered to create a private collection and send it to others but are not necessarily empowered as generators of valid and worthwhile public knowledge.

Other participatory projects on the site are the Provenance Research Project, where the gallery mentions that they welcome any information the public has about undetermined artworks, and links to the three social web tools that the gallery has begun to use: Youtube, Facebook and Twitter. The links to these different tools are on a single page buried in the website. While one might expect the social web links to be featured prominently on the homepage, they are nestled deep within the main NGC general information site under the obscure path “About the NGC > Online Communities.” When I asked Bhagrath about why they were not featured, he admitted that it had been on the frontpage but had to be
removed since they are “limited” with their “web architecture.” However, he notes that they are in the process of a redesign of the site to better accommodate these links.

Overall, both initiatives, provenance and social media sites, are not clearly linked to the Cybermuse part of the NGC’s web presence that is geared towards user interaction. This link system betrays a lack of connectivity within the site itself. But it is also interesting to note that the website in all of its spaces has virtually no hyperlinks to the outside network of the Internet. All sections are networked only within the gallery’s proper domain. By disassociating itself from the larger network, it presents itself as a closed system of objective knowledge. The art gallery is a final destination rather than a flow-through site to other parts of the web. Even the splash page visible at the main gallery.ca address serves as an unusual threshold that can be seen as almost an entrance mirroring that of the physical gallery. Just as in the physical gallery space, the dramatic image of Louise Bourgeois’ sculpture *Maman* is a primary feature. With the strong structuring practices of the web presence, the NGC has managed to avoid being what Malraux envisioned, a “museum without walls.” In fact, the walls seem to be well fortified even in the more fluid structure of code. And just as in the physical gallery, access to the site is a kind of solitary experience – the voice of the museum is the most prominent while there is an absence of other social bodies. As I have argued through the analysis of both the narrative and database forms on the website, neither seems to entirely support “the museums’ goal of improving access and building understanding of the objects in their care” (Trant 84).
Turning to an example of alternative online museum structuring, I would like to introduce the steve project and the steve.museum interface. Steve is so named since the collaborators involved wanted a name that was “simple, friendly and easy to remember” (“FAQ”). It represents a collaboration between a team of museum professionals and others who wanted to explore the use of social tagging as a means to both find new ways to organize heritage collections and provide new forms of engagement between visitors and these collections (“Home”). They saw that visitors often had difficulty navigating online museum collections and believed the problem to stem from “a semantic gap that separated museums’ formal description of works – usually created by art historians or other specialists – and the vernacular language used by the general public for searching” (“FAQ”). The steve team first collaborated in 2005 after a Museums and the Web professional forum (Chun et. al) and developed their initial project to test out the ideas of “social tagging and folksonomic description” they had discussed. As they elaborate:

We’re exploring the tools and techniques that support social tagging (and facilitate engagement with collections) and studying the resulting folksonomic terminology and its effectiveness in supporting improved access to museum collections. We’re also interested in understanding what motivates individuals to contribute tags and in studying how this new sort of engagement with museum objects might help build new audiences and draw contributors who bring a multi-cultural perspective to looking at our works of art (ibid.).

As a group they continue to conduct research on how to use tagging effectively, offer open-source software, and support to museums interested in using the tool for their own collections (“Software”). Their initial project remains active. First
called steve.museum, it is now named the steve tagger and located at tagger.steve.museum. A collaboration of art images from 18 different institutions, users can register to add their own qualitative tags to artworks describing ‘what they see.’ As common tags emerge, this system offers new ways to access images from collections based on the perspective of visitors. This offers organization that is non-hierarchical, collectively determined, and maintained by the users themselves. Tagging is interesting for museums in several key ways. First, the act of tagging an image proves to be a kind of “dialogue between the viewer and the work, and the viewer and the museum” (Trant 85). A tag is “a user’s assertion that a work of art is about something (in some way, at some time)” and thus supports the practice of visitors ‘reading’ works of art more closely and critically (Trant 85). The system of organization that emerges from the collective tagging of collections has been coined a “folksonomy,” named by Thomas Vander Wal in 2005 to indicate an “ordered set of categories … that emerges from how people tag items” (Weinberger 125). Second, the visitor becomes an active participant in the knowledge system of the museum. By creating new access points for artworks, the visitor not only improves the gallery archive but also becomes a part of the knowledge process. Finally, the use of this system provides a means for the museum to learn about how their visitors understand works of art. As Trant writes:

Looking at the types of tags supplied by those outside museums and studying how they correlate (or do not) with the data now made available by museums can provide insight into users’ perceptions, identify areas of disconnect, and help museums adapt to meet their missions (86).
Incorrect tags proving misinterpretations of artworks serve as “‘teachable moments’: places where museums could do more to facilitate the understanding about particular kinds of works” (100).

At the steve tagger site we can see how this folksonomic system works. From the homepage it is clear that there many different access points to images in the database: a search window at the top right, a random selection of clickable image icons, a tag cloud featuring the top 100 tags or “terms” used by visitors, and a drop-down filter to sort by institution. Moving your cursor over an image reveals its title in a flash overlay to briefly identify it before it is selected. There are also three main pages of access: Objects, Terms, and Sets. On the Objects page visitors encounters a set of images able to be browsed by page, and again my institution. On the Terms page the Top 1000 tags are displayed in a large tag cloud. Tag clouds are means of visualizing tags used in the folksonomy: popular tags that have been used repeatedly manifest as bolder and larger, while minor and lesser-used tags are smaller. Thus font size and thickness represent frequency of use. Some of the most popular tags in the top 1000 are words like “blue,” “abstract,” “building” and “dress.” On this page the visitor can also view the entire list of tags organized alphabetically. Upon first glance, here one can see a bevy of what seem to be inaccurate tags, for example “abrahamlincoln” and “abolishionist.” On the Sets page, thematically grouped sets of images are grouped under the heading of the two institutions that participated in this feature, offering yet another way of accessing works of art. The thematic groupings consist of both serious and playful categories, including for example “Happy Hour,” “Modern Art,” “In the Nude,” and “Prints and Drawings.”
The selection of an individual work of art, for example the painting

*Landscape* by the artist Jean Victor Bertin, reveals a plethora of data describing the image, each one hyperlinked to connect to other artworks. For example, the date it was created and medium are both clickable hyperlinks revealing all other works created during the same year or with the same medium. This is a significant point – the tagger tool allows users to see historical and other connections between a particular work and others, in this case making connections between artworks and across the spaces of different institutions – a powerful demonstration of the capabilities of digital media technology. Of course the tags identified by users are present on the painting’s feature page. Clicking the link on the left, that reads, “View on imamuseum.org,” brings one to the feature page of the painting on the institution’s own website. In this case, it brings you to a particularly interesting institutional site. Steve software has since been used in many different ways by different institutions. This museum, the Indianapolis Museum of Art, uses the steve software to fully integrate tagging into their online collection (“Steve in Action”). The feature page on their site offers what the steve tagger does not – a gallery label presenting the curatorial perspective on the artwork in a fuller paragraph format. To the top right, however, the steve tagger tags are provided and the museum invites the visitor to add their own tag. As the text reads above it: “Tell us what you see / Login to the Steve Tagger … to add tags / What Others Saw” (“Landscape”).

From this analysis, it is clear that the steve project presents a powerful means of organizing museum collections in different ways. The site enables multiple points of access that enable browsing or wandering for users with
different needs. Navigation is thus open and multi-nodal. Visitor contributions are publicly visible, are attached directly to the work of art, and affect the organization of collections in online space. But do these contributions translate into the “real” physical space of the gallery? I would suggest that perhaps this point has not yet been reached, but online experiments such as steve.museum offer possibilities for future re-imaginings of the institution and nonetheless involve visitors in the knowledge process of the museum through a different medium.

Eilean Hooper-Greenhill, in her book *Museums and the Interpretation of Visual Culture*, describes her vision of the post-museum, an ideal future possibility for art galleries that has not yet been achieved but “whose shape is beginning to be seen” (8). While the modernist museum understands “communication as transmission,” the post-museum sees “communication as an integral part of culture as a whole” (125). The post-museum re-envisions knowledge so that the expert knowledge of the museum remains present but is integrated with the “everyday human experience of visitors and non-specialists,” thus attempting to “involve the emotions and imaginations of visitors” (142-143). She adds that “[w]here the modernist museum was (and is) imagined as a building, the museum in the future may be imagined as a process or an experience” (152).

Hooper-Greenhill doesn’t explicitly mention participation as part of her vision, but I have argued that it may be key to an improved relation to the work of art. Before concluding this chapter it is important to address critiques of the concept of participation that have emerged especially in regards to the Internet,
and to define specifically what I mean by participation in this context. The Internet that has been enthusiastically hailed as a medium that allows for, as Astra Taylor writes, “the invitation and inclusion of everyone, everywhere. The Internet, we are told, makes this dream a reality, erasing borders and distinctions, smoothing out differences and hierarchies. We are all equal now, because we believe everyone's voice can be heard” (n.pag). Jodi Dean describes this type of discourse as a fantasy, identifying instead the abundance of online activity as resulting in a situation where the “exchange value of messages overtakes their use value” (11). In other words, what becomes valuable politically online is the act of contributing to circulation that viewers believe to be “registering” with others, while Dean argues it is ultimately a practice of de-politicization (14, 10).

Participation online in the form of blog commentary, online petitions, forums, and other seemingly active forms of information circulation, Dean argues, most often mistake meaningful politics as the “circulation of content” rather than as “official policy” (2). Online activity is misunderstood as “a good in itself” that may bear no meaningful impact on the objects of this active discourse in society (Foster Rooms, 194).

Andrew Barry writes that “in order to account for the significance of interactivity in different locations one must examine how the idea and the technology becomes associated with particular political strategies and ideas in specific circumstances” (151). In the introduction I referred to the issue of whether or not participation, in the cases of the online spaces I discuss, can be qualified as meaningful. The type of participation I feature is one that takes advantage of the Internet’s nature as a fluid information space and that is
mediated or facilitated by the museum as an intellectual authority. Participation in these spaces remains, therefore, hierarchical to a certain extent and linked to the ‘real world’ institution. The steve tagger project is one that I argue represents a meaningful space of participation. Access to institutions is achieved via an online interface through which visitors are invited to help define the online collection. This system with its functionality could be implemented in the electronic archive used by museum academics themselves since it helps to sort, classify and create new means of accessing the collection. In imagining other participatory projects initiated by the museum, opportunities for interaction in the gallery could have positive consequences for knowledge of Canadian art heritage. As works of art are opened up hermeneutically to a wider range of perspectives apart from that of the museum voice, they are, through dialogue, “constantly changing” and thus “alive” culturally (Trondsen 77). Thus, providing mediated social spaces for the exploration of art works seems to be of benefit to the museum institution’s educational aims and Canadian heritage.

The steve tagger project demonstrates in many ways participatory contribution that fulfills the glimpse of the post-museum that Hooper-Greenhill describes. Using the flexible and open tagging software they developed, the steve space enables users to participate in the knowledge process. In contrast to this system, the NGC website offers very little unique to the properties of the digital medium, but instead mirrors the limited knowledge-experience structures of the physical institution. The art gallery’s pedagogy seems to fail in two main ways in both realms: it does not provide the viewer with quite enough synthesized information to be able to ensure understanding of works of art based on a
transmission model of communication, and it does not provide means for visitors to participate, collaborate with others socially to determine meaning, or give feedback in the learning process. Both online sites demonstrate that web architecture, the coded software underlying online spaces, can enable or disable different behaviours by users just as in the physical space of museums. I would argue that the web presence of a museum does not necessarily purport to displace the physical institution but instead offers an alternative information-based resource to access the gallery’s heritage for visitors located in diverse geographic locations. These two projects are only two approaches to the organizing of art collections online. The web remains a rich and fluid information space in which museums can explore the establishment of “relationships” and “contextual references beyond what is visible in the gallery, and potentially richer than what is written in a book” (Samis 195).
Chapter 3: Narrative

Knowledge is a path cut through a maze, a line attempting adequacy to a plane, a mere chain seeking dominion over a network. As such, knowledge is necessarily incomplete, yet the drawing of lines, the chaining of links, is the only way to reach a point at the centre and to find one’s way home again.

Wendy Steiner, “Pictorial Narrativity” (145).

Narrative is a way of ordering information cohesively according to the logic of cause and effect or, as Ernst writes, “narration assimilates information by re-counting it in the synecdochical mode” (Telling, 32). As a cultural paradigm it is a ubiquitous human practice of making sense of the world. Art museums, as institutions devoted to the aesthetics and knowledge surrounding the works of art they collect, participate necessarily in narrative practice. They assemble and display a collection of meaningful objects within an institutional space, and as Susan Stewart writes, “[b]ecause the collection replaces origin with classification, thereby making temporality a spatial and material phenomenon, its existence is dependent upon principles of organization and classification” (Stewart 153). How does the museum, then, create narratives about and through the works of art in its collection? I share the argument posited by Mieke Bal in her book Double Exposures, that:

a museum installation is a discourse, and an exhibition is an utterance within that discourse. The utterance consists of neither words nor image alone, nor of the frame nor frame-up of the installation, but of the productive tensions between images, captions (words)
Bal defines the act of exposition by the museum in this way as a “discursive behaviour” (2). As the main interface to the visiting public, exhibition in the museum is the primary and most visible means by which it produces knowledge about works of art. To establish their authority in this production, museums exert control over narrative in this display in two main ways: through the recounting of a story about the individual artworks on display, and through the recounting of a story that uses those artworks as elements of a larger narrative trajectory. The different techniques Bal introduces – spatial display, textual elements, and curatorial choices of hanging – all constitute means by which works of art become a part of museum narratives. Composing part of the larger collection of the museum and in order to create a sense of its ‘unity’ and ‘completeness,’ art objects are placed “within a particular discursive order, to render them knowable through their inscription within a particular system” (Whitelaw 75).

Bal is particularly interested in outing the museum as the invisible “epistemic authority” establishing this institutional narrative, since it often serves as an external and seemingly neutral backdrop to the story being told (2). I would argue that the ways in which artworks form part of museum narratives are subtle, since, despite the powerful effects of the museum’s framing practices, the qualities of the display and space reveal an overarching effort by the institution to allow the artwork to ‘speak for itself.’ But are works of art innately narrative?

While narrativity is arguably best suited to linguistic media, non-verbal media can also communicate stories in interesting ways, often requiring for their narrative
completion the participation of the viewer who uses her imagination and
interpretive faculties to fill in the links of the narrative and discover meaning
therein. However, in many cases the narrativity in artworks is difficult to access,
unclear, or even anti-narrative, particularly in the case of some non-
representational paintings and sculptures of modernist and postmodernist
movements. Whether or not the viewer can interpret obscure narrative gestures to
understand the meaning of artworks depends to some degree on how the museum
frames them through display practices. With the art museum’s qualified body of
art scholars and historians, the employment of narrative as part of its facilitation
of knowledge of the works of art in its care is necessary and even desirable, I will
argue, but the quality of this narrative and its structure are worthy of critique. I
will conduct an analysis of the narrative techniques employed by the National
Gallery of Canada (NGC) focusing on the permanent collection, and specifically
with reference to Barnett Newman’s controversial painting *Voice of Fire* as an
example demonstrating some of the narrative limitations of the museum. Turning
to the Internet, I will confront the status of narrative in relation to emerging digital
media forms and discuss whether and how the narrative practices of the NGC are
carried into their online web presence. I will then explore the narrative qualities
of the blogging medium as seen in the Art Gallery of Ontario (AGO)’s blog *Art
Matters*. In analyzing narrative practice as it takes shape in such medial contexts
as architectural display, works of art, flash interfaces, and online blogs, I
participate in the scholarship of narrative across forms of media, otherwise known
as narrative media studies or transmedial narratology (Ryan Introduction, 33). As
Marie-Laure Ryan writes, “the abstract cognitive structure we call narrative is
such that it can be called to mind by many different media, but each medium has
different expressive resources” (Ryan Beyond, 594).

What then, are the expressive resources available in the multimedial space
of the art museum? As I reiterate, architecture can be seen as a spatio-temporal
construct that, in combination with other elements of display, can act as a
narrative framework (Ryan Defining, n.pag). The choices about which artists and
artworks to install in each space, how to order them in relation to each other, and
how to support them textually via text panels or labels – these are all choices
made by curators who anticipate the movement of visitors through the space and
attempt to make historical and aesthetic connections for them as they orient
themselves. Display in the gallery space is overall, as Bal writes, a “sign system
working in the realm between the visual and verbal, and between information and
persuasion, as it produces the viewer’s knowledge” (561). Setting aside the spaces
of the NGC devoted to temporary exhibitions, the main permanent gallery spaces
are clearly delineated: two blocks are devoted to contemporary art and two blocks
are devoted to historical works that demonstrate an organizing focus on
chronology and geographic location. The block on the second floor outlines the
history of American and European art with rooms devoted to movements such as
Gothic, Baroque and Renaissance, while the block on the first floor is devoted to
the history of Canadian art including recognized movements such as the Group of
Seven. Moving through each block with its different rooms containing artworks
aligned with different historical stages, leads the visitor along a transition through
time, made possible by the architecture of the space that “derives from the
Renaissance palace, with its series of rooms *enfilade*” (Krauss Postmodernism’s,
343). As Ryan writes, an analogy can be drawn between the “temporality of plot and the experience of walking through a building” where “the visitor’s discovery tour is plotted as a meaningful succession of events” (Defining, n.pag).

In the practice of organizing the display of the collection in these rooms, the NGC draws from the art historical tradition influenced strongly by Hegel’s *Aesthetics*, following a chronological order that adheres to the developmental history of art as a progress of creative movements (Whitelaw 93). As Hegel wrote,

> Unless we bring with us in the case of each picture a knowledge of the country, period, and school to which it belongs, as well as of the master who painted it, most galleries seem to be a senseless confusion out of which we cannot find our way. Thus the greatest aid to study and intelligent enjoyment is an historical arrangement. (qtd. in Carrier 61).

Situating artworks historically is seen as being a key practice for the museum to help visitors understand individual artworks as part of a larger historical context. In their 1985 publication *Collections Policy and Procedures*, the NGC reveals this evolutionary model and also their active engagement in the practice of establishing history even in their contemporary display areas:

> The collection has been developed, as a whole, with an awareness of historical process – which is to say, that what is modern today, will be historical tomorrow. In the future, no doubt, new directions will develop, but the evolutionary pattern set early in this century, has resulted in a collection of which the coherence and integrity can and must be perpetuated (n.pag).

There is a perceived need to maintain a clarity that aligns with other art museums that follow a similar system of display, so that the Renaissance area of the NGC can be related to the Renaissance rooms of other institutions and a cohesive sense
of the period can be formed for the visitor. The possible downfall of this approach is that it presents these historical movements as unified and homogenous and the artworks within each movement as being fully consistent with the movement’s or period’s ideals when in fact individuals artists often interrogate or experiment with the trends at hand and different movements have variances and complexity that are not always exhibited clearly in these spaces.

If not following along with the optional floor plan map it is easy to get lost in the winding rooms of either large historical block of spaces. As Whitelaw observes, “the galleries form a continuous loop from which the viewer can only with difficulty escape” (173). There are only two exits from each block: one next to the entrance from which one enters the block in the first place, and one hallway providing a passageway to the contemporary areas in the other blocks. The rooms are numbered generically with black-lettered labels such as A102 and C214 minimally hung in the narrow space of the doorjamb leading into each room. Otherwise, the wandering visitor can easily lose track and become disoriented in these large rooms filled with artworks. It is difficult to maneuver to locate a particular painting without getting disoriented and adjacent spaces are easy to wander into through this effort. Since each room presents a chronological stage in an overall tradition of art historical survey, one possible effect of getting lost could be the visitor’s discovery of their own narrative through their individual path taken. This effect of these spaces being encountered in the wrong order reveals a kind of non-linear formation of narrative. Another possible outcome of getting lost for a visitor is the experience of disorientation and frustration that
does not necessarily lead to a fruitful narrative ordering. I argue that this particular spatial formation in the art museum is labyrinthine in nature.

There are two main types of labyrinth design: unicursal or multicursal (Basu 49). The unicursal maze consists of a single path that may twist and turn but leads to a single destination (49). But the multicursal maze, as Paul Basu writes,

features an array of choices between paths and embodies frequent testing and repeated confrontations with uncertainty. Movement through the multicursal maze is thus repetitive, halting, and episodic, with each forking path requiring pause for thought and decision. In contrast to the unicursal maze, the essential experience of the multicursal maze is therefore one of confusion, doubt and frustration as one ambiguity follows another (50).

Having experienced the feelings of frustration myself in becoming lost in the large blocks of the gallery with their networks of rooms, I identify the labyrinthine quality it has as multicursal in this way. The mythology of the labyrinth is associated with the journey from “confusion to understanding” or “ignorance to knowledge” – pointing to a kind of process of learning in the experience (51). Basu points to postmodern qualities of this experience, where, mired in confusion, the “maze-wanderer participates in her own education, proceeding by trial and error, learning by dialectic” (51). But each room encountered presents a chronological module predetermined by the museum and presented as objective knowledge privileging a stable and seemingly unified conception of historical development. While the viewer may visit the narrative at different points and in an unexpected order, the rooms they encounter are presented as fixed knowledge points. The effect of becoming lost in a network of
cohesive room is that these historical formations become more distinctive and identifiable as landmarks to help one orient to the space, thus reinforcing the unified view of these movements. The museum’s overarching narrative system of display privileges sweeping visual associations – an understanding of works of art through observing the juxtaposition of artworks to one another and, by association with the room they belong to, noting the historical period or movement that the artwork is a part of. Art museums as institutions having an educational mandate are interested in providing a means to understand how works of art fit into a larger history of thought and practice – this is necessary for visitors who may not come equipped with foreknowledge of this historical trajectory. But this system of display does not provide opportunities or spaces for breaks in the narrative, questioning of the narrative, opportunities to incorporate the narratives of visitors in meaningful ways, or, and perhaps most importantly, a demonstration of how the narrative that these artworks are aligned with was formed in the first place.

This method of display dependent on chronologically-based rooms exerts a strong narrative force but nonetheless fails to distinguish individual works of art for their unique identities in each room. I observed that many individual artworks do not have extended text labels but merely have labels denoting their basic provenance. The display techniques implemented for individual artworks reflect a need to privilege aesthetic experience over information. The minimal decor in each space, the loose associations with historical periods and the diminutive text panels often with few details to aid in interpretation all point to efforts on the part of the museum to be as unobtrusive as possible in the experience, to privilege
works of art in order to allow the visitor to interpret the works of art autonomously, and for the artist’s work to ‘speak for itself.’

The organization of gallery space is in this way not the only means by which narrativity is established in the presentation of artworks in the museum; there is also the potential narrativity of the works themselves and the textual and interpretive material displayed alongside them. To what degree can works of art be interpreted as having narrative qualities? Sol Worth argues, “visual media lack the code, the grammar, and the syntactic rules necessary to articulate specific meanings” (qtd. in Ryan Introduction, 10). Most paintings do not demonstrate the kind of linear narrative sequences present in language but instead represent non-verbally and spatially through “pure configuration” (Steiner 145). Temporally, “[v]irtually all post-Renaissance works, however specific or particular their action, characters, place, or time – represent an event through an isolated moment” (150). As an “art of the visible” painting is also an “art of the present,” but through depicting a moment that is suggestive of the past and future, or a “pregnant moment,” a painting can take advantage of the viewer’s imagination to see a sequence of temporal actions (Ryan Introduction, 25). In this instance typical of representational paintings, narrativity to a large extent relies on the viewer who reads into the painting a series of actions having meaning. As purely non-verbal, visual works of art have an uneasy relationship to verbal descriptions. As W.J.T. Mitchell writes, “words can ‘cite,’ but never ‘sight’ their objects” and “visual experiences have no verbal equivalents” (Picture, 152). In attempting to understand a work of art, the viewer may experience it aesthetically in ways that are sensuous and pre- or extra-linguistic, but may also attempt to put that
experience and the work into words, to make sense of it. This translation into
textual description or interpretation is incomplete since it can never fully be
equivalent to experiencing the work of art visually. Many also believe that a
textual description can impose itself onto the artwork and incite a closure of
meaning; through summarizing it too succinctly a viewer may be prevented from
the other meanings the work may possess. There is thus an oscillation and tension
between the verbal and non-verbal in the experience of the artwork, both in the
process of interpretation and in its physical display accompanied by a text label.

A particularly charged instance of this tension is clear in the controversy
surrounding the purchase of the non-representational painting *Voice of Fire*
by Barnett Newman, acquired by the National Gallery of Canada in March of 1990
for 1.76 million dollars (Barber 99). Extremely large at 5.44 metres high and 2.45
metres wide, *Voice of Fire* consists of three vertical painted stripes of equal width
(Duve 85). The central stripe is bright cadmium red, while at either side there are
two stripes of deep ultramarine blue (85). The announcement of this large
financial investment caused a heated debate in the media as the public expressed
outrage at such a large amount of money spent on something that, to many,
seemed meaningless. Many announced that they could paint the same thing easily
themselves. This purchase and its meaning has become arguably one of the most
public narratives recounted about the NGC and the room in which the work is
exhibited is popular as people come to see this infamous artwork in person. A
year later nothing was said about the gallery’s purchase of a representational
painting by Italian Baroque artist Guido Reni for 3.3 million (O’Brien
Introduction, 7), so why did this particular purchase cause so much outrage?
I will argue that the controversy resulted from a fault on the part of the National Gallery of Canada, specifically a failure to narrate and contextualize a painting in the gallery that is difficult to understand and access conceptually for those without a theoretical background in abstract and formalist painting. As I described in the previous chapter, there is a conflict in the art museum between the aims of education and aesthetics. However, I argue that information may be necessary to a full aesthetic experience. One might think that one of the most controversial works of art in the gallery’s history would have an extended text label, some kind of support to help contextualize the work’s value. Instead, the work is displayed in one of the largest rooms of the interior gallery within a spare and minimal modernist setting (O’Brian Barnett, 130). The painting’s text panel, nearly invisible in its position on an adjacent wall, does not have an extended description or explanation but merely identifies the work. Physically located in the American and European blockade of rooms near rooms containing representational paintings such as those from the Baroque and Impressionist movements, the spare room with its large scale paintings including those such as Pollock and Rothko is an abrupt change conceptually for a visitor entering the space. Perhaps the way the NGC chose to design this installation of paintings reflects a need to be faithful to the desires of the artists of this movement for their work to be presented minimally, without textual support. However, this perspective fails to take responsibility for the real public visitors that the museum is meant to serve educationally and aesthetically. Setting aside the meaning of the work of art for the moment, the historical value of the painting is not acknowledged or accessible in the physical space and may have helped to allay...
the public outcry in the debates. *Voice of Fire* was created by American artist Barnett Newman as a commission by Alan Solomon for the American pavilion of Montreal’s Expo ’67 as part of a modernist display within a geodesic dome designed by Buckminster Fuller (124). Earlier in his career, Newman led the Emma Lake Artist’s Workshop in Saskatchewan and inspired Montreal neoplasticiens Guido Molinari and Claude Tousignant through his work (134). Despite these links to the Canadian art history, the painting is displayed in the American and European galleries with no textual linkage to the Canadian gallery artists Newman was in contact with during his career.

Confronted by a painting so simplistic and purely graphic without the aids of context or understanding of the background of the movement, some visitors feel an understandable confusion as to why the work has any value. How does one make sense of a painting that has no recognizable forms and seems to lack content? *Voice of Fire* follows the formalist visual logic of the grid that in its nature seems to be resistant to language. As Krauss writes,

> the grid announces, among other things, modern art’s will to silence, its hostility to literature, to narrative, to discourse … The barrier it has lowered between the arts of vision and those of language has been almost almost totally successful in walling the visual arts into a realm of exclusive visuality and defending them against the intrusion of speech (Originality, 9).

However, in his essay “*Ut Pictura Theoria*: Abstract Painting and the Repression of Language,” W.J.T. Mitchell explores how despite how the quality of pure presence promoted by this formal painting style may resist language, it “absolutely depend[s], at the same time, on the collaboration of painting with another kind of discourse, what we may call, for lack of a better term, the
discourse of theory” (Abstract, 354). Famous critics of abstract art, such as Clement Greenberg, do not merely draw from the sensual visual experience of the painting but from varied sources such as the writing of known theorists and art historians, practical knowledge of the art world, and experiences of other artworks (355). As Mitchell elaborates,

> It is one of the principal doctrines of abstract art that although iconography and represented objects may disappear, content and subject matter do not. These paintings, no matter how abstract, are never merely formal or decorative; the ‘greatest fear’ of the abstract artists, as Krauss says, ‘is that he may be making mere abstraction, abstraction uninformed by a subject, contentless abstraction’ (357).

Despite a seeming lack of content, there is much that can be read into non-representational paintings. The work, in fact, seems to promote discourse in an interesting way in its “demand for the spectator to fill the void with language” (354). This illustrates my argument that the narrativity of all works of art is to some degree incomplete, requiring fulfillment or completion through the viewer’s interpretation. But without understanding the ideals of the movement as Barnett Newman uniquely articulates them and without knowledge of the value of the work of art historically and contextually, an uninformed viewer may believe that a work like Voice of Fire is meaningless and worthless. As O’Brien writes in his take on the debate, Voices of Fire, what was lacking in the responses on the part of the NGC was “an admission that the painting is difficult” even in a metaphorical way by providing increased support textually or through mechanisms of display, and a failure to “mention … its flesh-and-blood history, the circumstances of its making and use, and the successive meanings that have accrued to it over time” (Introduction, 19). Visitors viewing a Barnett Newman
painting may not be privy to the theory and discourse surrounding abstract art that the art historian would possess, and thus through a minimal display are prevented from a full understanding of the artwork and its value historically and aesthetically. The museum attempts to prevent a closure of meaning through minimalizing textual interference, but in some cases this results in failing to assist or educate viewers when making meaning out of artworks is most difficult. To assume that a text label would prevent a viewer from forming their own opinions or interpretations about an artwork is to assume that viewers are passive and unthinking, which is of course far from the case. Understanding some of the conditions and contexts of a painting may in fact lead to a richer experience of an artwork.

**Narrativity in Digital Spaces**

Digital media holds its own challenges for art museums and they may or may not choose to take advantage of the unique properties it enables for telling stories about and through works of art differently. What becomes of narrative in the context of the expressive resources of digital media? What new ways of telling stories become possible? To begin, I would like to clarify the distinction between database and narrative as two modes of accessing cultural information that have come into an interesting conflict in recent debates. Lev Manovich perhaps made the most provocative claim concerning database and narrative in digital media:
As a cultural form, the database represents the world as a list of items, and it refuses to order this list. In contrast, a narrative creates a cause-and-effect trajectory of seemingly unordered items (events). Therefore, database and narrative are natural enemies. Competing for the same territory of human culture, each claims an exclusive right to make meaning out of the world (225).

Manovich emphasizes the increasing dominance of the database and describes how in attempting to understand digital media people have come to use the term narrative far too loosely. He argues that “under the surface” most digital media objects are databases, and the creation of a new media work “can be understood as the construction of an interface to a database” (226). It is true that the Internet is organized through the computational logic of the database – all is searchable, archivable and composed of data. N. Katherine Hayles, however, reveals the relationship between database and narrative to be more complex and integrated. She calls the two modes “natural symbionts,” and explains:

Because database can construct relational juxtapositions but is helpless to interpret or explain them, it needs narrative to make its results meaningful. Narrative, for its part, needs database in the computationally intensive culture of the new millennium to enhance its cultural authority and test the generality of its insights. If narrative often dissolves into database, as Folsom suggests, database catalyzes and indeed demands narrative’s reappearance as soon as meaning and interpretation are required (1603).

While data is needed to authenticate information, narrative is always used to make sense of data and to explain or interpret it. Database may be the underlying logic of the Internet medium, but narratives adapt to this structure and remain pervasive and essential. It is only through narrative, Hayles asserts, that we can “gesture towards the inexplicable, the unspeakable, the ineffable” while “databases rely on enumeration, requiring explicit articulation of attributes and data values” (1605).
The two main qualities of the digital medium that I would like to focus on as offering new possibilities for online narrative are choice and multivocality. When one considers narrativity online often what comes to mind is digital textuality and the innovation of hypertext. Hypertext refers to online “pieces of text which carry within them paths to other texts” (Landow 3.0, 135). It renders online pages unstable and nodal, since each site is a transitory platform to the next. As online users move through this textual network they continually shift the center – and hence the focus or organizing principle – of their investigation and experience. Hypertext, in other words, provides an infinitely recenterable system whose provisional point of focus depends on the reader, who becomes a truly active reader in yet another sense (56).

In their effort to make sense of the plethora of networked documents online, users come to craft their own narratives dependent on the choices they make and what they seek to learn. The choices made through accessing unique hypertextual pathways leads to an overarching kind of distributed narrative. As readers peruse different pathways attempting to discover a certain meaning, it becomes clear that:

what hypertext offers is not a story-generating machine but something much closer to the narrative equivalent of a jigsaw puzzle: readers try to construct a narrative image from fragments that come to them in a more or less random order, by filling each lexia into a global pattern that slowly takes shape in the mind (Ryan New Media, 342).

Distributed narratives in this way are stories with porous borders. They are not “self-contained” or able to be “experienced in a single session or in a single place,” but cross over into “daily lives” (Walker 1). Narratives found online, even if they are purely textual, are always unfinished and unstable when they contain
links to other sites, other ways of understanding information. This accords with
the overriding aesthetic of digital media according to Peter Lunenfeld, one of the
“unfinished,” often bringing with it the negative connotations of failure, the
unrealized, and death (7). But the incomplete in this case sometimes may allow
for more complexity in the understanding of objects. Digital text is modular and
able to be adapted for different uses, thus “always open, unbordered, unfinished,
and unfinishable, capable of infinite extension” (Landow Collage-Writing, 166).

In its main online interface, Cybermuse, the National Gallery of Canada
incorporates both the forms of the database and narrative in different ways: the
database function is available through the search tool, while the narrative function
can be seen in its flash module interfaces set up throughout the site. The web
presence of the NGC is geared more towards providing information and education
than aesthetic experiences of artworks, since these are either unavailable or
extremely limited in the digital format. The informational fluidity of the Internet
has its own possibilities for learning about artworks in new ways, but the NGC
only takes advantage of a selection of these possibilities, while ignoring arguably
some of the most potent online features for narrative expression. The database
tool is a functional one used to access the collection in ways directed by the user
who enters search values. It is not narrative in that the ability to access thematic
or chronological linkages between artworks is not available. An individual
artwork page provides the same provenance and label information as in the
physical gallery but does not have the same functionality to be able to be viewed
in relation to other works of art or within an overarching chronological period or
movement. The flash interface on the site, however, presents a much more
targeted and conscious narrative package composed by the curators in collaboration with programmers. A user clicks first on the section of the site that corresponds to their age or interest group, then on a link to a flash activity. These modules are non-linear narratives – the information presented within each one depends on what link the user chooses to click on in whichever order. In the Showcases section this is perhaps most clear, since each flash module presents an interface devoted to an overarching narrative theme, such as an artist or a subject that several artists are encompassed within. In contrast to the physical gallery space, these modules at times present opportunities to narrativize works of art more on an individual level and help users to understand them better than they might when provided a limited framework in the physical space.

While these features provide more of a focused narrativity on the part of the museum, the NGC maintains a strongly authored approach. There are no spaces for viewers to question or participate in narrative production and the entire interface is dictated by one unified authorial voice, mirroring the invisible pervasive narration that is a strong feature of the physical gallery space. The flexibility and innovation of hypertextuality is not employed to tell a different type of narrative. These flash modules are self-contained and do not take advantage of the modularity provided through a hypertextual organization. Users can link to the page containing the flash application, but cannot break the application apart and link to individual pages within it. Also, this interface limits choice to some extent – whereas hyperlinked pages allow for multiple paths away from the central narrative, choices available in the flash module are limited and clearly defined by the NGC; users can only click in predetermined areas to access
pre-prepared content relayed through the same museum perspective. Perhaps one of the most useful sections on the site, Gallery Channels, presents many audio and video recordings such as interviews with curators and artists about artworks and exhibitions. This feature grants users insight into the creation of museum knowledge and narrative visible in the physical museum space. But again, these are not all networked in larger media sharing sites. While the museum has some videos on Youtube, they do not list their podcasts in iTunes. Instead, media is contained primarily within the closed site and audible and visible through in-site streaming.

The blog interface, with its interesting hybrid of narrative and database structure, may serve as a useful accessory to the physical museum experience, a means of providing new narrative spaces not necessarily possible in the gallery. On its most basic level, a blog is a “frequently updated website consisting of dated entries arranged in reverse chronological order” (Fitzpatrick 170). While early blogs, or web-logs, emerged out of the need to make sense of a plethora of online data through the sharing and evaluating of links according to the personal authorial frame of the blogger’s interests, blogs as a medium used currently are applied for a wide variety of purposes. The strongest feature of the blog is arguably the personality of the blogger that emerges through the quotidian posts published, and may in some cases be the focus of the narrative. A blog consists of an episodic narrative, where each post becomes part of an unfinished, ever-unfolding process (Walker 112). The “literary quality arises from a complex negotiation among discrete, and often random, daily entries and the often invisible arc that they together sketch” (Fitzpatrick 168). Despite the strong authorial
presence that directs the writing, however, many aspects of the blog point to its multivocality. Each post contains any hypertextual links provided by the author, and when those who respond to a given post in their own blog link to the original post, the blog software automatically posts their link in the original blog post’s comment section. Readers can leave comments expressing their own opinions and feedback and may also share hyperlinks in their conversations with the blogger or each other. Also, bloggers typically provide a Blogroll containing links to their favourite blogs in the sidebar of the blog. Hypertext provides the means to take different paths out from the place where one has started and this uniquely offers the opportunity to hear different voices – to witness different approaches and perspectives on information by other authors that may have been linked to. The site creator of a given site is the primary gatekeeper as to what links are available and so does play a strong role in shaping its space as a node in a viewers’ overall narrative journey. As Fitzpatrick writes, “[b]ecause of the intense reliance on linking, whether within the blog, to earlier bits of narrative, or outside of the blog, to other blogs with whom the blogger is in conversation, blogs always, in some senses at least, have a collective and intersubjective authorship” (Fitzpatrick 177). Likewise, a distributed narrative emerges when bloggers take part in larger conversations with one another that can be followed through the hypertextual links connecting them. In this way, bloggers participate in a kind of “decentered” and “networked subjectivity” (177).

A reader to a blog is empowered to take actions in shaping the narrative according to their needs or by leaving their own contributions. He or she can access different links provided by the blogger, or can use the blog’s database
functionality to focus on different elements of the narrative for their own needs.
Since all posts are archived in different ways, the reader can sort posts by tags,
search, categories, date (month and year), or view a single post on one page. For
a hypothetical example, sorting all posts tagged “display,” once sorted could
create a more cohesive targeted narrative about display practices for a museum if
they offered this category. Blogging also anticipates a readership and is attentive
to an audience. Successful bloggers often ask questions in the body of the post to
inspire participation in the comments section. The very presence of a comments
section in the medium builds in a space for viewer feedback. In this way, “the
narrative act of blogging adheres to a performative standard that is tightly tied to
audience expectation and the audience’s consumptive participation in the
blogging process” (Bryson et al. 313). Rather than being a simple remediation of
a traditional literary form, the narrativity of the blog medium has its own unique
expressive properties made possible by digital media.

The Art Gallery of Ontario blog, *Art Matters*, employs some of these
beneficial aspects of blogging but arguably still demonstrates caution and resists
full engagement in the medium. Blogging presents an interesting challenge to the
museum since it seems to break down the boundaries between public and private.
Bloggers are normally transparent and personal in their narrativity, revealing
‘insider’ or ‘behind-the-scenes’ information and normally expressing a strong
personality that shapes their perspectives. The *Art Matters* blog seems to be
clearly produced by multiple authors, but the author of each post is not always
identified. Most posts are written in the general tone of the infallible institutional
museum voice and do not present a unique perspective or personality in the
construction of narrative. Using the blog categories to filter for “Behind the Scenes,” seems to reveal some of the most blog-worthy narrative content. This category contains blog posts that are written from a first person perspective, that do seem relatable and also seem to have the most comments on the site. For example, University of Toronto Masters student Kendra Ainsworth writes about her experiences working to produce an upcoming exhibition *At Work: Hesse, Goodwin, Martin.* When it is acknowledged, authorship is typically relayed through the perspective of research students, but seldom on the blog does one read the perspective of the professional curators and other experts who lead the construction of narratives in AGO display. The blog does take advantage of the multimedial possibilities of the medium, posting images, embedding audio files and Youtube videos within posts as part of their content. One especially provocative series is listed as “Inside the Artist’s Studio” where curators visit artists inside their studios. But the posts are frustratingly simple and didactic – while they post provocative photos of the artist spaces, the text accompanying them does not relay an interesting narrative about the experience. Instead, that objective third-person narrative voice relays only general details about what was discussed. While there is the promise of future videos of their conversations, the featured story is unfulfilling since the images point to an interesting experience that is not relayed effectively or personably in the blog post. I have shown the interesting ways that the AGO has used their blog to provide a different medium for narratives about the museum, but also how their approach falls short to what is possible. Their posts lack a certain energy and engagement with the medium and do not take advantage of the multivocality that a multi-authored blog is normally
known for. They rarely address the permanent collection and its existing fixed narratives but instead focus on promotion of upcoming events and exhibitions. They also do not engage in larger conversations with other bloggers and rarely link to alternative perspectives or even artist websites.

As I have described it, the work of narrative is accomplished by the museum through different techniques in physical and digital space. While the chronological ordering of the labyrinthine space of the galleries as the viewers experience them through walking results in a strong narrative framework, overall the NGC privileges aesthetics over information in display within the galleries and the resulting narrativity of individual works of art suffers. The NGC website provides more of a focus on information since aesthetics becomes a challenge in digital space, but still falls short of taking full advantage of the possibilities of emerging media to both provide information in different ways and support user-generated narratives and counter-narratives. Newman’s Voice of Fire is only a database search away on the NGC website, but as in its physical display, there is no text label to aid in interpretation and it has not been incorporated into any narrative flash modules. Blogging as a medium online is still highly one that is typically highly authored and structured by its inherent expressive properties, but contains spaces for viewers to leave impressions and interact, while the entire structure remains open and hypertextually networked with other sites. The Art Matters blog demonstrates these qualities to a certain degree and offers a glimpse of something more. Perhaps blogging might be a medium suited to discussing Voice of Fire in a more open fashion, providing different narratorial perspectives and clarifying the voice of the art museum and its choices in purchasing and
valuing the work. I see the blogging medium as offering a unique platform that could be a useful accessory in the museum’s web presence, an online interface through which visitors could access a more personal and relatable set of narratives. Overall, however, the challenge in these approaches is to preserve aesthetic experiences in the art museum while providing effective narrative support for sometimes obscure works of art in order for these aesthetic experiences to become possible. Further to this is the possibility of opening up the construction of narrative to the viewer in ways suggested by the affordances of new media.
Conclusion

Immanuel Kant first used the term parergon to simply denote the border that delineates what a work of art is from what it is not:

Even what we call ornaments (parerga), i.e., what does not belong to the whole presentation of the object as an intrinsic constituent, but [is] only an extrinsic addition, does indeed increase our taste’s liking, and yet it does so only by its form, as in the case of picture frames, or drapery on statues, or colonnades around magnificent buildings (72).

He refers to the ornamental framing of artworks, the refinery that separates the outside, parergon, from the inside, ergon, of a work of art. Jacques Derrida complicates this distinction, arguing that it is not as neat as it seems and that parerga:

…have a thickness, a surface which separates them not only (as Kant would have it) from the integral inside, from the body proper of the ergon, but also from the outside, from the wall on which the painting is hung, from the space in which the statue or column is erected, then, step by step, from the whole field of historical, economic, political inscription in which the drive to signature is produced (61).

This idea of framing is at the core of my thesis. In being displayed, works of art are always framed. The boundaries or borders enclosing them transcend wooden encasing to reveal other layers or forces including the institutional framework of the museum, the subjectivity of a person embedding the work within a conversation, or the information-based context of publications in both digital and print formats. As Derrida writes, the frame is actually an “invisible limit” distinguishing between the “interiority of meaning” of the work of art and the forces that act on it from the outside (61).
In my thesis I have focused on the many ways in which the art museum as an institution acts as a *parergon* shaping the perceived meaning of works of art through its practices of memory, information, and narrative. I argue that while the work of art’s intrinsic layers of meaning can never be fully resolved or contained, the work’s display and ordering by the museum has an effect on how it is perceived and understood by visitors. *Parergon*, as McTavish writes, “not only produce a bounded object of study (namely the work of art) but are fundamental to the becoming visible of the very concept of art and thus every discussion of art” (231). Art museums have power in shaping culture and through their assumed epistemic authority on works of art, the visibility of their controlled collections distinguish for society what is art and what is not. This is especially important to note for the National Gallery of Canada (NGC) as one of the leading national institutions, since through its ongoing collection practices of both contemporary and historical artists it shapes the canon of what is considered important Canadian art.

The *parergon* and *ergon* of artworks are called into question in the digital medium as it renders all material works into immaterial information-based code. Do artworks have beginnings or endings, outsides or insides, online? Through my comparison of the art museum as it works in physical and digital space, I argue that works of art online, while they only refer to works held in the physical collection, are still subject to the framing practices of the museum. This is not to say that I argue for these framing practices to be abolished. Throughout my thesis, in fact, I assert that art museums are necessary and important institutions – their work of preservation, storage, collection and in-depth study by art curators
and historians is crucial to the perpetuation of these works of art not only in terms of their material existence but also in the continuing remembering and experience of them as works of great accomplishment and importance. While the framing of works of art by museums is desirable, the quality of museum practice in doing so must be critically examined especially in light of the challenges of the digital medium of the Internet. I have shown in different ways that the art museum is an institution with the contradictory aims of serving works of art by providing a context in which they can be apprehended sensually for their innate aesthetic qualities and serving a visiting public democratically through education and ensured understanding. At the moment, aesthetics has won the battle in museum spaces. I have demonstrated that the work of the art museum in its display of artworks is in many cases lacking, since while it privileges aesthetics and letting the work of art ‘speak for itself,’ it fails to fully ensure that the historical factuality and narrativity of art works are understood by viewers and become a part of their larger aesthetic experience. Knowing about works of art, understanding the circumstances of their creation leads to a fuller and richer experience of them. While viewers are active interpreters of works of art, they may not have a wealth of art historical knowledge and aesthetic judgment to support their encounters.

Online, works of art are referential and less open to being fully appreciated aesthetically. However, knowledge and understanding of them can still be explored. Art museums have the opportunity to take advantage of the expressive properties of the digital medium to make the *parerga* around works of art more porous, social, and complex. As I have shown, they can invite visitors to help tag
images of artworks and contribute to their organization in the collection. They can invite visitors to participate in discussions around the meaning of artworks. They can create openings, windows into the creative and intellectual practices of museum scholars as they create exhibitions and set the terms by which visitors experience works of art. In all of these practices they can retain their historical and intellectual authority as guardians of cultural objects, but help to create spaces that are more consistent with their aims as a truly public institution and invite participation in the discourses about the public cultural goods they exhibit.

Despite the possibilities of digital media, I have shown the different ways in which the NGC has merely reproduced their limited framing practices in the digital space. They have produced a closed, walled-in space reminiscent of the physical gallery. While their flash interfaces present the possibility of a degree of interactivity and non-linearity, I have demonstrated how they remain highly-authored and still fail to situate works of art sufficiently for visitors, or to experiment with any of the more open and social capabilities of the Internet. Thus I argue that as guardians and preservers of the works of art in their care, art museums may be needed to take on a more active, integrated role online not only in order to authenticate vulnerable digital reproductions of artworks to perpetuate their memory within history, but also to open up the process of meaning surrounding the work of art so that visitors can understand them and perhaps even participate in public discourses and dialogue about them. Far from aiming to displace the need for the physical museum institution or hindering the amount of visitors to it, I posit that the online presence of the museum could serve as a valuable resource, an accessory to the physical museum where new connections
can be made that are not possible in physical space but that take advantage of the unique properties of the digital. While there are undoubtedly practical and political hindrances to fully embracing these possibilities for the National Gallery of Canada, projects such as steve.museum and the Art Matters blog hint at the possibilities of an emerging future of innovative and richer experiences of works of art.
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