

Introduction: Rethinking Change in Art and Museums

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But what is a movement of alteration? Is it ideal? It is natural that anything occupying time should alter, and that all things in space should be in movement; these things are contained in the nature of the notions of time and of space.

Fernando Pessoa (1906)

Historically, the development and dissemination of new technologies has often, if not always, been associated with the idea of change. Although the systems of production and communication tend to be identified as the epicentre of such change, the shift paradigm has a wider scope and scale. Frequently regarded and addressed as a revolution, technological innovation derives from, and impacts on, society and culture at large. Moreover, the recurring narratives of technology as change reflect an attempt to establish symbolic and material borders between past, present and future. Modernism, 'characterised by an abandonment of tradition and a forward propulsion towards the new' (Bishop, 2014, p. 19) configured a perspective of industrial progress as a promising opportunity for breaking with the past, which, in many aspects, still persists and resonates in current discourses about digital transition.

For more than a century, the social and cultural transformations driven by emerging industries, rather than the technologies themselves, have brought new challenges to museums. Interestingly, the harshest criticisms of the possible adaptation of cultural institutions to an increasingly industrialised world have not come from the field of science and technology, but mainly from the artistic avant-garde. Following the *Futurist Manifesto* (1909), in the first half of the twentieth century the key argument against museums was that they were not prepared to deal with change. Clearly, what was at stake in such criticism was not the integration of new technologies into museums but, above all, the latter's relationship with time. 'Time and space died yesterday,' Marinetti claimed, condemning museums to an absolute irrelevance for their 'unending veneration for the past' (Marinetti, 1909/2011, p. 6).

A few decades later, the advent of the computer and the globalisation of the Internet also generated utopian and dystopian visions of the future of art and museums, even when 'the actual relations between emerging technologies and their ancestor systems proved to be more complex, often more congenial, and always less suddenly disruptive than was dreamt of in the apocalyptic philosophies that heralded their appearance' (Thorburn and Jenkins, 2003).

Notwithstanding the postmodernist efforts to dismantle a linear perspective of technological evolution, arguing in favour of the complexity and ambiguity of time and space, the previous narratives of technology as a cultural rupture have proved to be widely appealing and resilient. Although the postmodernist conceptualisation of a hybrid and expanded reality would, at first sight, be more coherent with digital culture, the evolution of information and communication technologies and their incorporation into the most diverse sectors of society have repositioned the idea of change at the centre of political and cultural debates. The terminology that has widely come to be adopted – digital revolution, digital transformation, digital transition – reveals the tendency to focus on rupture to the detriment of continuity. Such an emphasis on transformation can also be interpreted as an expression of interest on the part of technological companies, for whom planned obsolescence and a collective movement of demand for new services and products represents a potential business opportunity.

Cultural institutions are never neutral agents in the development of these dynamics, and digital technologies inevitably reshape museum practices in various ways. As Chiel van den Akker and Susan Legêne point out, 'The use of information and communication technology affects means of display, research, and communication and may involve issues of power and authority, of ownership and control over access to heritage and information, both physically and intellectually' (Van den Akker and Legêne, 2016, p. 7). Furthermore, with the global spread of social media, museum audiences are more than ever active participants, assuming and demanding – whether in physical spaces or online, or moving between the two (Kidd, 2014) – the right to have a role in the representation and construction of knowledge and culture.

In this context, and especially after the global acceleration of the "digital turn" caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, it is crucially important to discuss the meaning of change in museums, questioning to what extent technologies can enhance their relevance as repositories and connectors of time and space (Castells, 2001/2010) or even whether "change" is the right path for museums to follow.

Following the International Conference on Art, Museums and Digital Cultures (online, April 2021)¹ this book represents the third phase of a collaborative project developed by maat – Museum of Art, Architecture and Technology and the Institute of Art History, School of Social Sciences and Humanities, Universidade NOVA de Lisboa, under the scope of its Art, Museums and Digital Cultures Cluster.² This partnership began in October 2020, with a webinar on these topics,³ which preceded the conference and enabled us to share the experiences and practices that had already begun to take place in the first few months of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The objective of this e-book is not to transpose the previous debates and presentations to a different format, but rather to gather together a diverse collection of essays by both renowned authors and younger researchers, from different backgrounds and geographies and to share them with wider audiences. Organised and designed as a born-digital and open-access publication, this book further seeks to expand the debate on how digital technologies have contributed to the creation of new territories and stimulated different innovations in artistic production, curatorial practices and museum spaces. On the other hand, this collective work also seeks to demonstrate that the relationship between technologies and culture has reciprocal impacts, as contemporary art and museums have formulated new challenges and paved the way for new scientific developments, based on alternative visions of change. Considering that digital resources 'are distributed unevenly across the globe, and the effects of digital media are not uniform' (Bollmer, 2018, p. 20), this project adopts the plural term "Digital Cultures", which not only signals the complexity of the subject-matter but also underlines the importance of cultural diversity and media pluralism in contemporary society.

In this sense, the book opens with the section 'Questioning Digital Culture', in which the conference keynote speakers Ross Parry and Vince Dziekan reflect on the meaning of the term "digital" in the museum context and its declensions over the past three decades, observing that currently 'it is no longer new or disruptive. It is no longer an anomaly that needs to be understood or assimilated.' Consequently, they argue that 'the metamodern museum today

1 For more information about the conference, see: <https://museumdigitalcultures.weebly.com/>

2 Both the International Conference and this book benefited from the support of Instituto Superior Técnico, Universidade de Lisboa (Partner Institution), Millennium bcp Foundation (Sponsor) and *Umbigo Magazine* (Media Partner).

3 More information about the webinar is available at: <https://museumdigitalcultures.weebly.com/related-events.html>

is where the sincerity of modernism and the critique of postmodernity can *quantumly* co-exist.' The post-digital and post-pandemic circumstances are also examined by John P. Bell, Jon Ippolito and Meredith Steinfelds, who use a multifaceted set of examples to expose some recurrent contradictions underlying digital transformation and open access in museums, insightfully asking: 'What do we want a museum to be?' and 'What is the information that should be free?'

Other historical and critical perspectives are examined in section two: 'Curating Digital Art Beyond the Institutional Sphere'. In her essay, Annet Dekker questions the persistence of traditional museum paradigms, noting that 'Comparing the current examples to some of their predecessors it seems institutions have barely changed and learned little when it comes to curating online exhibitions.' Focusing on the concept of "adversarial interfaces", Heiko Schmid also reflects on the potential of online exhibitions and the groundbreaking net art projects of the 1990s and 2000s. The variability of digital art is a theme that permeates the entire section and, through different perspectives and case studies, technology emerges as a decisive agent in curating and design, impacting perception and conditioning the way in which connections are made. While Dejan Grba addresses the conflicted relationship between experimental digital art and the established circuits of contemporary artistic production, Myrto Aristidou and Theopisti Stylianou-Lambert argue that the preservation of VR and AR artworks depends on an effective dialogue between artists and museum professionals. Finally, as a counterpoint to the international scope of the previous essays, José Oliveira outlines a brief retrospective of the early days of computer art in Portugal.

Entitled 'Collaborative Territories', the third section explores alternative forms of interdisciplinary cooperation between artists, curators and scientists. In revisiting both past and current projects, the four texts address such topics as the crossovers between neuroscience, algorithms and the visual arts (George Legrady and Timo Honkela), the role of artists in sci/art collaborations under the increasing pressure of "impact" factors and the potential of fictional strategies for innovative scientific approaches (Charlie Tweed). Other topical issues discussed in this section include artificial intelligence in art museums (Dominik Bönisch) and conceptual prototypes for virtual museums based on 'augmented urban spaces, populated by [...] layers of original and remixed digital audio-visual information, interconnected by hashtags and geo-tags' (Pedro Alves da Veiga).

The debate about online curatorial practices continues in section four – ‘Virtual Museums, Archives and Databases’ – in which different digital archives and virtual museums are analysed. This section discusses the importance of databases for the documentation and preservation of cultural heritage, as well as for democratising access to public and private collections. While the first two essays (Diego Mantoan; Joana Baião and Sofia Carvalho) focus on the digitisation of contemporary art through the introduction of new cataloguing practices, Maria de Fátima Lambert demonstrates the potential of online archives for the development of research and curatorial projects on nineteenth-century travelling artists and writers, under the scope of women’s studies. Centred on online sound archives and intangible heritage, the last text suggests that, with the development of media technologies, ‘museums have become places for experiencing new sensations not exclusively described by viewing’ (Madalena Oliveira and Cláudia Martinho).

The fifth section – ‘Museums on the Web: Shifting Representations and Narratives’ – pays particular attention to the pandemic situation, when museums had to find alternative ways to dialogue with their visitors and were forced to adapt their collections, exhibitions and programmes to a digital format. This sequence of three texts illustrates how cultural institutions are using digital platforms to build new narratives, fostering closer and more meaningful relations with their publics. The ambitious (and sometimes misinterpreted) digital strategies of leading institutions, such as the Uffizi Gallery in Florence (Vanda Lisanti), are contrasted here with the work of experimental web-based museums, such as the Museum of the Person in Brazil (Rachel Augusto). Addressing storytelling and the construction of individual and collective memories, the authors’ contributions suggest a ‘vision of contemporary museological concepts and practices, taking into consideration [...] shared responsibility, inclusiveness and creativity’ (Vitória Schincariol and Marina Pignatelli).

The last section – ‘Mediation and Prospects of Change’ – further explores the potential and implications of participatory dynamics in museums, addressing critical concepts and issues, such as digital solidarity, networked public space or the decolonisation of digital technology. Drawing on Nina Simon’s four models of participation – contributory, collaborative, co-creative and hosted – Jasmin Pfefferkorn suggests a fifth possibility: challenge, which proved to be extremely motivating in recent online projects involving the recreation of art collections. As John P. Bell, Jon Ippolito and Meredith Steinfelds also point out in the first

section of this book, the surprising lesson may be that challenge is attractive. On the other hand, Nick Pozek warns that the potential of digital platforms for providing a broader and more inclusive access to museum collections frequently ignores the fact that 'like the institutions and societies that they serve, digital platforms are not neutral. They incorporate the encoded biases and assumptions of their engineers, but, more dangerously, their ubiquity and ease of use obfuscate the scope of their design and make their consequences insidious.' This perception points to the increasing complexity of digital cultures, which is also explored through the contribution of one of the keynote speakers at the international conference: Felix Stalder. He insightfully questions the role played by the different publics under the present digital condition, observing that: 'Technology involves both reacting to and increasing social complexity. From a cultural point of view, rising complexity means that the number and diversity of normative positions [...] are increasing, together with the possible relations between them. [...] this is both a quantitative (more) and qualitative (different) transformation that has been fed from many sources.'

Rethinking change in art and museums therefore requires facing the complexity of a multidirectional process, in which not only does the evolution of digital technologies impact on cultural institutions, but also cultural agents themselves interpret, inform and inspire technological developments. This involves reframing the relationship between technology and cultural production, thereby overcoming the technocratic stereotypes of "digital transition", which, with their simplified and optimistic narratives, have tended to ignore the fact that new forms of control, segregation and inequality are emerging and spreading.

Contrary to the dystopian visions of the early twentieth-century Futurists, over the last century museums have been able to respond to the challenges of new and unstable notions of time and space, driven by ever faster movements of change. More than at any other time in their history, museums are now called upon to critically exercise their privileged power to simultaneously preserve cultural heritage and transform society.

As an epilogue, this e-book ends with a visual essay by the Portuguese artist João Paulo Serafim, who, together with all the other authors, generously participated in this collaborative project. With the suggestive title 'The Endless Task of Taxonomy', his contribution to the e-book derives from the video essay specially created for, and presented at, the conference in April 2021.

This sequence of images appears as a poetic stimulus to review and rethink the notions of change, time and space in museums, leading us back to Fernando Pessoa's fundamental question: what is, after all, a movement of alteration?

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