Variations: Experimenting with New Forms of Exhibition Making and Audience Participation in the Digital Era

by *Melissa Trottier, Pierre Tanguay, Charlotte Bouchard-Lafond,* and *Aurélie Vandewynckele*

The increasing predominance of social media and digital technologies within and around the museum is giving rise to a new age of exhibition-making involving the internet, participatory practices, crowdsourcing, and audience engagement. How might today's complex web and social media environment affect the nature, shape, and development of an exhibition? What role can the curator play in that context? What type of exhibition can emerge from a dialogue between internet users and curators?

In the winter of 2013, we formed the collective Les Commissaires Glaneurs[1] (The Gleaning Curators) and conceived a cyber exhibition entitled *Variations* to investigate these questions. The exhibition was created over a period of 15 weeks as part of a Master's seminar in Museum Studies at the Université du Québec à Montréal.[2] The project was developed and displayed entirely online. It was conceptualized as an experimental laboratory to explore cybermuseology and rethink both audience engagement and the nature and process of exhibition-making in a collaborative environment. We set out to build not only the exhibition itself, but a framework to co-create the exhibition with internet users. The focus of our project was not platform development, but rather using existing, inexpensive, and familiar online tools to experiment with exhibition development with web users where they are.

While a complete discussion of whether or not a project like *Variations* is truly an "exhibition" could fill another article, we hold that our use of the term is appropriate. In experimenting with exhibition-making in a purely virtual environment, our aim as graduate students in Museum Studies was to create an authentic online exhibition experience, one that would distinguish itself from blogs, Flickr pages, and the like by the very nature of its "museological lens": a curatorial treatment of online contents and a museological approach to their interpretation and dissemination.

Variations: Design and Development

Rather than choosing a theme or artworks *a priori,* we decided to create a cyber exhibition entirely based on crowdsourced material. In this sense, *Variations* was inspired by the internet and social media, and became a way to showcase the work of internet users. Ultimately, we wanted to foster a dialogue and an interaction between and with users. We invited the public to submit visual content using a dedicated submission website by responding to one of three suggested trigger sentences: "It reminds me of someone," "It's not important," and "I'm not here for the moment."[3] The use of trigger sentences was meant to inspire intuitive responses, thus scaffolding creativity without imposing particular results (Simon: 2010).

The crowdsourcing phase lasted two weeks, during which we used social media and email to solicit contributions. We also benefited from the support of arts and culture organisations and online grassroots media to disseminate our call to participation. We received about 300 submissions, the majority of which were photographs, as well as texts, poems, drawings, paintings, and collages.[4] With this collection in hand, the challenge was to develop a fully bilingual (French

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and English) online exhibition on the basis of the submissions and feature as many contributions as possible. In order to do so, we chose to take a closer look at the curator's role, the influence of biases in the exhibition process, as well as the new possibilities for exchange and dialogue offered by the internet today. We created four "rereadings" (or miniature online exhibitions) through a role-playing approach, using the styles of different curators and artists.[5] We wanted to question the role of the curator, highlight the subjectivity of curatorial practice, and observe its ability to generate completely different interpretations using the same collection.

Les Commissaires Glaneurs at work on curatorial rereadings. All images courtesy of Les Commissaires Glaneurs.

Variations offered visitors two distinct paths for experiencing the cyber exhibition: the first is the exhibition itself through the four curatorial rereadings and the second is a "behind the scenes" look at the project.[6] The behind the scenes aspect emerged from the desire to be as transparent as possible with internet users and visitors throughout the project: from ideation to crowdsourcing and finally to exhibition-making. Our process in creating the exhibition became a subject in and of itself. Moreover, we wanted to offer the resources we had used in the making of the project in the hopes that they would be beneficial to visitors, and also so that they would foster a wider reflexive process in the form of a dialogue with the public. Topics such as net art, crowdsourcing, and participatory culture were presented and discussed in a Logbook. We also encouraged visitors to experiment with their own mashups of the submissions and to give their opinion on a Message Board. These elements were both a presentation of our experience and our learning in creating *Variations*, as well as an invitation to the public to take over the content and enrich it through their own thoughts and comments. We maintain that such a dialogue could benefit both curator and user by multiplying opinions and perspectives, thus fostering a true exchange of ideas.

Learning by Doing

We conceived *Variations* as a laboratory for experimenting with new forms of exhibitions and learning about exhibition-making in the digital age. Our Master's seminar encouraged us to investigate these topics, which were of fundamental interest to us, in a proactive manner. It gave us free rein to determine the type of exhibition we wanted to design, be it physical or

A sample of user submissions.

virtual. The seminar also provided a pedagogical framework and various tools (i.e. exhibition scenarios, progress reports, etc.) to help structure our research and foster our own reflexive approach towards experimentation. That learner-rather than curriculum-centred approach gave us the necessary freedom and responsibility to define our own learning path and engage with theory and practice in a more exploratory and heuristic process of "learning by doing."

Variations proved to be a fruitful applied research model that led to further experimentation outside the context of our Master's program. In January 2014, the Musée de la Femme du Québec (the Quebec Women's Museum) commissioned us to create a new participatory project inspired by *Variations* in the context of its *États Dames* exhibition, which dealt with the perceptions and representations of women.[7] Using the same structure and tools—trigger sentences, readily available online and social media platforms— we developed a new crowdsourcing

initiative, this time adding a physical component: a participatory installation created by visitors on the exhibition premises by using images submitted by online contributors. The addition of that installation allowed us to generate a dialogue between online and on-site audiences, and prompted us to look for ways to translate and spatialize that dialogue in a physical exhibition.

As a learning model, *Variations* remains, of course, limited in scope. It is but one example of the many complimentary ways through which students can acquire theoretical knowledge, analytical aptitudes, and professional skills in the field of exhibition-making: readings and lectures, analysis of exhibitions, technical training, internships, mentoring or job shadowing, etc. In our view, what set *Variations* apart was its remarkable effectiveness, as an applied research tool, in generating real-time, hands-on situations and interactions with audiences through quick, inexpensive online prototyping and iteration. It allowed us to

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Screenshot of the Mieke Bal-inspired rereading.

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interrogate exhibition theory and practice through a much more incarnate process of collaborative experimentation that brought together museum concerns on the one hand (exhibitions, audience engagement) and new digital realities on the other (social media, online user behaviour, online content generation).

The ubiquity of digital technology in museums is challenging museum professionals, students, as well as the public to reconsider museums not only as spaces of learning and contemplation, but also as spaces of collaboration and multivocality where the curator's voice is as important and valued as the public's. Our view is that exhibition spaces can be either on site or online. The idea is not to adapt digital technologies to fit within the museum but for the museum to draw from the Web's particularities—interaction, crowdsourcing, dialogue, etc.—to create a museum to which audiences can relate. The challenge now facing museums is how to thoughtfully design spaces, be they physical or virtual, that engage audiences, encourage public participation and co-creation, and transform the museum into a space of dialogue. ✳

Screenshot of the Behind the Scenes *landing page.*

End Notes:

[1] The collective Les Commissaires Glaneurs (http://lescg.com/) included a fifth graduate student in Museum Studies from the Université de Montréal, Justine G. Chapleau.

[2] MSL6104 *Exposition, interprétation et diffusion,* Université du Québec à Montréal, Winter 2013, Prof. Jennifer Carter. The seminar is one of four mandatory courses in the Master of Museum Studies program offered jointly by the Université du Québec à Montréal and the Université de Montréal. M.A. candidates are required to follow three other mandatory seminars in History and Functions of Museums, Collections, and Museum Management.

[3] For more information on the submission process and trigger sentences, visit: http://lescommissairesglane.wix.com/commissairesglaneurs#!project/c1rt6.

[4] To see all the submissions received, visit: https://www.flickr.com/photos/lescommissairesglaneurs.

[5] We developed three of the four rereadings ourselves based on three different approaches: the "cinematic" approach of curator Eric Troncy (2003), the non-linear, "constellation" process of curator Mieke Bal (1996, 2007), and the cut-up technique pioneered by artist Brion Gysin and writer William S. Burroughs (2010). We entrusted the fourth rereading to guest curators Alice Jarry and Isabelle Guimond, two Montreal-based visual artists. For more details, visit: http://commissairesglaneurs.wix.com/variations#!eng-4-expos/c14a6.

[6] For a complete look at the "behind the scenes" of *Variations*, visit: http://commissairesglaneurs.wix.com/variations#!eng--backstage/c1kk3.

[7] The second participatory project inspired by *Variations* and commissioned by the Musée de la Femme was entitled *Idées reçues (Gleaned Ideas)*. For more information on the project, visit: http://lescg.com/.

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