

3

INTERNATIONAL CO-OPERATION

A Project in Theory and Practice

Jeremy Rees
International Visual Arts Information Network
UK

The context

Concerns about the "quality of experience" of visitors to permanent collections and temporary exhibitions (particularly in relation to twentieth century art) in art museums and galleries worldwide, led to my interest in the emergent potential of interactive multimedia - for museums visitors as well as for a curatorial/museum management resource.

Research in 1989, for a wider ranging project, led to the convening of a small international meeting in Amsterdam in March 1990 of people from nine European countries to discuss exchange of information and possible collaborations in the development and use of interactive multimedia.

The first tangible outcome was the compilation and twice yearly publication (from January 1991) of the ITEM (Image Technology in European Museums and art galleries database (Pring (ed), 1991). The second outcome has been a series of papers and discussions internationally on matters relating to digital imaging and intellectual property rights (including copyright). A paper given at the CIDOC conference in Copenhagen, May 1991 led to the third outcome, the interactive multimedia: BRANCUSI Project - and to the change of name from European to International Visual Arts Information Network (IVAIN).

The project

The concept

The interest expressed by the two Romanian delegates at the CIDOC conference, for Romania to become involved in a pilot European art museums interactive multimedia collaboration led to the decision to make the subject of the EVAIN project the major twentieth century sculptor Constantin Brancusi, who was born and spend his early working life in Romania and subsequently lived and worked in Paris for the rest of his life, finally bequeathing the contents of his studio to the French nation.

As many of his works are in public collections in the USA, the choice of Brancusi had the advantages that:

- it broadened the proposal to a European/USA collaboration

- three-dimensional work gave scope for realising the full potential of utilising film and video as an integral part of the underlying image database.
- it would result in a significant public information, education and publishing (as well as curatorial and research) resource on a major figure in the history and development of twentieth century art.
- although there is an established catalogue raisonné of the sculpture of Brancusi, this is not, as yet, the case with his drawings and his photographs. The image and text databases within the resource on these categories could assist with the development of more comprehensive data, particularly as it is planned that there would be a small consortium of museums, with significant holdings of Brancusi's work, who would have an open ended resource, which would be added to by consortium agreement.

The completed resource is planned as being:

- a museum-resident interactive public information system in a number of art museums that have works by Brancusi (touch screen and a higher screen resolution than the CD publication)
- a CD for use in libraries and education
- a CD for retail sale through art museum shops and other retail outlets.

It is also envisaged that some sites will be licensed to provide image and text hard copy downloads in colour and black & white. Downloading for publication purposes from the higher resolution resource and Networking have wider intellectual property rights implications and would be the subject of separate arrangements.

The Partnership

With the Musée National d'Art Moderne, Paris (who have the largest collection of Brancusi's work) ; Philadelphia Museum of Art (who have the second largest) and the Romanian Ministry of Culture as the principal development partners, IVAIN set up a three-phase development project, bringing in Illuminations Interactive, London as the multimedia development partner.

With financial help from the Arts Council, The Henry Moore Sculpture Trust, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and British Telecom work on the first phase "exploratory" interactive multimedia Demonstrator commenced in January 1992 and was completed in July 1992. The second phase "definition" Demonstrator has received a grant under the CEC IMPACT 2 interactive multimedia information services programme, with a production schedule January-June 1993. This has involved two additional production partners - SIDAC in Rome and CompArt in Berlin as well as a scholarly editorial direction from Berlin and authorial contributions from Romania, the USA and the UK.

The third, "implementation" phase is planned as being undertaken between autumn 1993 and the end of 1994 and was the subject of a second stage IMPACT 2 application. It is envisaged that the completed resource would be available in good time for the forthcoming Brancusi Retrospective in Paris mid-1995 and subsequently in Philadelphia.

Conceptual considerations

In the course of discussing the Palace of Living Art, Buena Park, Los Angeles, Umberto Eco in "Travels in Hyper reality" writes : The Palace's philosophy is not " We are going to give you the reproduction so that you will want the original" but rather "we are giving you the reproduction so that you will no longer feel any need for the original".

Whenever we are talking about image databases or interactive multimedia or bibliographic material to do with art, it is important that we remind ourselves that it is all part of a context for the original work of art - not an end in itself, to the exclusion of the work of art that has given rise to the information and comment that we are handling.

The Brancusi Project has been seen, from the outset, as a resource that complements and helps to contextualise museum collections, temporary exhibitions and adds to repertoire of books and articles on Brancusi - many of which are out of print and difficult to obtain. In drawing attention to publications, through an extensive bibliography, it also recognises that while interactive multimedia can add new dimensions to the opportunities for casual exploration, comparison and research, it is not an ideal medium for reading large quantities of text.

At the initial development discussions it was suggested that a decision had to be taken as to whether the resource was to be for serious researchers or for a general public information resource - with the implication that it had to be either one or the other. In reality it is not so much an "either/or" but a question of the ways in which the content of the resource is structured and accessed and the range of facilities that are provided for those who wish to be able to mark or "save" material for comparison and further reference. Many "casual" users may find themselves (possibly by chance) wanting to explore some aspect in considerable depth while, on occasions, a specialist researcher may be making a comparatively superficial enquiry or search.

Some realities of international co-operation

Theoretical objectives and likely outcome

Few art or other museums have specialised collections that are totally comprehensive or "stand-alone", so collaboration with others with common interests is, in theory, logical and offers ways of maximising the effectiveness of investment of research, production time and money.

The reality frequently is that differing objectives, priorities and extended lines of communication (particularly with international collaborations) can lead to frustrating debate and delay, possibly resulting in additional expenditure rather than savings.

International collaborations can lead to a "fast-lane" build up of interest, experience and utilisation of the potential of interactive multimedia.

The reality may involve steep (frustrating and expensive) learning curves within, rather than prior to, project development. This applies not only to principal partners but also to authorial and other contributors who have not had direct experience of working with interactive multimedia.

The technical possibilities for multilingual presentation and the exploration of material from many differing viewpoints is attractive. To successfully realise much of this potential, which can dramatically increase the complexity of development, involves detailed collaboration and considerable resources.

One important aspect of this is that writing for the interactive multimedia screen is very different to writing for traditional publication. However detailed the briefing, it is extremely difficult to get this over at the first attempt and even more so over long distances and in different languages.

The involvement of the CEC in applications of new technology for the production of public information systems is very welcome.

It needs to be clearly recognised by all concerned (and the CEC themselves point this out) that international partnerships of more than a very small number of organisations, with clearly defined and complementary roles, add very considerably to the complexity and cost of a development project. It also needs to be recognised by all parties that the level of grants being given under application of information technology programmes such as IMPACT 2 are very modest, not only in terms of some of the CEC technical research and development programmes but also in terms of successfully achieving international collaborations that will be able to explore and undertake more than superficial application programmes.

The *interactive multimedia*: BRANCUSI project

Following the original aspirations and objectives when the concept of IVAIN emerged in 1990, the Brancusi project has been developed in a high profile way. The intention behind this has been to encourage others to enter into wider ranging partnerships and to highlight major issues and problems - such as:

- compatibility/cross platform addressability between interactive multimedia projects
- matters concerning digital imaging and intellectual property rights.
- adoption of established or emergent international standards, eg. CIDOC Data standards, ISO standard on Bibliographical References etc.
- utilisation of market standard authoring software, rather than specially written programmes, to maximise the benefit to others of the working experience gained in developing the Brancusi resource.

Another major concern, from the outset, has been to explore the potential of the medium in relation to the (possible) needs of users and the best use of the medium in relation to the material available (or that could be made available) - rather than undertake a technology-driven programme.

This has led to extensive, and sometimes heated but ultimately productive, discussion about design concepts, the extent of interactivity and questions of navigation that would take interactive resources to the next stages beyond the National Gallery, London Micro Gallery, which is currently an international "benchmark" for interactive public information systems in art museums.

The target markets (user population)

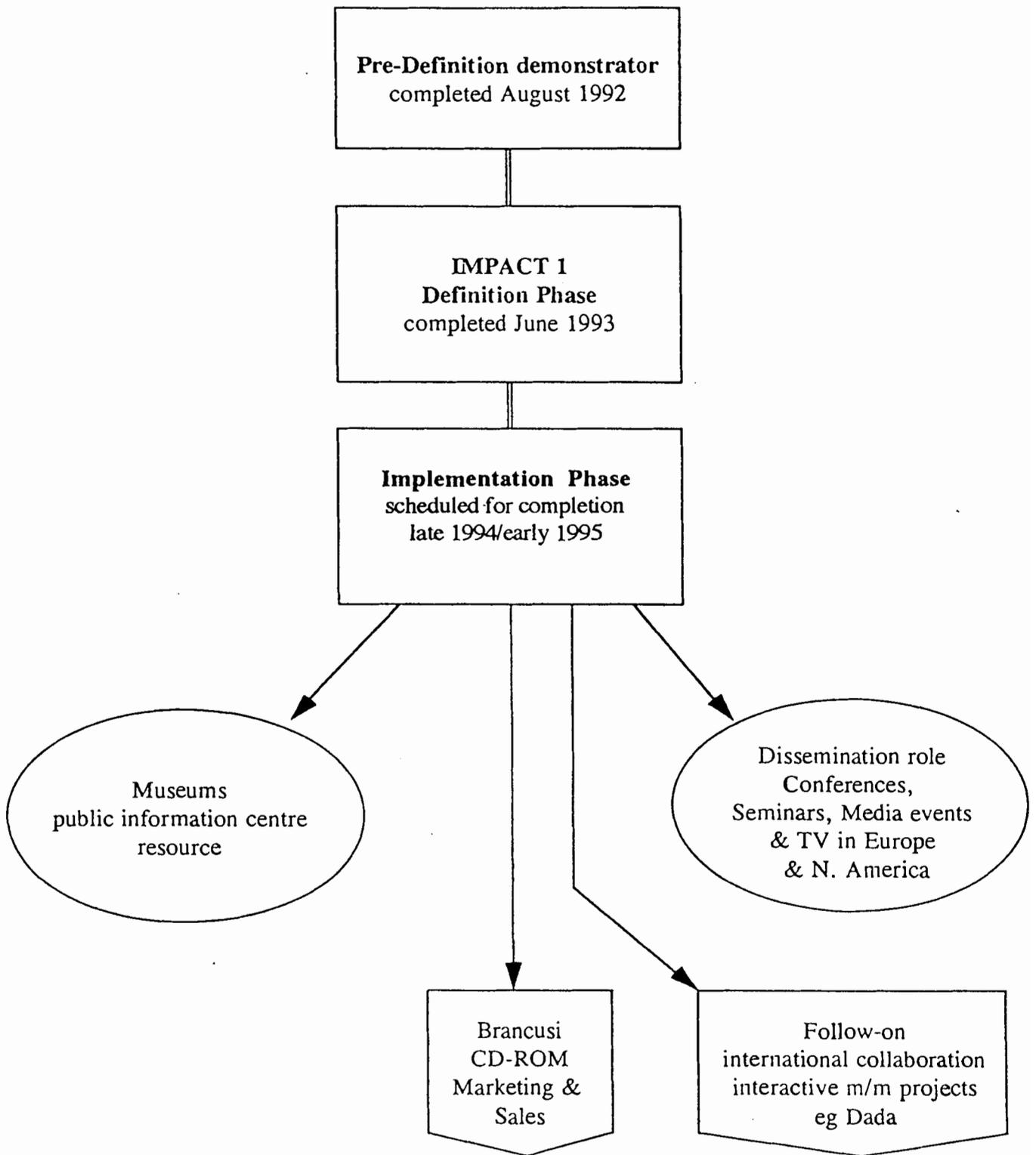
The museum-based public information resource is primarily intended for use in art museums that have works by Brancusi - to facilitate the cross over between viewing original works and a wealth of information about the artist, his work and his era.

It will be interesting to see where such a resource will be located - in relation to the relevant works on display and whether this will facilitate and encourage such crossover.

The digital resource represents an extensive image bank which can be utilised (subject to the appropriate permissions and controls) as a significant on-site publishing resource for visiting public and staff. It remains to be seen to what extent art museums (and museums generally) will take advantage of such potential.

It is envisaged that the retail CD publication will be available for public purchase in the museum bookshop. The fact that the resource (although possibly in an enhanced mode in

Fig. 1 *Interactive multimedia: BRANCUSI*
project development and exploitation



terms of screen size and image resolution, but with less functionality) can be seen and used in the museum itself should be an effective solution to the problems and limitations of on-site user displays in a retail setting.

It will be extremely interesting to monitor the situation at MNAM in Paris and in Philadelphia Museum of Art during the course of (and subsequent to) the 1995 Brancusi Retrospective exhibition - in terms of the extent of a retail market for a CD additional to and separate from conventional exhibition publications

There is already a rapid growth of interest in developments of the CD market, admittedly from a zero starting point in the, as yet, minuscule (particularly in relation to the visual arts) retail market. This will hopefully lead to a rapid change from the low key mail-order and software supply houses handling of "serious" CD publications - and facilities for potential buyers to be able to try out the programmes.

While it is true that computer software is sold in vast quantities shrinkwrapped and mainly undemonstrated, this is certainly not true of the retail book market nor of the video market, particularly in relation to the fact that a significant part of that market is for films already released and seen in cinemas and/or on television. Such material also forms the bulk of the Laserdisc retail market in Japan and the USA. Likewise, the audio market does not sell "blind" and record departments and shops are not places of total silence.

Clearly the role adopted by the larger bookshops is going to play an important part in the success of retail market development - as distinct from the existing situation in the UK where electrical retail chains (particularly Dixons) are the principal sellers of CD-I (with demonstration facilities). In the USA, television feature coverage is also beginning to play a significant role in generation of market awareness and interest.

In Conclusion

I suggest that there are many advantages to be gained from international co-operation. It is expensive in time and money and so, in the circumstances to which most museums and galleries are having to increasingly face up, represents a luxury that may not be affordable. To succeed, it requires a degree of commitment and understanding of all the participants, and at times and to degrees that may not fit in with their own priorities and immediate concerns. In the museum priorities for the beginning of the next century, international co-operation in fields such as interactive multimedia and its potential role in museum user development is clearly going to be a significant factor in museum justification and securing of public and other funding.