

# **IIIv**

## **Changing Institutional Environments**

# 14 THE ROCKY ROAD TO MULTIMEDIA: MUSEUM POLITICS AND INSTITUTIONAL CHANGE

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The title, "The Rocky Road to Multimedia," could almost have been inspired by a proverb Paul Saffo of the Institute for the Future cited at a recent panel. Saffo said: "Never mistake a clear view for a short distance." He went on to explain that a clear view is something you can gain from a mountain top, where you dominate forest and plain and see effortlessly to the next mountain top across the way. However, to actually get to the next mountain top, you must first descend into the brush and scree, climb over rocks and traverse streams, find your way through dense forests and finally ascend through rocks and scree again. In certain cases, you might find yourself on the peak you had first espied. In the interim, years may have elapsed.

The title could have been inspired by Saffo, but it was not. For I trust that each of us who has attempted to implement a multimedia program at his or her institution has their own war stories to share. The hard truth is that such an undertaking necessitates a systematic review of the curatorial and educational mission of the museum, and of how best to achieve the institution's goals given limited resources, both human and financial. Only a few of the rocks in the road are technical; others are financial, still others philosophical, and still others political/personal. And all of these components are interrelated, of course.

Multimedia can be regarded as a panacea-it is not. Nor is it the devil in disguise that some forces of reaction would have us believe, a trivialising fiend lurking in the palaces of culture. It is a viable and vital tool for increasing public exposure to collections and familiarisation with the issues they raise. Particularly in light of the publication in the United States last year of the American Association of Museum's special task force report, *Excellence and Equity: Education and the Public Dimension of Museums* (1992), it seems there is a growing consensus among museum professionals that the old, exclusively collection-based definition of the museum is inadequate to our mission to serve the public. That report proposes "an expanded definition of museums' educational role that involves the entire museum." It maintains that there is an educational purpose in every museum activity, and calls for integration of the education function in the museum's organisational structure, including the allocation of sufficient resources to ensure that such a commitment is carried out.

The report recommends consultation with experts in educational psychology and learning theory, exploration of new communications technologies, and developing tools that reflect "the different learning styles visitors bring to museums." It promotes the use of electronic media to extend the educational mission beyond museum walls, collaboration with schools, research labs, and corporations, and the development of learning laboratories to

research, evaluate, and communicate insights about museum learning at both adult and children's levels.

We are reminded of the cultural and intellectual complexity of objects and the different meanings accruing to them in diverse cultures and times. Museums are encouraged to present a variety of cultural perspectives, including informed but differing viewpoints. Museum directors and boards of Trustees are called upon to lead the way in hiring and training staff capable of achieving these goals.

It is worth enumerating these recommendations at some length because interactive multimedia is positioned as a very important tool for achieving these goals-capable of presenting a multiplicity of narratives, encouraging self-paced inquiry, framing content for a variety of learning styles, and providing access to collections beyond museum walls.

The papers in this section are authored by veterans and visionaries; each has been involved in early attempts to realise this potential in his or her own institution. Their experiences run the gamut of institutional responses to these questions. Philip Yenawine, for many years Director of Education at New York's Museum of Modern Art and founding president of the Museum Education Consortium, has some sobering lessons to tell of the pioneers who envisioned public outreach through electronic media before there was a defined standard or critical mass-much less a usable off-the-shelf authoring tool. Without institutional support at the highest level, without firm commitments of staff and financial resources, without even benefiting from an ambient commitment to education "in any but the most direct sense of providing labels, tours, and brochures," members of the Consortium despaired of finding solutions within their institutions. Then, when they put aside their ties to these same constraining but ultimately legitimating institutions, their hopes of finding support elsewhere were dashed as well.

Françoise Le Coz and Fabrice Lemessier fared better at the Musée d'Orsay in Paris, a relatively recently established institution that has education and cultural dissemination at the heart of its mission. Working in the same time frame as the Museum Education Consortium, but with the support of the State, they implemented two first generation multimedia programs for the public in the museum, and have now assessed their strengths and deficiencies. The museum as a whole has worked from the premise that its visitors' understanding and experience of the artworks will be enhanced if the works are inscribed within their historical context. A second explicitly stated goal is to provide a multiplicity of viewpoints and interpretations.

The fruit of Le Coz and Lemessier's experience has been the development of a five-year plan, which, although adopted in principle, does not resolve questions of staff shortages and insufficient funding. On the continuum of institutional attitudes towards multimedia projects, one might say that in this case the institutional support is present in theory, but the onus of responsibility for follow-through is left to people who have neither the budgets, the time, or the autonomy to realise the ambitious projects with which they have been charged.

Finally, San Francisco's Exploratorium represents that rare institution which, under the leadership of Goéry Delacôte, clearly perceives the broad range of potential applications of new media technologies as learning tools for both their visiting and remote or potential publics. Furthermore, they are willing to re-design the museum to maximise those benefits. This utopian scenario, although hard-won in and of itself, has resulted in the creation of a new Centre for Media and Communication under the leadership of Rob Semper. Working together with Apple Distinguished Scientist Kristina Hooper-Woolsey and an internal team, they have created the Learning Studio, a model for other institutions in its design, its outreach potential, its daring to prototype and test, and its determination to constantly retune to better suit the needs of its users.

Two concluding observations might be in order. First, we are still labouring under an outmoded model that associates computers with the hard sciences. By extension, in the case of art museums, information sciences are relegated to the periphery of the institution's self-definition. But it has been years since computers were limited to the diffusion of tables and graphs; their ability to integrate text, voice, sound and imaging forms makes them equally well adapted for conveying content in the arts and humanities. When art institutions take the lessons of institutions like the Exploratorium, and start planning their computer usage as one of an array of vital communications tools, we will have reached a new plateau.

Secondly, it is telling that two of our three papers are presented by collaborative teams—far from the norm at this conference. (As if to bear this out, the third chronicles the frustrated efforts of individuals who felt isolated in their museum environments.) It seems that we are at a stage where collaboration is essential, and the higher the level of collaboration, the more an institutional buy-in is assured. Effective integration of these new communications technologies in the service of museum mission goals such as those articulated by *Excellence and Equity* may be an idea that starts from below, but until it is embraced at the top, the road up will continue to be rocky and fraught with obstacles.