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MUSEUM WITHOUT WALLS

Noelle Paulson

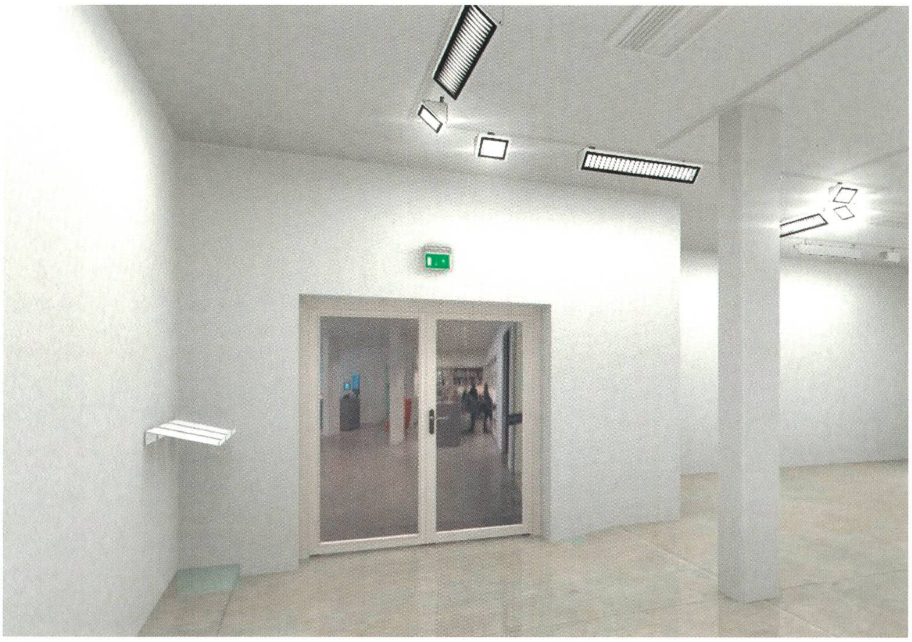

fig. a
screenshot, SandboxGallery.com
Retrieved 20.6.2015

As an academic discipline established in universities by the late nineteenth century, the history of art can claim side-by-side comparison as one of its foundational methods. Whether they are displayed as visualisations on textbook pages or projected onto a classroom wall, image comparisons, which trace their roots to the techniques of comparative visual analysis codified most prominently by the Swiss-born art historian Heinrich Wölfflin (1864-1945), form the basis of art history's visual archive. This archive, like the one used to teach the history of architecture as well, is resolutely flat. Three-dimensional sculptures are rendered as planes; entire buildings are presented as two-dimensional photographs, floor plans, or line drawings. Despite the shift from lantern slides to Powerpoint presentations, the purity offered by two images maintains a privileged place in the teaching of the discipline. When shown side-by-side against a neutral background, every work of art can become a standard size. This standardization brings order to what might otherwise be a chaotic mess of seemingly unrelated images and may explain the continued predominance of comparative methods.

Photography—first analogue and then digital—is the medium that has facilitated art history's reliance on the comparative method. Thanks to photography and to cheaper mass reproduction techniques that allow for its widespread distribution, fruitful juxtapositions can be made. Works that may never meet in reality due to various logistical reasons come together on classroom screens or on exhibition catalogue pages, effectively creating curated collections of decontextualized images that André Malraux (1901–1976) called the ‹musée imaginaire›. Utilizing Malraux's formulation as a starting point, this essay explores the recent availability of three-dimensional online exhibitions spaces to assess their implications for the teaching of art history and for curatorial practice. Can they be understood as useful tools that advance understandings of art and visual culture? Or are they instead simply reproducing exhibition conventions for crowds of self-trained, would-be curators without advancing knowledge? Considerations of two-dimensional representations of three-dimensional objects or spaces reappear throughout as a leitmotif, for in this way everything becomes an image that can manageably be curated.

From the birth of public exhibition spaces in the early nineteenth century until the dawn of the digital age, artists relied upon two basic templates to display their works: the museum and the gallery—the former preferably in its columned, neo-classical or neo-gothic guise and the latter most often of the white-cube variety.[1] These spaces continue to function as signifiers: here fine art can be seen; here the ‹aura› of the original can be felt.[2] By the turn of the 21st century, the internet had co-opted the gallery, flattening its walls into two dimensions to create a so-called ‹gallery› of images. Click or swipe to scroll through, every image a similar size, every colour distorted. By 1985, the philosopher of media Vilém Flusser had already predicted the turn to an image-focused society in his essay ‹Ins Universum der technischen Bilder›: «Taking contemporary technical images as a starting point, we find two divergent trends. One moves toward a centrally programmed, totalitarian society of image receivers and image administrators, the other toward a diaologic, telematic society of image producers and image collectors.»[3] Arguably (and depending on the political situation in one's location), Flusser's second trend now dominates, since nearly everyone carries around a device capable of recording moving or still images. However, Flusser does not specifically mention those who curate the images that are incessantly being produced or collected. An era of exponential image creation requires someone (or something) to select from, arrange and interpret the raw data of images in meaningful ways.

The recent appearance of web applications like SandboxGallery or Artsteps may be understood as a response to this requirement, for they bring curating's actions to anyone with a computer and internet access[4] (fig. a). Borrowing their digital technologies from architectural rendering and game development, 3D online galleries are navigable rooms with works of art shown to scale upon their walls. They seek to recreate a museum-like experience on the computer screen and may even provide commentary in the form of wall texts or audio guides. Users upload digital images, which are then displayed to scale on the walls of customisable spaces. Instead of a single, infinitely scrolling, two-dimensional wall, to which images may be ‹pinned›, these applications provide four walls, multiple rooms, and the illusion of space. However, there are also limitations. The software for the exhibition rooms cannot yet convincingly display three-dimensional works of art. Any three-dimensional works must first be flattened so they can be presented as digital images. One can recognize comparative scale to a certain extent, but a true understanding of how three-dimensional works function in space or interact with their surroundings remains inaccessible.

This is in fact the same problem that André Malraux encountered when creating his musée imaginaire, the ‹museum without walls›. Malraux, a Prix-Goncourt-winning novelist, an embattled archaeologist, France's Minister for Cultural Affairs, and above all a scholar of world sculpture, was a perpetuator of the three-dimensional rendered two-dimensional in his many publications on the history of world art. As a result of his extensive travels, Malraux collected photographs and postcards depicting works of art from around the world. In an effort to make sense of this archive of images, Malraux codified the concept of the musée imaginaire, which was rather infelicitously yet poetically translated into English as the ‹museum without walls›. The musée imaginaire's basic premise is disarmingly simple and familiar, especially to a generation that has come of age with Flickr, Instagram, and Pinterest. It is the idea that photographic reproductions enable the qualified curator to bring together previously separated works of art from wide-flung corners of the world. That curator can then select from and combine their image collection in a meaningful way and make comparisons that could never be made in any physical museum. As Malraux wrote, «thus, by the angle at which it is displayed, and with appropriate lighting, a fragment or detail can tell out significantly, and become, in reproduction, a not unworthy denizen of our Museum without Walls….by means of the fragment, the photographer instinctively restores to certain works their due place in the company of the elect»[5]. Through the selection and arrangement of images or fragments thereof, Malraux's photographer-curator can reformulate the canon, bringing unknown works or details to the fore by presenting them as two-dimensional photographic images.

The name ‹Musée imaginaire› was used as the title for the first part of Malraux's trilogy ‹Les Voix du silence› and later repurposed as the name of a three-volume text on sculpture, ‹Musée imaginaire de la sculpture mondiale›.[6] In her article ‹Postmodernism's Museum without Walls›, the art historian Rosalind Krauss succinctly summarizes the importance of what is lost in the translation of this title from French to English: «In French, Malraux's master conceit addresses the purely conceptual space of the human faculties: imagination, cognition, judgment; englished, it speaks instead to a place rendered physical, a space we might walk through, even though a museum without walls, being something of a paradox, will be traversed with difficulty».[7] The very act of translation adds the third dimension to Malraux's concept in the word ‹Museum› and then attempts to take it away again by rendering the walls of this museum non-existent.

A well-known portrait taken in 1954 by the photographer Maurice Arnoux for the magazine ‹Paris Match› is often used as a type of shorthand for the concept of the musée imaginaire (fig. b). At first glance, it appears to show Malraux in suit and tie most elegantly creating his personal museum with rows of images arranged neatly around himself. However, as Walter Grasskamp has noted in an extended visual analysis of the ‹Paris Match› photo in his recent monograph on the musée imaginaire, Malraux is in fact surrounded by the pages of a later book on bas reliefs, ‹Du bas relief aux grottes sacrées›.[8] He therefore stands amongst photographs of sculptural works that are most often attached to buildings, graves, or other primarily immovable objects. Indeed, bas-reliefs function at once as 3D sculptures and 2D images. Unless one views them from an angle, their three-dimensionality is not immediately evident, especially when they are published as photographs. This becomes the dilemma of the digital world, in which the rendering of 3D objects or spaces as images requires a paradoxical loss of their three-dimensionality. Developments and advances in 3D printing, like the Berlin-based company Twinkind, which prints three-dimensional figurines to scale from photographic scans, may change this, but for the moment, photographic images of three-dimensional scenes or objects must still be flattened before being printed.[9]

In arranging this specific musée imaginaire in his Paris apartment, Malraux utilized not the walls but the floor—or at least it was staged this way for the magazine spread. Nevertheless, the important point is that sculptures of diverse ages, scales, and origins are rendered equivalent by their translation into black and white photographs of consistent size and resolution. They can then be arranged and rearranged at will, though unlike the walls of an actual museum, Malraux's imaginary museum is confined to the limitations of his book's size and format.

‹The Museum without Walls› covers centuries and continents, with many more works mentioned in the text than actual reproductions, but it quite clearly represents Malraux's personal imagination, however much the author attempted to universalize his claims. For example, in contrasting a Greek Aphrodite after Praxitiles with a 10th-century sculpture from the temple at Khadjuraho in India—a site of notorious sensuality and eroticism, Malraux confidently asserts: «We need only cease observing the Greek nude through Christian eyes, and compare it not with the Gothic but with the Indian nude—and its nature promptly changes; the erotic elements fade into the background, we see it radiant with new-won freedom and in its amply molded forms find hidden traces of the drapery of the figures from which it has gradually broken free, and which the Greeks called ‹Victories›»[10]. Such curatorial decisions ultimately reveal more about the curator than about the works of art themselves. In order to de-eroticize Khadjuraho's figures for his imaginary museum, Malraux had to radically decontextualize them, even to the extent of cropping away head and feet to render the sculptural images comparable. Malraux included only sculpture and painting, with stained glass and manuscript illumination, two drawings and two portrait photographs representing the ‹minor arts› in his publication. Had Malraux published his book in our image-saturated, post-Pop Art era of visual culture studies, his imaginary museum might have included an entirely different range of media, for, like all museums, the musée imaginaire is very much a product of the curator's particular time and place.

Although much has been made in the secondary literature about Malraux and his relation to and use of photography, it should be emphasized that the majority of works included in his musée imaginaire appear in textual form only. Often, Malraux's syntax itself resembles the act of quickly thumbing through postcards. «What is modern in [Goya] is the freedom of his art. For his colors, though not derived from Italy, are not invariably different from those of the museum, the May Third, the Burial of the Sardine, are pure Goya, but a comparison or his various Majas on the Balcony with, say, Murillo's Courtesans can be revealing. […] His painting and his passion for Velazquez point us back towards the last period of Frans Hals (the hands in ‹The Women Governors› strike perhaps the first aggressively modern note in painting); On the margin of this lineage, less obviously akin, come certain works by the Venetians, the Spaniards, some English portrait-painters; and, at a later date, by Géricault, Delacroix, Constable, Turner, and Courbet—even Decamps and Millet.»[11]

Malraux's references are multivalent and variable, ranging from a cropped view of specific hands in one painting by Hals to apparently the entire oeuvres of Géricault, Delacroix, Constable, Turner, and so on. This is the advantage of an imaginary museum. It is not constrained by physical limitations of size, space, financial costs, or image rights. However, since it remains unknown whom exactly Malraux means when he connects Goya to «the Venetians» or «some English painters», the reader must have recourse to his or her own extensive, imaginary museum archives in order to follow Malraux on the tour of his museum. Those without an internal image bank based upon the Western canon might feel lost here.

Malraux's era, modern as it was, seems far removed from our own. The internet commandeered the term ‹gallery› to signify any collection of images regardless of their subject matter. These are grouped together by people called ‹curators› who gather and present content from the far reaches of the web and its image banks. Taken to the extreme, everyone who ‹pins› something to his or her Pinterest account or uploads photos to Flickr is a curator. However, the internet's many ‹pinners› are Flusser's image producers and collectors. They are not curating in the sense of interpreting and analysing. An egregious example of the devaluation of the job title may be found in a recent article profiling the star curator Hans Ulrich Obrist in the ‹New Yorker› magazine. While describing an exhibition of his own works that he had selected for display, the artist Ed Ruscha acerbically notes, «They told me not to go throwing that word ‹curator› around. I was told I was just assembling an exhibit»[12]. Astonishingly, everyone trolling the web to post and repost material is allowed to be a curator, but at the same time the title is forbidden to one of the most eloquent and visionary contemporary artists.

Obrist takes a more optimistic view. In the same ‹New Yorker› profile, he predicts a bright future for virtual curation and devices, suggesting gleefully that «maybe the iPhone is the new nano-museum». Until the technology catches up and 3D online galleries can be navigated smoothly via smartphones, Obrist's «new nano-museum» will remain a musée imaginaire, a 2D paradise of image saturation incapable of conveying realistically rendered 3D-objects in space.[13] These curatorial web applications have succeeded in returning a sense of scale to online galleries. They unite far-flung works of art in massive imaginary exhibitions that would otherwise be nearly impossible. However, the three-dimensional (and beyond) remains lost, as does an imaginative approach to art exhibition curation—on- or offline—that frees itself from museum or gallery walls.[14] Seen more positively, this deficit presents an opportunity for architects, artists, gallerists, and curators to design new solutions for a digital age.

Furthermore, although 3D online exhibition spaces have been developed almost exclusively for commercial use, their primary (and largely untapped) value may in fact be as a teaching tool. These spaces speak in visual languages familiar to the so-called digital natives, who enjoy the game-like aspects offered by such platforms. However, 3D online galleries do not represent actual innovations in terms of display possibilities. They are rather reproductions of the very templates that mark images as fine art. Worse, they might be understood as further contributing to the unnecessary vulgarisation of curation. Instead, the value in 3D online exhibitions remains foremost in their ability to convey relative scale. For students who are unable to travel, the possibility of viewing a work's dimensions opens up other levels of understanding. In a 3D online space, the work's proportions are no longer simply numbers. Seeing the work in comparison to other works ultimately offers deeper insight into artistic practice, which is the true value of any museum—with or without walls.

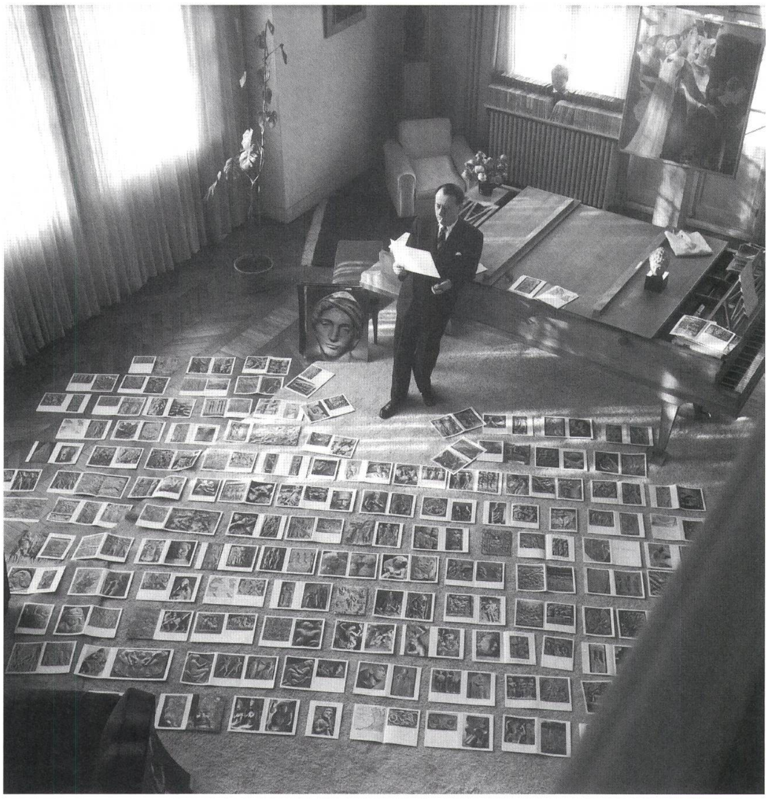

fig. b
André Malraux working on his book ‹Le musée imaginaire: Du bas relief aux Grottes Sacrées›, 1953
Photography: Maurice Jarnoux for ‹Paris Match›. © Getty Images

Noelle Paulson, born 1979, received Master of Arts and PhD degrees in Nineteenth-Century European Art History from Washington University in St. Louis, Missouri, USA, in 2004 and 2009 respectively. As an independent art historian and researcher, she has published essays on Vincent Van Gogh, the Neo-Impressionists, Édouard Vuillard, and others for museums in the U.S., Canada, The Netherlands, Italy, and Switzerland. She also works as administrative coordinator for the Block Research Group (BRG), Institute of Technology in Architecture, ETH Zurich.

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1 The concept of the white-cube gallery was formulated by Brian O'Doherty in a series of articles for the journal ‹Artforum› in 1976 and 1986. These were anthologized in Brian O'Doherty, ‹Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space› Berkeley, CA University of California Press 1999.

2 Walter Benjamin, ‹Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit›, in ‹Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung› Jahrgang V, Paris, Félix Alcan, 1936, pp. 40–68.

3 Vilém Flusser, ‹Into the Universe of Technical Images› trans. Nancy Ann Roth, Minneapolis: MN University of Minnesota Press 2011, p. 4.

4 sandboxgallery.com and artsteps.com, Retrieved 15.7.2015.

5 André Malraux, ‹Museum without Walls› in ‹Voices of Silence› trans. Stuart Gilbert, Princeton: NJ Princeton University Press 1978, p. 25.

6 Malraux, ‹Les Voix du silence›, Paris Gallimard 1951; ‹Musée imaginaire de la sculpture mondiale›, 3 vols. Paris Gallimard 1952–54.

7 Rosalind Krauss, ‹Postmodernism's Museum without Walls›, in Reesa Greenberg, Bruce W. Ferguson and Sandy Nairne (Eds.), ‹Thinking about Exhibitions›, London/New York Routledge 1996, p. 341.

8 Walter Grasskamp ‹André Malraux und das imaginäre Museum. Die Weltkunst im Salon› München C. H. Beck Verlag 2014, pp. 11–15.

9 www.twinkind.com, Retrieved 19.5.2015.

10 Malraux, ‹Museum without Walls›, p. 81.

11 Ibid, pp. 99–100.

12 D. T. Max, ‹The Art of Conversation. The Curator who Talked his Way to the Top›, ‹New Yorker› www.newyorker.com/magazine/2014/12/08/art-conversation, Retrieved 05.5.2015.

13 As this essay goes to press, SandboxGallery has released a mobile app for Android operating systems.

14 Reviewing projects on Holocenter: Center for the Holographic Arts, Long Island City, NY, USA, reveals that many holographic works are still framed and/or hung on the walls for exhibitions. www.holocenter.org/projects, Retrieved 05.5.2015.