

An exhibition within an exhibition: how do the public go from reality to virtual ?

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How does a virtual exhibition find its place within a traditional exhibition? How is a virtual exhibition visited? What are the uses and who are the public concerned by a virtual exhibition? How does a public that is used to visiting traditional exhibitions perceive digital works?

These questions are discussed in a usage study of an interactive terminal installed in a permanent exhibition devoted to animated images in Annecy, France, as part of the CITIA (City of moving images) project. The terminal has been designed as a multimedia space giving visitors the possibility to move around different rooms in an imaginary building full of interactive objects that give access to the works. The interactivity presented there is like “a realistic representation of a micro-universe, sophisticated scenarios and interfaces and numerous possible routes to take” (Le Marec 1998) and shows the wish to portray an “exhibition within an exhibition” as “a micro-visit encased in a bigger visit of the exhibition” (Le Marec).

This research continues the work carried out by researchers in information and communication sciences on the uses of information and communication technologies (J.Perriault, 1989) and particularly, on diverse uses of interactivity in museums (D.Thierry, 1992, J. Le Marec, 1998). The project also shows how to “understand how a given society (our own) at a given moment of its own history perceives the world surrounding it” (F. Forest, 1984) and inspires work on the visual side of communication. The project simultaneously uses datamining techniques (as used in e marketing) and techniques used in sociology and on the public which give quantitative and qualitative methods of analyses.

Quantitatively, the automatic measuring tools integrated in the terminal analyse how visitors (4,000 since June 2005) move around the virtual part of the exhibition and how they view the work presented :

- if the visitor moves around in the same way in a virtual exhibition as he does in a real one;
- if the behaviour of the visitor is influenced by the spatial and interactive organisation set up in the device (an interactive scenography anticipating moving around and between rooms, using an interactive map, access to a catalogue, help etc.);
- if the visitor would rather go directly to the works on view and gain access through the catalogue, rather than taking the planned visit.

Qualitatively, observations are carried out on-site, by filming, taking notes or interviewing visitors to confirm and complete the first approach in context and identify the different types of people visiting the “real and virtual” exhibition – (retired people, adults, students, teenagers, children etc.). This sociological approach “makes it possible to understand how different people perceive the terminal, and particularly to consider the space-time dimensions associated to places and susceptible to influence the uses”. (J. Perriault, 1998).