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Physical Closure & Virtual Visibility
Digital Initiatives at the Stedelijk Museum (2004-2011)



Introduction

Mobile technologies and augmented reality are widely promoted in museums today for their ability to facilitate an interactive visitor experience, and for the informative layers they can add to the experience of objects in the museum gallery. Among a wide array of museum implementations, mobile media are being explored as a means to provide access to archives, and as a tool to contextualize and enliven the presentation of a collection. Yet digital and mobile technologies also offer a frame through which to consider a matter that has come increasingly to the fore in current debates around slashed cultural budgets: can a museum survive if it is without a physical, architectural body? Can a museum which exists only in the digital realm – online and through the medium of digital devices – still be considered a museum, or is the act of crossing the threshold into the museum too integral to the experience? The Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam provides an important case study to inform this discussion, namely because the Stedelijk was itself without a physical body for the better part of a decade. As a museum with a reputation as a vanguard leader in the collection and presentation of avant-garde modern and contemporary art, the Stedelijk is also a museum which, while international in its scope, is distinctly grounded in the city in which it stands. It is a museum with a long and significant history embodied within its walls, and within its collection. Therefore, the fact that the Stedelijk Museum building was closed in 2004, and would not be fully open again until 2012, provides an apt case study to examine the effects of a closed museum, and the alternatives to physical sitedness explored by the museum during this period. As a living museum, one that sets itself the task of maintaining a direct link to the most contemporary art practice, it was imperative

that the Stedelijk Museum continue to grow and evolve even while undergoing construction. How could the Stedelijk Museum function beyond the white cube? How could it continue to be an innovator, using new technologies – online and onsite – to stimulate art production, create and sustain a public presence?

The Long Closure

The exterior structure of the Stedelijk Museum went unaltered from the time of its opening in 1895 until the Sandberg wing was added during the tenure of Director Willem Sandberg (1945-63).¹ It would again go untouched until 2004, when the Stedelijk closed for renovations that would replace the Sandberg Wing. In need of improved facilities for the presentation of its collection and temporary exhibitions, the museum sought to expand with an iconic new contemporary wing – one that would bring the museum into the 21st century. From the beginning, the Stedelijk renovation was plagued with problems of staff turnover and budgetary

1 This 'Sandberg Era', the most salient period of the Stedelijk's history and the period most cited as the institutional pinnacle to which the Stedelijk aspires to reach again, was the period in which a number of the Stedelijk's most canonical exhibitions were featured, such as the iconic *Bewogen Beweging* (1961), *Dylaby* (1962), and *Op Losse Schroeven* (1969). Yet the wing, built in 1954, was not saved by this nostalgia for the Sandberg Era, and was instead demolished to make way for the new wing.

conflicts, leading to delay after delay. While the remodel was only intended to take four years, after the bankruptcy of the initial contractors hired by the municipality, and a difference in opinion with the architects involved, the reopening was repeatedly postponed.⁵

The Pop-Up Museum

Irregardless of these practical challenges, and the long closure period that ensued, there remained a salience of the old building within the minds of the citizens of Amsterdam.⁶ The exhibitions and events that took place in important Stedelijk Museum spaces – like the Appel bar, or the main staircase – resulted in the formation of a deep-seated relationship between art, the institution, and the building itself, each element inextricably linked to the other.⁷ Yet, despite the closure of these evocative spaces, the museum found it necessary to remain operational. As Director Ann Goldstein explained, “the museum is like a living thing, if it does not stay active it dies. If it closes its doors and shuts its windows, it decays.”⁸ The museum would continue to move forward, seeking out alternative institutional models. One alternative, the pop-up museum, was explored, with the Post CS-Building near the Amsterdam Central Station forming a temporary museum site. The Stedelijk took up residence here, where it would remain for four years, until the building had to be turned back over to its private ownership. While the climatic conditions of the new site would make it impossible to exhibit the Stedelijk’s twentieth-century collection, thematic exhibitions such as *Populism* (2005), *Mapping the Studio* (2006), and *Next Level, Art, Games & Reality* (2006) were combined with large solo-exhibitions such as those devoted to Rineke Dijkstra (2005/6) and Andy Warhol (2007/8). The variety of disciplines represented by the Stedelijk collection all received ample attention, with exhibitions featuring drawing, photography, film, video, digital media, applied art, and design. External curators, including artists, were regularly invited to develop exhibitions. The museum experimented with a wide range of presentation models, partly because the loft-like architecture of the Post CS-building was an invitation to do so.¹⁰ The move provided the impetus to give the Stedelijk’s program an upgrade and an update, as noted by both the press and the public.^{13 15} This was only a temporary solution for the Stedelijk, however, from late 2008, the Stedelijk was forced to give up its temporary residence and become, quite literally, a museum without walls.¹⁶

5 Davidts, Wouter (2008) 'Nostalgia and pragmatism: Architecture and the New Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam', *Architectural Theory Review*, 13:1, 97 -111.

6 Hendrik Folkerts, interview with the author, Amsterdam 15 May 2013.

7 Boomgaard, Jeroen, 'In Defiance of the Building. Art Related to the Stedelijk Museum's Architecture', *Stedelijk Collection Reflections. Essays on the collection of the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam*, 2012, p. 441.

8 Goldstein, Ann. 'Ann Goldstein: Director, Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam', *The Museum Revisited: ArtForum*: Summer 2010, pp. 292-293.

10 Roos, Robbert, Gijs van Tuyl. *Stedelijk Museum CS: Prospect/Retrospect*. Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam: 2008.

13 Roos, Robbert, Gijs van Tuyl. *Stedelijk Museum CS: Prospect/Retrospect*. Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam: 2008.

15 In 2008, *Andy Warhol – Other Voices, Other Rooms*, an exhibition highlighting the video work of Warhol, was a huge success, drawing 124,000 visitors. Stedelijk Museum Website 'Stedelijk Museum Leaves Post CS-Building After 904,238 Visitors', 1 October 2008. accessed online: <http://www.stedelijk.nl/en/news-items/stedelijk-museum-leaves-post-cs-building-after-904238-visitors>. 11 May 2013.

16 Andre Malraux in his canonical text, *Le musée imaginaire*, describes his concept of a museum of photographic reproductions as a "museum without walls".

A Museum Without Walls: Stedelijk in de Stad

In response to this situation, the project, *Stedelijk in de Stad (Stedelijk Goes to Town)* – a cabin touring the city – was designed by Niels van Eijk and Miriam van der Lubbe. The cabin was intended as a traveling center for experiments, workshops, performances, discussions, debates and artist works. In addition to the cabin, exhibitions were planned to showcase the Stedelijk collection at other institutions and sites, including De Nieuwe Kerk.¹⁷ At this time, in addition to becoming a physically traveling museum, the Stedelijk began to further engage with the possibilities for visibility provided by the internet. Without a permanent building in which to show the collection, online alternatives seemed a logical alternative to pursue. A website for Stedelijk in de Stad charted events throughout the city and the Stedelijk became increasingly involved with art students in the community, commissioning new works and projects both online and at various public and institutional sites.¹⁸ The cabin and related Stedelijk in de Stad programs ran until the latter half of 2009 and featured works including *Me at the Museum*, a photographic project by Isabel Lucena that used a green screen to project the image of visitors to the cabin into the historic Stedelijk galleries.¹⁹

Though this project brought about increased involvement with emerging artists and art school students, seeking greater visibility for the collection, the Stedelijk chose to commission artists to create works that responded to works from the collection and install them in public spaces throughout the city. Students reacted to the Stedelijk's art and design collections, creating connections between original and new works and installing them in public spaces.²⁰ In March, May, and September 2009 the projects were put on display. Online, a website marked the progress of the traveling Stedelijk and the developments of the extra mural exhibition.²¹ Viola Renate's installation in Central Station is one example, featuring light-box projected images collected from social networking sites of women interpreting their own film noir stars, a la Cindy Sherman's photo series. Another example was Matthias Schreiber's translation of Jeff Koons' piece, *Ushering in Banality* into an inflatable, far larger than original work.

The ARtours

These installations did their task of infiltrating the public space of the city with art, and gave some visibility to the Stedelijk; however, this period was not marked by a great enthusiasm for the Stedelijk's programs, and participation was limited outside of art communities. Public outcry with the continued slowness of the Stedelijk renovation ensued.²² Attachment to the old building and a longing for the Stedelijk of the past caused concern about the museum not contributing *enough* to the city and to art discourse. So, while working towards the reopening, a new public program was put into place that would expand the reach of the Stedelijk's programs, and would focus more on the opportunities provided by digital media – including the capacity of digital media to retain public visibility of the institution, and provide a format for the proliferation and discussion of contemporary art. Utilizing augmented reality on smart

17 The Stedelijk Museum filled De Nieuwe Kerk with an exhibition entitled, *Holy Inspiration, Religion and Spirituality in Modern Art*, from 13 December 2008 to 19 April 2009.

18 The website can be found at: <http://www.stedelijkindestad.nl/>

19 An archive of images of *Me at the Stedelijk* can be viewed at: <http://mats.stedelijkindestad.nl/>.

20 Stedelijk Museum Website. 'Visibly Absent - 3rd and Final Edition' 3 Sept. 2009. accessed online: <http://www.stedelijk.nl/en/news-items/visibly-absent-3rd-and-final-edition>, 11 May 2013.

21 See: http://www.stedelijkindestad.nl/projects/english/posts/visibly_absent_2nd_edition; <http://www.extra-muros.nl/>

22 Siegal, Nina. 'Pointed Criticism', *Time Out Amsterdam.Com*, January 2010, pp. 54-55.

phones was particularly interesting for the drifting Stedelijk, and a decision was made to embark on a project entitled, ARtours. One of the main goals of the ARtours was to explore and investigate the possibilities of augmented reality (AR) and its impact on the user experience.²³ After funding was raised, the project kicked off in January 2010 – a period in which the technique incorporated in the augmented reality browser, Layar, had existed for no more than half a year.²⁴

Me on the Museum Square

The first project to incorporate AR was *Me on the Museum Square*, a concept that brought a virtual 3D-artwork exhibition into the public park adjacent to the museum's premises at Museum Square. Students of various Dutch art academies were approached to create 3D-artworks, viewable through the screen of a smart device. The briefing for the students was not detailed and was open for interpretation in many different ways.²⁵ Curatorial staff of the Stedelijk then viewed and rated the artworks of the students. From all the entries, six works were selected to be realized in 3D, augmented reality space. In May of 2010, the exhibition was launched at the Museum Square to mixed reactions. The technical difficulties experienced by the project were the largest barrier to user enjoyment: as a result of the high demand of the application on battery life, after forty-five minutes most devices were out of power; because of the sun and its placement in the sky, it was difficult to see the device screens; a map and the assistance of museum attendants was necessary to guide visitors to the sites where different artworks were appended in digital space; and, although thoroughly tested, the GPS accuracy was sometimes poor, causing objects to appear in the wrong place.²⁶ Undeniably, however, the exhibition stimulated interaction among visitors. Not every visitor had a smartphone with the Layar application, so groups formed and together walked around Museum Square to view the artworks. Onlookers became interested and asked whether they could see what others were viewing through their devices.²⁷ As these were works created specifically for 3D space, issues that would be challenging in terms of the reappropriation of art icons in ulterior contexts (and dimensions), were averted.

ARtotheque

With another ARtours project, the collection was used as a tool, or as content for interactive, virtual curating. Lowlands, a three-day festival in the Netherlands with a focus on musical performances, provided a unique site to bring increased visibility to the Stedelijk collection and its digital initiatives. With a small team comprised of curators of the museum, programmers and (digital) artists, a concept called ARtotheque was developed to function like a public art library. A visitor to the Lowlands Festival could borrow a replica of a work of art to view in AR, download the artwork to his/her smartphone, and position it anywhere on the festival

23 Schavemaker, M., Pondaag, E., e.a. 'Augmented Reality and the Museum Experience,' *Archimuse.com* 2011.

24 Schavemaker, M., 'Is Augmented Reality the Ultimate Museum App? Some Strategic Considerations', Proctor, N., (ed.), *Mobile Apps for Museums. The AAM Guide to planning and Strategy*, 2011.

25 Erik van Mastrigt. 'Interview with Hein Wils: Stedelijk Museum and ARtours', *Masters of Media: New Media & Digital Culture MA, University of Amsterdam*, October 1, 2011. accessed online: <http://mastersofmedia.hum.uva.nl/2011/10/31/interview-with-hein-wils-stedelijk-museum-and-artours/> 11 May 2013.

26 Schavemaker, M., 'Is Augmented Reality the Ultimate Museum App? Some Strategic Considerations', Proctor, N., (ed.), *Mobile Apps for Museums. The AAM Guide to planning and Strategy*, 2011.

27 Goudsmit, Lisa. 'Ongrijpbare gelaagdheid: De invloed van augmented reality oop kunstbeleving', *Kunstlicht*, nr. 4, 2012, pp. 67-75.

premises. A booth was assembled on the festival grounds for use as a store front, through which staff connected with the audience. Participation was relatively simple: the visitor could choose an artwork from a selection of 160 masterpieces, all printed on A4 cards, scan the QR code on the card and thus activate the 'Kunstuitleen' (art loan) layer on the Layar platform. The last step was to choose a position for the artwork, hang it and share it with all other users in the public 'Kunstuitleen' layer.²⁸ In terms of attention, visibility, and public reception, ARtotheque was a success. Yet, there were again technical difficulties. Effective AR relies heavily on reliable connectivity, and with 60,000 music fans simultaneously calling and texting one another, reception was limited. An (unauthorized) Wi-Fi-spot was needed in order to make at least some experience with ARtotheque possible. In the end, forty-five artworks were borrowed.²⁹

ARtotheque brings some philosophical concerns to the fore: namely that the media used to frame and portray these works from the collection has a powerful agency, and an impact on the manner in which the featured art is viewed. AR shapes the manner it is received and the context surrounding it. Therefore, bringing artworks from the Stedelijk collection into public space through the use of new technology has a major impact on the manner of viewing and on the perception of the art itself. The work of art is contingent on its surroundings, and this event in the life of the work does effect the future agency of the original collection work, and reflect on its holding institution. This is not to argue that such mediations should never occur, and in fact, in today's contemporary image economy, to prevent an image from circulation is perhaps akin to its death. However, in cases like these, the tendency has been to first embrace the medium, and then consider the consequences on the content. This has been a major problem with AR applications in museums thus far, and a rigorous theoretical approach to the medium of AR – with concern for its specific modality – should be considered before applying the medium for use with all manners of art content. The art should drive the application. Yet, despite what can perhaps be seen as an unconsidered application of works from the collection, these early experiments of the Stedelijk with AR were all successful in providing experience using the medium, testing its limits, boundaries, and possibilities.

The Temporary Stedelijk and Taking Place

When it came time for the Stedelijk to temporarily reopen the newly remodeled Weissman building, the museum was still without temperature and humidity controls and the new wing was still under construction. As such, the Stedelijk was somewhere between a building and a museum. Thus, the museum made the move to open its doors and present empty spaces and artworks; to premiere an interior space that would serve to exhibit both works of art, and the newly finished architecture itself with a program of exhibitions and events called the *Temporary Stedelijk*. *Temporary Stedelijk* marked the ideal opportunity to bring lessons learned about AR inside, into the white cube. The empty galleries of the new building provided space for new layers: space for art, space for contemplation, for memories, and also for augmented reality. Featuring an exhibition called *Taking Place*, works of art (not temperature sensitive) were installed within the galleries, leaving other galleries empty of art and open for the contemplation of the architectural components themselves. Furthermore, these long-

28 Schavemaker, M., 'Is Augmented Reality the Ultimate Museum App? Some Strategic Considerations', Proctor, N., (ed.), *Mobile Apps for Museums. The AAM Guide to planning and Strategy*, 2011.

29 Schavemaker, M., Pondaag, E., e.a. 'Augmented Reality and the Museum Experience,' *Archimuse.com* 2011.

unseen spaces allowed for artworks to be affixed to the physical spaces of the galleries through augmented reality applications.

To allow for augmented reality to partially fill the empty spaces of the Stedelijk, curators invited Dutch artist Jan Rothuizen (b. 1968) to come up with ideas for an exhibition, solely viewable in augmented reality. Rothuizen works primarily with pen, ink, and paper. He draws sociographs, maps, and situations, which he enriches with written thoughts and observations. The curators of the Stedelijk introduced the AR medium to Rothuizen and discussed the possibilities and constraints of working with AR on a mobile device, and the artist responded enthusiastically.³¹ Excited about the prospect, Rothuizen started to conceptualize his ideas in connection with the Stedelijk's technical and design partners, TABworldmedia and Fabrique.³² In the resulting work, Rothuizen's drawings are appended to the spaces of the building to which they refer using the Layar platform. The result is a layering of the museum with virtual information, bringing the objective outer world of material spaces into collision with the subjective inner world of conceptual memories and storytelling: "a mapping of the museum inside the museum".³³

After *Taking Place* closed in late 2011, it came time to complete the new wing and merge it with the renovated original building. The museum needed to close, once again. This led to an entirely new kind of program, which benefitted even more from collaborations between the Stedelijk and other local institutions, and the lessons learned from social networking and digital media during the long period of closure. *Do It!* events were hosted by cultural partners (and those less established as public partners). In one iteration, Trouw, a nightclub in the building of a former newspaper factory hosted an interactive exhibition of AR artworks. A variety of apps that used a combination of QR codes and layar were accessible, and users were invited to try out the works in this evening public forum, with discussion and feedback encouraged.³⁴ Having so much experience with partners – other cultural institutions that allowed the Stedelijk to program within their spaces – and having become so flexible and agile in their ability to generate a public program in a moment's notice, this final period of closure reflected a profound shift in the thinking and practice of the museum.

(Re)Opening the New Stedelijk

The Stedelijk Museum opened, fully finished, on September 23, 2012. With the reopening the museum has again placed its focus on creating traditional exhibitions within the fully finished gallery space. Yet, having experienced this period of closure, and wanting to continue to develop and use the new technologies previously explored, the Stedelijk has honed focus on finding new uses for AR within the white cube, in a manner that links it with the outside world and branches and contextualizes the artworks and spaces featured in layered applications. Further, the aim of such applications has become less centralized on the technology and the innovation therein, and more on the content relayed by the technology. A nuanced approach to the medium, looking first at the work and the research or archival material and if it makes sense to show in AR, has become a major consideration for the museum's augmented reality applications.

31 ARtours Vimeo Channel. 'AR(t): Jan Rothuizen – Portrait', Accessed online: <http://vimeo.com/18092710>, 12 May 2013.

32 Schavemaker, M., Pondaag, E., e.a. 'Augmented Reality and the Museum Experience,' *Archimuse.com* 2011.

33 Schavemaker, M., Pondaag, E., e.a. 'Augmented Reality and the Museum Experience,' *Archimuse.com* 2011.

34 Hendrik Folkerts, interview with the author, Amsterdam 15 May 2013.

By evoking new encounters between physical artworks, their historical trajectories, and the sites in which they have been installed, the Stedelijk's smart device touring application will be released in September 2013. The latest generation of ARtours, it provides for the visitor an encounter with archival material and historical information in relation to artworks or the architectural spaces where historical events took place. As such, this application allows museum visitors to locate archival information directly in space, returning the context to the artwork and to the museum, a space with a fundamentally different rhythm and code of behavior. One of the most detailed tours is a multi-narrative tour that focuses on the Stedelijk design collection. The app includes a design tour that allows users to experience the whole museum as a design collection, moving the objects themselves into other galleries, becoming their own designers, or curators, of the design collection throughout the galleries, bringing the museum, for example, back to the way it was installed during the Gerrit Rietveld-designed *De Stijl* exhibition of 1951.³⁵

Looking Ahead

This period of remodeling and reconstructing brought with it a rethinking of the identity of the museum and the role and mission it aims to fulfill in the future. With a new building, a museum is not only expected, as Glen D. Lowry put it at the start of the building campaign of New York Museum of Modern art, to “fundamentally alter its space,” but also to present a blueprint for a museum “of the future”.³⁶ Yet the question remains if a physical change to the museum, a new innovative and eye catching iconic building, also necessitates a new thought-provoking institutional structure. At the Stedelijk, over the course of the agonizingly long period of closure, the museum was forced to be reactive and flexible, it developed relationships with other institutions, re-conceptualized the role that can be played by the collection, and re-considered the spatial politics of the museum in many ways, most notable for the purposes of this essay, through the space of the digital. While the reopening of the museum has again turned the focus back towards more traditional aims – to more traditional models for the exhibition and presentation of the collection – remnants of those lessons learned by closure remain. Closure, thus, can be seen not only as a hiatus for the institution, but as an opportunity to embrace those possibilities offered by the digital realm.

³⁵ Margriet Schavemaker, interview with the author, Amsterdam 23 April 2013.

³⁶ Glenn D. Lowry, *The New Museum of Modern Art Expansion: A Process of discovery*, in: John Elderfield (ed.), *Imagining the future of the Museum of modern art*, *Studies in modern art* 7, New York, Museum of modern art / Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1998, p. 21.

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