

Chapter 10

Art and articulation: the finer points of engaging the user in abstract concepts and lateral thinking

Linda Leung and Scott Bryant

Fine art challenges its audience to engage with abstract concepts that may not be easily articulated and require introspective reflection. The art gallery offers a rich metaphor for conceptualising digital experiences: just as the gallery is the space where the spectator engages with works of art, digital worlds represent the interface between users and content. Furthermore, the art world creates experiences that enable users to tackle challenging content, and elevates content to the level of the sacred. This can be applied in digital design to contexts where complex ideas take primacy. However, conceptualising an online environment as a gallery and its content as ‘art’ can mean contravening Web usability principles which assume task-oriented, utilitarian and time-constrained online interactions.

This chapter examines the ways in which art is presented, and the design of experiences of art. The instruments which ‘frame’ an artwork and scaffold the experience for the spectator are discussed in relation to how such techniques can be translated for digital contexts.

Scott explores the differences and similarities between art and design, in terms of his training as an artist, and his work as an Experience Architect. How does his development process as an artist intersect or diverge from what he does as a designer?

The gallery as interface

Going to see an exhibition is more than just about experiencing art. It is a highly designed experience which is framed in a way to set up and fulfil certain expectations before the spectator even enters the exhibition space.

When visiting an art gallery, one anticipates the art work to take ‘centre stage’. The works of art are intended to take precedence over the space or architecture in which they are presented. In more simplistic terms, it could be said that the art and what it conveys is the point of focus and

prioritised over the gallery or exhibition space. In the art world, galleries are often referred to as 'white cubes': that is, they are designated as neutral spaces which are supposed to be visually, sensorially and experientially unobtrusive. They are 'blank canvases' that recede into the background when they are filled with art.

'Fundamentally, exhibition-making is focused on the content of the works to be displayed and concerns the ordering of these works as a sequence, to be understood in relation to each other and in dialogue with the conditions of the viewing environment.' (Dernie 2006: 6)

A corporate Web site can be similarly conceptualised as a 'blank canvas' or neutral space in which an individual or organisation presents their 'message' or content. Applying this metaphor means the architecture of the site and the presentation of the content should not distract from the content itself. This approach is also illustrated in Nielsen's usability guidelines (2000) which advocates aesthetic and minimalist presentation and toning down distinctive design. Content is king, while the shell in which the content sits ought to take a back seat.

The problem with the notion of 'content' is that it suggests material that is not particularly meaningful. Instead, perhaps digital experience designers should regard content as having the status or importance of works of art. In this way, only content that has been carefully crafted is made public. A shared digital environment (including intranet or public Web site) should not be seen as simply a storage mechanism for any old content. Rather, it is an exhibition space for work which has undergone a thorough development process and which is worthy of showing to users. Furthermore, 'content' implies a critical mass or volume of material, whereas art is about delivering key messages through an object or work. Elevating content to the level of art means applying the old adage 'less is more' and doing more with less.

Artists and art critics discuss art works in terms of their 'conceptual rigour'. That is, an art work is judged according to the relationship between what the work is trying to convey (its 'key message'), its medium (the materials used), its form (its characteristics, scale, size, construction, architecture) and presentation (the manner in which it is shown). To what extent is the relationship between these aspects resolved and coherent?

‘...an exhibition design considers the simple dialogue between the objects to be exhibited and the space in which they are presented: where the objects are, and how they are arranged will determine the nature of the message they communicate.’ (Dernie 2006: 6)

A glance at many organisational Web sites would indicate that such ‘conceptual rigour’ is missing. For example, a corporate Web site which functions as a dumping ground for every piece of content produced by the organisation can be inconsistent with the ‘key message’ of its branding if the company markets its knowledge as exclusive and desirable. As an exhibition space for the organisation, the Web site conveys to the user a confusing array of messages which they must decode in order to work out which are important. Conceptually, there is a lack of resolution between what the organisation seeks to say about itself, and how it does this through its online presence. Thus, the Web site could not really be considered a great work of art.

An exception to the rule of ‘content is king’ is the Guggenheim Museum, in both its online and offline manifestations. The physical architecture of the New York museum could be seen as overpowering or competing with the artworks that it exhibits. However, the distinctiveness and innovation of its architecture has come to be associated with the kind of art that is shown there. In this regard, both the art and architecture are equally reputable and complementary. In its online capacity, the Guggenheim Virtual Museum demonstrates a consistency in its experimentation with virtual space to allow users to experience its art collections. The Guggenheim brand is exceptional in its ability to achieve this coherence in its ‘message’ across media, particularly in a digital arena that inherently devalues content due its ready availability.

While many Web sites have gallery sections, this chapter argues that a Web site (and indeed any openly available digital offering) in its entirety can be regarded as a gallery, a space which presents the work of an individual or organisation to a public. This opens up opportunities to think beyond the ‘page paradigm’ of Web sites, and instead consider a company’s online presence as an extension of how it presents itself in other ways to the world: whether it is its headquarters, offices, staff, CEO, employee uniforms, all these artefacts are means of exhibiting the company to others. Therefore, the work that is presented online should be accorded the status

of 'art' by the digital designer as well as the spectator in that it ideally would have been subject to much reflection and revision before being exhibited.

Art criticism and interpretation

To fully appreciate a work of art takes time. A gallery invites the spectator to quietly ponder the meaning of the work. One is not expected to understand it immediately because its meaning is often complex and open to interpretation. Therefore, the spectator is free to linger and muse upon the artwork. To apply this to the online world runs counter to usability principles which assert that Web sites must have 'zero learning time or die' (Nielsen 2000). Going to an art gallery is not meant to be a hurried or pressing experience. Nor is it intended to be task-driven so that the spectator leaves as soon as they have looked at the work and 'get it'. For example, the Porsche Web site (www.porsche.com) allows the user to find the specifications for a specific model, but still manages to convey their cars and the site itself as works of art, inviting the user to appreciate the quality and detail of each.

If Web sites can be thought of as gallery spaces, then users should also feel welcome and enticed to consider the content in their own time and at their own pace. This necessitates content that is worthy of the user's time and which engages them in a way which is both intellectually and sensorially stimulating. The 'key message/s' that are to be conveyed do not have to be simple, but they do have to encourage the user to think. This is harder than it sounds. It is far more difficult for an organisation to depict its values, principles or ethics through its online presence in a profound and memorable way, than to just include a superficial statement in the 'About Us' section of the company Web site which is concerned mainly with helping users find information in the quickest possible way. To be able to draw in users through abstract concepts is critical to any organisation that trades on its ideas. Just as art can get spectators to confront heavyweight issues, users can be willing to tackle complex subjects - such as inequality, identity, stereotypes, compassion in an age of excess - if given appropriate contexts to do so. However, the experience has to be designed to be conducive to this sort of contemplation.

In a gallery, the spectator is provided with clues, as well as tools or instruments to assist them in their interpretation of an artwork. The gallery environment clearly differentiates between what is

art and what is not. It is evident what the spectator should be looking at. The artwork might be framed and mounted on the wall (if it is a painting), or placed on a plinth covered with a glass box (if it is a sculpture). In an online context, this equates to flagging important content, presenting it in a way which highlights that which is important and that which is not.

Furthermore, an exhibition generally provides a room sheet, catalogue essay or audio guide for the spectator to either introduce them to the work or aid them in interpreting it. These tell the spectator where the work is located, what it is made from and offer a perspective of what the work is about. This can be applied in an online environment as a kind of scaffolding which helps orient the user and provides an entry to content which may be quite challenging.

The history of modern art provides an insight into experimentations with traditional forms of representation. Where pre-modern painting was traditionally a means of recording history through portraits, landscapes and 'still life'; modern art pioneered visual styles (such as Impressionism, Cubism, Surrealism, etc) that depicted the world in different ways. It changed the purpose as well as the user experience of art from merely being an historical archive to challenging people's perceptions of the world. Online design is arguably still in its pre-modern era, given that many Web sites function as digital repositories, rather than aim for loftier objectives such as offering an alternative vision.

Perhaps online ventures such as *SecondLife* have succeeded because they enable a change in perspective. It provides a contemplative space similar to that of a gallery through which the user can experience the world in a different way. It is an unhurried environment that allows the user to interact with others and things beyond what might be deemed 'normal' in the offline world. It epitomises many of values of Surrealism, Pop and Conceptual Art movements in that the user can be confronted by the downright bizarre, while simultaneously closely referencing the social context of 'real life'. Like much great art, it asks, tests and questions who we are.

The phenomenon of *Second Life* also reflects the trend in contemporary art of letting the audience determine the outcome of an artwork:

'...exhibition design now tends to be explicitly audience-focused.' (Dernie 2006: 13)

The art world calls this relational aesthetics, whereby the experience of an artwork is shaped by the people who interact with or participate in it. Bourriand (2002) calls this 'interactive' art because it concerns human-to-human encounters; it experiments with sociality and ways of bringing people together whereby the artwork becomes an arena of exchange. For example, artist Lincoln Tobier set up a radio station in galleries and invited the public to discuss their views which was then broadcast over the airwaves (ibid: 32). Felix Gonzalez-Torres' work, 'Stacks', is a pile of sweets from which the visitor is welcome to pick; however, the visitor is faced with the responsibility of diminishing the work by taking away from it (ibid: 39). Gabriel Orozco slings a hammock in the garden of the Museum of Modern Art in New York, with no restrictions on how visitors use it (ibid: 17). Hurst (2007) calls artist Richard Serra 'a great American experience designer' whose 'explicit focus [is] on creating an *experience*, rather than an object to be revered...Here's the old way: a painting hangs on a gallery wall, and we, the subject are invited to look at it, the object. We're here, and it's there. In contrast, Serra's work makes *us* the object. As you walk through the mazelike structure of "Sequence", for example, the art's impact is on your own personal experience walking through the space...The steel just sets up the context for the experience (always note the importance of setting context when creating good experience!).'

Again, the online world has mirrored these orchestrations in human contact, immediacy and proximity through Web 2.0 and the growth of user-generated content. This can be deemed a form of relational aesthetics, as it is essentially about the relationship between the user, the content and other users. In the art of relational aesthetics, the dynamic between the spectator, the work and other spectators is explored by requiring the spectator to become an active participant in the work. The distance that usually exists between the artist and the passive viewer is contested as elitist. The perception of art as the product of the sole creative effort of an artist is also challenged. The artist relinquishes control over the creative process and submits it to the collaborative process. The kind of art that is produced is aesthetically different and not always pleasing to the eye, giving primacy to the social over the visual.

Relational aesthetics may result in an art product that is not aesthetically pleasing (for example, huge amounts of user-generated content). In terms of online relational aesthetics, this is

exemplified in *MySpace*, which has become known for its ‘ugliness’, although part of its appeal lies in the ability of the user to ‘beautify’ or make their mark on it (Porter 2006). It, too, prioritises social design over visual design: it provides a social framework in which users can engage in creative collaboration. Perhaps its popularity can be attributed to the opportunities it offers to users to partake in artistic practice. Relational aesthetics may even be deployed in an organisational Web site which acts as a content ‘dumpster’. It is the participatory process of a Web site which relies on user contributions that makes it artistic and distinguishes it from the content-rich corporate Web site which does not. Art is no longer about the visual: it is determined by process rather than outcome. The traditional question of ‘what is art?’ becomes superseded by the question of ‘*when* is art?’ (Ardenne et al 1999: 40, my emphasis).

Contemporary art practice as seen in relational aesthetics, other movements such as Conceptual Art, and forms of installation challenge traditional economies of exchange. The economic value of a work of art is called into question, as it cannot be purchased like a painting and hung on the wall of the buyer’s home. Indeed, as art objects are not functional, the worth of an artwork is always open to debate. Similarly, popular and successful online phenomena such as *YouTube*, *MySpace*, *Flickr* and *SecondLife* all disrupt conventional business models. Like expensive works of art, they have been bought for large sums of money in the absence of being able to explicitly demonstrate their financial value.

The artistic process

Artists, whether formally educated or not, enter their professional practice knowing that their work is valued, appreciated and even judged according to sets of culturally determined criteria. In isolation, the criteria are quite abstract in relation to the way the art is appreciated as a whole. For example, a work of art can be appreciated purely for its use of ‘line’ or ‘form’ while the content or the meaning of the artwork operates on another level of appreciation. Conversely, the use of ‘line’ and ‘form’ could be the elements that enable our understanding or experience of that content on an emotional level. Whether considered separately or in combination, it could be argued that these criteria form a platform for the experience of art itself. These sets of criteria not only influence the way artists work and create art but also the way in which art is positioned and understood. Artists when creating art are conscious of this ‘language’ of appreciation criteria and

once their work is exhibited, they know their art will be discussed in relation to those criteria. This language has been built upon over time often in response to trends in art and culture.

These criteria for art appreciation include:

- **form**, the physical qualities of the work shaped by the materials it uses. Beard (2007) recommends visual design should aim to please users through its form, but how can we think about form digitally? Perhaps it is more difficult to think about Web sites in terms of form because they are 'soft' and largely two-dimensional, whereas in art, form refers to an object's three-dimensionality, its weight, the way it feels to touch or hold it. Art innovation comes from experimentations in form, and so it is important to learn how to articulate and manipulate form digitally as well.
- **content**, the art work's subject matter, what it is or represents, and the emotions, ideas, symbols, narratives, or spiritual connotations it suggests. In the digital arena, content is understood well as the ultimate draw card for users (Beard 2007). Content is king in design circles, but as in art, the key concepts and ideas are more difficult to convey well.
- **feeling**, the emotional design and impact of a work. Art can achieve this affect through the simplest of design elements: it may be through a colour combination or contrast that a particular feeling is evoked. Online design is still in its early days of learning the importance of engaging emotion in the user experience.
- **critical opinion**, the public response to a work of art or an exhibition of work. There are different spheres in which this takes place in the art world: in the media (in newspapers and magazines reviewing art) and in education (in institutions where teaching and learning of art takes place). This critique of art across different arenas operates as a kind of quality assurance, pushing the artist to strive for critical acclaim. The digital world needs a similar level of critical discourse in order to encourage innovation and extend the boundaries of design.
- **craftsmanship**, or the quality of the technical execution of the work. In the work of a professional artist, the craftsmanship is clearly more sophisticated than that of an amateur. Likewise, the technical execution of a Web site says as much about the coder / programmer as it does about what it represents. In some cases, a Web site that appears to be the work of a single person might imply a lack of professionalism and/or a budget

paucity. Web craftsmanship can also refer to the ability to adapt a Web site for the end user experience, such as dial-up or broadband, or making CSS and slick Javascript work across different browser versions.

- **art history**, the diversity of movements which artists reference and extend in their work. This is rich tradition into which other design disciplines tap, as online design should too. Design has inherited much from the world of art, and digital experience design needs to exploit that heritage to elevate the discipline to an art form.

Print media, graphic design, architecture, photography and cinema have also adopted much of this language of art appreciation. Designers are arguably practicing as artists on many levels, but added to their discipline is the requirement to create for function and use. Therefore, it is also necessary for them to be educated in and familiar with the levels of art appreciation. Indeed, many of the principles of design historically come from art.

‘In the Renaissance there was no clear distinction between branches of the arts. For example, such artists as Michelangelo and Raphael were called upon to practice all three of the major fine arts.’ (Bush-Brown 1976: 91)

These major fine arts included painting, sculpture and architecture. In other words, artists were also design practitioners.

‘The artists of the Renaissance used divine proportion to design their paintings, sculpture and architecture just as designers today often employ this ratio when creating page layouts, posters and brochures.’ (Beaird 2007)

Likewise, interactive media and particularly the Web as an emerging popular medium of our time is increasingly being subject to a specific language of appreciation that incorporates and builds upon the language of art appreciation. Web sites are quite often judged appreciated and experienced on what Garrett (2003: 140 -159) describes as the ‘surface plane’ of visual design according to his ‘elements of user experience’. These judgements in relation to visual design and the ‘surface plane’ have been found in research studies (Skatssoon, 2006) to be crucial to

whether a user will stay on a Web site. Remarkably ‘visual appeal can be assessed within 50 milliseconds, suggesting that Web designers have about 50 milliseconds to make a good impression’. This does suggest that in terms of Web sites that the ‘medium is the message’ and as in art, the visual design is very much part of how we make sense of content.

The high level of visual literacy of users means that, at the very least, online designers must understand the basic elements and principles of design. The elements of design are the fundamental ‘building blocks’ of design, and are not only used in art, but in visual design, architecture and other design disciplines. According to McClurg-Genevese (2005), Zelanski and Fisher (1988), they include:

- line
- shape and form
- texture (the suggestion of form through for example, the bevelled edges of a button which give the impression that it can be pressed)
- value and weight (contrast and salience)
- colour (the vocabulary of colour, emotional effects of colour, warm and cool colours, advancing and receding colours, colour combinations, limited and open palette)
- time (the duration of viewing a piece of work).

It is not the intention of this chapter to elaborate on these elements of design, as any introductory art book will do this better. However, while this is terminology familiar to visual designers, it is also imperative for digital experience designers to understand the role of these elements in the design of human-computer interaction. The element of time is especially relevant because, as mentioned above, the digital experience designer has far less time (50 milliseconds to be precise) in which to impress the user than the artist (whose viewer can ponder the work at their leisure).

The elements themselves do not determine good art or design, but how they are used, combined and applied through the principles of design. The factors which inform how the elements are deployed include:

- variety
- rhythm
- balance (symmetrical and asymmetrical)
- compositional unity (proximity, repetition)
- emphasis through placement, continuance, isolation, contrast, proportion
- economy
- relationship to the environment (context, site specificity).

Beaird (2007) and McClurg-Genevese (2005) give examples of how these principles are used well in web design. Bearid argues that good design is like a language: just as only certain configurations of words make sense, there are a limited combination of elements and principles of design that work or are aesthetically pleasing.

Aesthetics is now being discussed within the discipline of interaction design (Dimond 2007, Heller 2005 and Lowgren 2006) and so there is a growing acknowledgement that interactive media is experienced and even judged according to a new language of appreciation criteria. This is because the aesthetics of digital experience design is made more complex by the additional ingredient of interaction. That is, it goes far beyond the visual. User interaction means that a Web site's relationship to its environment can constantly change. Whereas in art, the viewing context might be in a gallery or a site where public art is exhibited; there are a multitude of contexts in which a single Web site is seen. Firstly, it competes with a deluge of other content in the online environment (compared with the conventional sparseness of art work in a gallery separated by large amounts of space). Secondly, search engines shape and filter the context for a Web site to be accessed and viewed. Thirdly, the Web site is seen within the user's environment: on their browser and operating system, probably while they are using other applications, and in any possible physical location.

Thus, the aesthetics of digital design is complicated, but simultaneously, can also be as distinctive as any kind of art movement. For example, early hand-coded HTML Web sites had their own unique aesthetic that included limited hypertext interaction. These were superceded by more 'designerly' Web sites, many developed in Flash, which generated a very different

aesthetic with newer and more experimental forms of interaction but arguably poor usability. Then came Web 2.0, with its 'ugly' but highly usable relational aesthetics. Now the exploration of three dimensional spaces online through, for example, *GoogleEarth* and *SecondLife* has heralded a new aesthetic age, one of 'pliability'. Pliable interaction is pseudo-tactile, allowing the user to feel the interaction as one more closely aligned to the offline world. The ability to 'zoom in' smoothly and gracefully to a closer view of the Earth from outer space down to a specific neighbourhood is an example of this.

'The notion of pliability is an attempt to articulate a certain quality in using digital, interactive products and services. The use of a digital artifact is characterized as pliable if it feels like a tightly connected loop between eye and hand, between action and response. A pliable interaction is one where the user is drawn into a sense of shaping the digital information with her fingertips, even though the actual artifact might employ standard, non-tactile interaction techniques such as mouse, keyboard and a display monitor. Pliability is a sensuous quality, having to do with how it feels to use the artifact in the here-and-now of the use situation, and as such it plays a role in understanding the aesthetics of interaction.' (Lowgren 2006: 3)

New aesthetics emerge with the introduction of new technologies, and exploration of their possibilities as well as their constraints. For example, AJAX has brought another kind of aesthetic to the web, one which provides an alternative to the 'page refresh' when, for example, an online form has not been fully completed. Instead, only the incomplete sections of the form are highlighted. On the other hand, it is still difficult to translate fluorescent colours for online media, and so a digital aesthetic has a limited colour palette compared to the aesthetics of print media. Aesthetics is informed by what you can and can't do with a medium. Thus, digital aesthetics are very much technologically determined and this is where it differs from art.

Art is determined by the artist: the artist is inspired to create their own personal vision and finds the most appropriate materials to realize this. This sort of vision can be translated to the digital arena by organisations and communities. Perhaps thinking about Web sites as works of art, and subjecting them to the same criteria that art critics employ, would bring greater rigour and innovation to online design, and elevate their status in the design world.

Summary

- The notion of a Web site as a gallery forces designers to think about value of the content that is to be exhibited
- Thinking about content as ‘art’ necessitates revision and reflection on the key messages to be conveyed and the way it is to be presented
- Environments in which art is exhibited challenge spectators to confront difficult and abstract concepts in their own time: examples of this sort of space online are rare because usability principles recommend designing for ease and efficiency
- Online ventures which have followed the footsteps of modern art in providing new perspectives of the world that contest traditional methods and economies of exchange have been popular and successful
- Exposing digital design to the same level of review and critique as art would encourage greater innovation and improve rigour in the discipline
- Any kind of designer from any kind of design discipline (including digital experience architects and interaction designers) should be familiar with the basic elements and principles of design, even if it is to contradict them. This is not the sole terrain of visual or graphic designers.

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