

Art Micro-Sites: A Manifesto!

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Introduction

The paper examines the ways in which web-sites have been used as devices to present, contextualize, reflect, and document artwork. The goal is to discuss to what extent the medium (the technology) is affecting the means of production of web-sites dedicated to art exhibitions. The analysis will include a brief overview of a recently constructed micro-site that illustrates the theoretical study and serves as an example of a collaborative working process. The reflections presented here are the result of conversations and collaboration between a museum curator and a designer.

The museum

In the recent past, art museums have relied upon the web for both dissemination and archival purposes. Web-sites have been used as devices to present, contextualize, reflect, and document artwork. Artwork produced in the physical realm and intended for physical sensorial experience, including those that are already multimedia (i.e., movies, video installations) have been experienced mainly in a mediated form. Mediation, however, is not new, prints and books are traditional forms of art reproduction and distribution that have been with us for centuries.

We could divide museum web-sites into three groups that aim at disseminating information about art exhibitions:

- The institution—also functioning as the repository of the other two groups;
- Temporary art exhibitions;
- Media art (works only with a virtual presence, commissioned by museums).

Museums have other online components that disseminate related cultural activities such as music pod casts, and educational information.

The article examines sites presenting temporary art exhibitions. Our analysis involves aspects of the production, distribution and consumption of these online projects. The question is not whether museums should or not have an online presence. But whether museums can generate new expectations while providing form and content for their web-sites. Have museum web-sites fully registered on the cultural seismometer as other traditional forms of mediation? Can they ever do so, unless they give rise to new forms of experience?

Access

It is unquestionable that a major result of the online presence of museums has been the expansion of access to information beyond the art milieu, reaching audiences across cultures, geographies and interests. Whereas the physical museum is a closed built environment, not always public and mostly paid, the online counterpart is open, free and can be accessed anytime and from anywhere in the globe.

If on one hand, the web provides easy access to art presentations, facilitating both distribution and consumption; on the other, it imposes a series of constraints: from reducing the quality of the output (due to data transfer limitations), to determining forms of interaction. For example, in most cases, interactions between viewer and interface (in personal computers) require that we manipulate/input data by means of an external device (the mouse) while we rigidly position our bodies frontally to a screen, so as to experience the outcome of our actions.

The digital presentation of information has not solved the problem of the detached experience (forced by the hardware), where we are framed outside the sensorial experience. Furthermore, the fact that all visuals have reduced resolution handicaps the digital experience. Meanwhile, the possibilities offered by multimedia presentations, even with low resolution, engage senses that are excluded from the print format such as sound, for example. But, is that enough?

The catalogue

The exhibition catalogue, as the term indicates, has been used as a device to register, to examine and to list the artwork while providing contextual information about the artist and venue through the critical lenses of the art expert (the curator, and/or art historian). The format has been expanded and modified throughout the years, yet the enumeration and presentation of a body of work while preserving a specific moment in space and time prevails as a model. Examined as a document the catalogue serves both functions of disseminating and archiving.

In the great majority of cases, the online component of temporary exhibitions mirrors the printed catalogue, as the same model has been carried over with slight variations. The most common modification is the inclusion of time-based media. But is that all that we can contribute? It could be argued that the digital art presentation has perpetuated the printed one rather than critically exploring the new medium. By adapting a model from a previous technology, the sites are transposing formats rather than generating new ways of experiencing artwork. A similar parallel could be made to the beginning of portrait photography, which was slow at freeing itself from the painting tradition.

It is relevant to consider that the digital presentation could have followed other models, since experimental forms of art presentation have emerged under the catalogue rubric. For example, artists have seized the opportunity afforded by their solo museum exhibition to design the catalogue. As artists grew to appreciate the rhetorical advantage of self-representation in printed form, so too did publishers learn to work closely with artists in the design and structuring of their books. This has allowed artists to anchor down the form and content of their museum publications in a much more direct way than ever before. What is seen is what is heard, in a sense that imagery reverberates through these pages like walls.

The archive

The digital domain, however, has adopted the most conventional model of the catalogue by structuring works as checklists. The list format gives access to a well organized collection of artworks, in which interfaces function mainly as archives and cabinets. A *wundercamera* of infinite memory.

The archive model requires the storage of data organized in a systematic manner to facilitate sorting and retrieving. The computer facilitates the storage of large amounts of data (because of its quasi-infinite storage capacity) as well as easy sorting and retrieval of individual datum (mathematical operations). The result is that most web-sites use the organizational model provided by the database/archive duet.¹

We have detected two major trends in the current production of art web-sites: the focus on the object and the role of the viewer as a collector. The interfaces examined tend to focus on the single object and not on the relations between objects. Artwork is presented in isolation: isolated from the museum installation context, as well as segregated from the current art discourse. This might seem contradictory when we think that the connectedness between objects is the main concept behind the development of the World Wide Web by Tim Berners-Lee. The question is whether the technology is dictating the archival form or enabling it?

Following a general trend for customizing products and services, art web-sites are currently inviting viewers to customize their visit by encouraging them to select artwork and create their personalized online collections. The viewer/user has now become the "art collector" in a do-it-yourself trend. What does this role represent in terms of aesthetic experience? In the case of artist Andy Warhol *Timecapsules*, given his broad collecting agenda (he spent decades acquiring anything and everything that struck his interest) acquiring was a form of effectively collecting himself, a sort of ironically designed self-storage. But when a museum teaches its viewers to collect from its database, it may be encouraging the fabrication of personal time capsules, but it is also perpetuating the commoditization of art. And then what?

Paradox

The production of web-sites is now ubiquitous. It is unquestionable that museums should have a stronger online presence. All parts involved are in agreement: institutions, artists, and audiences. It is also relevant to remember that in the case of contemporary art these micro-sites would help legitimize work that is not on the general public's radar. After all, isn't promoting change and growth in the perception and reception of Art part of the mission of the museum?

The digital presentation of artwork seems to have resulted in a paradox: the need to have an online presence regardless of the form of presentation. It could be argued that not all content is appropriate for the internet. But, if not online, how will museums reach out to new audiences?

Museums need new models for presenting artwork that are compelling while exploring the potentials offered by the computational medium. As we wait for technology to develop more sophisticated ways of interacting with the viewer, an opportunity resides in the collaborative model of working with content. We believe that a multi disciplinary collaborative approach

between designers, artists and curators can serve as a catalyst to create, mediate and disseminate in new and thoughtful ways.

Artists books

There is a lesson to be learned from contemporary artists and how they have approached artists books in the second half of the twentieth century. Artists books can teach us a lot both as art forms and as devices for presentation. Can we design online experiences that function in similar ways as they do? Can online art spaces, rather than duplicating the physical installation, or serving as archives, invite viewers to explore the artwork in new ways?

Artists books critically explore the medium as an art form, such that content and form collide into an integral physical whole. We believe that artists books can serve as a source for the conceptualization of art micro-sites, in that similar strategies can help the design of dynamic art spaces where the visual, verbal and temporal interact and intersect. We invite the critical use of the digital domain as the way into a aesthetic experience rather than the mere re-presentation of artworks. We are not proposing the development of media art, which is a category in itself and outside the scope of this paper. Micro-sites must participate in the current art discourse and art production.

It was the print media's easy accessibility at the turn of the century that suited artists who wished to publicize images or texts beyond the limits of the traditional aesthetic status quo. The cultural presence of artists books boosted forward with the technological advances in the 60's and 70's, which paved the way to instant copy and the reproduction of material at very low cost. Although artists books were around well before then, their distribution was limited to a small group of collectors, art dealers, artists, and intellectuals. Today any artist with access to a printer can make one. The book has become a platform where everything is possible.

Whether an inexpensive text and image based conceptual book of the 70's or a deluxe *livre d'artiste* of the 20's the beauty of artist books is that the physical appearance of the book grew to match the directness of the idea. The artist book is a mutable form of aesthetic expression with perhaps one common quest: "The book as a form to interrogate, not merely a vehicle for reproduction."²

It is important to note that in the history of artists books the collaboration between artists and other practitioners, such as poets, writers, printers, was key. These days some publishers like the very trendy Three Star Books in Paris have returned to the deluxe crafted *livres d'artiste* in the tradition of Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler. But whereas the latter in the 20's was a publisher who conceptualized and produced the books by Picasso, Juan Gris, Maurice de Vlaminck, today's highly crafted conceptual *livres d'artiste* of artists like Maurizio Cattelan, Jonathan Monk, Liam Gillick are the product of the collaborative practice between the artist and publisher/curator.

Artists books are now a way for artists to explore, to interrogate and as such they have turned into first rate cultural emissaries. Primarily artist books have become a way for artists to exert control over their image while doing what they do best: teach us visual literacy and the workings of the creative mind. A perfect example of this is the *Autobiography* of Sol LeWitt.³

Nothing similar seems to have happened on the web. Most institutions seem to exert very little effort in controlling their image on the web. If we consider that Museums are in the business of teaching visual literacy, most of them seem to do a very poor job at it. Why is that? Certainly so many things are possible with this new digital media. Why aren't they searching for an equivalence of ideas in form and content? The problem may be that websites as they stand today are locked into formulaic solutions, such as templates, and they are not highly malleable forms of expression. New depths of perception are needed.

Case study

It is our view that art exhibition micro-sites can contribute to the meaning and experience of the art, rather than serving as neutral output for the re-production of the works. As in the case of artists books, the collaboration between artist, curator, and designer can help better express aspects of mainstream art while repositioning and empowering the medium, the form, and the technology.

In order to exemplify the theoretical issues proposed in this paper, we would like to briefly present the micro-site *Luisa Rabbia: Travels with Isabella. Scrapbooks 1883/2008*, which is the result of a recent collaboration between the artist (Luisa Rabbia), the curator (Pieranna Cavalchini) and the designer (Isabel Meirelles).⁴

During her residency at the Gardner Museum in 2007–08, Luisa Rabbia researched photographs from the 1870s and '80s, culled from one of Mrs. Gardner's Chinese travel scrapbooks. The outcome of Rabbia's investigation was *Travels with Isabella, Travel Scrapbook 1883/2008*, a digital-video project that takes [the viewer] not only through objective time and space—following the narrative outline of an American's view of imperial China—but also through an intimate inner space, located somewhere between the rational world and the dream world.⁵

In conceiving the micro-site our main concern was to determine to what extent technology would inform the choices of content and the kinds of interactions with it (search, retrieval, etc.). How would the content be different due to the change in output medium—from digital video to online art space? Our answer was provided by the artist's process of creating the digital video:

As she connects Mrs. Gardner's memory of China to her personal geography, Rabbia moves from one level of reality to another. She glides among ontological categories: archival record, imaginary figment, truth, invention. How do we prevent the traces of human events and actions from being erased by time? The artist has composed a fascinating fictional visual journal—a dreamlike diary of life observed. The viewer enters a memory system in which the pages of Gardner's scrapbook have been shuffled and re-positioned according to a complex curatorial rationale based on emotion, spontaneity, and aesthetic intuition. In this way Rabbia creates a flow of movement among individual photographs, formulating a composite landscape in which past and present merge and contrast—from the Great Wall of China to the streets of Brooklyn to cattails on the banks of Muddy River on Frederick Law Olmsted's Emerald Necklace in Boston.⁶ (see images 1–2)



1. Installation view of *Travels with Isabella, Travel Scrapbooks 1883/2008* by Luisa Rabbia at the Gardner Museum, Boston, MA. (photo credit: Stewart & Howcroft)



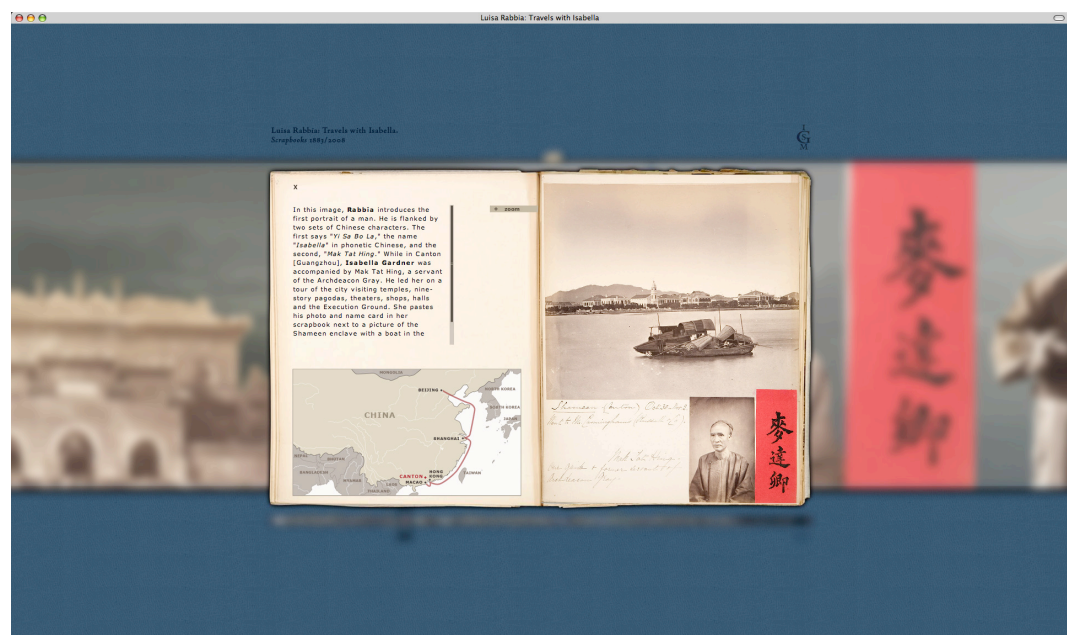
2. Screen-shot of the main interface of the micro-site *Travels with Isabella*.

The digital video was Rabbia's way of mixing two different points of view in order to create a third reality or landscape to which viewers would bring their own surreal interpretation. Because "landscapes are journeys into ourselves everyone is looking at the images and seeing something."⁷ The micro-site was conceived and designed to engage the viewer into this kind of exploration. Tone, shape, color; the fluidity of juxtapositions all echo the artist's sensibility and creative process. The interface is a "digital scrapbook" in which the platform is a single page, or better yet, a continuous scroll representing the temporal dimension of the movie (26 minutes)

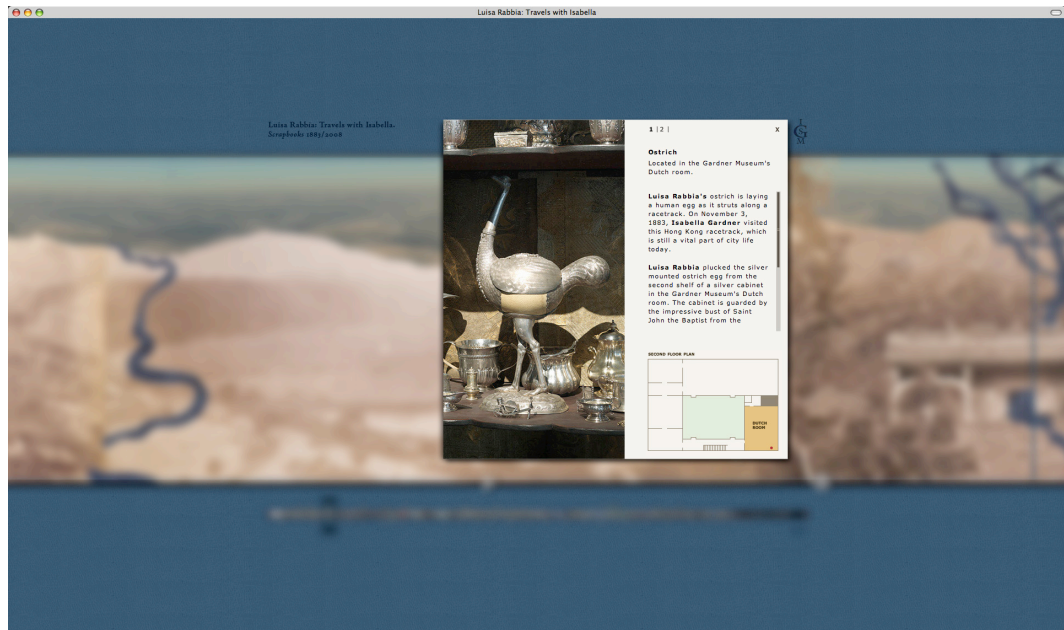
in spatial form (80,000 pixels). The viewer can navigate the long scroll by using a slider provided in a miniature version right below it. The miniature scroll is an informational map of the entire structure of the site, in which all the content can be accessed at any time and from anywhere.

There are bookmarks on the scroll that punctuate invitations for deeper exploration into the works used by Rabbia in her digital video construction. The interface reminds us of the tactile presence of the artist's hand. As she worked on the digital video Rabbia imagine herself to be a story teller "it is my own story because it is related to my experience and my past. Everyone has their own story and I expect the viewers to relate to that, to approach the drawings from their psychological whereabouts." And "there are so many things to look at, so many details, and everyone has their own experience. There are stories, there are moments, clicks, ideas, things that happen. That is at least what I do when I look at something. I expect the viewers will build their own story." ⁸

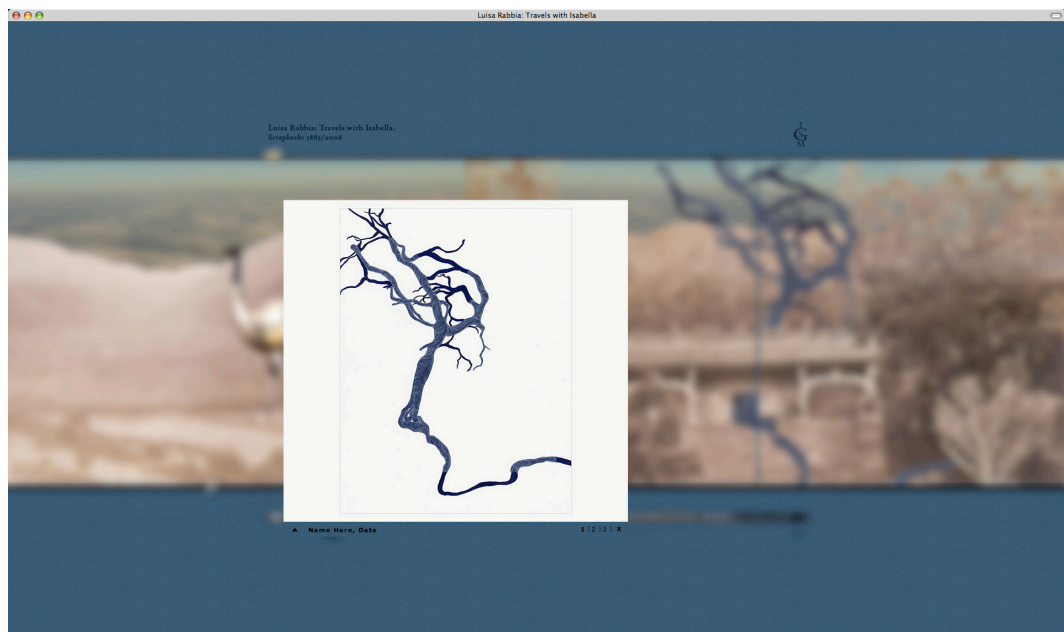
The works are organized into two groups: the top bookmarks present pieces originating from Mrs. Gardner's world, such as pages of the original scrapbook, and objects displayed in the museum (see images 3–4); and at the bottom the marks give access to Rabbia's works, which range in technique and media, and invite the viewer to explore series of drawings, installations and movies (see image 5).



3. Screen-shot of the interface of the micro-site *Travels with Isabella*: viewing the original scrapbook page.



4. Screen-shot of the interface of the micro-site *Travels with Isabella*: viewing artwork at the Gardner Museum.

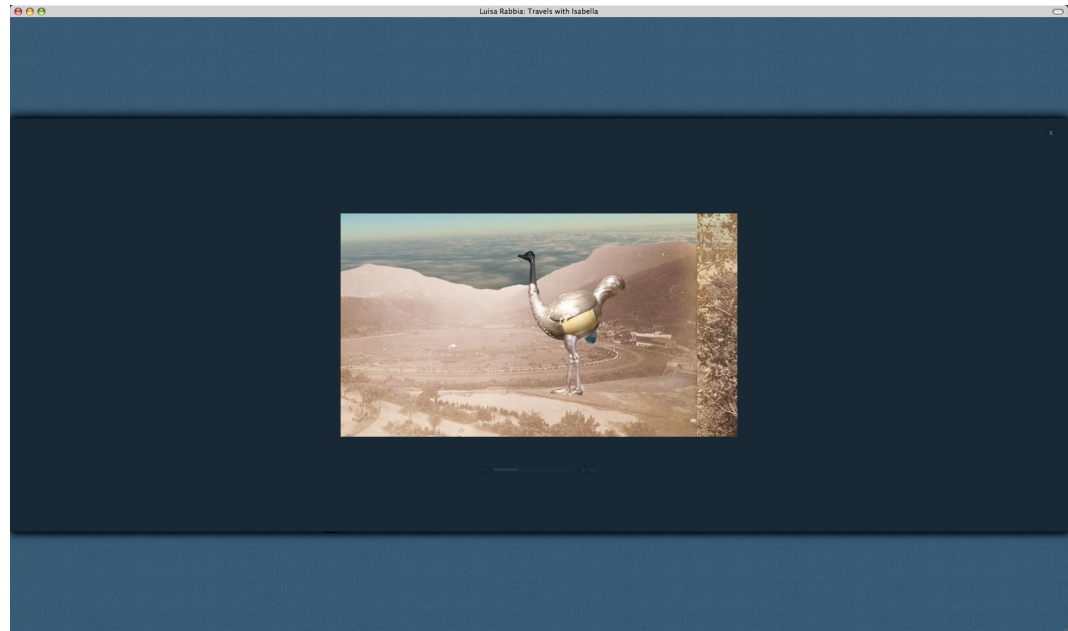


5. Screen-shot of the interface of the micro-site *Travels with Isabella*: viewing Rabbia's original drawing.

The viewer will never leave the “digital scrapbook,” which is the main content and context for everything else that is presented. There is just a slight shift in focus, both visually and metaphorically: the images blur when the viewer is looking at artwork accessed by the bookmarks. This design translates Rabbia’s poetics without being linear or literal.

The only time when the scroll is not visible happens when the viewer watches fragments of the digital video *Travels with Isabella* (see image 6). We have to remember that the video is the time-based project, which, in fact, provided the sequential frames we see in the scroll by removing its temporal dimension. In other words, *Travels with Isabella* is the space-time continuum of this multi-level and rich online experience that weaves the stories and artistic legacies of two women across 125 years.

To paraphrase Ezra Pound “the art micro-site should be a ball of light in one’s hand.”



6. Screen-shot of the interface of the micro-site *Travels with Isabella*: watching a fragment of the digital video.

Notes

1. See chapter 5: “The Forms” in Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2001; pp. 212–285. And the chapter “The Archive, the Media, the Map and the Text” by Rudolf Frieling in Rudolf Frieling, Dieter Daniels (editors), *Media Art Net : Survey of Media Art*. Wien. New York: Springer, 2004; pp. 236–253.
2. Johanna Drucker, *The Century of Artists’ Books*, New York, NY: Granary Books, 2004; p. 9.
3. Sol LeWitt, *Autobiography*. New York, NY: Multiples Inc., 1980.
4. The micro-site *Luisa Rabbia: Travels with Isabella. Travel Scrapbooks 1883/2008* is in its final stages of development and will be online by June 2009: www.gardnermuseum.org/travels/
5. “Blue Roots” by Pieranna Cavalchini in *Luisa Rabbia Travels with Isabella*. Italy: Charta/Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum; 2008; p. 90.
6. *ibid.*; pp. 91-92.
7. Luisa Rabbia in interview with Pieranna Cavalchini, April 2009.
8. *ibid.*