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The Narration of Art on Google Arts and Culture

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Abstract

Google Arts and Culture (GAC, former name: Google Art Project) is a non-profit program within the Google Cultural Institute that provides open-access online exhibitions for users and shares technical tools with cultural institutions across the globe. By digitizing art collections and creating a supportive structure that can hold all information into one place, Google's digital technologies and the hyper-communicative characteristics of the internet support the open access of art collections and cultural organizations. This type of online institution can have a significant influence on the narration of viewing art. In this paper, I will show that the representation of art on GAC uses a scientific method for the means of massive transmission. With an emphasis on two visual features: The Art Camera and 360 Degree Videos, my paper focuses on the change of narration in viewing art from using the visual features on GAC, and questions GAC's role between art history and museology and its responsibility in formulating multifold interpretations and methods of studying art.

Keywords: Digital Humanities, Art History, Digitalization, Internet

The development of the internet, personal computers, and mobile devices has profoundly redefined the access of art and the method of displaying art. Google Arts and Culture (GAC) is a non-profit platform under Google Cultural Institute, providing online exhibitions and museum

collections for users, and sharing technical tools with cultural institutions across the globe (Google Cultural Institute par. 1). By digitizing art collections and creating a supportive structure that can hold all information into one place, Google's digital technologies and the hyper-communicative characteristics of the internet support the open access of art collections and cultural organizations. This type of online institution can have a significant influence on the narration of viewing art. In this paper, I will show that the representation of art on GAC uses a scientific method for the means of massive transmission. With an emphasis on two visual features: The Art Camera and 360 Degree Videos, my paper focuses on the change of narration in viewing art from using the visual features on GAC, and questions GAC's role between art history and museology and its responsibility in formulating multifold interpretations and methods of studying art.

GAC is a re-organization of museum collections and digital content online. From 17 partner organizations at its initial period in 2011 to 2,000 museums and cultural institutions by 2020, GAC has offered an online museum experience for the masses (Google Cultural Institute par. 6). The collaboration between GAC and museums is an exchange of resources at a global scale (see fig 1). GAC reaches out to museums and looks for partnerships that can combine its interests in digital innovation and users growth with museums' needs for developing and upgrading digital archives. By working with Google Arts and Culture, museums can have more access to digital technologies.[1] By building partnerships with museums, Google Arts and Culture becomes an encyclopedia museum of museums, managing a world collection of arts and culture virtually. For Google, whose major revenue is derived from advertisement and cloud-based

[1] This is especially beneficial for smaller non-profit institutions and cultural heritage sites, whose budgets are limited and cannot afford to have a department or team of professionals to manage digital assets of their collections. Google provides technical assistance for bringing museum collections online, which includes lending out equipment that scans objects into high resolution images.

services, the increasing volume of high-quality digital content, and users' data are constructive for branding and profit-making.

Although the collaboration between GAC and museum meets the interest of both sides, it marks a vast transformation of the narration of art, turning a physical personal experience into a virtual public tour. Through the lens of GAC, objects are represented in the website space as digital reproductions. GAC redefines the representation of objects through developing many digital programs, such as The Art Camera, 360 Degree Video, and Street View. On GAC, the focus of innovating digital features improves the circulation of art education. But behind those features, the method of viewing on GAC imposes restrictions on more organic ways of looking at art. For example, a forceful close-up view can be found in the 360 Degree Videos and The Art Camera. The 360-degree Video is a pre-recorded immersive virtual program. By providing a combination of panorama and diorama style of viewing experience, two-dimensional art is presented in a multidimensional interface.[2]

The highlight of this feature is that the position of users is adjustable in the virtual space. By moving pointing devices, the angles of the artwork are not always based on the artist's original intention. This excessive freedom of users can impose a problematic view that provides misleading interpretations and understandings of artworks. Taking the application of 360-degree video to an oil painting of Asher B. Durand as an example. *Kindred Spirits* (1849) is a work that inherited the legacy of naturalism and realism, offering a snapshot of the glorious American landscape (see fig. 2). Google Arts & Culture turns this painting into a short virtual reality video. As shown in Figure 3, brushworks, shadows, lights are recreated with more dimensions and

[2] Panorama was created as a style of painting as a replacement for touring in the 19th century. This style of vision satisfies people's curiosity and desire to see the full scale of objects, such as architectures and landscapes. The diorama is a miniature model that is often used in museums to recreate a life-size showcase for exhibitions.

movements (see fig. 3). Moreover, contextual introduction, sounds of birds and forest are added to the work. Noticeably, some subjects of the painting can be distorted, rescaled and tilted as users move around their cursors. Oil paints are transformed to slices and blocks (see fig. 4). The content of this work is reproduced with a new addition of visual qualities, including composition, focal point and the effect of light.

The integrity of Durand's landscape painting is essential as a way to receive the message from the artist. Although the audio guide and music in the background provides contextual information of the artwork, the sentimental harmony of nature originally created by the artist is not captured in this method of viewing. In naturalist paintings, the hyper-realistic style represents the truth of life. But in the 360 Degree View, the blended layers of oil paints are broken down into slices. Durand's meticulous treatment of the details is lost. Art historian Barbara Novak observed that "The compositional structure of such a painting takes its shape from the rocks and trees themselves, their weights and volumes and linear balances playing against one another within the picture plane" (Novak 251). Novak's notes suggested that Durand's decision on the position and form of each object has a direct influence on the materiality of objects and their correlations to the larger composition. Therefore, the scale, placement and the layers of objects are an irreplaceable combination in creating the atmospheric landscape painting. The misuse of movements of users inside of the picture frame can lead to a problematic point of view that invalidates the artistic technique of the artist.

Another example of the changing narration of works of art on GAC is The Art Camera feature. The Art Camera provides pictures of artworks with a resolution that is over one billion pixels. With such high resolutions, The Art Camera feature emphasizes on the motion of digital zoom effect, which is often applied as a built-in digital tool in many tele-devices to magnify

details. While the digital zoom effectively increases visibility, the range of vision is reduced to a square of the screen size, leading to a re-scaling of the work of art. One of the examples of this practice is works of impressionist artist Paul Signac. *The Lagoon of Saint Mark* (1905) is a landscape painting that uses pointillism, an iconic Neo-impressionist technique composed of dotted brushstrokes (see fig. 5). By zooming in, the brushstrokes are enlarged. The shape of clouds, the ripples on the lake, the distinct figures have disappeared. Moreover, Signac's mastery depiction of the brilliant lights are overshadowed as they are no longer in a relation with other colors (see fig. 6). Just as art historian James Elkins observed, "we are now seeing the things more than we should" (Elkins par. 3). The loss of context and balance demonstrates the necessity of keeping a proper viewing distance in order to appreciate certain artistic techniques.

In addition, the motion of close looking is an automatic action in many exhibition contents on GAC, including one of the highlighted contents in The Art Camera section. *12 Artworks You Will Like To Zoom Into* presents an intergenerational and cross-cultural group of 12 artworks that have no contextual connections. Together, these artworks are exhibited in a PowerPoint style. For each works of art, there is a text on the left side, disclosing where in the artwork that viewers should Zoom-in. For example, on the page of Vincent van Gogh (1853 – 1890)'s *Starry Night* (1889), users are asked to "Zoom in to the artwork to see the cracks in the paint"(Google Arts and Culture 3) (see fig. 7). As users swipe down to the next slide, the zoom-in motion applies automatically to the painting. *Starry Night* is cropped and enlarged by the digital zoom effect, presenting cracks that are results from the dryness of the thick oil paints (see fig.8). Since *Starry Night* always attracts traffic in the museum, the cracks are almost invisible or the last thing people would have noticed. Therefore, the zoom-in provides an additional detail for observations, bringing a different angle for many people's personal experiences of this work at

its original collection, the Museum of Modern Art in New York. However, the cracks are such a trivial detail that is less important than many other formal qualities, including the dynamic movements constructed by the artist's elaborate composition and brushstroke. Without having a transpositional experience of eyes, inconsequential and unnoticeable detail surfaced before users' own critical judgements and aesthetic perceptions towards artworks. A predetermined set can fail to give viewers the chance for any self-identification. This forceful way of close looking overlooked artists' conscious decisions.

Although The 360 Degree View and The Art Camera are different features, the reason for misreading the artworks all imposed the similar method of forceful close-looking. Close-looking from the screen is a result of using the zoom effect. According to film historian Nick Hall, the concept of zoom was a derivative practice from the invention of the telescope for observing scientific objects, including solar eclipse during the 1830s. (Hall ch.2) Moreover, the artistic use of zoom was developed as an optical effect of the camera lens (known as Zoomer lens) in the 1920s for the purpose of producing films and recording sports games. (Hall ch.2) Hall's finding suggests that zoom-in was invented as optical tools to observe scientific phenomena. Additionally, the use of zoom technology in the live sports game can be seen as an initial approach for zoom technology in the field of mass communication for the increasing demand of accessing distant information.

The origin of the zoom effect explains the failure of close-looking in keeping the integrity of visual qualities of art on GAC. Objects that are looked through close-ups, such as solar eclipse, is a natural formation that has no artist to decide the composition, medium, and technique. To record a close-up view of a solar eclipse is an action that does not change any default statistics as it never had any artistic specification. However, works of art are one the polar

opposite of many scientific objects. The existence of art objects relies on humans' decision after a pragmatic deliberation, and that this decision is to determine what characteristics of the artwork are most relevant to its substantive identity. Since there is an inseparable relationship between artistic decisions and the ontological context and aesthetics of art, the scale of each element and details we are supposed to see has reflected in the final outcome of art. In the realm of viewing in art, using an external method of viewing to interpret works of art are likely not a part of artists' intentions. By forcefully changing the distance and scale between each component in a work of art, artists' intentions are altered by a new narrator.

The impact of a new appropriation to art is explored by artist Daan van Golden, who conducted a series of close-up studies of Artist Jackson Pollock (1912 – 1956)'s paintings. (Fig.9) Painted with precision by hand, *Study Pollock IV/IV* (2006) shows an extracted fragment of a drip painting from Pollock. According to the wall text at the Art institute of Chicago, Golden sees this zoom-in practice as a "mystery," uncovers the narrative that Pollock "absolutely did not intend," even though the fragments are a part of Pollock's original work (Art Institute of Chicago, Wall text). Golden's work is a serious criticism of zooming in art. The shift in narration and representation of Pollock become a new work of art by Golden. Similarly, the omniscient usage of close-looking on GAC goes beyond the boundary of representational artworks. GAC acts as the second narrator of the artworks after the artist. By using close-looking features in The Art Camera, the viewing experience that GAC provides is a partial scope of art, ignoring the integrity of visual qualities, such as the scale, composition, pictorial space, form, line, color, light, tone, texture, and pattern. By having mobile zoom in view in the 360 Degree Videos, GAC enables more users to join the recreation of the content as a part of narrators. As it turns out, although zoom-in is effective in observing objects for the purpose of scientific analysis, the

method of close-looking alters original intentions of the artists. Thus, zoom-in should not be applied as an omnipresent method of viewing.

In Walter Benjamin's influential essay, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (1935), Benjamin noticed this motion of close-looking in digital equipment, and expressed his critical concern about the impact of viewing distance on art. By using an analogy of a magician, a surgeon, and a sick man, Benjamin argues that the magician represents a painter who "heals a sick person by laying on of hands," having a non-intrusive experience of art from a natural distance (Benjamin 400). On the opposite side, the surgeon refers to the cameraman, which is characterized as an intrusive way of creation that "penetrates" into the patient by having an operation (Benjamin 400). By comparing a painter to a cameraman, Benjamin's analogy questions the truthfulness of the art that are created through the narration of modern media.

Moving from the lens, the experience of zoom effect is applied as a built-in digital tool in many types of tele-devices to magnifying details. In contrast, when human-eyes concentrate on details, the angle of viewing will not shrink as much as the digital zoom effect does on the screen. This is because human eyes do not have multiple lenses to create a magnified vision by nature. What we experienced on GAC through The Art camera and the 360 Degree Videos is a verisimilar experience only for the armed eye. Benjamin argues that there is a "new law" that sutures all "fragments" together in this operation (Benjamin 400). By reformulating the structure of art, this new law can create a fresh vision that is more verisimilar than the "unarmed eye" can see (Benjamin 400). The role of GAC in the process of reinventing representation of art through the changes of narrator, space and medium is similar to the cameraman. All open-access resources on GAC, including two-dimensional, three-dimensional, and multidimensional art objects, are influenced by digitalization and the internet -- two invasive "surgeons" that impose

their embedded narration on art objects. As Benjamin noted in the same essay, "close-ups" from equipment can expand space and movements, as well as restructure subjects and its environments (Benjamin 402). Benjamin's argument indicates the viewing experience on GAC only shows a partial scope of the comprehension of art with an addition of new subjectivity. Through indirect contact, this new environment takes control over the process of finding details. In this process, users are passively receiving GAC's feed of the existing method of viewing without practicing how to generate the new ways of seeing.

In the realm of art history, art historians are the narrator who decides the use of methods and how to present the content. If we consider art historical methods, such as Formal analysis, Iconography, Semiotics, and Psychoanalysis as a channel to access the history of artworks. The developer of those channels has influenced the artworks as profound as the channels themselves. Art historian Donald Preziosi wrote in the second edition of his influential book *The Art of Art History* (2009):

> Working as a historian, critic, or museologist for artistry in the contemporary world demands increasingly explicit attention to the ethical dimension of one's practice and its inescapable political and economic resonances, along with an acknowledgement that one's intellectual and professional labour implicates and fosters enterprises devoted to the fabrication, maintenance, and political transformation of social life. (4)

Preziosi's writing responds to the rise of needs for self-awareness about the larger social impact of one's work as a narrator of art and its history. Art historians or museologists' decisions about how to interpret art and how to exhibit at museums are integrated with artworks as a part of their cultural and historical identities. As a mediator between arts and public, GAC's ethical intention in designing the new narration of art on GAC needs more attention.

To me, digital features are the surgical knives in the hand of a surgeon. Therefore, the position and purpose the surgeon for treating the sick man should be examined. As a narrator behind the designation of the narration of art, the role of GAC in the course of aesthetic education is ambiguous. GAC's complex relationship with Google and its umbrella company Alphabet Inc. likely results in the focus on digital tools and assets. Digital technologies are one of Google's strengths as a technology conglomerate. Many digital products and resources of Google are used on GAC to present art collections. For example, the usage of Google map and Google Street View in 360 Degree View and Street View on GAC. There are both advantages and limitations that GAC can face. Having a multinational technology company is a supportive foundation for creating innovative tools to organize and view art.

The limitations are how to avoid the singular presentation of art in such digital gaze for the purpose of improving the current practices in museology or art history. The unprecedented access to art and its history brings freedom. At the same time, accumulated information and users have inverted the relationship between seeing and being seeing. According to writer and architect designer William J. Mitchell, "The Net has a thousand eyes, anyone with a personal computer and a search engine can stealthily make us objects of visual surveillance" (Mitchell 176). Mitchell's argument implies a more severe ethical issue about users' vulnerable position behind the seemingly subjective internet. In this inverted power relations between narrated information and user, those ethical issues include the collection of users' data, as well as the impact of forceful zoom-in technology to art. For GAC, the main task is to segregate itself from the master narration of Google and become more independent for its representation of art and culture.

All of the criticism I made towards GAC in this paper does not mean GAC has no potential to succeed in bringing an authentic art experience. Not all works of art have a universal

reaction to digitalization. The level of change in content and forms varies based on each case, and it has to be treated separately. For example, post-internet art is able to exhibit online without experiencing much transformative experience in medium. For artworks that need to be reproduced, there should be more methods of digitalization and its representation according to different art historical contexts and forms of art. In Elkins's paper about "Zoom in" effect on Google Arts & Culture, he pointed out there is an "invisible boundary between historically appropriate seeing and inappropriate peering" (Elkins par.19). Since my research suggests that looking at art closely can be a derivative method of viewing art, this "invisible boundary" can be understood as the intersection between different methods of art and science. While I'm still in the process of developing a better re-definition of the "invisible boundary," my assumption is that this interdisciplinary conflict can be resolved by having a better understanding of both parts.

In addition to museums and cultural institutions, GAC needs to consider its collaboration in a wider scope by encouraging more individual art historians to start scholarship about its digitization practice in a more diverse manner. Throughout my research, the art historical scholarship in this new type of digital museums remained unpopular. There are only a handful of published academic researchers in English about GAC since it started in 2011, such as media professional Alexandra Lussier-Craig's thesis *Googling Art: museum collections in the Google Art Project* (2015) and Educator and Design curator Adrienne L. D'Angelo's dissertation *Museums Without Walls: Smarthistory And The Google Art Project—a Mission Possible Prophecy* (2017). Likely, my on-going thesis will be the third one to be published as an update to the works of Lussier-Craig and D'Angelo in the course of GAC. As the art world has moved online after the outbreak of the COVID-19 in 2020, there has been a virtual exhibition boom that urges more serious scholarships about online platforms. Currently, there is a distinct disparity

between the amount of art exhibiting online and the numbers of academic research have been done in this field.

GAC is neither a museum, nor an academic institution that hosts art history. Through the lens of digital tools and the internet, GAC expands the idea of digitalization of art. The application of The Art Camera and the 360 Degree Video show GAC's attempts to bring different experiences to art. At the current stage, those features can impose a forceful viewership that not only fails to reactivate artists' intentions, but also fails to provide a mobile narration for users. I propose that it is necessary for GAC to consider a border array of digital presentations and art history in order to adopt the individuality and materiality of each artworks. Even though we are not at that turning point to see the change, the expansion of art to digital space opens up possibilities for starting a new collaborative relationship between art history, museology and art.

Figures

Figure 1. The Map of Partner Institutions of Google Arts & Culture, Google Arts and Culture. 2020.

Figure 2. Durand, Asher B., *Kindred Spirits*, Google Arts and Culture.

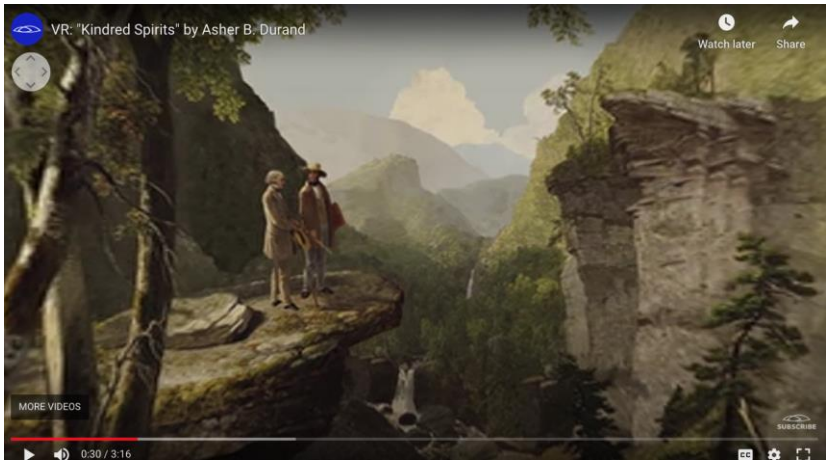

Figure 3. *Virtual Reality: Explore "Kindred Spirits" by Asher B. Durand*, Google Arts and Culture, Accessed May 11, 2020. 0’30’’.

Figure 4. *Virtual Reality: Explore "Kindred Spirits" by Asher B. Durand*, Google Arts and Culture, Accessed May 11, 2020.1’56’’.

Figure 5. Signac,Paul, *The Lagoon of Saint Mark, Venice*, Google Arts and Culture. Accessed May 11, 2020.

Figure 6. A Close-up View of *The Lagoon of Saint Mark, Venice*, Google Arts and Culture, Accessed May 11, 2020.

Figure 7. Van Gogh, Vincent, *The Starry Night* in *12 Artworks You Will Like To Zoom Into*, Google Arts and Culture, Accessed May 19, 2020.

Figure 8. Van Gogh, Vincent, *The Starry Night* (Zoom-in) in *12 Artworks You Will Like To Zoom Into*, Google Arts and Culture, Accessed May 19, 2020.

Figure 9. Daan van Golden, *Study Pollock IV/IV*, 2006.

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