Surfing and walking. Museums and the 2.0 challenges.

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In the last years an incredible increase in the use of technology has taken place in both the domestic and working environment and particularly applied to free time. The convergence of communication and information, the decrease of the technology costs of production and consume, the rise of “long-tail” economies, as well as the Web 2.0 standing out are just few of the most relevant phenomena at the global level. It needs to be considered that, in terms of access to the new technologies, despite the still existing not irrelevant conditions of digital device at a general level (the incidence of which is very variable according to the national contest and social composition), we see a steady increase in the use of the Internet by an increasingly wider number of users’ categories.

Changes have inevitably occurred in the cultural consumes and uses. Especially the museum sector, in the last years, seems to have picked up, not always with consistency and awareness, the challenges and the opportunities that the technology evolution and its new communication ways bring with. In this sector, Italy seems to suffer for a rather pronounced delay compared to other Countries (the Anglo-Saxon ones at the top), due both to less sensibility and knowledge of the new technologies and to a greater distance from the philosophy and conceptual main points that subtend the new digital culture.

Widening accessibility to artistic, scientific and cultural contents, extending communication and channels for better knowing the audiences, enriching tools and interpretation ways in museum, straightening the experience and the educational value of the visit, reinforcing the sense of community and belonging to museums: those are some possibilities coming up from a more mature and aware use of the “digital culture”.

The most significant experiences developing at international level tell us about a really vivid panorama, characterised by projects often strongly interdisciplinary and able to involve the different functions of the museum organisation (from the curatorship, to research, education, marketing and communication). The web 2.0 potential is now explored and experimented on different fronts, through projects aimed at approaching new audiences, through innovative ways of involvement in the institution’s activities, through initiatives that use the visitors’ skills and interests for creating a community sense, through the digital platform’s potential in order to extend and intensify the real visit experience.

In lots of these contexts, social networks can play a crucial role in the process of the information dissemination, of contents building using participatory modalities, of creating communities interested in specific cultural institutions or in special themes (from contemporary languages to the archeological excavations, from the environment to the green economy, from the Templers to nanotechnologies). Facebook, Twitter, Flickr, Youtube are not simple platforms of contents gathering, but spaces of
social action working as a privileged habitat for the co-creation of contents, the information dissemination, the sharing and in some cases also the re-semantisation of the lived experience: one can think to the self-produced films and posted by the visitors on Facebook or Youtube of museums, or, like in the case of the pioneering project Artcasting of the MoMA, to the production of the non-authorized audio guide by a group of students of the Marymount Manhattan College, where the museum, instead of rising copyright issues, understood the potential of the situation and married the initiative facilitating the production of audio tour mp3 which made use of an informal and winning language. These are good examples of how can be used the possibility of putting into circulation the contents created by the users in favor of other users, bypassing or integrating the traditional one-way approach where the knowledge is transferred from the museum (which holds the knowledge) to the visitor (student to enlighten) by a multi-way approach.

Moreover, more and more often, museums use the contents created by the audience and enhance their value or stimulate their production for different goals, by creating online and offline initiatives that generally are built around the theme “Explore-Collect-Share”. Such as the project It's time we met! of the Metropolitan or the exhibition Graffiti created by the Brooklyn Institute. In the first case, some, among the hundreds of pictures made by the visitors inside museums, are published on Flickr for personal reasons and to be collected, became the visual part of the official advertising campaign launched in grand style in 2009. During the exhibition Graffiti of the Brooklyn Museum in 2006, it was asked to the visitors to design both virtual graffiti by using a specific online application and real drawings inside the museum inspired by the themes of graffiti and the best works (both the real and the virtual ones) have been included in the exhibition and the photo section of Flickr, that still nowadays documents the process and the astonishing results in terms of number of people involved and artistic results achieved.

The participatory approach and the direct involvement of the visitors in the museum visit, in some cases, have been so pushed forward to concern functions and practices traditionally considered of exclusive apanage of the scientific direction: the collection organization, the choice of the works of art, the curatorship of the exhibition. These are small signals – pilot experiences where the margin of action and the levels of freedom of the audience are precisely defined and controlled – which anyway show a big difference, bring up for discussion again the principle of authoriality, a fissure in the monolithic rock on which is based the institutions’ system authorities.

Among the most significant examples it is worth to underline the Röhsska Museet of Goteborg that involved 1.500 members of the Facebook community in order to decide whether to accept or not the vintage 1950’s leopard fur coat as part of the permanent collection, and the popular project Fill the Gap of the Smithsonian Institute, where the members of the virtual community directly effected the works of art selection and the setting of the warehouse of the American art section. Such experiences have been carried out also by other museums where, for example, the audience had been involved in order to select the works of art to exhibit

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2 [http://www.designmuseum.se/](http://www.designmuseum.se/). Incidentally: the Facebook community confirmed the initial decision of the museum of not accepting the donation
Forcing the developments of this perspective and assuming as true the James Surowiecki’s opinion stating that “a diverse crowd is often wiser at making decisions than expert individuals”, it wouldn’t be too much risky to think of a museum, in the next future, that actively and systematically uses the energies, the ideas and the knowledge of people with a passionate interest and involved them as “semi-finished” or finished products in the planning and production of scientific and cultural projects. It is a direction full of implications on crucial issues in the definition of the identity and sense of the contemporary museum, such as authoriality and control of the process of production, organization and access to knowledge, open attitude and debate (also critical) with the audience. Are museums really interested to put themselves at stake so much?

Furthermore, new digital frontiers allow to face with more awareness the issue of listening to the audience. Social networks, from this point of view, represent an absolutely privileged space for monitoring and conversation, because they allow the institutions to start strong and interesting relations with people asking for attention, exchange, interaction and giving more or less expectations, motivations and enthusiasm, really useful to those who are able to listen to and consider each comment and critic not as a problem but as a constructive exchange and an opportunity to grow. As usual in moments of strong change and transition, it becomes hard to evaluate the real dimension and spread of usual procedures and innovative solutions in the specific sector, to separate contingent effects and structural and permanent changes. The speed by which new systems of communication and production of collective meanings become popular at a global level doesn’t give enough time to reflect on the experiences lived and to compare the adopted solutions and the results achieved. Moreover, the new metrics of communication and relations ask for rethinking radically the evaluation tools: how to measure, for example, the efficacy of a Facebook page for a museum or for a photo project on Flickr? Especially, which are the results that is licit, right, proper to expect?

Considering these reflections, it is clear that the new paradigm of the digital culture can not be considered by museums as “communicative exoticism” that refreshed and makes up tired and increasingly less effective protocols of reception and information; it will act in the contrary way, as a punch in the stomach, forcing institutions, in a rather short time, to put in practice general and radical changes in the audience policies, dedicated to both real or virtual audience.

Therefore the communication and marketing functions won’t be the only one involved, but with different intensity, the whole modus operandi of the museum that will have to accept and introject the principles and the keywords of the “innovation” already become “ordinary”: listening, ability to react, relationship building capacity, involvement, complicity, multi-way approach, participation, creativity, flexibility, uncertainty and conflict management. From the user’s point of view the risk is to create a schizophrenic situation where two museums coexist. The digital one, in line with the new mantras of the sharing and the conversation, alert, always open, ready to react to a less anonymous audience who is more willing to be part of a community of “peers” and the other one, a museum made of walls, objects, things, opening hours and prohibitions, often made heavy by the idleness and longer times of the real world, used to interpret the concept of reception as
impersonality, asepticity, respect of the behaviour rules more and more far from the new anthropologies of use and enjoyment of culture. Therefore the point is not only the increasing of complexity in the quality of the visit experience, but - if it is true that the dominant medium of a particular period impacts and shapes the way in which people think of themselves and the world around them – the real point is to plan pertinent and adequate answers of sense taking into consideration the collective changes in the models of use, of learning, of creation of ideas, of problem solving, of use and sharing the cultural contents.

In other words, are museums ready for a new species of “visitor”, genetically modified by the continuous and long exposure to new models of social sharing of meanings and information, artistic authoriality, participation to the decisional process, supplying and manipulation of the products of the artistic creation? Does the definition itself of visitor risk to be limited and obsolete?

The conference “Surfing and walking. Museums and the 2.0 challenges”, through the cases that will be presented and the invited experts, aims at showing the state of art of the relationship between museums and the new digital culture, trying to offer answers to some of the questions and issues here above mentioned, by underlining the critical aspects and by suggesting the most interesting perspectives of development.