

A Viewing¹ of *Zombies in the House of Art.* (Am I a Zombie?)

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- 1 Viewing: 1. An occasion for a special look at an exhibition
2. A display of a corpse prior to a funeral
3. An instance of perceiving something (sighting)

“[The zombie] evokes the voracious hunger for ideas and images from the past that [...] are consumed, digested, and re-presented in guises that resemble their original forms, but are somehow changed.”²

“The physiognomy of decomposing things is that of their second life. Nothing has substance but what has already been mediated by memory.”³

2 Hoptman, *The Forever Now*, 24.
3 Adorno, “Valéry Proust Museum”, 182.

“Although it is easy to see the zombie paradigm as pejorative, it also has a deep-seated appeal. In its variations, the idea of reanimating what was thought to be dead, or out of time, or the possibility of reliving something from the past, speaks to our core fantasies, which are drawn to heel by the inevitabilities not only of our cultural timeline, but also of our mortality.”⁴

“It is only the death of the work of art in the museum which brings it to life.”⁵

4 Hoptman, *The Forever Now*, 24.
5 Adorno, “Valéry Proust Museum”, 182.



In 1947 André Malraux came out with the idea of *Le musée imaginaire*, translated as *Museum without Walls*. While the phrase was new, the idea of a museum consisting of reproductions of art works collected in a book was not original.⁶ The execution of this idea was not original either.⁷ Even before the advent of photography there were attempts at creating museums without walls. David Tenier published his book *Theatrum Pictorium* for his employer, the Archduke Leopold Wilhelm of Austria, in 1660, essentially a depiction of the Archduke's collection.

Malraux devised his museum without walls to facilitate the comparison between a large number of art works by means of juxtaposing their photographic reproductions. That way he thought we could both discern variations within one style, and also compare art works from very different cultures, places and times. This was because the photographic reproduction transformed the works into equally sized, black and white images. This was a way of standardising them and further allowed the viewer to focus on certain details rather than compare complete art works. In the end, the museum without walls reveals itself as an organizational system which “preceded and pre-interpreted any artefacts selected for representation”.⁸



Nowadays, the digital platform Google not only provides a digital version of Malraux's museum granting everyone access to hundreds of thousands of digitized artworks, but also supplies Google street view technology that enables us to compare not only art works, but also their contexts in museums.⁹ The Google Arts Project (GAP) aims at a replication of the museum tour. But it also allows us to jump from the Museum of Modern Art or the New Museum in New York to the National Gallery in London or the Uffizi Gallery in Florence. Or from the Parthenon Gallery in the British Museum in London to the Acropolis Museum in Athens. This way, a digital meta-museum may be created, which is representing museums containing art works.

The art works in the digital museum without walls are thus twice displaced. They were taken out of their context when they were placed in the museum. And in a second displacement they became representations within the representation of museums.

6 Cf. Grasskamp, *The Book on the Floor*, 42.

Grasskamp cites Walter Benjamin as a precursor to Malraux.

7 Cf. Grasskamp, *The Book on the Floor*, 40.

8 Irvine, “Malraux and the Musée Imaginaire”, 4.

9 <https://artsandculture.google.com/project/streetviews>. The Google Art Project (GAP) was launched in 2011, cf. Proctor, “The Google Art Project”, for the context and history of GAP. Nancy Proctor cites Eric Johnson, who describes this viewing experience as “a shift from ‘content’ to ‘context’” (215).



The museum is a macabre place. In his essay “Valéry Proust Museum” Adorno links it to the mausoleum, a preserve of certain objects to which the observer no longer has a vital relationship and which are in some stage of decay. So “[w]ho is right, the critic of the museum or its defender?”¹⁰

For the critic of the museum, the museum is the place, where art works perish when they are taken out of their functional context.¹¹ “Painting and sculpture [...] are like abandoned children. Their mother is dead, their mother, architecture. While she lived, she gave them their place, their definition. The freedom to wander was forbidden to them. They had their place, their clearly defined lighting, their materials. Proper relations prevailed between them. While she was alive, they knew what they wanted.”¹²

The defender says: “[T]he masterpiece observed during dinner no longer produces in us the exhilarating happiness that can be had only in a museum, where the rooms, in their sober abstinence from all decorative detail, symbolize the inner spaces into which the artist withdraws to create the work.”¹³ Because it is only when the original intention of the work of art has died, and the work of art becomes part of the consciousness of the viewer, who fits it into his own theories and images, that the second life of the art work begins.¹⁴

10 Adorno, “Valéry Proust Museum”, 182.

11 Ibid. 180.

12 Valéry, “Le problème des musées”, 1293. Cited in Adorno, „Valéry Proust Museum“, 177-178.

13 Adorno: “Valéry Proust Museum”, 179.

14 Ibid., 182.



Instead of arguing for or against the museum we should note that critic and defender may both be right, as they are arguing on different levels. Objects perish and are reanimated as art works. In other words, the museum turns objects into Zombies. (This is also known to happen to quotes in research papers.) The underlying mechanism is the denial of the original use and the display in a new context which places special emphasis on “attentive looking”.¹⁵ This kind of attentive looking was analysed as a form of ritual by Carol Duncan. Not only have art museums traditionally borrowed the architectural features of ritual sites such as temples and churches,¹⁶ but they have also provided settings for the museum ritual, a special way of paying attention. This is specifically true for museums of modern or contemporary art. “The act of looking becomes a sort of trance uniting spectator and masterpiece [...]. One could take the argument even farther: in the liminal space of the museum, everything – and sometimes anything – may become art.”¹⁷ But this capacity of the museum “could entail the negation or obscuring of other, older meanings.”¹⁸ And it also follows from this capacity that “[t]he institution of art is [now] not something external to any work of art but the absolute and irreducible condition of its existence.”¹⁹ The point of the modern ritual is the spiritual transformation of the viewer. The museum is supposed to help us in our symbolic efforts to deny the fact of death by creating structures in which we can construct a time-less presence.²⁰ The museum achieves this by facilitating a specific mode of attention and contemplation.

15 Alpers, “The Museum as a Way of Seeing”, 26-27.

16 Duncan, “The Universal Survey Museum”, 449.

17 Duncan, “The Art Museum as Ritual”, 434.

18 Duncan, “The Art Museum as Ritual”, 431.

19 Fraser, „Why Does Fred Sandback’s Work Make Me Cry?“, 39.

20 Duncan, “The Art Museum as Ritual”, 434.

What happens when this specific mode of attention is brought into the digital realm? To answer this question, we need to examine what happens to the objects of this specific mode of attention, when brought into the digital realm. In the age of digital reproduction the divorcing of art from its bodily incarnation turns art works into information,²¹ which is “transmittable, ubiquitous and free”²² potentially “opening the discussion to users from outside the art world, who can choose to make their own meanings, or take from accepted interpretations.”²³ This echoes the museum defender's sentiment that the art work becomes part of the consciousness of the viewer, with the difference that in the digital realm “notions of originality, authenticity, and presence, essential to the ordered discourse of the museum, are undermined.”²⁴

21 Cf. Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, 24.

22 Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, 32.

23 “The virtual virtual museum tour”,
<https://artsandculture.google.com/usergallery/oAKir0hqoP3eKw>

24 Crimp, “On the Museum’s Ruins”, 56.

“Through reproductive technology postmodernist art dispenses with the aura. The fantasy of a creating subject gives way to the frank confiscation, quotation, excerptation, accumulation, and repetition of already existing images.”²⁵

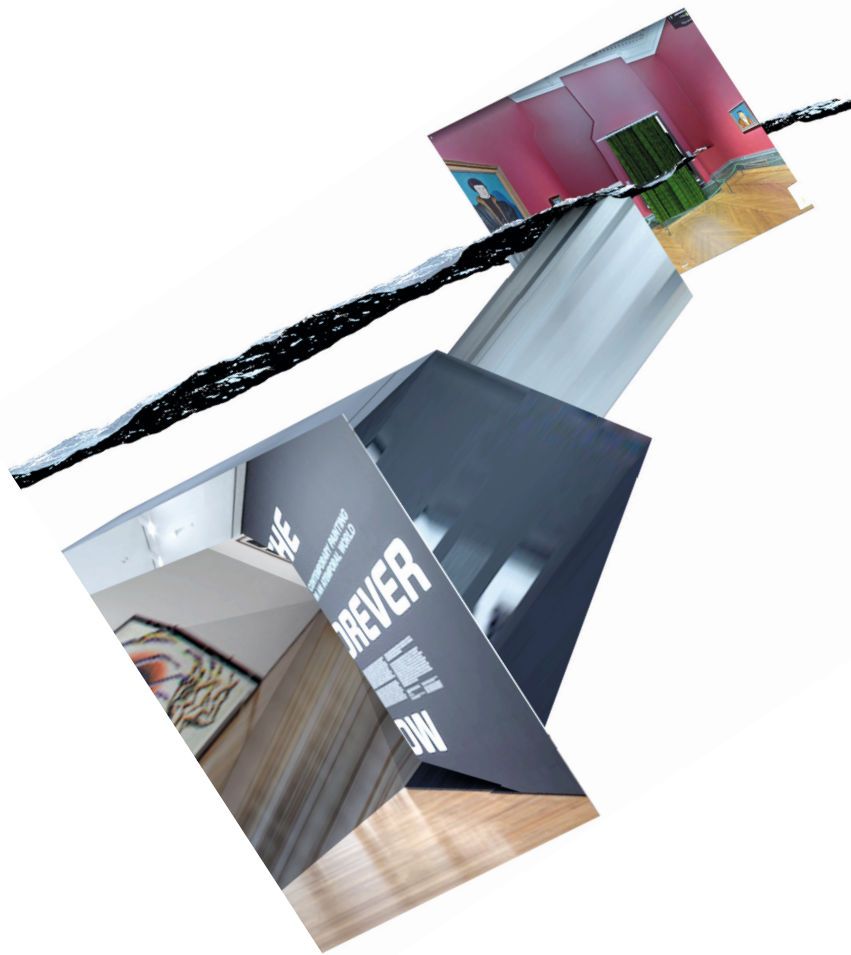
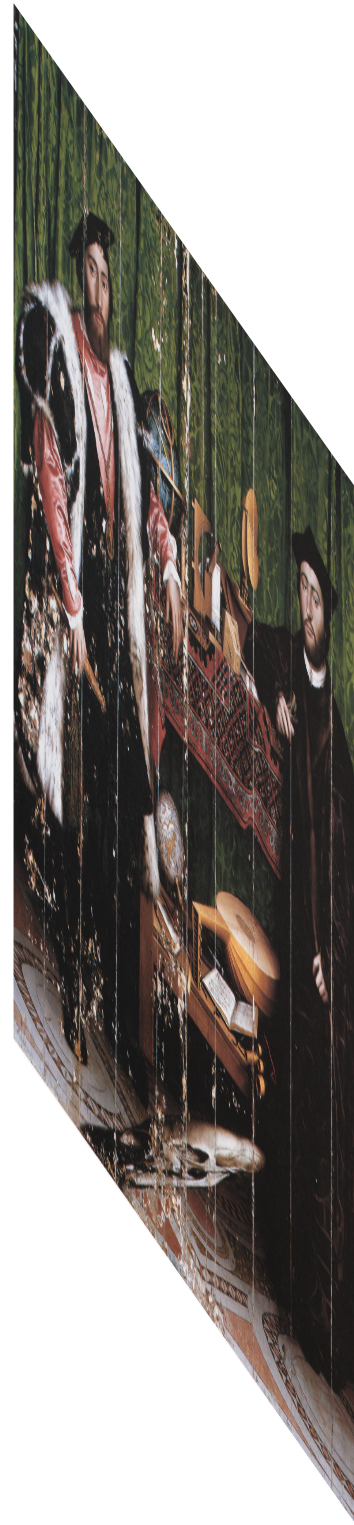
But the digitization of reproductive technology not only turns art works into information and diminishes the cult of the original work of art, but also facilitates changes in content.

When physical objects become part of the realm of the digital and turn into information, it is easy to eat away at them and morph their forms into something else. The same applies to the physical space, the rooms of the museum, where those objects are housed. Those spaces, as well, turn into information, courtesy of Google.

25 Ibid.



When art works turn into unstable information, then Alper's "attentive looking" becomes a kind of distracted looking, which results from the mere magnitude of information available, some of which may be ignored, some of which may be changed during transmission. And ritualized public contemplation with all its associations of being seen while seeing becomes a voyeuristic private ritual with all its associations of shamelessness and idiosyncrasy. Yet, some form of liminal experience may still occur, when the viewer makes use of the Zoom feature of GAP which allows us to examine art works much closer than would be possible in the museum. However, this experience could also reveal a withered and broken body beneath the masterpiece, which turns out to be a heavily made-up corpse. And instead of delivering symbolic structures, it could lead to the loss of the bigger picture, much like the invention of the microscope is said to have led to the loss of the cosmic explanations of the middle ages.



The architecture of the great museums is such that rooms are linked in a way that you must visit them all. There is no escape. This was analysed as the museum's way of enforcing an order to art, thereby creating art history²⁶ and affirming the power and authority of the ruling class or cultural establishment.²⁷ When architecture is transformed into information, this opens up the space for self-curating, for the juxtapositions of art works in differing settings, for breaking down the walls, and for taking on "the inevitabilities not only of our cultural timeline, but also of our mortality."²⁸

26 Crimp first applied Foucauldian theory to the philosophy of museums, cf. his "On the Museum's ruins", where he writes: "Foucault has analyzed the modern institutions of confinement – the asylum, the clinic and the prison – and their respective discursive formations – madness, illness and criminality. There is another institution of confinement ripe for analysis in Foucault's terms – the museum – and another discipline – art history" (45).

27 Cf. Duncan, "The Universal Survey Museum".

28 Hoptman, *The Forever Now*, 24.



GAP essentially affirms the status quo as set out by the partner museums by replicating the museum tour. By using their “dead end” technology (meaning that GAP does not make it possible to alter the content or re-use it) to create an alternative museum tour, by finding ways to access content and to fundamentally alter it, I am subverting the design and content goals of GAP thus deconstructing their digital museum experience and, in the wake of this, commenting on the physical museum tour as well.

The art museum is a dead end ripe for re-animation.



“A Viewing of *Zombies in the House of Art*” is a research Zombie feeding on images and quotes rearranged to give voice to a kind of audio guide, as well as a play on, and a collage of animated paths based on Google street view providing a viewing of an imaginary exhibition called “Zombies in the House of Art”, but also a sighting of Zombies in the museum and the viewing of the undead corpses of masterpieces.



"You take your ordinary, barnyard room, so to speak, the familiar room that you have lived in, that you never thought of as a work of art, and somehow, insensibly, you pull it about, you put a chair in a different place, you arrange the mantelpiece, get rid of half the impedimenta of the mantelpiece—you know how most people load up the mantelpieces—you simply strip it and you put one or two things there and you put them in the right place . . . an artist will do that . . . Well, that's what a museum does, I think, for all of us."³⁵

I'd like to continue on now to the first floor . . .

Jane descends the Great Stair with the group. At the second landing she begins speaking, gesturing in various directions around the Great Stair Hall as she walks. When she reaches the bottom of the stair she walks around it to the left:

As I mentioned earlier, it "consists of a center building, with wings at each end extending back . . . It is four stories high, including the basement . . .

"The inmates are lodged in rooms of about 22 feet by 45 feet (of which there are 42) from 20 to 24 persons in each room, and are classed according to their general character and habits, separating the more deserving from the abandoned and worthless, and thus removing the most obnoxious feature consequent to such establishments. The Americans are generally by themselves; so are the Irish; and the Blacks also have their separate apartments.

"[It] also contains a penitentiary, a hospital for the sick and insane, several large buildings for work shops, school rooms, lodging rooms for children, and the various out-houses of a large and well-regulated establishment . . ."³⁶

She stops in front of Diego Rivera's Liberation of the Peon, which is hung outside the door to the coat room underneath the stair:

And isn't this a handsome drinking fountain!

Jane walks into the Coat Room, gesturing toward the drinking fountain at the far end. Addressing the drinking fountain:

Hmm, ". . . a work of astonishing economy and monumentality . . . it boldly contrasts with the severe

35. Royal Cortissoz, "Life and the Museum," Fairmount Park Art Association, *Fifty-Seventh Annual Report of the Board of Trustees* (1929), p. 55.

36. Philadelphia Board of Guardians, "Report of the Committee Appointed by the Board of Guardians of the Poor of the City and Districts of Philadelphia to Visit the Cities of Baltimore, New York, Providence, Boston and Salem (1827)," in *The Almshouse Experience: Collected Reports*, ed. David Rothman (New York: Arno Press, 1971), p. 8.



"...In flashing a blinding light on to a series of historical objects, Nashashibi and Skaer subvert the notion of contemplation that is so closely associated with a museum environment. The viewer is instead granted a fleeting glimpse of a series of artefacts, which, with any detail removed, reduces their status to an icon without a narrative...."²⁹



29 <https://www.nationalgalleries.org/art-and-artists/94580/flash-metropolitan>

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Museums in Google streetview (in order of appearance in booklet)

Hall 10/14 of the Uffizi Galleries, Florence (Botticelli Room)

G24/od of the British Museum, London

Installation view of Petrit Halilaj, *RU*, New Museum, New York

Hermitage Museum, The Great Throne Room, St. Petersburg

Installation View of *The Forever Now: Contemporary Painting in an Atemporal World* (14.12.2014-5.4.2015), MOMA, New York.

Room 4 (Germany) of the National Gallery, London.



3D models (in order of appearance in booklet)

Parthenon, East Pediment, „Hestia“, Author: adamtr, source: <https://sketchfab.com/3d-models/parthenon-east-pediment-hestia-73cf2493f-237467d941c682b0e70d66c>. Changes made.

Hoa Hakananai'a, Author: British Museum, source: <https://sketchfab.com/3d-models/hoa-hakananaa7526934933438d8230ac-829d22300e>. Changes made.

The Universe is nothing but dancing stars, author: Miguelangelo Rosario, source: <https://sketchfab.com/3d-models/the-universe-is-nothing-but-dancing-stars-03b52b627be84c7bba2a60fa8a834aef>. Changes made.

<https://www.cgtrader.com/free-3d-models/character/man/fat-zombie-96d89fa7-4d7f-4c1a-a229-12f5f30ce795>



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Digital Images

(in order of appearance in booklet)

David Teniers the Younger. The Archduke Leopold Wilhelm in his Painting Gallery in Brussels, 1647 – 51, Prado Museum, Madrid. Changes made. Source: Public Domain, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=16058063>.

“The moai Hoa Hakananai’a on the deck of HMS Topaze”. Source: <https://imaginaislادepascua.com/en/moai-hoa-hakananaia-the-stolen-friend-of-rapa-nui/>. Changes made.

Installation view of *The Forever Now: Contemporary Painting in an Atemporal World* at the Museum of Modern Art, New York (December 14, 2014–April 5, 2015). Photos by John Wronn © 2014 The Museum of Modern Art. Source: https://www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/1455/installation_images/10409?locale=de

Hans Holbein the Younger. The Ambassadors, 1533, National Gallery, London. Source: Google Cultural Institute, Public Domain, <https://artsandculture.google.com/asset/bQEWbLB26MG1LA>.

“The Ambassadors after Cleaning, before restauration.” Source: Martin Wyld, “The Restoration History of Holbein’s Ambassadors.” National Gallery Technical Bulletin, Vol. 19. London: National Gallery Publications 1998, 19. Changes made.

Screenshot of Andrea Fraser, “Museum Highlights: A Gallery Talk,” 116.

Videostill of Lucy Skaer, Rosalind Nashashibi, “Flash in the Metropolitan”, 3 min. 25 sec., 2006.

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