17 MULTIMEDIA AND THE POLITICS OF MUSEUM ORGANISATIONAL CHANGE

Philip Yenawine
Consultant
USA

This paper will summarise several personally-held conclusions developed from the experience of working with a consortium of museum education departments, the Museum Education Consortium (MEC), to produce multimedia projects related to teaching about art. In short, it is my opinion that we have not yet achieved many of our goals because there is no consensus within and among museums about how to address electronic issues in general. It would appear that the profession is on the cusp of changing its attitudes and procedures with regard to new publishing opportunities and the consequent possibilities of reaching new audiences, but it is not there yet. It would also appear that museum educators are unable to pressure effectively for the change.

The MEC began when educators from seven major US art institutions banded together in 1986 because none of us alone had mandates or money to work in multimedia for educational purposes, even though some of our museums had participated in projects sponsored by outside producers. All of us had the desire to reach broader publics as well as to do more for existing audiences which expressed need for further instruction to understand art. We realised the potential of multimedia to assist with increasing "visual literacy" (the skills involved in finding meaning and pleasure in works of art) in museum visitors, and saw that it could also serve another goal, less generally held, which was to see that large numbers of excellent reproductions became available cheaply and conveniently for teaching in other circumstance, e.g., schools.

We worked under the sponsorship of The Museum of Modern Art, NY, of which I was then director of education. Our first funding, and the major support throughout our six active-year history, came from the Pew Charitable Trusts in Philadelphia in order to enable us to research and produce prototypes of systems useful for both in museum visitors and outside.

Over the years, our projects focused on two different content directions. The first was built off a project undertaken by the Charles and Ray Eames design office in the late 70s called **Art Game** which focused on Impressionist and Post Impressionist art. (The original consortium membership was built around institutions with important holdings in these areas.) Our prototypes, much changed, were referred to as the "Museum Visitor's Program" and the "Teacher's Program" which had as its target people studying and teaching art history.

The second direction was designed to address multicultural education, which needs broad resources to achieve its goal of diversifying the range of things taught, not only in teaching the separate cultures which emigrate to America with immigrants but also the results of their exchanges with other transplants.

In 1991-1992, as part of the second project, we conducted a survey of collections of museums then involved in the MEC. Our findings were not completely surprising. There were many gaps in our own collections, pertaining to modern and contemporary work by artists representing the diversity required by the project. This is in fact a political fact: there are biases within collecting patterns in most museums, regardless of attempts to be encyclopaedic.

This survey made it clear how much research and photography was required to document the art of our multicultural nation, despite increasing focus on it during the last decade. In other words, tiny representation of artists of colour and disappointingly little documentation was available in substantial detail, and almost all work was in need of archival photography. This finding suggested not only the curtailing of the size of our desired imagebase, but also expanding the time frame for doing an adequate job pulling it together. It also became apparent that we could accomplish more if we conceived a series of small projects which could eventually be linked to serve longer range goals.

While we were unable to organise any forums for discussing specific issues involved for museums in multimedia publishing, slanting them toward educational goals and projects, there was ongoing communication between our staff and people working on the Database for Swiss Cultural Heritage; the Art Information Task Force; the Computer Interchange of Museum Information Committee; the Getty's Art and Architecture Thesaurus; and so forth. The thrusts of this were mostly to keep in touch with the network of institutions working out methods for both collection management and electronic publishing.

The most useful outcome of communication was to become assured that we could input data in conformance with standards being set by the museum profession. We would have liked to become more of a player in their deliberations, however, in order to get the staffs involved to be a bit more open to publishing opportunities which might cost more than they produce in the short run, but which open whole new, huge educational opportunities for museums in the future.

Basically, any attempt to get a larger community of museum people to think beyond rather narrow and institution-bound issues, particularly considering policies with regard to reproduction rights and fees for "venture" projects in multimedia, proved unproductive.

A factor which greatly influenced our thinking about the size and nature of image and databases was the final financial data from the Impressionism/Post projects. This data revealed that, even given the significant collections represented by the MEC members, it was still an enormously costly matter to put together the kind of imagebase that makes a difference in teaching and that makes use of the storage capacity of electronic media. Our collections could not provide adequate coverage of the periods, there were few documentary images in any of our collections, and virtually no useful moving picture footage was available "inside." Therefore images of Monet at his easel, for example, which enliven multimedia, were very costly.

Moreover, very little agreement had been achieved in standardising the method of archival storage of images from which to make reproductions. Most reproduction archives still cleave to photo transparencies, and there is very divided opinion about the efficacy of digital image storage. The range and the quality of "original sources" was another disappointing factor, therefore. All of this reflects the timidity with which museums have accepted new technologies in general. Evaluating the results of both sets of projects is revealing about museums, education departments, and cooperative efforts among them as well as into the funding community, none of it overwhelmingly positive.

Sitting behind all problems was the inherent conservatism of museums and their ambivalence toward education in any but the most direct sense of providing labels, tours and brochures for visitors. As a consortium of museums working together, there was a great cumbersomeness to our decision-making process, partly because of our own fears about what we could and couldn't do.. The way that this became a problem might be seen by the discussions that took place in the spring of 1991. For example, several of us were determined to bring museum resources more directly to bear on the challenges of culturally-inclusive curricula in schools of all levels. The majority disagreed with this as a priority, feeling that their museums would not back this kind of ambition and scope of project. Finding no consensus, we decided that part of the problem was that as representatives of institutions, we did not have the same mandate or priorities we might have as individuals.

We therefore decided to reconstitute ourselves as a body of museum educators, representing ourselves not our museums, coming from a wider range of institutions, including historical collections, and to create an independent non-profit corporation. While this allowed us to create a group within which it was much easier to communicate, the fact that we did not represent enormous visual resource banks (as we had in our first configuration as an institutional group, at least in theory,) made us less interesting to funders of all types.

One major problem was that we were unable to raise additional money with which to carry out the multicultural project. In other words, extensive efforts to adapt our goals to coincide with the priorities of various foundations and publishers during these difficult economic times ultimately proved fruitless. On many occasions we were greatly encouraged, but despite considerable positive feedback, we ultimately were rejected. We therefore failed to obtain money either to continue the work initiated in the final year with Pew funds, or to turn our Impressionism/Post prototypes into projects, however much scaled down. The reasons for this, as much as we can determine, are as follows:

Subtle changes in the general political climate undermined a still-building commitment to broadening the canon of what is taught in schools. At the point that we were armed with an NEA challenge grant, the purpose of which was to start a comprehensive widening of the visual resources available to support multicultural teaching, we found a pulling back from the notion that such resource enlargement was essential. Agencies which championed multiculturalism at one point began instead to de-emphasise it.

We also found new resistance on the part of foundations to fund research and product development in multimedia, partly out of concern that the industry has not yet standardised. There are few clear choices with regard to systems, and this in turn confounds efforts to disseminate new programs broadly. While everybody acknowledges that this is probably a short range problem, it can be an excuse for the uncertain not to fund research and product development that commits to any particular direction.

Furthermore, there is the much discussed crisis in the schools and concomitant economic challenges. There is an attitude that they have insurmountable problems, at least ones that are too big for museums programs to have an impact. It is also thought that they cannot afford equipment, let alone the programs to take advantage of new resources, and that teachers are technophobic so it does not make any difference what you invent to solve their problems, they cannot buy it and wouldn't use it if they could. Beyond this, there is no commitment within museums that we have an essential role in school curricula in general or reform efforts.

Finally there is the economic situation. Much beleaguered and cut back in available funds, foundations, especially the public sources, are focused on immediate needs and sustaining basic operations of cultural resources faced with severe financial difficulties. Taking on

large problems that involve the broadening use of museum resources, given all of the above, was not a priority as it had been a short time before. Moreover, with museums having a hard time holding the line, there was no great enthusiasm on the part of administrations for expansionist efforts as this is perceived to be.

Although we have given up all staff and our office because of the lack of funds, we still exist as an organisation committed to concerted action by a range of museums, geographically widespread, different in terms of collections and more diverse as individuals.

We are still committed to bringing museum resources into schools to enrich and broaden teaching of the artistic and cultural histories of more Americans.

We still feel that new technologies are the logical way to do this efficiently and economically, that schools will be able to afford them, that teachers will want to keep up with their students and learn to use them. In fact, many already can, despite rumours to the contrary. Important within that assumption, however, is that whoever makes these new programs must also assume responsibility for: 1) research into what works best and 2) training teachers to become comfortable with the potential of multimedia to assist their teaching, helping them to reach existing and new goals.