Chapter 10

Technology and Created Spaces:
Reframing Interpretations of Public Art through Digital Augmentation

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ABSTRACT

This chapter examines the educational potential of existing technologies to reframe student interpretations of public art spaces and promote civic engagement, interest, and investment within the vicinity of the interpretive exercise. The chapter specifically explores the theoretical relationship between virtual and local experience and traces the development of four research-in-teaching initiatives, interpretative exercises in which student participants examined local public art sites using digital imaging platforms and place-based technologies. The methods and findings sections of the chapter define the objectives and procedures most central to each interpretive exercise and present research findings in the form of selected student work. The research findings suggest that the digital augmentation of public art spaces reconfigures more traditional educational spaces/methods and compounds the benefits of virtual and local experience.

PROLOGUE: TIME MACHINE ON A TABLET

On this cool mid-November morning two students and the author cross the historic quadrangle to check their group's progress on a semester-long research project. Earlier in the year the class had been tasked with the development of an interactive art and architecture tour; the students here hope to test the accuracy of their group's geographic coordinates and demonstrate the ability to link an image overlay to a trigger location using a web-based augmented reality platform.

"We're here," announces the first student, still looking down at the coordinates on her phone's location services application. The group stops by a magnolia tree about twenty feet short of one of several

nearby wrought iron gazebos. The second student pulls a tablet from her backpack and frames the gazebo on the tablet screen. Students and author both watch the screen with anticipation.

"It worked last time," the second student notes reassuringly. Then, her tablet registers the trigger location and an overlay of an early 20th Century photograph taken from this exact vantage point appears on the screen. The group momentarily steps into the year 1915: Surrounding buildings and bustling sidewalks dissolve into the sepia tones of the photograph; the group exchanges glances with six women now visible in a garden gazebo and dressed in the long, dark skirts and white starched blouses of yesteryear. Without warning the student lowers her tablet and the image drops from the screen. The group abruptly returns to here and now.

"It worked," she announces, smiling.

INTRODUCTION

Murals, installations, parks, gardens, and other forms of public art present the educator with an interesting pedagogical dilemma: How to design meaningful student interpretive experiences to simultaneously address both created object and object setting? Per one resolution, the digital augmentation of public art spaces can be used to shift the scope and sequence of interpretive exercises– Students might use technology to simulate, supplement, or completely substitute for direct experience with a public art site, to virtually manipulate the visual elements of created objects and related spaces, and to link critical commentary, social history, or other forms of explanatory information directly to an artwork's geographic location. The opening prologue referenced two examples of repurposed and/or reconfigured technologies applied with the intent to connect students to artwork and locality; the following chapter examines the educational potential of existing technologies to reframe student interpretations of public art spaces and promote civic engagement, interest, and investment within the vicinity of the interpretive exercise. While technological innovation is absolutely important to all forms of education, more general discussion of technology in education exceeds the parameters of the present chapter. Instead, this chapter concentrates primarily on the theoretical relationship between virtual and local experience and traces the development of four research-in-teaching initiatives, interpretative exercises in which student participants examined local public art sites using digital imaging platforms and place-based technologies.

Purpose and Rationale

Interpretive frameworks are personally and socially-situated. Individual interpretive frames bring something original, revealing, enriching, or thoroughly unanticipated to the interpretive experience (Eisner, 1998). Students can examine the same image or object but develop simultaneously convergent and divergent interpretive conclusions (Arnheim, 1966). Where one student interprets an equestrian statue as a heroic tribute, another student sees only a reminder of nationalistic fervor and political upheaval. Given the complexity and nuance of the interpretive experience, framing devices capable of multifarious descriptive, analytical, interpretative, and evaluative functions are a prerequisite to comprehensive, critical consideration of public artwork and geographic setting (Feldman, 1967; Efland, 1995). Artists relinquish intellectual and creative control of their work upon exhibition; thereafter, the artist cannot significantly influence how the work is treated by society, as sacred, profane, revered, despised, politicized, or commercialized. Over time, society will define an artwork in multiple ways. Shifting interpretive frames

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