

**Mario Santamaria's *Trolling Google Art Project*:  
Critical Explorations in Google's Museum Views**

By Victoria Milne

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## Abstract

Closures and the demands of physical distancing following from the Covid-19 pandemic resulted in a wave of promotion positioning virtual tours (360-degree virtual environments navigated using first-person user interfaces) as potent substitutes for local, physical interactions with museums, objects, and collections. While there is an existing body of writing (most often aligned with ‘institutional critique’) engaging with practices of museums and galleries, little scholarship yet exists on virtual tours or Google’s significant role in their purveyance. This MRP explores the sociopolitical and affective implications of museum spectatorship as reconfigured within Google Museum Views’ virtual tours. Through an exploration of Mario Santamaria’s *Trolling Google Art Project* (2013-ongoing), Google Museum Views is analyzed from three angles: 1) the platform’s relationship to physical architectures, 2) the platform’s configuration of user subjectivities, and 3) the platform’s challenges to the public role of the museum. Founded in critical theory and museum studies and drawing on a multidisciplinary array of texts, this MRP argues the importance of critical engagement with the ways that Google’s virtual museum environments perpetuate capitalist ideologies already recognized as troubling their physical counterparts.

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Victoria Milne

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## Introduction

The connection between the virtual and the real has never been more widely evident than it became during the shutdowns precipitated by Covid-19. Facing business and event closures and the imperative to maintain social distance, many of those lucky enough to be able to do so coped by pursuing virtual activities and interactions as alternatives to formerly physical ones. Involving many platforms, applications and practices, an online migration took place; one area seeing a significant upsurge was an interest in virtual tours. Virtual tours, using panoramic captures and first-person user interfaces, allow user-visitors to move through, most often, a mimetic recreation of an actual site, usually one construed with a touristic and/or educative public imperative.<sup>1</sup> Museums are prominently recreated following this format. Many ‘virtual’ activities were the subject of an increasing curiosity, but, significantly, Google trends identifies ‘virtual museum tours’ as the term users were searching for most in this category in 2020.<sup>2</sup>

The computerization of museum collections began in the 1960s, fueled by a need to optimize record keeping and documentation, as museums saw an increasing staff turnover in light of a more mobile workforce and began facing increased scrutiny and demands for accountability by both the public and funding bodies.<sup>3</sup> By the early 1990s the first virtual museums for the personal computer became available in the form of CD-ROMs, available to

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<sup>1</sup> Native-to-digital virtual tours are less common but are on the up-rise in recent months.

<sup>2</sup> Sam Gaskin, “Google Arts & Culture Booms as Art World Moves Online,” *OCULA*, 30 Mar. 2020, <https://ocula.com/magazine/art-news/interest-in-google-arts-culture-skyrockets-as/>; Ben Davis, “In a Year When Many Were Stuck Indoors, Google Says ‘Virtual Museum Tours’ Was Among Its Most Popular Search Terms,” *Artnet News*, 11 Dec. 2020, <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/virtual-museum-tours-1930875>; Google “Year in Search: Trends that Shaped 2020,” About Google, accessed 4 Feb. 2021, <https://about.google/stories/year-in-search-2020/trends/virtual-activity/>.

<sup>3</sup> David Williams, “A Brief History of Museum Computerization,” in *Museums in a Digital Age*, ed. Ross Parry (London: Routledge, 2010), 15-17.

purchase from museums giftshops and book and media suppliers.<sup>4</sup> Most early digitized museums were limited in the scope of their re-creation. Rather, they were understood as souvenirs or informational supplements than substitutes for physical visitation.<sup>5</sup> With the advent of the internet, enabling not only intensifying reproduction and access to content, but blurring traditional distinctions between content producers and consumers, the authority of knowledge and heritage institutions faces increased questioning.<sup>6</sup> Nonetheless, given the increasing market competition and the imperatives of attracting visitors to meet performance indicators and secure funding, as well as some museum workers' desires to take advantage of the pedagogical and engagement opportunities new technology creates, many institutions are cultivating online presences.<sup>7</sup>

The hype about how museum online interfaces support user-visitor learning and involvement is dubious. As Glynda Hall and John Scott, scholars in education and new media studies writing on the ability of museum web platforms to engage youth, note that “[t]he websites of most museums appear yet to operate from a knowledge-telling mode...providing only limited opportunities for interaction or engagement with holdings.”<sup>8</sup> The authors go on to link this to a standardization of the way museums represent themselves online, noting that “[c]anonical categories for such sites now dominate.”<sup>9</sup> Among such canonical forms for

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<sup>4</sup> Erkki Huhtamo, “On the Origins of the Virtual Museum,” in *Museums in a Digital Age*, ed. Ross Parry (London: Routledge, 2010; 2013), 122.

<sup>5</sup> Huhtamo, “On the Origins,” 122.

<sup>6</sup> Jenny Kidd, *Museums in the New Mediascape: Transmedia, Participation, Ethics* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2014), 8.

<sup>7</sup> Kidd, *Museums*, 8; Pierre Lévy, “Building a Universal Digital Memory,” in *Museums in a Digital Age*, ed. Ross Parry (London: Routledge, 2010; 2013), 109; Andrea Bandelli, “Virtual Spaces and Museums,” in *Museums in a Digital Age*, ed. Ross Parry (London: Routledge, 2010; 2013), 148-149; Nancy Proctor, “The Google Art Project: A New Generation of Museums on the Web?” *Curator: The Museum Journal* 54, no. 2 (2011): 215–221.

<sup>8</sup> Glynda Hull and John Scott, “Curating and Creating Online: Identity, Authorship and Viewing in a Digital Age,” in *Museum Communication and Social Media: The Connected Museum*, eds. K. Drotner, and K.C.Schrøder (London: Routledge: 2013), 130.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 130.

museum online presence are virtual tours hosted by and created in partnership with Google Arts and Culture.

Google launched Art Project and the first Museum Views in February 2011 in partnership with seventeen museums, including such major European and American institutions as the Tate and the Museum of Modern Art (MOMA).<sup>10</sup> In 10 years, that number grew to over two thousand, and as of December 15<sup>th</sup> 2020 Google Museum Views hosted 3964 virtual tours.<sup>11</sup> Google's virtual museum environments integrate with other, complementary Google applications such as Arts & Culture, Street Views, Maps, and, of course, Search.<sup>12</sup> While the Google Cultural Institute that administers the Museum Views content denies being for-profit, a rationale of privatized investment underlies Museum Views and Art Project. Danilo Pesce, Paolo Neirotti, and Emilio Paolucci, management and technological organization specialists, note that Google benefits from the project in two ways:

[D]igitizing artworks would have introduced two types of benefits for Google: (1) increasing the time users spend in a day on Google's platform and generating more data for their individual profiling [and] (2) enhancing the role and the reputation of

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<sup>10</sup> Showkat Ahmad Wani , Asifa Ali and Shabir Ahmad Ganaie, "The Digitally Preserved Old-Aged Art, Culture and Artists: An Exploration of Google Arts and Culture," *PSU Research Review* 3, no. 2 (2019): 112; Proctor, "The Google Art Project," 215; Danilo Pesce, Paolo Neirotti, and Emilio Paolucci, "When Culture Meets Digital Platforms: Value Creation and Stakeholders' Alignment in Big Data Use," *Current Issues in Tourism* 22, no. 15 (Sept. 2019): 1892. For further details on the history of Museum Views I suggest looking to these articles; it is difficult to source information on the platform from Google itself.

<sup>11</sup> Google, "About Google Cultural Institute—Partners," Google Arts & Culture, last modified 2020, <https://about.artsandculture.google.com/partners/>; Google, "Museum Views," Google Arts & Culture, last modified 2020, <https://artsandculture.google.com/search/streetview?project=streetviews>.

<sup>12</sup> For example, clicking on certain works in Museum Views will take users to other Arts & Culture features like Zoom (which allows users to scale within high resolution images), and results for museums within Maps and Street View link to Museum Views.

Google in creating value at the societal level by inventing a way of accessing art that is free and that removes geographical barriers.<sup>13</sup>

Data profiling, cross-branding, and horizontal networking aids Google, for whom advertising is the main revenue source, by increasing usership and developing algorithmic targeting for those who use the company's applications.

Virtual encounters with museums are no less 'real' than in-person visitations. The accessibility for which they are celebrated enables museum narratives to be received by new audiences and in new contexts, let alone in a new format. Coupling enthusiasm for digital access with the recent upshoot in virtual tours' popularity, it becomes necessary to interrogate the ways Google Museum Views reshapes the meaning of concepts like art, culture, history, and heritage.

Museum Views' value to users rests in proposing to digitally reproduce the experience of visiting a physical gallery, without the same barriers, and in functionality as a tool for planning visits, especially in terms of the platform's integrations with Maps and Street View, where information about operational hours and nearby hotels, shops, and restaurants can be found.<sup>14</sup> Virtual tours like Google's are celebrated for fostering arts and culture literacy and supporting museums in engaging and connecting with their publics. Yet, how well served are museums and their audiences in the climate of pandemic lockdowns and protests for social change? This major research paper argues that museum virtual tours that do not engage in critique replicate the capitalist power structure already haunting the museum. The virtualization of museums is often posed as an opportunity to overcome access barriers related

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<sup>13</sup> Pesce, Neirotti and Paolucci, "When Culture Meets Digital Platforms," 1892.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 1893.



to and propagated by classist and bigoted ideologies often entwined with historical museum practices, as it delimits museums from some physical and material constraints that otherwise impede changes responsive to this imperative. By looking at the differences between corporate and alternative virtual tours, I will show that critique is essential to museums' pursuit of inclusivity and literacy.

Google Museum View's containers, Google Earth and Google Street Views, are taken up as medium, subject, or both, in works garnering artworld attention. Including Jon Rafman's (Canadian) *Nine Eyes of Google Street View* (ongoing since 2008), Doug Rickard's (American) *A New American Picture* (2009-2012), and Michael Wolf's (German) *Street View* project (2008-2010), such works often look at patterns and behaviors rendered perceptible through Google's platform.<sup>15</sup> The more successful projects often draw attention to privacy concerns and their unequal provisioning and/or to the failure of the technological interface to correspond exactly with the physical actuality it represents.<sup>16</sup> Other artists and projects focus on Google's platform logic, responding to or manipulating its algorithms and economic models.<sup>17</sup> Mario Santamaria, whose *Trolling Google Art Project* (ongoing since 2013) will be considered throughout the remaining sections of this major research paper, is unique, to my knowledge, in producing work that is directly centered the ways Google Museum Views continues, transforms and expands an interrogation of the company's practices and influence.

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<sup>15</sup> Jon Rafman, "9eyes," *Tumblr blog*, accessed 5 Mar. 2021, <https://9-eyes.com/>; Doug Rickard, "Projects: A New American Picture," [dougrikkard.com](http://dougrikkard.com), accessed 5 Mar. 2021, <https://dougrikkard.com/a-new-american-picture/>; Michael Wolf, "Street View," [photomichaelwolf.com](http://photomichaelwolf.com), accessed 5 Mar. 2021, <https://photomichaelwolf.com/#asoue/1>.

<sup>16</sup> Gabrielle Moser, "Exhaustive Images: Surveillance, Sovereignty, and Subjectivity in Google Maps Street View," *Fillip* 15, no. 1 (fall 2011): n.pag. I recommend this article for more on privacy concerns and marginalization relative to Street View photography.

<sup>17</sup> Gretchen Andrews, "Frieze Los Angeles," [gretchenandrews.com](http://gretchenandrews.com), accessed 5 Mar. 2021, <https://www.gretchenandrew.com/frieze-los-angeles>; UBERMORGEN, *Google will Eat Itself*, accessed 5 Mar. 2021, <https://www.gwei.org/index.php>. For example, Gretchen Andrew uses Google's algorithm to insert her own work at the top of search results for the Frieze art fair, and the collective UBERMORGEN uses Google's advertising programs to buy and redistribute Google's own stocks.

In the following sections of this major research paper I examine three components for Santamaria's *Trolling Google Art Project: Running through the Museum, The Phantom in the Mirror, and The Non-Imaginary Museum*. Bracketed by an introduction to the project and some concluding remarks, my discussion precedes in three sections, corresponding to the three works discussed. I begin by considering Google's Museum Views in terms of the virtual application's relationship to physical reality. With the second section, I examine Museum View's conditioning of user subjectivities. In the final section I address the privatization of public culture. Grounding an exploration of Google Museum Views in Santamaria's works illustrates and lends clarity to stakes of Google's arts and culture purveyorship, while suggesting further relationships and areas for future study.

### **Mario Santamaria's *Trolling Google Art***

Artist Mario Santamaria (b. Spain, 1985) creates works focusing on the material eruptions of virtual technologies, and, conversely, on making material correspondences a prominent component of virtual experiences. In doing so, his work interrogates absurdities of the digital age—the massive consumption of information through networks and devices that, themselves, most folks know little about; networks as places of convergence and synchronicity, yet simultaneously incompatibility and dysfunction; the apparent novelty and democratizing potential of digital culture, despite Google's virtual tours reliance on, and further entrenchment of, historical corridors to wealth and power.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> See Michael Betancourt, *Glitch Art in Theory and Practice: Critical Failures and Post-Digital Aesthetics* (New York: Routledge, 2016); James Bridle, *New Dark Age: Technology and the End of the Future* (London; New York: Verso, 2018); David M. Berry and Michael Dieter, *Postdigital Aesthetics: Art, Computation and Design*, Houndmills (Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015). These sources discuss virtual-actual continuities and the way that digitality obscures the workings of historical politics and agendas.

This section focuses on three components of Santamaria's *Trolling Google Art Project*, comprising digital captures taken in Google Museum Views. On his website the artist briefly describes the project as one dealing with both the representation of physical museums and the medium of this representation:

*Trolling Google Art Project* brings together a series of works on certain cracks that appear on the platform that break the capture system. [The collection focuses on] exposing both analog politics transferred to virtual settings (copyright) and the technical device itself that constructs this experience of cultural heritage created by Google.<sup>19</sup>

While Google Museum Views grants digital access to museums, Santamaria's works question what is exchanged for this gain in access by raising concerns about privatisation and surveillance.

'Trolling' takes on a double meaning in the title of this series. In one instance, the title can be read as referring to the process through which the Santamaria, expanding from the tradition of artist-as-*flâneur*, scours Google Museum Views for his subjects. In another, to internet trolling, the act of commenting with intention to provoke controversy. All three components, by capturing the artist's systematic observations, point to the incongruencies and failures of Museum Views to perform as a seamless substitution for in-person access, though each advances this critique differently.

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<sup>19</sup> Mario Santamaria, "Trolling Google Art Project," MS Maria, accessed 10 Feb. 2021, <http://mariosantamaria.net/trolling.html>. My italics, my translation from the Spanish.

## I. Immediacy, Mediation, and (Virtual) Museums

For, after all, there are no half measures. Either it is reality or it is fiction. Either one stages something, or one does reportage. Either one opts completely for art, or for chance. For construction or for actuality. Why is this so? Because in choosing one, you automatically come round to the other.

–Jean-Luc Godard<sup>20</sup>

Though a screen capture video taken of the artist's actions in Google Museum Views, Mario Santamaria's *Running through the Museum* opens on a black screen, gesturing to the video's continuity with more than a century of film. An instant later the title flashes. Hovering white text, as in an old silent feature, lets the viewer know what's about to happen: "[r]unning through the museum: The Palace of Versailles: 1 min 8 s." The title disappears and darkness looms for a few long seconds before cutting to an interior view of Versailles' Coronation Room. For a moment the frame is still, lingering on Jacques-Louis David's *The Consecration of the Emperor Napoleon and the Coronation of Empress Joséphine on December 2, 1804* (1805-1807), then a cursor appears, and the interface's graphics—a set of arrows and an oval that stretches like a cast shadow on the floor behind the cursor—activate.<sup>21</sup> A click sounds and the scene becomes a blur as the application reloads the image of the interior from a new vantage. The next minute and 8 seconds pass in a series of clicks and blurs that only have time

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<sup>20</sup> Jean-Luc Godard, "No Half-Measures," *Godard on Godard: Critical Writings* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1972), 132. This quote comes from a review of André Malraux' *Les Conquerant*.

<sup>21</sup> "The Coronation Room," Château de Versailles, accessed 16 April 2021, <http://en.chateauversailles.fr/discover/estate/palace/coronation-room#to-the-glory-of-the-emperor>. The choice to linger on David's painting reinforces the interrogation of the relationship between copy and original in Santamaria's video. The version housed in Versailles is a slightly later copy of the original, also painted by David.

to partially resolve before another click can be registered and the race tunnels on. The only other sound, a steady, droning electronic hum of the sort that tends only to be noticed in silence and solitude, inhabits the Baroque architecture oddly, matching its relentlessness but out of step with the movement's rich opulence. Without fanfare the race ends, and the video with it.

This action, racing through the corridors of a French museum, is done in direct reference to Jean-Luc Godard's *Bande à Part* (1964).<sup>22</sup> The film, centering around a heist, repeatedly draws attention to its own artificiality: the motivation of the three main characters emphatically stems from their own idolatry of such genre movies, for instance. While *Bande à Part* is a heist film, thematically the film is concerned with mediation and representations' influences on and failed correspondences with reality. Repeatedly throughout the film Godard defies conventions set out by proponents of realism in film.<sup>23</sup>

One such instance where conventions of realism are challenged, and the one that most concerns me here, is a scene occurring midway in the film in which the main characters race through the Louvre museum. The scene does not follow linearly from the narrative, its abruptness instead serves as a jolt, highlighting for viewers' expectations of filmic artifice by breaking with them and in doing so referring the audience back to the space of their own consumption. Significantly, motivating the race through the Louvre, like the heist, is the characters' media-inspired aspirations—in this case they reproduce the exploits of an American they heard set a record by taking only 9 minutes and 45 seconds to visit the Louvre. The alienating effect is redoubled, then, by the space that the interruption of cinematic

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<sup>22</sup> Mario Santamaria, "Running through Versailles 1 min 8s," *Vimeo*, video, 1:08, 10 Nov. 2013, <https://vimeo.com/79060771>. The artist notes the reference to *Bande à Part* in the video description.

<sup>23</sup> Gabor Gergely, "Jean-Luc Godard's Film Essays of the 1960s: The Virtues and Limitations of Realism Theories," *Studies in French Cinema* 8, no. 2 (2008): 111-121.

immersion creates for attending to the issue of the viewer's own position within an ecology of media, which is raised by the characters' actions. By presenting 'mediation' through both form and content a critical doubling is achieved, carving out something like a sense of immediacy for the viewer. On the one hand by referencing this moment from film history and, on the other hand, by actually enacting (just as Godard's characters do) his referent, Santamaria's project relocates a dialectic of mediation/immediacy within Google Museum Views.

Of course, concerns with the deceitfulness of images hardly begin with the virtual modelling of museums, or even with the increasing media penetration of Hollywood films and television that Godard's film takes up. In *Simulacra and Simulation*, sociologist and cultural theologian Jean Baudrillard argues that developments of the late twentieth century—the rise of multinational capitalism, the increasing penetration of media to many people's everyday lives, the realisation of computer and genetic technologies, intensifying globalisation and urbanisation, etc.—have contributed to the indistinguishability of non-reality from reality. He describes a new order of the image which, “threatens the difference between the ‘true’ and the ‘false’, the ‘real’ and the ‘imaginary’”<sup>24</sup>. To describe the collapse of previously recognizable categories of real and unreal Baudrillard coins the term *hyperreality*. Explaining the term, Baudrillard states,

Today abstraction is no longer that of the map, the double, the mirror or the concept. Simulation is no longer that of a territory, a referential being, or a substance. It is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal. The territory no

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<sup>24</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994), 3.

longer precedes the map, nor does it survive it. It is nevertheless the map that precedes the territory.<sup>25</sup>

Baudrillard identifies three orders of simulacra comprising this procession, which correspond to the pre-modern, modern and post-modern periods, and are posed as increasingly insidious as they advance into proximity with the moment contemporary. The first order is “founded on the image, on imitation and counterfeit.”<sup>26</sup> It seems a reasonable assumption that users of Google Museum Views are aware that when they look at their computer screens they are viewing an image and not physically entering these locations. The idea that the physical referents and virtual reproductions of these spaces is obvious to user-visitors corresponds with Baudrillard’s first order simulacra, which is readily understood as an artificial stand-in for a reality (that is recognizable as such). So why does *Running through the Museum* work to point out such a distinction? One explanation is non-equivalency counters the existing rhetoric that surrounds virtual tours, which is posed in direct and physical language on Google’s site—“visit,” “move around,” “explore,” “right here, right now.”<sup>27</sup> The appearance of “running” in the title of the video is provocative on this point. Coupling with the sense of motion captured in the video, “running” at first seems an obvious description of what takes place. So, while an intellectual awareness of the application’s virtuality might be taken as given, a recourse to habits of perception nonetheless sutures the virtual act to physical referents. The actional nature of running, however, suggests that *Running through the Museum* escapes being understood through Baudrillard’s first order of simulacra.

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 1.

<sup>26</sup> Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, 121.

<sup>27</sup> Google, “10 Virtual Museums You Can Explore Right Here Right Now,” *Google Arts & Culture*, Google, Accessed 31 Dec. 2020, <https://artsandculture.google.com/story/10-museums-you-can-explore-right-here-right-now/igKSKBBnEBSGKg>.

The second order of simulacra that Baudrillard proposes concerns the manner of production. Here the simulacra “masks and denatures” reality, yet that reality is still capable of being identified as such when the means of the simulacra’s trickery is exposed.<sup>28</sup> As Media scholar Lev Manovich points out, “oscillation between illusion and its destruction, between immersing a viewer in illusion and directly addressing her” confers a user with a sense of mastery, therefore “[t]he user invests in the illusion precisely because she is given control over it”<sup>29</sup>. The appearance of interface mechanics within virtual spaces requiring action and attention before the illusion can continue encourage subjects to invest their time and focus. Throughout *Running through the Museum* the cursor clicks insistently, constantly reminding viewers of the computer-based nature of the action. Importantly, the filmic nature of the work frees viewers from the actional demands of the interface (whose mesmeric property Manovich spells out), highlighting the actuality of what is physically taking place. The idea that the interface produces an illusion of presence—to the degree that it seems natural to think interactions in virtual museums in terms of embodied verbiage like running—but that this can be stripped away by revealing the way an illusion of embodiment is produced, falls in line with this second order of simulacra. Conversely, however, this opens the question of whether a false equivalency is not being set up: does experiencing something virtually necessarily mean it is not real?

On a certain scale it is true enough that the museum environments encountered on computers are not *really* the museums they represent and that user-visitors cannot *really* run through them. But this model of reality is on a limited scale and of limited applicability. Despite the virtual basis of *Running through the Museum*’s portrayal, the events portrayed

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 6, 121-127.

<sup>29</sup> Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press 2001), 209.



cannot be so easily separated out from physicality: Google Museum Views still relies on the physical senses and faculties of user-viewers, albeit in a shifted modality, and on a physical infrastructure that stretches from computer to data center. In *Bande a Part* the main characters' actions precede from the content that they experienced through film, television, and the radio; likewise, user-visitors of virtual tours can draw on their experiences to make resonant choices. User-visitor experiences, however mediated (and dispensing with solipsism), seem to contain their own degree of reality. Yet questioning something like the reality of this experience is Baudrillard's third order of simulacra.

With the third order, Baudrillard posits that reality and simulation have become entangled beyond the point of distinguishability. This third order is haltingly described as a “simulacra of simulation, founded on information, the model, the cybernetic game—total operationality, hyperreality, aim of total control.”<sup>30</sup> Baudrillard's stance to the shifting location of truth is apocalyptic verging on defeatist, in no small part because the writing is concerned with an understanding of experience that is oriented towards a concept of reality that still privileges finitudes.<sup>31</sup> Nonetheless, screen culture—fake news and the echo chamber of social media, YouTube celebrities and Instagram influencers—secures the polemic's remaining relevance, and subsequent refinements (which I will return to). One example given by Baudrillard to illustrate hyperreality is of American reality TV show, *The Loud Family* (1971). With the implosion of divisions between model and reality, subject and object, and passive and active that reality TV occasions, traditional perspective and causality is thrown

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<sup>30</sup> Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, 121.

<sup>31</sup> Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002); Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 1987).

into impossible confusion. Registering this ambiguous position to actuality or fiction when the model precedes the actualization of the event itself, are *Running through the Museum's* dialogue with documentary media.

Unlike Godard's film, *Running through the Museum* makes no pretense at constructing a traditional narrative. The video, particularly against the background of Santamaria's other, direct observation-based works in *Trolling Google Art Project*, is readily understood as a recording of the artist's actual, even if staged as such, actions. Formally, not only in the video's quotations of projection and silent film, but also in its short and fragmentary nature, a relationship to documentary's predecessor, *Actualités*, is established. While *Running through the Museum* pays homage to a fiction film, it thematically connects with issues that have traditionally dominated film's engagements with non-fiction.

In regard to the relationship between *Running through the Museum* and documentary film, Frederick Wiseman's *National Gallery* (2014) suggests itself as another instructive point of reference. Like *Actualités* and Santamaria's work concerned here, *National Gallery* takes an indirect approach to the museum and abandons linear narrative in favour of collaging together disparate (though not unrelatable) events. The stylistic similarities are significant given prominent documentary film theorist Bill Nichol's observations, based on the aforementioned hallmarks, that Wiseman's films' approach to factuality "stresses goal-seeking and constraints more than determinism and causality."<sup>32</sup> Accordingly, this model understands reality as always already mediated but, importantly, defies absolute relativism. Rather than a repetitious, doomed search for contact with an essentialist notion of reality, 'reality' conceived in this fashion holds space for interrogating systems' capabilities and

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<sup>32</sup> Bill Nichols, "Fred Wiseman's Documentaries: Theory and Structure," *Film Quarterly* 31, no. 3 (1978): 21.

incommensurabilities—their resistance or vulnerability to growth, transformation, and collapse. Reality, as formulated here, is not just a one-way, top-down concept: it is interrogated and remade in the in the complex interplays of systems that always already precede it.

The question of access within virtual museum spaces becomes fraught when considering access' coextensively with a notion of reality as direct contact with a profound, originary *somethingness*. Accordingly, Santamaria's *Running through the Museum* probes the mediated access that Google Museum Views provides to invoke the circularity inherent in this model of thought. The work's tangled references to *Bande a Part* and documentary film signal an ambivalence to the mediated nature of the experience. Nevertheless, *Running through the Museum* confronts the application with its failure to deliver on terms advertised, not based on the tours' mediated nature, but on the imperfect communication between the systems in relay. The artist records a tour occurring neither "[r]ight here" nor "[r]ight now."<sup>33</sup> Throughout, the imagery lags behind Santamaria's clicks: the race pits the eye and hand of the artist against the network itself.

The server's inability to keep up with the digital signal is pushed to the fore, highlighting the fact that the museum does not appear on the screen *ex nihilo* and does not exist outside temporality. By invoking the network in relation to human scales of space and time, *Running through the Museum* makes the opacity, the inaccessibility of all that back-ends the imagery, discernible. Simultaneously, the imperfect compatibility of Santamaria's embodied actions and the technology's response points to the limitations of translation. The question of access shifts onto qualities of translations between the user-visitor and the virtual

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<sup>33</sup> Google, "10 Virtual Museums You Can Explore Right Here Right Now."

museum interface: in recognizing that access goes both ways, the asymmetry of the exchange Google facilitates with its users becomes clear.

## II. Of Spectres and Spectators

[T]here are places where an individual feels himself to be a spectator without paying much attention to the spectacle. As if the position of spectator were the essence of the spectacle, as if basically the spectator in the position of the spectator were his own spectacle.

– Marc Augé<sup>34</sup>

The next section of this case study attends to *The Phantom in the Mirror*, another of Mario Santamaria's works in *Trolling Google Art Project*. Concerning itself with concurrences of spectatorship and surveillance within Google Museum Views, the series collects and posts to social media instances where the robotic Street View camera captures images of itself. Since 2014 Mario Santamaria has been posting such images to a Tumblr blog titled *The Camera in the Mirror*. The titular discrepancies—the project itself is titled *The Phantom in the Mirror* on the artist's CV and webpage, spoof the ontogenetic confusion that the collected images draw out. The pictures present an element of uncanniness; perched atop a vehicular apparatus and raised to suggest a human's-eye view, the camera stares back from the mirrors, dark windows, and polished surfaces of museums and heritage sites where viewers expect a facial reflection. While the camera displaces the viewer's reflection, viewers in turn displace the camera, seeing

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<sup>34</sup> Marc Augé, *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity* (London: Verso 1995), 70.

the camera's reflection from perspective the image's capture. Accordingly, *The Phantom in the Mirror* conjures the question of identity's (in)dependence on/of its images and their deathly fixity, a preoccupation reflecting the psychological alienation of the relational distance imposed by mechanical, and now to an even greater degree, digital reproduction.

In one set of images posted to Santamaria's dedicated blog for the work, the camera captures itself in a convex mirror traversing the hallway of de Centro Penitenciario de Hombres de Barcelona (La Modelo), a prison built in 1904 adopting Jeremy Bentham's panoptic layout. In 2018 the prison was scheduled to be torn down, to be replaced by several municipally-run facilities.<sup>35</sup> The obsolescence of La Modelo, and the nostalgia the site's preservation suggests, tells of a shift in the way that social control is exercised. In the blog posts, as well as in the total series of *The Phantom and The Mirror*, Santamaria points to the overlapping of spectatorship and surveillance in Google Museum Views. Yet even as such posts mark a continuity of panoptic architecture on Google Museum Views—La Modelo's recreation as a virtually tour-able space, the element of surveillance that the camera's gaze insinuates—they point to the ways Google's network architectures go beyond historical constructions of panopticism.

*The Phantom and the Mirror's* visual citation of selfies points to their function as an act of self-surveillance, signaled in the juxtaposition that Santamaria's posts create. In *Psychopolitics*, philosopher Byung-Chun Han argues the delimiting of Bentham's panopticon from perspectival vision to 360-degree omniscience resulting from systems that attain this high level of access to the psyche via an excess of self-disclosures. The result, for Han, is an

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<sup>35</sup> "Preso Modelo," Barcelona.cat, accessed 18 Feb. 2020, [https://www.barcelona.cat/en/coneixbcn/pics/attractius/la-presos-model\\_92086008654.html](https://www.barcelona.cat/en/coneixbcn/pics/attractius/la-presos-model_92086008654.html). This is the Barcelona government's tourism page.

intensified (compared to pre-digital) overdetermination of subjects following from digital modes of reproduction that, by exploiting the psyche through algorithmic targeting, intercede in the ability to separate one's own will from systematically delivered aspirational content, let alone exercise it. As Han explains,

Today we are entering the age of digital psychopolitics. It means passing from passive surveillance to active steering. As such, it is precipitating a further crisis of freedom: now, free will itself is at stake. Big Data is a highly efficient psychopolitical instrument that makes it possible to achieve comprehensive knowledge of the dynamics of social communication. This knowledge is knowledge for the sake of domination and control (*Herrschaftswissen*): it facilitates intervention in the psyche and enables influence to take place on a pre-reflexive level.<sup>36</sup>

Given the extensivity *The Phantom and the Mirror* gestures to between such mechanisms and Google Museum Views, some further points raised by Han bear consideration in their relation to the platform and Santamaria's work.

Two aspects of Han's account of new technologies' transformations to apparatuses of power are particularly relevant for my discussion. The first is a key distinction for Han between panoptic, disciplinary control and its contemporary descendant is that "[p]ower that is smart and friendly does not operate frontally—i.e. against the will of those who are subject to it. It says 'yes' more often than 'no'... It *leads astray* instead of erecting obstacles."<sup>37</sup> What

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<sup>36</sup> Byung-Chul Han, *Psychopolitics: Neoliberalism and New Technologies of Power*, trans. Erik Butler (London: Verso Books, 2017), , 11-12.

<sup>37</sup> Han, *Psychopolitics*, 14. In this quotation Han is specifically in dialog with Foucault's formulation of biopower, which is a core theme throughout this book.

Han is describing in this quote is the violent ability of positivity to elicit acts of self-disclosure. The commanding nature of such positivity is of particular relevance in probing Museum Views' rhetoric of access. Santamaria's images in *The Phantom and the Mirror* point to a misleading element of Museum Views' access through their ready conjuring of the social media trope of museum selfies.

The blogged images, where the camera's presence accentuates the physical absence of the user from the physical museum environments, contrast the inability of platform users to themselves participate equally in such displays of affluence-and-consumption-as-enlightened-intellectualism. Within the previous case study, I proposed a divide between the access that the platform grants to viewing museum spaces and access to the systems that support them. Google's virtual tours almost certainly do bring images of museum objects and interiors to those who otherwise could not or would not view them; yet the ability to view Google's museum spaces does not automatically undo the capitalist leanings of either the museum or Google. Moreover, by placating those who might otherwise criticize inequities of access, they favour the perpetuation of existing inequities at a structural level: as in the above quote, the access granted by Google Museum Views "leads astray," obscuring the growing gulf between a mostly white, educated, upper-middle class and the limited mobility of the remaining majority.

Google has a demonstrated willingness to harm populations less efficiently instrumentalized towards its own economic interests. The technology used to create Google Earth emerged in cooperation with the US military amid the country's war on and occupation of Iraq. The company also secured several military contracts during the struggle to wrest

control of oil.<sup>38</sup> While Google puts on a friendly image, the company's economic interests would have been served not just by payment received for contracts, but by maintaining favour with Big Oil and the politicians supporting it. Data centers—the facilities where servers are housed—are comparative to the airline industry in their energy consumption and pollution.<sup>39</sup> With the Global South bearing the brunt of climate crisis, the willingness of Google to profit from maintaining imperialist configurations of power reveals the deceptiveness of the company's benevolent imaging.

Recognizing the museum's history as an institution for brokering identity and relations, questioning the politics of structural access takes on additional meaning. A second point that I want to draw from Han is the precipitation of an evolved brand of positivism which, in distinguishing it from, while also placing it on a continuum with historical positivism, he calls *dataism*:

The second Enlightenment is summoning forth a new kind of violence. *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* holds that the process of illumination that set out to destroy mythology became entangled, with every stride it made, in a mythology of its own: 'False clarity is only another name for myth.' Adorno would say the 'transparency' of today is another name for myth too—that dataism heralds false clarity. The dialectic of old is also making the second Enlightenment, which seeks to counter ideology, into an ideology in its own right—more still it is leading to the *barbarism of data*.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Yasha Levine, "Google's Earth: How The Tech Giant is Helping The State Spy On Us," *The Guardian*, 20 December 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2018/dec/20/googles-earth-how-the-tech-giant-is-helping-the-state-spy-on-us>.

<sup>39</sup> Nicola Jones, "How to Stop Data Centres from Gobbling up The World's Electricity," *Nature*, 12 Sept. 2018, <https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-018-06610-y>.

<sup>40</sup> Han, *Psychopolitics*, 59.



Han is pointing out the imperative in the digital age for something to be digitally translatable and locatable before its existence is recognized.<sup>41</sup> Findability on Google's Museum Views confers legitimacy to museums in this manner, while partnership with major institutions likewise lends legitimacy to the platform. Effectively, partnering with Google serves to reify museum narratives that have now long been contested for the way that they stereotype, omit or otherwise marginalize people.<sup>42</sup> Further, digitization on Museum Views distances virtual museum spaces from the faults and culpability of human histories and authorships, disinhibiting the circulation of now-dated narratives and reiterating and reinforcing an imperial, economic logic.

Google, after all, is synonymous with the company's technologies, less its staff or shareholders, and like its name suggests, there is something in Google's scale that helps the company defy apprehension. The camera's seemingly autonomous agency in delivering the tours is submitted for attention and interpretation in Santamaria's captures. By posting the images as the camera's "selfies" to a dedicated social media blog, Santamaria provokes the absurdism of such supposed autonomy. The camera, of course, is no more the sole producer of the blog than of Google Museum Views. Nonetheless, and despite the search-driven logic of

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<sup>41</sup> Han, *Psychopolitics*, 57-60.

<sup>42</sup> Naveet Alang, "Google's Arts and Culture app and the damaging bias of technology," *The Globe and Mail*, 26 Jan. 2018, <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/opinion/ways-of-seeing/article37752697/>; Adrian Chen, "The Google Arts and Culture App and the Rise of the 'Coded Gaze,'" *The New Yorker*, 26 Jan. 2020, <https://www.newyorker.com/tech/annals-of-technology/the-google-arts-and-culture-app-and-the-rise-of-the-coded-gaze-doppelganger>. The biases contained in digitized collections came to public attention when Google added a face-match extension to the Arts and Culture app and people of colour found themselves most often matched with images of persons in positions of subjugation or exoticization.

much of Google itself, finding Santamaria as the creator of the blog is much easier than locating who is on the team running Google's Arts and Culture content.<sup>43</sup>

Besides highlighting the uncanny, possession-like mode of spectatorship afforded to Google Museum View's user-visitors, the images also point to the melancholy nature of the experience on offer; the emptiness of the spaces and the solitude of the camera as it records its passage through them are striking. In the same passage as the opening quote to this section, Augé also remarks on this affect:

To the coexistence of worlds, and the combined experience of anthropological place and something which is no longer anthropological place, movement adds the particular experience of a form of solitude and, in the literal sense, of 'taking up a position': the experience of someone who, confronted with a landscape he ought to contemplate, cannot avoid contemplating, 'strikes the pose' and derives from his awareness of this attitude a rare and sometimes melancholy pleasure.<sup>44</sup>

Correspondingly, the emptiness of Santamaria's images is especially palpable given the traces of human presence and activity juxtaposing their absence: performers' shoes tumbled on a dressing room floor, empty chairs in a meeting room, faces that gaze unseeingly from paintings and sculptures. Anna Munster, new media and arts scholar, describing Google Earth more generally, notes that it "both emerges from and is constitutive of an aesthesia of

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<sup>43</sup> Amit Sood, "Arts head: Amid Sood, director, Google Cultural Institute," interview by Matthew Caines, *The Guardian*, 3 Dec. 2013, <https://www.theguardian.com/culture-professionals-network/culture-professionals-blog/2013/dec/03/amit-sood-google-cultural-institute-art-project>. Amit Sood is the director. Though he stresses Google's role as facilitator only, this obviously already either misses or deliberately does not engage with a host of assumptions. The Arts and Culture site itself does not name him or other staff visibly.

<sup>44</sup> Augé, *Non-Places*, 70.

networked corporatism; it is a mode of foraging and conjunction—in actuality more of an aporia—between hyperindividualism and sociability.”<sup>45</sup> This aporia, the contradiction between the museums as public spaces and forums where collective identities, experiences, and relations are reflected and negotiated, and the solitary, self-encapsulating logic of the Museum Views’ interface, is where I now turn to unpack the final component of *Trolling Google Art Project: The Non-Imaginary Museum*.

### III. The Privatisation of the Public

We, however, have far more great works available ... than even the greatest of museums could bring together. For a “Museum without Walls” is coming into being, and it will carry infinitely farther that revelation of the world of art, limited perforce, which the “real” museums offer us within their walls.

– André Malraux<sup>46</sup>

*The Non-Imaginary Museum* compiles another series of images that Santamaria hunts out from Google Museum Views. Where *The Phantom in the Mirror* is an amassment of instances where the Street View camera captures its own image, *The Non-Imaginary Museum* brings together images showing the blurring of artworks on the platform. Unlike the blurring that results from lags of the rendering process that Santamaria calls attention to in *Running through the Museum*, the blurs captured in the images for *The Non-Imaginary Museum* are a

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<sup>45</sup> Anna Munster, “Welcome to Google Earth: Networks, World Making, and Collective Experience,” in *An Aesthesis of Networks* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2013), 63.

<sup>46</sup> André Malraux, “Museum Without Walls,” in *Voices of Silence*, (Herts: Paladin, 1974), 16.

deliberate feature of Google's virtual museum environments; hovering like sudden pockets of dense fog in otherwise crisply pictured galleries, they obscure items held under copyright.

Above, Malraux argues for the ability of colour photography, which was newly viable as a means for reproducing and sharing images of artworks *en masse*, to revolutionize access to and circulation of, works of arts and culture. Santamaria's *The Non-Imaginary Museum* invokes and at the same time suggestively negates the title of quote's originary text, *Le Musée Imaginaire*.<sup>47</sup> While Malraux' "imaginary museum," in humanist fashion, celebrates the delimiting potential of image reproduction for enabling viewers to call to mind an increasing number and variety of artworks, with *The Non-Imaginary Museum* Santamaria challenges the idealism of Malraux' notion by highlighting how Google's "museum without walls" re-encodes structural barriers to access despite the capabilities of the technology itself to be used towards overcoming them. The collection of blurred, copyrighted images points to the eruption of the politics of physical institutions within digital space, particularly the tensions between the public nature of museums and their increasing cooperation with private partners and co-option of a privatized logic.

Critiques expounding the effects of neoliberalism and commercialisation on modes of sociality encouraged through designs for such supposedly public and shared spaces as museums are well-established.<sup>48</sup> Art historian Julian Stallabrass articulates a contradiction at

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<sup>47</sup> The title of the project on the blog is *Righted Museum*, with Santamaria again destabilizing the informational clarity and hyperlinked correspondence that is presupposed online.

<sup>48</sup> Liesbeth Melis and Jorinde Seijdel (eds.), *Open 14: Art as Public Issue* (2008); Hal Foster, *Design and Crime: And Other Diatribes* (London: Verso, 2003); Augé, *Non-Places*; Koolhaas, "Junkspace." For more on public space I recommend this issue of *Open* particularly Chantal Mouffe's article "Art as Democracy: Art as Intervention in Public Space" (6-15). The concern here is the trend in public space towards harmony, which might well also be termed docility, ultimately as a way of pre-empting conflict to secure safety and security. Of course, the problem of this model is *whose* safety and security, and, predictably, this model of public space preserves the comforts of the dominant social class over confronting the, often more materially consequential, discomforts of the already marginalized. Resultingly, the need for public space to permit what Chantal Mouffe calls agonism, or contestations of hegemonic perspectives is a pressing matter. Foster's, Augé's, and Koolhaas' texts are just a few examples of places where this argument has been made.

work in private partnerships and sponsorships: if museums intend to “salve the social divisions opened up by unrestrained market forces” and foster alternative means of relationality to those already prescribed and sustained by those same market forces, then it stands to reason that they cannot be self-same with those market forces.<sup>49</sup> Foregrounding, through the seriality of censored works, the platform’s replication of private logic of copyrights, *The Non-Imaginary Museum* foregrounds the continuation of a practice already criticized as compromising the modern museum, one that engages in and shapes the conditions for contemporary capitalism and the inequities capitalism creates.

As museums’ digital presences grow, the reproduction and distribution of images from their collections online becomes a flash point for the incompatibilities of museum business practices and their public missions. While reproductions of many holdings fall within public domain, a common practice for museum websites is to nonetheless feature terms claiming rights to images and the need to apply to the museum for their use.<sup>50</sup> Intellectual property law specialist Jason Mezzone defines this practice as ‘copyfraud’, the false claiming of copyright over something.<sup>51</sup> In an article discussing the practice’s widespread prevalence in relation to museums and galleries, Grishka Petri, art historian and legal scholar, notes that such practices stand in defiance of museum ethics and their public missives, regardless of their financial straits or what might be expected as a moral reciprocity on the behalf of the public.<sup>52</sup> Yet

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<sup>49</sup> Julian Stallabrass, “The Branding of the Museum,” *Art History* 37, no. 1 (2014): 164.

<sup>50</sup> “Terms of Use,” MoMA, accessed 8 Feb. 2021, <https://www.moma.org/about/about-this-site/#terms-of-use>; “Website Terms of Use,” Tate, accessed 8 Feb. 2021, <https://www.tate.org.uk/about-us/policies-and-procedures/website-terms-use>. Both the Tate and MoMA, for example, have terms stipulating that the copyright-expired content they host *cannot* be used for private commercial use, yet this is not supported by copyright law.

<sup>51</sup> Jason Mazzone, “Copyfraud, Brooklyn Law School, Legal Studies Paper No. 40,” *New York University Law Review*, 81, no.1 (2006): 1026-1100.

<sup>52</sup> Grishka Petri, “The Public Domain vs. the Museum: The Limits of Copyright and Reproductions of Two-Dimensional Works of Art,” *Journal of Conservation and Museum Studies* 12, no. 1 (2014): 8.

sharing imagery via Google’s platform deepens, rather than resolves, the privatisation of public culture.

The location of *The Non-Imaginary Museum* (and *The Phantom in the Mirror*) on social media points to a significant limitation of Google Museum Views itself: the virtual environment’s non-functionality as a social space or public forum mean that interactions around its content, here taking the form of artist intervention and critique, can only occur peripheral to the museum space, keeping virtual tours, and Google itself, at a remove from the messiness that a diversity of interests and demands for public accountability create.<sup>53</sup>

Santamaria, in a talk discussing the *Google Art Project*, notes the blurred works of *The Non-Imaginary Museum* are often not updated in timely ways when copyright expires, leaving their spaces oddly detached from the world of human events and temporality.<sup>54</sup>

The divorcement from worldly goings-on is compounded by the fact that, returning to the matter of image rights, the terms of use for Google’s Street View (whether legitimately enforceable or not) forbid users from screenshotting or embedding to other apps and websites such images “for any purpose.”<sup>55</sup> The image captures that Santamaria presents in *The Non-Imaginary Museum* not only figure-forth censorship but are themselves embedded in and vulnerable to its machinations. While the right (in some countries) to take photographs including artworks in public spaces, like the tourist photographs and selfies that Santamaria’s Tumblr content suggests— called freedom of panorama— might mean that a similar view

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<sup>53</sup> Munster, “Welcome to Google Earth,” 52.

<sup>54</sup> Mario Santamaria, “SITUATION #202 — Mario Santamaría: Explore the Non Imaginary Museum! – PhotoIreland Festival 2020,” YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZPRdyJV6wWo>. Santamaria makes this observation at 09:20-09:45.

<sup>55</sup> Google, “Google Maps, Google Earth, and Street View,” Google Brand Resource Center, accessed 9 Feb. 2021, <https://about.google/brand-resource-center/products-and-services/geo-guidelines/#street-view>.

could be locally photographed without the murky threat of repercussions, Google's own panoramic spaces do not afford even this same permission.<sup>56</sup>

Google's for-profit nature often recedes from focus. It is, therefore, worth pointing out that Alphabet, Google's parent company, was the thirteenth largest publicly traded company in the world in 2020. Last year it had a market value of \$919.3 billion dollars and, despite the economic difficulties that pandemic shutdowns caused, made \$34.5 billion dollars—more than three times Amazon, which faces wide criticism for profiting from the pandemic.<sup>57</sup> While Alphabet might still be a lesser “evil,” the company is undeniably interested in furthering its own interests and bottom line. Whatever “public” good the company claims to be creating, it is not especially interested in contributing to the *actual* public funding, the shortage of which, in part, presses museums to seek out private partnerships. Such privatization raises concerns about how for-profit motivations will shape and censor radical and potentially progressive representations and messages.

Google's own friendly image is not tangential to the platform's function, and the company has an interest in maintaining it—with potential consequences for the type of museum content the company will take initiatives to support. While Google is widely recognized as a search engine company, as digital culture scholar Richard Graham argues, it is better understood as an advertising company. Graham writes that if you, “[a]sk someone what Google does and they will likely reply that it is a search engine company. However, a more accurate description is that Google is an advertising company.”<sup>58</sup> The company's primary

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<sup>56</sup> Mélanie Dulong de Rosnay and Pierre-Carl Langlais, “Public Artworks and The Freedom of Panorama Controversy: A Case of Wikimedia Influence,” *Internet Policy Review* 6, no.1 (2017): 1-27.

<sup>57</sup> Christian Fuchs, “Google Capitalism,” *TripleC* 10, no.1 (2012): 42-48. Here I would like to stress not that Amazon should not be criticized, nor that the two businesses' practices are directly analogous, but rather that there is a gap in general awareness towards Google's profit margins.

<sup>58</sup> Richard Graham, “Google and Advertising: Digital Capitalism in the Context of Post-Fordism, the Reification of Language, and the Rise of Fake News,” *Palgrave Communications* 3, no. 1 (2017): 2.

sources of income are the AdSense and AdWords programmes. AdSense, by incentivizing users to monetize their online presences, creates an environment variously configuring users as labourers and/or products. AdWords—Google’s system for matching sponsored results to search terms—incentivizes the use of profitable terms and the ideas that go with them, reifying those cultural forms imposing and bolstering the prioritization of economic gain.<sup>59</sup>

While a growth strategy based on collecting and instrumentalizing user data does not greatly differ from the models of other Big Data companies, Google dominates the market by disregarding property rights. The company has a history of pursuing litigation and creating precedents that favour its access to hosting public culture, as well as exerting monopoly power to shape digital regulatory processes. Access to more information provides Google with a considerable edge over other search engines. As Joanne Gray, digital media scholar, notes, “Google has a strong advantage in internet search because it has exclusive access to large repositories of data derived from copyrighted information.”<sup>60</sup> Digitizing museum collections aids Google, enabling the company to not only provide a competitive range of search results, but also to collect the data that enables its economic viability and, relatedly, future developments.

Returning to *The Non-Imaginary Museum*, conjoining spectatorship in Museum Views with social media and blogging highlights the similar way that content creation happens on both platforms. The continuity between content production and consumption is highly visible on social media, where popularity breeds paid sponsorship and ads are less seamlessly integrated as the “natural” result of a search. Yet, as I touched on earlier, usership, even

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 1-4.

<sup>60</sup> Joanne Elizabeth Gray, *Google Rules: The History and Future of Copyright Under the Influence of Google* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 137.



usership the does not put users directly in contact with ads, as is the case with Museum Views, provides the company with access to users' information. In turn, user information shapes software development and search results, which optimize Google's ad revenues. Google is a product of its users, and particularly in Museum Views, their cultural heritage.<sup>61</sup>

Nonetheless, Google does not belong to users, but answers to the self-preserving, profit-driven logic of a private organization. Resultingly, the featured museums' positions of public trusteeship are troubled by an unequal dynamic of access wherein users are accessible to and through Google, but Google occupies a sovereign position in deciding what gets eked out to them in exchange.<sup>62</sup> The blurring of copyrighted works presented in *The Non-Imaginary Museum* makes the hierarchy clear: by presenting the strangeness of blind spots within Google's all-seeing eye, the degree of penetration the organization presumes becomes denaturalized and suddenly visible.

## **Conclusion**

Google's Museum Views encourages users to view the platform as remaking the accessibility of the world's arts and culture, removing the exclusivity of in-person visitation held in place by established financial and social hierarchies. Following from this image, the platform is embraced for supporting museum mandates by creating an opportunity for online engagement with spaces and collections. However, Mario Santamaria's *Trolling Google Art Project* prompts a reconsideration of how the access and the type of cultural literacy Google provides is conceived and what its emphasis elides. Rather than opposing the obviously virtual nature of the tours to an 'authentic' physicality, access is structurally conceived in the artist's work

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<sup>62</sup> Munster, "Welcome to Google Earth," 46.

relative to the virtual itself. Glitches and omissions within the seamlessness of the digital panorama point to the platform's dependence on material technologies and the social and economic structures they serve.

The asocial configuring of spectatorship on Google's platform prevents these virtual museum spaces and their collections from functioning relationally, hindering the emergence of forms of sociality beyond consumerism. Santamaria's projects point to and betray these virtual tours affective similitude to other spaces of global capitalism; both refer those who engage with them to their own private spaces of consumption. Engagement and the quality of literacy engendered in interaction with Museum Views are of questionable quality. Rather than democratic citizens embedded in a social, historical matrix, users are recommended by Google's virtual museum environments to experience their role as limited to consumers of Google's products. At the same time, Google relies on users not only to provide ad revenue, but to provide the data that enables the company to develop the software that makes advertising with the platform attractive as well as the content that encountered on platforms from Google Search to Google Earth. Despite disregards for users' privacy or public ownership of some of the content hosted, Google assumes private rights to imagery in Google Museum Views.

The enormity of Google's presence on the online-- and offline-- landscape necessitates an understanding of the influence the company holds over current culture and culture's potential future configurations. An awareness of the company's influence is essential to making conscious choices towards shaping online spaces and ecologies that serve diverse interests, not just those that align with Google's. Pandemic lockdowns may have initially driven an increased interest in visiting virtual museums, as I noted at the outset of this major

research paper, but that initial interest quickly waned suggesting the format's inability to sustain the increase in interest initially following physical shutdowns.<sup>63</sup> Private contemplation has a place, but is far from desirable as a sole means of interacting with arts and culture. Museum audiences have not been well-served in this regard by museums' virtual presences on Museum Views, nor have museums themselves. Virtual events can reveal larger trends and patterns. The past year was marked for many by the isolation of social distancing and, at the same time, calls for social change and political upheaval. More than ever there is the need for virtual spaces that support sociality and dialogue, and alternative ways of affirming and reconstituting identities. Museums have potential to fill this role by exploring non-privatized platforms and alternative interfaces.

The virtual access that Google provides is not a universal solution to the barriers that capitalism and entails. New technologies for engaging and interfacing with user-visitors can re-inscribe the historic prejudices of the museum, or they can be a resource in redefining to whom and to what ends art, knowledge, and cultural heritage serve. Neither of these potentialities, though, is given in advance or will resonate in every context. Rather than being contented with the easy centralization that Google's monopoly provides, museums need to be meaningfully involved in continually developing and testing a diversity of formats that are responsive to a spectrum of contents and situations.

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<sup>63</sup> Davis, "In a Year When Many Were Stuck Indoors."

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