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# Voice of Fire: Sensory Museum Experiences and Digital Reproduction

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UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY

Voice of Fire: Sensory Museum Experiences and Digital Reproduction

by

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A THESIS

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### **Abstract**

The purchase of the painting *Voice of Fire* by the National Gallery of Canada (NGC) ignited one of Canada's most heated artistic debates. Focusing on *Voice of Fire* and the NGC website, this study analyzed how digital reproduction of art on a museum website contributes to a sensory understanding of museum experience. Communicative technologies in the form of websites, social media and high-resolution images have changed spectatorship but continue to be problematic when essential features of the painting are dependent on physical and sensory museum 'experience'. Interviews were conducted with National Gallery of Canada staff about the redevelopment of the NGC website, their communicative goals as well as their sensory museum experiences using netnography and sensory ethnography. Rather than reproducing the sensory museum experience online, websites and social media can present a 'story' of the painting to Canadians and offer valuable opportunities for curating communication strategies for art specific spectators.

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**Dedication**

To H. A and N. M

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**List of Tables****Development timeline**

<b>Year</b>	<b>Website</b>
1998- 2000	1 <sup>st</sup> version- Website
2000/2001- 2007	2 <sup>nd</sup> version- Corporate version of website
2007- 2011	3 <sup>rd</sup> version- Outward facing site/tab structure
2011- Present	4 <sup>th</sup> version- Reintegrated websites, rebranded and rebuilt website

## Chapter One: **Introduction**

### **1.1 Objective**

The painting *Voice of Fire*, by American abstract expressionist Barnett Newman, was a controversial purchase. Although the National Gallery of Canada anticipated the 1989 acquisition would attract some attention, they were largely unprepared for the firestorm that ensued (Smith, 1990b). For months after the announcement of the purchase by the National Gallery of Canada (NGC), Barnett Newman's alternating stripes were splashed across magazines, television screens, newspapers and was the subject of heated discussion on radio programs. While the purchase was contentious, the subject matter and composition of *Voice of Fire* is fairly innocuous. *Voice of Fire* measures approximately eighteen feet tall by eight feet wide and is composed of a central band of cadmium red flanked by two bands of ultramarine. When the painting's purchase was officially announced in 1990 it ignited a debate involving curators, art historians, politicians and the Canadian public and would garner sustained media attention for over two months, "an unusually long stretch of time for a work of art to command widespread media attention, in Canada or any other place" (Barber et al., p. viii). The purchase of *Voice of Fire* was attacked by a host of critics. The Canadian public questioned the artistic merit of the piece, the Canadian national artists' lobby group (CARFAC) denounced the exorbitant spending of Canadian funds on American art and Conservative Member of Parliament Felix Holtmann, chair of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Communications and Culture, scoffed that the painting was a waste of money. Barber, Guilbaut and O'Brian, authors of *Voices of Fire: Art, rage, power, and the state*, argued the dispute "should be recognized as the product of a particular place and time—Canada

in the 1990s – and therefore unlike other artistic controversies” (p. xi).

O’Brian maintained that the uproar was “a tempest in a cultural teapot” and a reflection of the specific climate when concerns surrounding “federal budget deficits and perceived misuse of taxpayers’ money; growing threats to the nation’s social safety net; the country’s cultural and political agendas and who should control them; the relationship of Quebec to the rest of the country; and the relationship of the whole country to the international community” were projected upon one work of art (O’Brian, 1996, p. 3-4). While the circumstances of the 1990 controversy were certainly unique, strong opinions about the piece continue relatively unabated. In 2010, MacLean’s magazine published an article entitled, *Voice of Fire: Are we over this yet?*, a title which demonstrates the painting’s ability to polarize viewers more twenty years later (Geddes, 2010). While the political, social and cultural circumstances, cited as fuel for igniting the *Voice of Fire* controversy were certainly unique, I maintain that, in part, the controversy stems from issues of visual, sensory and museum communication.

In the flurry of media coverage after the purchase was announced, several prominent members of the NGC staff partook in numerous interviews discussing the rationale for the purchase. I argue that they defended the work in two ways: museum staff justified the purchase from an art historical perspective describing Newman’s significance as an artist and how the addition of *Voice of Fire* would enhance the National Gallery’s American abstract collection. Second, they rebuffed criticism about the perceived artistic merit of the piece by dismissing reproduced images as inadequate, urged patrons to come to the museum with an open mind to see the work for themselves and repeatedly emphasized the importance of the sensory experience of seeing the work

in a museum setting (Kidd & Nemiroff, 1990; Smith, 1990a; Thomson, 1990). However, existing literature on *Voice of Fire* has not undertaken a critical analysis of the technological limitations of reproduction. Documented archival interviews indicated NGC staff felt that the sensory experience of viewing *Voice of Fire* was significant and advocated for viewers to come to the Gallery and see it for themselves. Prior to my visit to the National Gallery as I worked to arrange interviews and data collection, I spoke to several staff members at the NGC. After describing the project, staff would inevitably ask me if I had seen the work in person. My confession that I had seen the painting in reproductions was almost always followed by the affirmation that one has to see it in a gallery setting to truly understand the magnitude of the piece. The people who spend each day in the National Gallery, working to interpret the collection and communicate these ideas to Canadians overwhelmingly acknowledged that the experience of *seeing* the painting involved a pilgrimage to Ottawa. If a painting like *Voice of Fire* is best seen in person, than what is the role of the website? Why devote significant time and precious institutional resources developing a product that cannot rival the original? My research was guided by the research question, how does analysis of digital reproduction of art on a museum website contribute to a sensory understanding of museum experience?

## **1.2 Thesis Outline**

Chapter Two explores the theory and literature related to three main areas: museum communication, visual studies and reproduction. Access and communication between professionals, art enthusiasts and the Canadian public are pivotal aspects of the National Gallery of Canada's objectives ("About, National Gallery of Canada", 2013). Although there is a tendency to focus on the objects and works of art in collections,

museums are not simply repositories for artifacts. Museums are obligated to make collections available to the public, facilitate the education of both the public and professionals, and essentially communicate Canadian culture across the country and the world. Today, this museum communication takes two predominant forms either direct, fact-to-face communication or mass communication (Hooper-Greenhill, 1995). While mass communication has the advantage of reaching more people, Hooper-Greenhill argues that it is a “less personal” form of interaction (Hooper-Greenhill, 1995, p. 6). The effect of reproduction on viewing works of art and viewing a work of art via ‘less personal’ forms of mass communication has been the subject of study (Benjamin, 2008; Hennessey, Wallace, Arnold & Jakobsen, 2012). However, the failure of reproductive technologies to convey the sensory museum and art experiences associated with the work subsequently altering visitor experience of viewing art on a museum website has not been explored extensively.

Viewing reproductions of paintings is an integral part of the learning process for researchers and art history students. Today, mechanical and digital reproduction has revolutionized the field of art history and given the public greater access to museum collections, the opportunity to see paintings in unprecedented detail and created new curatorial practices like virtual repatriation. In the future, some see almost limitless opportunities like, “virtual collaborations with visitors or other museums, digital content development, handheld devices and wireless applications, distance learning, and interactive communication with online visitors may lead eventually to a broader role for museums” (Müller, 2010, p. 296). Unlike physical gallery spaces, websites have a flexible structure able to offer a variety of content, “real-time and interactive access, by

multiple users” from anywhere in the world, entertainment, and educational programs, which can respond quickly to change (Jackson, 2010, p. 154). Initial fears that reproduction would diminish the original have been largely unfounded and desire to see original works of art in museum settings continues unabated (Anderson, 1997). Offering high-resolution images or virtual tours on websites have not replaced the experience of physically visiting museums statistically, “The number of virtual visits to museums is in general less than the real visits” with the exception of the Washington National Gallery of Art, where virtual and physical visitation rates are roughly the same (Battro, 2010, p. 145). However, websites are unable to fully replicate the experience of seeing certain works of art in person. As technology continues to play an important role in creating and displaying art in museums, traditional art historical methods of interpretation and evaluation are being challenged. In a rapidly evolving discipline, some react against the interpretation of art that relies on a linguistic model in favour of an interdisciplinary mode of understanding, one that takes into account the senses, the body, movement and setting (Brodsky, 2002; Classen & Howes, 2006; Edwards, Gosden, & Phillips, 2006; Howes, 2005).

The methodological and research context is outlined in chapter three. The challenge for this project was developing a methodological perspective that would allow me to investigate online and sensory museum experiences. Drawing from archival material and interviews conducted with staff at the National Gallery of Canada, this project endeavored to analyze how digital reproduction of art on a museum website contributes to a sensory understanding of museum experience. In order to explore this topic sufficiently, sensory ethnographic and netnographic perspectives were utilized.

Sensory ethnography provided a productive framework to better understand the sensory categories participants used to define their experiences, values and sense of place.

Netnography provided a vehicle to explore how these experiences might be expressed online and used computer-mediated communication as data source blended with face-to-face ethnography to “arrive at the ethnographic understanding” of a culture or communal phenomenon” (Kozinets, 2010, p. 60).

Chapter four will lay the historical and artistic groundwork for an investigation of *Voice of Fire* as it relates to this project. Drawing from existing literature on Newman, his artworks, as well as archival data from the National Gallery of Canada Library and Archives, this section explores three main topics: ‘Historical background’, ‘Art history and *Voice of Fire*’ and ‘Reproduction and space’. The literature on Newman is quite plentiful however, the material chosen for this project focuses on the history of *Voice of Fire* as it relates to Canada and the National Gallery of Canada exploring the time period 1966 to 1990. First, the creation of the painting, display at Expo ’67, its acquisition by the National Gallery and the subsequent controversy surrounding the purchase is explored in detail. The second section explores the process of ‘reading’ and interpreting meaning of *Voice of Fire*. A theoretical art history perspective drawing from influential work of Erwin Panofsky is discussed and issues with applying this method of interpretation to contemporary works of art is introduced. Lastly, the final section probes the limitations of iconographical methods of interpretation by discussing the sensory and optical features of *Voice of Fire*, as well as the importance of setting and space in Newman’s work.

Chapters five and six will present and discuss the data resulting from interviews

conducted at the National Gallery of Canada. Discussion of the museum and website are divided into two chapters. Chapter five will present a narrative history of the NGC website redevelopment and explore the Gallery's motivation for redesigning the website. This is followed by a virtual 'tour' of the website which outlines the salient features of the home page and the communicative goals of the redeveloped product. The website, particularly the comprehensive search feature and its organization, is analyzed in relation to its effectiveness in communicating with the Gallery's intended target audiences. Chapter six will offer material related to the sensory museum experience. Interviews revealed the sensory categories that define the museum experiences of staff and these categories were used thematically to organize the second analysis chapter.

Finally, chapter seven will summarize and discuss the major findings. There were institutional constraints that altered the course of this research project. These constraints are outlined in the 'Limitations' section. Lastly, I offer suggestions for future research. The study of museum websites, communication and technology is a rich and fascinating topic. The 2011 redesign of the National Gallery of Canada website is relatively recent and prior to this project, had not been the focus of comprehensive academic study. This project offers an examination of sensory experiences and digital reproduction but the National Gallery of Canada's website and online communication could provide future scholars with a number of important and dynamic projects.

## Chapter Two: **Theory & Literature Review**

### **2.1 Introduction**

In her book *Museums, Media, Message*, Eilean Hooper-Greenhill argued that museums are unique institutions that utilize two distinct models of communication. First, museums are based on physical objects, which rely on face-to-face communication, interaction with the artifacts, texts and people within the walls of the institution. However, Hooper-Greenhill argues that museums are simultaneously a form of mass communication, capable of interacting with “a great number of people in a less personal way” (Hooper-Greenhill, 1995, p. 6). Museums utilize advertisements, publications, and most recently websites, to communicate to a diverse audience. Websites represent a significant development in museum practice. Requiring only a computer and an internet connection, viewers can circumvent visiting a physical museum and instead summon images and content from anywhere in the world. Websites present a wealth of interesting features: the ability to continuously and permanently display objects and exhibitions, they allow for new curatorial practices like ‘virtual repatriation’, host online forums that allow for the exchange of knowledge between institutions, individuals and cultural groups and allow images and information to be accessed at the convenience of the viewer.

While the advantages of viewing museum collections online are numerous, the act of reproducing and disseminating a work of art changes the way images appear and potentially changes the way a viewer interprets and interacts with an artifact. In 1930, Walter Benjamin wrote about the experience of viewing art in person, his concept of ‘aura’ and the effect of mechanical reproduction on works of art. Since then, it has

become a seminal work on technology and reproduction. Although technology has advanced greatly since the time of writing, Benjamin's belief in the liberating aspects of reproduction at the expense of authenticity continues to be profoundly influential.

One of the most recent technological developments for museums has been the introduction of websites and these tools present a unique challenge. Traditionally, disciplines like art history have treated images and artifacts as singular 'texts' to be deciphered by the viewer but the hybrid nature of communicative tools like museum websites have challenged traditional modes of analysis. Gallery websites utilize art historical methods to educate viewers and disseminate reproductions of images from their collections. However, even the most technologically advanced websites cannot reproduce specific elements of a physical gallery setting, leading some scholars (Brodsky, 2002; Classen & Howes, 2006; Howes, 2005; Mitchell, 1992, 2004) to insist that new modes of viewing must call on different forms of analysis and interpretation. Despite the ease of access and increasing sophistication of digital reproduction on websites, traditional, physical museum viewership continues to thrive. During the 2011-12 fiscal year, the National Gallery Canada (NGC) saw a ten percent increase in attendance compared to the previous year (Adams, 2012), while the 2011 Da Vinci exhibition in London, which brought together works from around the world, was projected to be a blockbuster show ("London Show Set to Smash Attendance Records", 2011). Although it is possible to virtually navigate the hallways of these and other important institutions from a distance, viewers continue to go to great lengths to see original, physical works of art.

## **2.2 Objective**

This thesis asks: how does analysis of digital reproduction of art on a museum website contribute to a sensory understanding of museum experience? Hooper-Greenhill

argued museums operate using two different kinds of communication. In this thesis, I will argue that these different modes of communication yield different kinds of information and unique encounters, which can provide insight into the museum experience itself. There is face-to-face communication, seeing a physical painting in a gallery and the personal, sensorial visual experiences that it may evoke. Alternatively, there is the online experience, which is primarily visual, often fleeting, and lacking in Benjamin's concept of the 'aura' but accessible by anyone anywhere, anytime. Recent museum scholarship has focused on issues such as museum communication (Preziosi & Farago, 2004; Ravelli, 2006), the museum experience (Falk & Dierking, 1992), visitor experience (Falk & Dierking, 2000) and sensory museum and art experiences (Brodsky, 2002; Classen & Howes, 2006; Edwards, Gosden, & Phillips, 2006; Howes, 2005). The effect of reproduction on viewing art is also a topic that has been the subject of extensive writing, particularly by Benjamin (2008), and current literature has discussed curation and digital technologies (Hennessey, Wallace, Arnold & Jakobsen, 2012), the sensory experience of viewing art (Brodsky, 2002) but the experience of viewing works of art on websites has not been critically addressed. This project will not seek to compare and contrast the online and physical experience with the intention of proving one is inherently preferential or superior. Rather, this project sees online and physical encounters as potentially communicating different types of information in an equally effective manner. The absence of an established methodological perspective appropriate for studying the sensory dimensions of online viewing led me to utilize two methodologies. For this project I have combined sensory ethnography and netnography, two different but compatible methods to probe this emerging area of study. Previously, netnography has

been predominantly harnessed for marketing research into virtual consumption communities but more recently it has been taken up by researchers in a variety of disciplines. In contrast, sensory ethnography is used in a variety of ways to explore the multisensoriality of environments and to better understand the sensory categories and experiences of research participants. Although there is material that deals with sensory dimensions of art (Brodsky, 2002) and a number of sensory ethnographic studies ranging from consumer research (Valtonen, Markuksela & Moisander, 2010), to gardening (Tilley, 2006), there is little research available which explores sensory dimensions of art galleries and online spaces. As such, the research will offer a methodological contribution by exploring the sensory museum experience of interview participants and how their understanding of spectatorship helped shape the National Gallery of Canada website.

Second, current museum studies have dealt with an array of issues ranging from visitor motivation (Falk & Dierking, 2000), the effect of technology and social media on museum learning (Russo et al., 2009), to the use of e-resources by art historians (Elam, 2007). As well, Falk and Dierking (1992) and Gjedde and Ingemann (2008), have conducted noteworthy research studying museum visitor experience from a methodological perspective. The sensorial aspects of the museum experience have been the subject of study (Brodsky, 2002; Classen & Howes 2006; Losche 2006) as well as online museum and galleries (Breman, 2011; Gardner, 2011; Hazan, 2003) but the relationship between digital reproductions on museum websites and the sensorial museum experience of *Voice of Fire* has yet to be critically analyzed.

The relevant literature and material that will provide a theoretical background is divided into three main categories: museum communication, visual culture and images

and lastly, mechanical and digital reproduction. First will be an examination of theoretical approaches to museum communication, technology and discussion of how museums have shifted from a linear, transmission-based model of communication meant to impart a prescribed message to an audience to a more interactive model emphasizing education and participation. The second section will explore changes in the way scholars theorize pictures, paintings and images. Scholars from a variety of disciplines have challenged dominant modes of theorizing images, paintings and visual culture which has resulted in a rethinking of the relationship between word and text, vision, senses and body. Lastly, the museum experience and the effect of technology, reproduction and websites will be discussed using Walter Benjamin's concept of 'aura' and his analysis of mechanical reproduction.

### **2.3 Museum Communication**

Traditionally, art objects were, and continue to be, viewed, 'read' and interpreted by art historians in a specific way. Building upon layers of history and meaning, art historians work to 'read' complex paintings and sculptures like a text. This method, which is discussed further in the *Voice of Fire* chapter, maintains that visual images were governed by language or grammatical principles. Iconography, developed by art historian Erwin Panofsky, was concerned with constructing a system to allow viewers to understand the complex meaning and inner structure of all works of art (Chaplin, 1994). An iconographical approach mandates that paintings should be understood and interpreted in a very specific manner. Panofsky did not believe there were natural principles that could guide interpretation of an artwork (Chaplin, 1994). The meaning in paintings was singular and it was up to the viewer to develop the tools to successfully understand what a painting was meant to communicate. It was the task of the art historian

to develop the skills to correctly interpret images and in turn, those skills could be imparted to museum visitors. Early museums also worked to convey specific meaning to visitors by using the 'transmission' model of communication. This model conceptualizes the communicative process as linear and where objective knowledge is transferred from an authoritative source to the uninformed viewer (Hooper-Greenhill, 2010, p. 15). With the transmission model, communication was one-way, considered the viewer cognitively passive and asserted that content was to be interpreted in the manner intended by the sender.

In the 1970s, using a combination of behaviorist psychology models and positivist American mass communication theory, researchers investigated the communicative capabilities of museum exhibitions. Researchers believed that if they could perfect the design, the exhibition would seamlessly communicate the desired message to its viewers (Hooper-Greenhill, 1995, p. 5). However, this model has been dismissed as inefficient for contemporary museum communication (Hooper-Greenhill citing Miles & Trout, 1991). Preziosi and Farago note that much of the contemporary literature regarding the modern museum had treated institutions as a "form of infotainment" and problems as merely 'technical' issues with "packaging and dispensing various kinds of cultural information to targeted audiences" (2004, p. 1). Rather than viewing communication as a complex exchange in which multiple meaning could be made, it was viewed as a problem which could be 'solved' by fine tuning the approach and catering towards certain audiences through "refined imagineering, marketing, or more subtly prefabricated 'interactive' opportunities for audiences" (Preziosi & Farago, 2004, p. 1). However, contemporary museums and thinkers began to realize that communication is more complex than a

simple cause and effect relationship, where viewers receive meanings and messages verbatim,

In such ways, communication has become an essential part of the contemporary institution's agenda. And communication is important because it is largely about making meanings—constructing, sharing and interpreting a range of content, attitudes and values. However, communication is not a straightforward or transparent phenomenon: it takes a complex range of skills for either an individual or institution to be an effective communicator, and there can be debates and contestations over both what should be communicated, and how. (Ravelli, 2006, p. 3-4)

Emphasizing the capability of exhibitions and museums to simply impart information diminishes the importance of the visitor interpretation. Rather than telling viewers what to think about exhibitions and artifacts, museum communication is now centred on facilitating interpretation and viewer participation. Ravelli writes that, “An intrinsic part of this communication process is the museums' role to *interpret* these collections: to explain what it is the objects are meant to ‘say’—why they have been chosen, what they reveal, what they relate to” (Ravelli, 2006, p. 95).

The transmission model was also meant to impart information to an ambiguous ‘general public’. However, Hooper-Greenhill argues that audiences are unique. Viewers come to exhibits with a variety of experiences and must make their own meaning rather than accepting prefabricated messages. Communication is multi-faceted and given the complex nature of museum communication, Hooper-Greenhill argues that there is a need to think of communication as “a set of negotiated practices of meaning as a part of the

complex and unequal part of everyday life” (2000, p. 22). While information and artifacts may be presented in a number of ways that invite a variety of interpretations, a viewer’s “prior knowledge and historical and cultural background” can have an important role in the meaning making process (Hooper-Greenhill, 2000, p. 22). One of the dominant ways museums facilitate interpretation is by the use of texts. Texts are used to educate viewers but instead of simply telling viewers what to think, museum professionals realize that meaning is constructed “through the interpretive strategies used by the reader (viewer, visitor)” (Hooper- Greenhill, 2000, p. 26). Museum texts can include the language used in brochures, maps, exhibition labels, website exhibits, or can encompass educational displays and even the museum space itself to help viewers learn about artifacts and construct meaning. Bradburne defines museum text as “the sum of all the elements that make the museum a meaning-rich environment for its users” (Bradburne, 2008, p. x).

Increasingly, technologies have played an important role in allowing participation to move beyond text on walls helping viewers make sense of exhibits and artifacts. In their book *The Museum Experience*, Falk and Dierking trace the contemporary shift in museum practice, arguing that the museums have transformed from research institutions and artifact repositories to become sites of public learning (1992, p. xiii). This shift began to occur in the 1950s when Willem Sandberg, director of the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, introduced the first museum audio tours. The introduction of audio technology shifted museum communication from a ‘top-down’ lecture to a dialogue focused conversation between viewer and the institution. Bradburne argues that a ‘bottom-up’ approach to museum communication, or the process of giving viewers and other constituencies an active role in creating a “meaning-rich environment”, has become

increasingly important (2008, p. x). Since visitors are individuals, learning from each other as well as from a museum, Breman argues that museums should foster an environment that facilitates dialogue, which will “elevate the kinds of conversations taking place within the museum walls” (2011, p. 121). It became essential, and even expected, that museums would create and facilitate personal participation in order to satisfy the learning needs of viewers (Falk & Dierking, 2000, p. xii). Falk and Dierking argue that it is expected that all museum professionals, from director to exhibition designer, will have the ability to clearly communicate to the public (Falk & Dierking, 1992, p. xvi).

Museums are a “powerful, communicative resource” which allow viewers to “make meaning, in multiple ways” utilizing the written and verbal texts, exhibits, artifacts and programs (Ravelli, 2006, p. 119). Ravelli argues that the definition of museum communication comprises all the “practices which make meaning” ranging from the design of the building, brochures, aesthetic appeal of the galleries, to the labels that accompany the works of art (Ravelli, 2006, p. 1). The ability of museums to effectively communicate is becoming an increasingly vital part of the contemporary museum agenda (Ravelli, 2006, p. 3). Currently, museums are witnessing a tremendous shift. Hooper-Greenhill writes that the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century has seen the beginning of the paradigmatic change, which has forced many museums to justify their existence (Hooper-Greenhill, 2000, p. 11). In order to appeal to a contemporary audience, Hooper-Greenhill believes that the modern museum needs to act as a communicator or liaison and think analytically about the experiences that they are creating (Hooper-Greenhill, 2010, p. 12).

Previous museum communication strategies entailed relaying a specific message

to a broad, diverse audience. Early museum communication centred on teaching viewers how to properly interpret artifacts in the same way that certain art historical methods taught viewers that there was a singular way to ‘read’ a painting. However, this rather narrow approach to museum communication fails to acknowledge the complexity and uniqueness of the interaction between viewer, artifact and institution. Interaction, participation and education are considered paramount and it is now expected that the museum will facilitate this type of communication in a transparent and accessible manner.

#### **2.4 Visual Studies**

Museum communication has seen a reconfiguration in recent years, resulting in a decisive shift in the way scholars theorize images, painting and art. Paintings and other two-dimensional objects now share museum spaces with video performances, mixed media works and complex installations. Since the definition of what is considered ‘art’ has been expanded, some argue that a different perspective is required in order to understand and decipher art objects (Mitchell, 2005 p. 260). Mitchell (2002) argues that there was tension between art history, aesthetics and visual studies. If the connection between art history and aesthetics is seen as working in tandem to answer visual questions, then there are a host of contemporary visual experiences that do not fall neatly into this scheme. Currently, the definition of art has expanded to include performance or conceptual art, installations or mixed media works. Additionally, some artifacts like film, advertisements, or installations utilize a variety of senses and fall outside the iconographical methodology advocated by Panofsky and other art historians. Mitchell notes that Anglo-American art history was not able to address the new visual concerns

and continued to focus on sociological issues like patronage studies and “avoided theory like the plague” (1994, p. 14).

In recent years, Visual Studies has been heralded as a means of dealing with the complexity of contemporary visual concerns and the collapse of “enduring assumptions about the status of a spectator” (Alpers et al., 1996, p. 33). Mitchell defines visual culture as “the study of the social construction of the visual field, and the visual construction of the social field” (Mitchell, 2003, p. 253). Visual studies is a broad, interdisciplinary approach, which draws from other areas of study to “construct a new and distinctive object of research” (Mitchell, 2002, p. 179). Mitchell (2002) offers visual culture as a subdiscipline of art history, aesthetics and visual studies focused on the aesthetic experience and issues of vision. Groundbreaking work in the visual field began to unfold in America, lead by Svetlana Alpers and Michael Baxandall among others, contributing greatly to the emerging field of visual studies. However, rather than view visual studies as a useful subfield used to address concerns outside the realm of art history and aesthetics, it was often viewed as a threat. Visual studies had the potential to indicate, “an incompleteness in the internal coherence of aesthetics and art history, as if these disciplines had somehow failed to pay attention to what was most central about their own domains; and second, in that it opens both disciplines to outside issues that threaten their boundaries” (Mitchell, 2002, p. 167).

Art historian Michael Baxandall is credited with developing a general definition to the term visual culture in his book, *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth Century Italy* as well as laying the groundwork for a new art historical approach for understanding images. Rather than simply focusing on style, images or patronage, Baxandall viewed

paintings as a currency of social communication (Griffin, 2002). While Panofsky's iconography placed emphasis on meaning as opposed to form, Baxandall saw these elements as inseparable arguing that colour, form and symbols communicated theological, economical, social messages (Griffin, 2002). Baxandall never used the term 'visual culture' explicitly and the current definition of the term is credited to Svetlana Alpers. Alpers helped to popularize the term with the publication of her book, *The Art of Describing*. Her work differed from traditional art history in that she argued visuality was a cultural resource in Northern Europe, which led to the creation of a pictorial mode of painting that differed from the narrative style that was traditional in Italy (Griffin, 2002). Alpers's work is noteworthy because instead of studying the history of Dutch painting, as art historians often did, she shifted her focus to study "painting as a part of Dutch visual culture" (Alpers et al., 1996, p. 26).

Alpers's work is also crucial because it acknowledged the importance of text in the realm of image, making art history "awake to the linguistic turn" (Mitchell, 1994, p. 14). The linguistic turn was a position, which stated that "all human thought and endeavor can be understood as structured by, and analogous to, language", and that interpretation should be drawn from "linguistics for models of philosophical and social interpretation" (Howes, 2005, p. 1). This viewpoint gained momentum in the 1960s and continued to influence the humanities and social sciences well into the twentieth century (Howes, 2005, p. 1). Mitchell made a substantive contribution to this position with his investigation into the relationship between image and text. Images and pictures that were once the sole domain of the visual arts were now believed to be fraught with 'textuality' and images were "sign systems informed by conventions" (Mitchell, 1994, p. 14). There

was not one thesis or reaction against the visual but there was anxiety about the field of the visual, which manifested itself in various ways,

“What makes for the sense of a pictorial turn, then, is not that we have some powerful account of visual representation that is dictating the terms of cultural theory, but that pictures form a point of friction and discomfort across a broad range of intellectual inquiry” (Mitchell, 1994, p. 13).

Mitchell (1994) says that the expanding world of visual culture and the renewed interest in studying images is also met with uncertainty,

The simplest way to put this is to say that, in what is often characterized as an age of ‘spectacle’ (Guy Debord), ‘surveillance’ (Foucault), and all-pervasive image-making, we still do not know what exactly pictures are, what their relation to language is, how they operate on observers and on the world, how their history is to be understood, and what is to be done with or about them. (p. 13)

Pictures and images are pervasive in contemporary culture. They can be found in advertisements, museums and theaters but Mitchell argues that we are now living in a world of spectacle and surveillance, which calls for a new way of understanding images, their history and their relationship to words. The idea that images act as a ‘visual analogue’ relating to text and literature was a prevailing mode of interpreting works of art. However, Mitchell in one of his most influential works, *Picture Theory*, challenges the tendency to read representations like linguistic signs (Brodsky, 2002, p. 99). Mitchell calls this renewed interest in the philosophical aspects of images the pictorial turn. The

pictorial turn offers not an answer but a new way of questioning, calling on “a long-standing tradition of scholarship in aesthetics, art history, and the sociology of art” which will provide, “instructive and well-tested models for the sociocultural analysis of visual forms” (Griffin, 2002, p. 31). Further, the pictorial turn is a postlinguistic, postsemiotic,

Rediscovery of the picture as a complex interplay between visibility, apparatus, institutions, discourse, bodies, and figurality. It is the realization that *spectatorship* (the look, the gaze, the glance, the practices of observation, surveillance, and visual pleasure) may be as deep a problem as various forms of *reading* (decipherment, decoding, interpretation etc) and that the visual experience of ‘visual literacy’ might not fully be explicable on the model of textuality. (Mitchell, 1994, p. 16)

The pictorial turn posited that pictures and paintings are more than simply paint on a canvas meant to be read like a text, despite the tendency to treat them as such. Mitchell argues that viewing culture, discourse and images from a textual perspective omits certain important information. While paintings are considered highly visual objects, or purely visual objects according to Greenbergian aesthetics (Mitchell, 2005, p. 258), many scholars argue the complex bodily activities involved in making the work of art is an essential part of ‘seeing’ on the part of the viewer (Brodsky, 2002, p. 100). For Brodsky, ‘seeing’ an Abstract Expressionist painting invokes the desire to move “closer to the canvas to see the individual, *indexical marks* and move back in order to experience their intermingling to form an image as did the artists in painting the works” (Brodsky, 2002, p. 102).

Brodsky's description of 'seeing' a work evokes a wealth of sensory information beyond the purely visual experience. This stance is suggestive of a sensorial perspective, which treats artifacts as a mixture of sensory experiences rather than just a visual object. Brodsky's recollection of her movement around the gallery space enables her to connect with the physical movements of the artist. Mitchell argues that the experiences usually described as 'visual' often involve other senses, particularly tactile and auditory elements (Mitchell, 2004, p. 257). Further, Mitchell critiques the continued practice of treating media as exclusively visual arguing that it would be more productive to study visual culture as "an intricate braiding and nesting of the visual with the other senses" (Mitchell, 2004, p. 265). Building upon the pictorial turn, anthropologist David Howes argues that there was a need to move away from linguistic based models of analysis towards a recovery "a full-bodied understanding of culture and experience" (Howes, 2005, p. 1). This 'sensual revolution' argues, "every artifact embodies a culturally salient, sensory combination" and considers the body and the senses when interpreting cultural and artistic material (Classen & Howes, 2006, p. 212). Preziosi and Farago note that historically, "aesthetic discourse was a general extension and transformation of activities rooted in sense experience that has long been associated in both theory and practice with the *devotional* function of religious images" (Preziosi & Farago, 2004, p. 5). This rediscovery of the sensorial nature of museums, culture and art arose out of a concern that contemporary museums placed too much emphasis on the importance of sight above the other senses. Stewart is critical of modern museums arguing that they are so visually biased that "it barely occurs to us to imagine them as being organized around any other sense or senses" (Stewart cited in Classen & Howes, 2006, p. 200).

The pictorial turn and the sensual revolution similarly argue that viewing images and artifacts is a complex, bodily, sensory process. More recent scholarship argues that treating artifacts and the museum spaces that house them, as a visual experience is a rather limited means of understanding viewing experiences. Instead, Mitchell, Brodsky, Stewart, Classen and Howes contend that pictures and artifacts need to be viewed as a complex interplay between the body and senses. These factors can come together in a museum setting to create a memorable experience for the viewer. Samis argues, “The museum is the sum not of the objects it contains but rather of the experiences it triggers” (Samis, 2008, p. 4).

Today, most paintings are regularly photographed and images are often reproduced digitally and displayed on museum websites. Digital reproduction offers many advantages but it has not completely replaced the act of visiting physical museums. Recently, the National Gallery recorded a ten percent increase in attendance compared to the previous fiscal year, an impressive feat considering the NGC launched their new website during the same time period (Adams, 2012). Despite the considerable advantages of websites it is possible to surmise that there is something different about going to a museum, something about the experience that draws viewers back. Falk and Dierking’s research has found that the physical attendance and memory work together to create a meaningful experience for viewers. They note that the “total experience from the moment the thought occurs to someone to go to a museum, through the remembrance of the museum visit, days, weeks, and years later” is extremely important to visitors (Falk & Dierking, 1992, p. 1).

It is this ‘experience’ of seeing art in a museum that becomes difficult to

communicate. The image of a painting might be reproducible but the sensory experience associated with seeing the work in person is not as easily translated, reproduced or communicated. An image, or copy of a work of art may be communicable but the total sensory experience is not. As Ravelli writes, “the ‘experience’ of an exhibition or an institution is a powerful communicative tool, and is one of the defining features of museum visiting” (Ravelli, 2006, p. 2). Pine and Gilmore contend that experience is becoming important to visitors and museums have a vested interest in creating memorable encounters for viewers. Having a memorable experience is also becoming increasingly important to customers, leading companies and institutions to consciously create meaningful events or products. They note that one of the most successful ways of making an experience more memorable is to enhance a customer’s “sensory interaction” (Pine & Gilmore, 1999, p. 18). Some goods like wine naturally evoke a sensory response but others are intentionally imbued with sensorial elements in order to make the product more memorable. Pine and Gilmore note that books are sometimes intentionally given tactile surfaces while automobiles are infused with distinctive scents in order to heighten their sensory effects (Pine & Gilmore, 1999, p. 18). While museums are unlikely to infuse gallery spaces with artificial scents in the same manner as automobile makers, it is important to note that experiences are important to producers as well as consumers and sensory features can play a role in making a memorable encounter. Using Pine and Gilmore’s model of analysis, museums have the potential to become the ‘experience stager’ and offer more than concrete goods or services. Instead, they argue that museums should endeavor to facilitate an “experience, rich with sensations, created within the customer” and engage with the visitor (Pine & Gilmore, 1999, p. 12).

The challenge is that experiences are very personal and occur when an individual has “been engaged on an emotional, physical, intellectual, or even spiritual level” which results in an encounter unique to each individual (Pine & Gilmore, 1999, p. 12-13). The work of the experience stager is completed when the “performance” or experience is completed but the memory of said experience can continue to linger in the mind of the viewer long after the event is over (Pine & Gilmore, 1999, p. 12-13). Similarly, the work of the museum is over when the visitor leaves the exhibit but thoughts of the experience have the potential to stay with the audience long after they exit the museum doors. The value is that these experiences create unique, meaningful memories for the people who witness them. For Falk and Dierking, a meaningful experience is partly dependent on physical attributes. When visitors choose to visit a museum they are consciously choosing to place themselves within the ‘physical context’ of the space along with all the constraints and experiences that go along with it (Falk & Dierking, 1992, p. 11-12). Visitors expect a certain kind of experience when they visit a museum. Falk and Dierking argue that people go to museums because there are certain expectations associated with the physical context of visiting museums. They note, that in the case of art museums, visitors expect to “to see paintings hung on walls, often very specific paintings” and embedded in the physical and personal experience is the assumption museums will fulfill certain expectations (Falk & Dierking, 1992, p. 12). The viewer expects certain experiences when they attend an exhibit or wander through the hallways of a museum. The endurance of physical museum attendance continues in an age of digital reproduction indicates that there is something more to the museum experience, that there are different experiences and expectations associated with museum spaces and websites.

## 2.5 Reproduction

German cultural critic Walter Benjamin, best known for his essay, “The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility”, wrote about issues of reproduction and its effect on works of art and the human sensory apparatus. While mechanical reproduction allowed images to be freed from the confines of museums walls, Benjamin questioned the effect this had on the art viewing experience. Reproducing images of artwork was essential for the development of art history outside Europe after World War II when technology became reliable and inexpensive enough to document museum collections (H.W. Janson & A. F. Janson, 2004, p. 16). Benjamin argued that around 1900, technological reproduction reached a standard, which “permitted it to reproduce all known works of art, profoundly modifying their effect” (Benjamin, 2008, p. 21). The *Work of Art* essay focuses on the technology’s ability to recreate a work of art for a mass audience and the consequences this had on the quality and practice of viewing art. With mechanical reproduction, all works of art were now reproducible, which had a profound effect on an artwork’s uniqueness, authenticity and authority, all qualities that gave individual works of art their privileged status in Western culture (Jennings, 2008). Photography and film replaced the unique art object with infinite copies, removing the work of art from its unique place space in time. Reproduction liberates the work of art from the confines of the museum allowing it to be enjoyed in new places by a new audience but this devalues the immediacy of the object. Uniqueness, authenticity and authority are all aspects of an artwork’s aura, a characteristic that withers as a result of technological reproducibility. Benjamin said the withering of the aura,

Might be stated as a general formula that the technology of reproduction

detaches the reproduced object from the sphere of tradition. By replicating the work many times over, it substitutes a mass existence for a unique existence. And in permitting the reproduction to reach the recipient in his or her own situation, it actualizes that which is reproduced. (2008, p. 22)

Reproduction shattered the aura and shifted the spectatorial space by creating a simultaneous collective reception of an object by a political body (Jennings, 2008). In addition to creating a new kind of audience for the work of art, mechanical reproduction changed the way that art was to be used and understood. Chaplin (1994) notes that this concept of aura is a variation of Marx's commodity fetishism, which created distance, mystery and detached the art object from ritual (p. 41). Decay of the aura is regretful but means that the "social function of art is revolutionized" moving the work of art from a basis in ritual to one based on politics (Benjamin, 2008). Previously, the work of art was embedded in the ritual of Western tradition and was an important cultural validation of the claim of power made by the ruling class. Benjamin noted that mechanical reproduction allowed for manipulation of the image through technical processes like enlargement and slow motion, which could "bring out aspects of the original that escape the eye" (Long, 2001, p. 91). This could allow the viewer to see the art object in a new way, one which might normally "escape natural optics altogether" (Benjamin, 2008, p. 21). Benjamin's ideas referred specifically to mechanical reproduction, film and photography, but Hazan argues there are "similar implications for electronically reproduced art" (Hazan, 2003, p. 2).

Museum websites have an advantage over the physical museum because they are able to extend time and space of visitation and learning, creating new viewing

opportunities. The NGC website, available with the “click of a mouse, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week” allows viewers from across the nation to access and learn about artifacts from the collection (Hazan, 2003, p. 1). Reproduction has the ability to liberate objects from the physical museums and make art available to entirely new audiences. Hazan argues that reproduction allows for new audiences to view art, moving accessibility from “private to public, from the elite to the masses” (Hazan 2003, p. 2-3). Digital reproductions displayed on websites have the capability to “meet the recipient halfway” by displaying the copy outside of the context of the physical museum where they are traditionally enjoyed (Benjamin, 2008, p. 22). With the aid of institutional websites, visitors can create their own virtual experience remotely rather than resorting to physically accessing the “brick and mortar museum in order to engage with the original artifact” (Hazan, 2003, p. 1). Technological improvements have also provided an opportunity to view works of art in an entirely new way. The camera lens and more recently, magnification features on museum websites, can bring out details undetectable to the human eye or the ability to display copies in places unattainable by the original (Benjamin, 2008, p. 22).

The virtual experience created by websites can also allow for new curatorial, technological and ethnographic possibilities as well. The paper, “Virtual Repatriation and the Application programming Interface: From the Smithsonian Institution’s MacFarlane Collection to “Inuvialuit Living History”” provides a fascinating example of contemporary issues of digital reproduction, aura and the experience of viewers. The authors discuss the Reciprocal Research Network (RRN), an online museum portal and its subsequent effect on digitization and access to Inuvialuit artifacts. In 2009, a

delegation of Inuvialuit peoples traveled to the Smithsonian's Museum Support Centre in order to expand upon the current curatorial information and help make collections accessible to descendent communities (Hennessey et al., 2012). However, after visiting the Smithsonian there was a desire by those in attendance to extend the experience beyond the physical visit to engage other members of the Inuvialuit community and the general public. A website was created using Application Programming Interface (API) to "curate and remediate object records" and "reconnect the collection to intangible knowledge, local cultural practices, and revitalization initiatives" (Hennessey et al., 2012). The result was the creation of an innovative online exhibit and archive which allowed the collection to 'live' and evolve as new information is uncovered and provide a space where "Inuvialuit knowledge of the [Smithsonian] collection could be elicited, curated, and represented in an Inuvialuit-owned virtual space" (Hennessey et al., 2012). Similarly, the Smithsonian felt that the project would allow the institution to share the physical objects by means of 'virtual repatriation'. The virtual portals or websites would provide an excellent space for the exchange of knowledge, access to information and high quality images of artifacts, while the physical objects and the copyright of digital materials remain in the possession of the institution (Hennessey et al., 2012). The physical artifact, as well as the sensory experiences that accompany seeing the object in person, remain firmly within the walls of the institution.

The Smithsonian delegation expressed interest in extending their experience to more people outside the specific locale and time of their visit. The RNN presents a suitable space for the exchange of textual information and images, a viewer interacting with a computer will likely have different experiences than a person who physically

interacted with the artifacts. The Smithsonian delegation had the unique experience of being close or handling the objects, breathing in their smell, moving around the museum space and partaking in other sensory features. This is an experience that a website cannot replicate. While the creation of the website allows for an extension of elements of the experience of the Smithsonian delegation, it does not reproduce the experience in its entirety. Benjamin wrote that singular artifacts in museums were unable to “provide an object of simultaneous collective reception” (Benjamin, 2008, p. 36). However, with the aid of reproductive technologies, *Inuvialuit Living History Project* provides connection to artifacts that community members might not have otherwise been able to access. The collection, which had never been physically displayed in its entirety, was displayed continuously in a virtual setting and available to physically remote community members (Hennessey et al., 2012).

The *Inuvialuit Living History Project* is an extremely valuable contribution but the assertion that the experiences of the Smithsonian delegation could be extended by means of a website warrants further investigation. The website, with its ability to exchange data efficiently allows for the easy dissemination of image and text. However, it is less efficient when transmitting information that is sensory, or physical and cannot replicate the experience of seeing an artifact in person. Falk and Dierking assert, “all learning occurs within a physical context” with the display and use of physical space playing a critical role in relaying important information and creating memories (Falk & Dierking, 1992, p. 112). Hennessey et al. noted that in addition to facilitating the reconnection and recirculation of information about the artifacts in the MacFarlane Collection, the authors hope that the endeavor will result in the “the long-term loan of

objects for exhibition in the Inuvialuit Settlement Region” (Hennessey et al., 2012). This is noteworthy because, despite the sophistication of the RNN and the communicative benefits from the virtual project, there is still the desire to gain access to the physical objects themselves.

While the potential of programs and websites like the *Inuvialuit Living History Project* allow for new connections with physically distant materials it would be a disservice to treat these experiences as one in the same. Photographs and websites are dedicated to displaying copies or, as Hazan says, “simulacrum of the genuine article” with websites and digital images displaying only an “echo of the original artifact” (Hazan, 2003, p. 1). Digital images of Inuvialuit artifacts accompany written information but it is not the same as physically seeing the object in person. Susan Buck-Morss writes that the experience of seeing an artifact is difficult to communicate arguing the, “Aesthetic experience (sensory experience) is not reducible to information” (Alpers et al., 1996, p. 30). Websites can transfer visual and written information across vast distances but they cannot reproduce the experience of handling an object or seeing it in a museum setting. Long argues that Benjamin’s definition of aura is significant because it “does not refer to the work of art at all, but rather to the *experience* of the aura of natural objects”, one that is diminished or completely lost with reproduction (Long, p. 92).

## 2.6 Summary

Museums, Hooper-Greenhill argues, are at a point of change where old orthodoxies are being broken down and development of “communicative functions” have the potential to make art museums “vital new institutions for the 21<sup>st</sup> century” (Hooper-Greenhill, 2010, p. 31). While museums have moved away from a transmission model of communication to impart meaning to viewers, they still utilize text-based resources to

facilitate educational and participatory opportunities. Museum professionals have realized that the audience is diverse and comes with ideas and experiences of their own. Communication strategies have shifted from transmission to education and include new technologies that have become integral to helping audiences ‘read’ and interpret artifacts in a number of ways (Preziosi & Farago, 2004, p. 4). Evolving theoretical perspectives on images and art, the relationship between work and image, and the revival of interest in the sensory context of museum artifacts has effected museum communication practices, educational strategies and even how physical gallery spaces are used. Museum websites are an extension of the traditional text-based model of the museum. They display written information about art and artists but are restricted in their ability to transmit the sensorial elements of viewing a work of art in person. Alternatively, museum websites are dynamic sites of innovation, where technology and educational resources are combined to bring elements of the museums experience to a greater audience than ever before. Museums have the difficult task of preserving the nation’s treasures, interpreting these artifacts in a way that it accessible to an incredibility diverse audience, all the while keeping abreast of the latest technological advancements with limited monetary and institutional resources. Presently, technology presents new learning and communicative opportunities but Richardson contends that museums are also “struggling with how to position themselves” endeavoring to strike the delicate balance between tradition and innovation (Richardson, January 31, 2012). In 2011, the National Gallery of Canada launched the newest version of their website ([www.gallery.ca](http://www.gallery.ca)) and the following chapter will lay the methodological foundation for an exploration of communication, reproduction, spectatorship and experience.

## Chapter Three: **Methodological & Research Context**

### **3.1 Objective**

This chapter outlines the methodological strategies for investigating the relationship between digital reproduction on museum websites and the sensory museum experience. Current museology scholarship has dealt with an array of museum issues such as motivation behind museum visitation (Falk & Dierking, 1992), technological issues and information management (Marty, 2005) and the effect of social media on learning in museums (Russo et al., 2009). While the museum experience itself has been the subject of study (Falk & Dirking, 1992; Gjedde & Ingemann, 2008), critical investigation into the sensorial relationship between the online and physical museum experience is still unfolding.

The first section of this chapter contains a brief evaluation of existing methods used to understand the museum experience and will illustrate how this project will differ from previous studies. The absence of methodological approaches for a combined analysis of sensorial and virtual museum features presented a unique opportunity to draw from various research perspectives in order to glean the relevant information from interview participants. The 'Data Collection' section will introduce the methods of sensory ethnography and netnography, provide an overview of interview questions, and outline the recruitment of participants. Existing methods have traditionally treated the physical and virtual experiences separately creating an opportunity for this research project to blend two different perspectives in a mixed method approach. Sensory ethnography and online ethnography are well-developed methods and can be used by the researcher to analyze different kinds of data. The sensory ethnography and netnography

sections of this chapter explain in detail how these two methods will be employed in this study and used to interpret data. The coding process is described and significant themes that emerged from the data are identified. The interpretation of these results will be analyzed in the following chapters. Lastly, there were a number of challenges and limitations that changed the course of this research. Although the resulting interviews provided a wealth of insightful data, limiting factors are discussed in the concluding sections of this chapter.

### **3.2 Literature: Researching Museum Experience**

Experience is an essential part of museum visitation and a subject that has been the focus of much study. Smith and Wolf write that there are three distinct interactive elements that “determine the nature of the encounter: the work of art, the presentation in the museum and the individual” (Smith & Wolf, 1996, p. 220). The unique and personal nature of a museum experience or viewing a work of art means that there are no definitive tests that can objectively or scientifically measure the significance or impact of this experience on a particular audience. Falk and Dierking however, developed a qualitative method of analyzing the museum experience using what is called the Interactive Experience Model (IEM). This model was intended to provide a methodological lens allowing researchers to better understand the motivation and experiences of people who visit museums. The Interactive Experience Model is comprised of continuously shifting interactions between the personal, social and physical context of the visitor. Falk and Dierking’s model considers the interests and expectations of a museum visitor (personal context), how other visitors and settings can effect interaction (social context) and the effect of the physical building and exhibition

attributes on visitor behavior. This model, meant to consider the museum experience from the visitor perspective, is used to investigate a “visitor’s total experience—a socially, physically, intellectually, and emotionally rich experience” (Falk & Dierking, 1992, p. 7). While Falk and Dierking focused on a contextual model investigating the various aspects of museum experience, others have tried to study museum experience using different techniques. Gjedde and Ingemann’s book *Researching Experiences* presents several different methodological tools for analyzing different types of experiences, including the physical and online museum experience. Their methods are largely video-based and endeavor to assess audience construction of meaning and experience by adopting the perspective of the museum visitors (2008, p. 78). This approach attempts to provide insight into the various dynamics of the museum experience by recording interviews in the gallery and as participants viewed art online in order to investigate the “strategies visitors use to create meaning in relation to their personal agenda and identity” (Gjedde & Ingemann, 2008, p. 2).

These examples are a productive starting point for the methodological exploration of museum ‘experience’. In their book *Learning from Museums: Visitor Experience and the Making of Meaning*, Falk and Dierking, realizing that learning is not instantaneous, added the context of time to their model (2000). Although Falk and Dierking continue to be influential in the realm of museum studies, *The Museum Experience* was written several years before the NGC launched one of the first museum websites in the world. This is significant because one of the key aspects of Falk and Dierking’s model is the physical context, an experience significantly altered when a work of art is viewed online. Ord argues that one notable concern with contemporary art is the technological processes

which transmits information to viewers. Whether it is a glossy page in an art book, a small image in a newspaper or on a website, Ord contends that impressions based on reproduction are likely challenged after a visit to the physical gallery. He writes,

For the visitor to such places soon discovers that ‘art’ does not consist only of painted images of this or that, as seen through the eyes of someone able to wield a paintbrush. Nor does it always consist of objects the *experience* of which can be reduced to the dimensions of a newspaper column or a television screen. (Ord, 2000, p. 7)

Similarly, Smith and Wolf (1996) refer to the presentation of art in the museum setting as one of the essential elements of visitor experience. In the *Voice of Fire* chapter, I argue that one important aspect of the controversy was an apparent inadequacy in communicating the sensorial, artistic and historical significance of the work to the public. During the height of the controversy in 1990, Canadians living outside of Ottawa mainly knew *Voice of Fire* from various forms of reproduction. The insufficiency of contemporary technology in relaying the significance of the piece indicates a deficiency in the communication between the NGC and the Canadian public. Although several modes of communication have become more technologically sophisticated since the initial controversy erupted, there continues to be obstacles when disseminating visual and sensorial information connected to Newman’s work.

Although the online encounter lacks a physical element, it would be unwise to completely dismiss the virtual setting as somehow lacking significant information or experience. Gjedde and Ingemann’s work investigates the online and museum experiences but focuses attention on reception research and the “person-in-situation” and

“processes that took place in a visual and mediated context” (2008, p. 1). Their processual methodology investigates the museum setting and the “rules, control, strategies of reading, cognitive resonance and the user’s physical interaction with the work of art” but the sensorial aspect of their findings are not explicitly discussed or analyzed (2008, p. 135). The methods outlined in *Researching Experiences* are very proficient when exploring “various media and mediated situations” which facilitate experiences, this perspective skews towards a visual analysis and does not fully explore the dynamics between the various museum experiences.

Today, the ability to retrieve images and information about works of art is readily available with the help of websites, which have become an increasingly important mode of museum participation and communication. However, rather than simply analyzing the website visually and compiling a list of ways in which the digital copy on the NGC website resembled or differed from the original, I endeavored to compile a more nuanced understanding of the process of communicating information about *Voice of Fire* to the public. Employees at the National Gallery of Canada (NGC) are tasked with acquiring, interpreting and educating Canadians about the artifacts in the national collection. The sensorial, emotional and intellectual experiences of those responsible for communicating information pertaining to the national collection can profoundly shape the information that is conveyed to viewers. This desire to learn about how the National Gallery of Canada's professional community understands digital reproduction and the museum experience, as well as their personal and lived experiences, led me to ethnography as a method of investigation. Ethnography is an anthropological approach that strives to provide a detailed understanding and interpretation “of a cultural phenomenon, and a

representation that conveys the lived experience of culture members as well as the meaning system and other social structures underpinning the culture or community” (Kozinets, 2010, p. 60, 190). Particularly, two specific ethnographic methods were relevant to this investigation: sensory ethnography and netnography.

### **3.3 Data Collection**

Broadly, I was interested in exploring two different experiences with interview participants, the physical, sensorial experience of seeing art in person and the virtual, computer mediated experience. The data from this project was sourced from interviews, archival documents as well as from texts, audio and pictures found on the National Gallery of Canada website. Since this project draws from a variety of disciplines, it was advantageous to blend together different modes of investigation, which corresponded with the two previously identified experiences. Sensory ethnography was used to discuss the experience of NGC professionals with regards to seeing art in person and in the gallery where the work is displayed. This method of investigation was utilized to explore the relationship between the online experience and the physical one and to investigate if the museum staff considered them to be fundamentally different encounters. Participants were posed semi-structured, open-ended questions about their experiences with art, the senses, their sense of space and place, how they would describe *Voice of Fire* to someone who has never seen the work before and asked consider why the initial purchase of the painting was met with so much controversy.

The second main area of investigation was the experience of viewing digital reproductions of art on the NGC website. In April 2011, the NGC launched its fourth and most current version of their website. Interviews with the Web and New Media

department revealed that the redesign of the website was subject to careful study. In November 2010, the NGC decided to redesign and rebrand the entire website rather than upgrade the existing site piece by piece over several years (Bhagrath, February 1, 2012). The complete rebuilding of the website began December 2010, was finished in March 2011 and the new website officially launched to the public in April of 2011 (Bhagrath, February 1, 2012). Although it appears to have occurred rather quickly, the actual process of redesigning the website was the result of much consideration and study. I was interested in exploring the theme of technology and communication with participants by inquiring about the technical factors pertaining to the website and how the website was actually 'built'. Participants were asked open-ended questions about the painting *Voice of Fire*, the technical process of translating an artistic experience to an online setting and their opinions about the effectiveness of the final virtual product. Further, I also hoped to inquire about the social and institutional aspects of the website redesign, particularly how texts and authority affected the development of the website, the influence of documents and bureaucracy on the redesign, the usability studies that helped to inform the process and possible outside influences like copyright or legal issues which restrained the process or that affected the outcome<sup>1</sup>.

### ***3.3.1 Recruitment & Sample***

Participants were recruited from the Web Development department and the

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<sup>1</sup> Institutional ethnography was also considered as a methodology to explore the relationship between texts, power and authority in order to better understand how the museum operates. However, as the project progressed it became clear that communication, technology, and sensory elements were more pronounced in the data material. In the interest of highlighting the most relevant points and to aid organization and clarity, I elected to focus solely on sensory ethnography and netnography. While there were several significant organizational points that emerged from the interview data, the overall themes related to institutional ethnography were minimal compared to the other themes that emerged from conversations with participants. Material related to institutional aspects was treated as elements of the communication, technology and the sensory museum conversations.

Education Public Programs division at the National Gallery of Canada. Although employee contact information is available to the public, the recruitment process was facilitated with the help of a NGC employee who acted as an internal liaison. This internal liaison worked in the Web and New Media department and assisted with navigating the institutional setting by identifying appropriate potential participants. Individuals were targeted for interviews based on their involvement with the NGC website and knowledge of the painting *Voice of Fire*. After participants had been identified by the internal liaison, individual museum staff were approached and invited to participate in the study. Potential participants were contacted by email and provided with a detailed outline of the project. Interviews were then scheduled with interested participants.

Four participants were interviewed during two different discussion sessions. Megan Richardson, Chief of the Education and Public Programs division and three members of the Web and New Media department were interviewed. Richardson works alongside two managers of the Youth and Adult Programs and an additional four educators who “plan, develop, implement, and evaluate all of the education programs that are done both on site and online” (Richardson, January 31, 2012). Her job is to “set the vision for the future of *Education and Public Programs* at the Gallery in response to a number of contextual elements- budgets, the economy, aging population, changes in technology, changes in museum visitation patterns, any manner of things impact the kind of vision that I set and the directions that we take” (Richardson, January 31, 2012).

The three participants from the Web department were: Ashish Bhagrath, Head of the Web and New Media department, Web Master Colin Chen and one marketing staff

member from the Web & New Media department. The Web & New Media department is responsible for the NGC website itself as well as the internal web based systems and applications and overseen by Bhagrath as department head. Responsible for the “front and back end” of both the internal and external websites, the Web & New Media department maintains, upgrades and develops entirely new systems like electronic forums and internal databases (Bhagrath, February 1, 2012). Working alongside Bhagrath is Web Master Chen whose role, in addition to being a member of the social media committee, is to “liaison between our web department and the other departments around the building” and assist the various departments within the Gallery in strategizing and facilitating the development of their online content (Chen, February 1, 2012).

Ms. Richardson was interviewed on January 31<sup>st</sup> and the three members of the Web and Development department were interviewed together on February 1<sup>st</sup>. Each interview session lasted between seventy and ninety minutes, conversations were recorded using audio equipment and subsequently transcribed. After the interview with the Web and New Media department was complete, an additional thirty-minute interview was conducted with Web Master Colin Chen. This additional interview involved Mr. Chen taking me on a ‘tour’ of the NGC website and discussed the salient features. The tour of the NGC website was recorded using audiovisual equipment and the ensuing discussion was transcribed.

### ***3.3.2 Ethics***

The involvement of human participants meant that ethics was required from the University of Calgary Conjoint Faculties Research Board (CFRB). Ethics approval was granted on December 13<sup>th</sup>, 2011. The National Gallery granted research approval for

conducting interviews on site on December 2, 2011.

### **3.4 Sensory Ethnography**

Vision and sight are often given precedence when discussing and studying works of art (Pink, 2011; Rose, 2001). Contemporary museum practices rely heavily on visual material, emphasizing the importance of sight by encouraging visitors to view objects and learn using visual “technologies of communication” like exhibit labels (Edwards, Gosden & Phillips, 2006, p. 18). Written museum texts are one of the most pervasive and effective means of transmitting information and engaging visitors (Bradburne, 2008, p. ix). Undoubtedly, vision plays a significant role in appreciating and learning about art. Visitors can gaze at the artifacts themselves and can choose to learn by reading the textual information which often accompanies exhibits. However, the physical act of viewing a work of art in a gallery setting often involves senses other than sight. Pink contends that since visual images are “produced and consumed in multisensory environments” they should be understood with “a theory, methodological appreciation, and practical awareness of multisensoriality” (Pink, 2011, p. 602, 603). Images, she argues, have the ability to invoke memories of other senses or movements stating that “None of these practices—of seeing, taking photographs, or viewing them—can be understood as simply visual practices” (Pink, 2011, p. 602). In recent years, there has been an increasing application of multi-sensory research in such diverse areas as ethnography of sport (Sparkes, 2009), consumer research (Valtonen, Markuksela & Moisander, 2010), sensory dimensions of gardening (Pink, 2009; Tilley, 2006) and embodied ethnography in nursing and health care (Edvardsson & Street, 2007; Sunderland, Bristed, Gudes, Boddy & Da Silva, 2012). However, there is currently little

research available which analyzes the sensory dimensions of the physical and online museum experience.

Sensory ethnography views events as multisensory and aims to investigate “how research participants represent and categorize their experiences, values, moralities, other people and things (and more) by attending to *their* treatment of the senses” (Pink, 2009, p. 81). In the case of *Voice of Fire*, the largely negative reaction from the public in response to the purchase seems to indicate that there are important aspects of a painting that are not easily communicated or reproduced technologically. I intend to explore which sensory features the NGC staff felt were important in an effort to learn how these elements might be subsequently communicated (or not communicated) to an audience. Sensory ethnography is concerned with learning about “other people’s emplacement and experiences through participation in specific practices and environments” and endeavors to keep these concepts as a central concern throughout the course of investigation (Pink, 2009, p. 85). Like Pink, my concern was not about simply creating interview questions that could compile a comprehensive list of sensory features associated with viewing *Voice of Fire*. Rather, the objective was to question participants about their personal and occupational experiences in the hope of understanding the perception of *their* senses when experiencing art and how they subsequently communicated those encounters in an online setting (Pink, 2009, p. 46).

### ***3.4.1 Place-making***

The interviews conducted in Ottawa were intended to explore the sensory, and intellectual experiences of participants in order to better understand what it “feels like—including the sensory, emotional, and intellectual experiences—to inhabit certain spaces,

places and events from the insider's perspective" (Sunderland et al., 2012, p. 1056). I was interested in discussing the significance of seeing *Voice of Fire* in person and if this physical, sensorial encounter was a consideration when designing the web content and the entire website itself. Using the experience of those who worked in the museum setting, I endeavored to better understand what NGC professionals felt when looking at *Voice of Fire*, their thoughts about the exhibition space, the virtual website space and their reflections concerning the bodily, sensory aspects of seeing this work of art in person. I chose the Web and New Media and Education and Public Programs divisions as specific areas of investigation because these employees are responsible for creating the website and educational content accessed by the public. How they understand objects in the collection, as museum professionals, art aficionados, technology and education experts, is likely to influence the content that is ultimately communicated to a public audience. I have purposefully chosen to focus on the experience of the museum staff and concentrated the scope of investigation to those who facilitate the museum experience and their theoretical understanding of audience interpretation (discussed further in Challenges & Limitations section). The data generated from interviews with NGC staff was meant to investigate how the museum professionals conceptualized their sensory experiences and sense of place to provide a lens for analyzing my own experience with seeing *Voice of Fire* in an online and physical setting.

### **3.5 Netnography**

The first museum websites were launched in the late 1990s and since then, institutions like the NGC have experienced a technological revolution which has seen the introduction of multi-media and computer-based interactive media in exhibition spaces

capable of enhancing visitor's participation and experiences (Filippini-Fantoni & Bowen, 2008). Outside the walls of the institution, technology and websites are extremely useful and can provide access to information "before, after, or even instead of visiting an exhibition or museum" (Filippini-Fantoni & Bowen, 2008, p. 79). Arguably, much of the textual information contained within the walls of a gallery could be effectively communicated in a virtual setting. Exhibition labels, artist biographies and brochures can be reproduced and made available on an institutional website. However, replicating visual and the sensorial information related to the physical exhibition environment is more problematic. One of the main objectives when interviewing NGC employees was to probe Filippini-Fantoni and Bowen's suggestion that the website could act as a substitute for the physical museum. In addition to discussing the physical gallery experience with participants, I was also interested in learning more about the technical process of communicating a physical experience in an online setting, the effectiveness of the NGC website, and how users might theoretically interact with the website. Since there is currently a lack of sensory ethnographic research dealing with online or virtual museum spaces, I felt it necessary to incorporate another perspective to this project in order to sufficiently analyze the museum website experience.

Netnography is a form of online ethnography focused on participant-observational research which utilizes computer-mediated communications as a data source in order to "arrive at the ethnographic understanding of a cultural or communal phenomenon" (Kozinets, 2010, p. 60). Netnography also utilizes other elements like interviews, archival data collection and historical case analysis in the research process (Kozinets, 2010, p. 60). Unlike traditional ethnography, where research is conducted at a physical research

site, netnography adapts traditional methods by treating the internet as a “virtual field site” (Mkono, 2011, p. 255). Online ethnography was originally used for marketing purposes to better understand virtual consumption communities (Kozinets, 2002; Hewer & Brownlie, 2007). As the internet gained commercial significance, netnography became a powerful method for investigating the desires and motivations of particular online consumer groups (Kozinets, 2002, p. 61). However, the method has been increasingly seen a much broader application in a range of disciplines (Hewer & Brownlie, 2007; Kozinets & Kedzior, 2009; Mkono, 2011).

### ***3.5.1 Research Design***

Kozinets outlines a multi-step research design when conducting a netnographic study: research planning, entrée, data collection, interpretation, ensuring ethical standards, and research representation (Kozinets, 2010, p. 61). In the book *Netnography: Doing Ethnographic Research Online*, Kozinets outlines several examples of data collection taking place entirely online using message boards, emails and websites. While it is possible to conduct a ‘purely netnographic’ study, data collected exclusively from online sources can be limiting and less effective when the scope of research extends “beyond the online community context into the larger social world” (Kozinets, 2010, p. 65). Kozinets continues, asserting that in some cases “it would be wrong to assume that we could gain a complete picture through a pure netnography” and argues it is sometimes necessary to blend online and face-to-face interaction when collecting data (Kozinets, 2010, p. 65). Rather than simply studying the website or social media sites, I decided to blend online and interview data gathering techniques in order to gain a more comprehensive understanding of issues related to the sensory and physical museum

experience. This study will employ what Kozinets calls a “blended ethnography/netnography”, which utilizes a mixture of data gathered from face-to-face and online interaction (p. 65). Netnography recognizes that “the online social experiences are significantly different from face-to-face social experiences” and studying these experiences requires a very specific ethnographic type of study in order to understand the meaningful differences (Kozinets, 2010, p. 5). Combining face-to-face and online experience was an ideal approach because a blended netnography and ethnography would account for the “rich online representations of the behavior, [perhaps] including photographs and audiovisual recording” as well as the physical and sensorial information that may not be easily communicated online (2011, p. 66). While an entirely online ethnography would have been possible, the opportunity to observe, interact and discuss the NGC website and *Voice of Fire* with those most knowledgeable about these experiences made for much richer and comprehensive data.

Although I followed Kozinets’ procedure closely, my own research deviated from his outline slightly. Data collection in netnography occurs through “communicating with members of a culture or community” (Kozinets, 2010, p. 95). This communication can take place in person, through engagement, by email, online message boards and mailing lists. The importance is placed on the “connection with community members—not with the website, server, or a keyboard but with the people at the other end” (Kozinets, 2010, p. 95). My research was concerned with connecting with the professional NGC community and understanding their perspective related to the creation and maintenance of their website. Unlike many of the studies cited by Kozinets, the scope of my study was confined to the National Gallery of Canada making it unnecessary to seek out a particular

online community that would be the source of my data. Since the NGC employs a dedicated team to create the website within the institution it was not necessary to seek out an additional site for research.

### ***3.5.2 Role of Researcher***

Both sensory ethnography and netnography consider the perspective of the researcher an important element when representing the experiences of participants. In netnography, it is important to highlight the role of the researcher's own online experiences and encourages reflection on the progression from relative 'outsider' to insider, knowledgeable about the languages and practices of the community in question (Kozinets, 2010, p. 114; Kozinets & Kedzior, 2009, p. 8). Netnography considers the experiences of the researcher as essential to uncovering an "enhanced understanding of the cultural nature of online experience" (Kozinets & Kedzior, 2009, p. 8). Sensory ethnography also considers the sensorial experiences of the ethnographer an important part of the investigative process. Some scholars even argue that considering "the perception of one or more senses and the physical feelings associated with this perception" on the part of the researcher and informant can lead to enriched data collection and analysis (Edvardsson & Street, 2007, p. 25). In their study of nursing and embodied ethnography, Edvardsson and Street argued strongly in favour of "sensate field researcher" noting that a "sensate field researcher deliberately uses their own senses and bodily responses, along with the senses reported by their informants to enrich the data gathered and the subsequent analysis" (Edvardsson & Street, 2007, p. 25). The sensory ethnographer works to understand how "his or her own sensory experiences [which] are produced through research encounters" with the goal of better understanding the

experiences of others (Pink, 2009, p. 50). Pink sees “the use of the ethnographer’s own sensorial experiences as a means of apprehending and comprehending other people’s experiences, ways of knowing and sensory categories, meanings and practices” (Pink, 2009, p. 46).

### **3.6 Coding**

Both sensory ethnography and netnography use coding in order to identify important themes and categories that emerge from the data collected. However, they differ slightly in the analysis of relevant research material. Netnography has a six-step analytic sequence that is used to turn the “collected products of a netnographic participation and observation—the various downloaded textual and graphical files, the screen captures, the online interview transcripts and reflective field notes” into a finished product (Kozinets, 2010, p. 118). Sensory ethnography also employs an “intense and systematic treatment of interview transcripts, notes, memories and imaginaries” but differs from netnography in that there is no standard procedure that outlines how the researcher “should account for the senses” or how one might “acknowledge sensory experience and knowing” (Pink, 2009, p. 120).

Although there is no set procedure for analysis in sensory ethnography, Pink notes three areas to consider when researching sensory ethnographic material. First, Pink argues that research materials should be treated as “evocative of the research encounter through which they are produced, and of the embodied knowing this involved” (2009, p. 122). The embodied, sensory experiences researchers have with the materials they are studying are a crucial aspect of analysis. Therefore, a researcher needs be aware of “how different types of research might facilitate ways of being close to the non-verbal, tacit

emplaced knowledge that a sensory analysis seeks to identify” (Pink, 2009, p. 130). A second major task for the sensory ethnographer is to identify how participants express their sensory experiences by identifying the “sets of culturally constituted sensory modalities that people associate with their physiologies and the categories” (Pink, 2009, p. 125). It is necessary for researchers to recognize that the modern western sensorium is constructed and understanding about “other people’s worlds” must be interpreted “through their sensory categories” (Pink, 2009, p. 130). Lastly, in her study of the Slow City movement, Pink’s analysis involved moving between “different sets of research materials to make connections between the way it linked to the principles of Cittaslow and different ways it might be experienced” (Pink, 2009, p. 129). Different kinds of research material, including written notes, audio-recorded and transcribed interviews, and photographs, are analyzed in different ways in order to “make connections between the different levels of analysis and knowledge involved” (Pink, 2009, p. 131). Sensory ethnographic research recognizes that people inhabit multisensory environments, which are “constantly being remade”, making movement between different sets of research materials a necessary step (Pink, 2009, p. 131). In order to understand these constantly changing environments, ethnographers use mixed qualitative methods to study how “places are constituted and experienced and understood by others” (Pink, 2009, pg. 131). For this project, making connections meant moving between the different sets of research materials, including interview transcripts, historical documents, field notes and website content, in order to account for the senses in the museum and website experience.

In practice, a skilled netnography uses analytic coding-based methods to identify coding categories and interprets these findings using hermeneutic interpretation in order

to “delve into the social and historical contexts of the data for its explanations, providing subtle, specific, nuanced cultural interpretation” (Kozinets, 2010, p. 120). A general analytic process has been adapted for netnographic research and is comprised of six steps: coding, noting, abstracting and comparing, checking and refinement, generalization and theorizing (Kozinets, 2010, p. 119). In netnographic data analysis, the categories or codes are not prescribed from the outset and instead “emerge inductively through a close reading of the data” (Kozinets, 2010, p. 119). Although data can be sourced from a plethora of online cultural material ranging from blog posts, social media messages to videos, this project will restrict the scope of content for analysis to interviews, field notes, archival documents and online content from the National Gallery of Canada website.

For coding and interpretation to take place, it is first necessary to reduce the data to its “constituent elements”, with the purpose of identifying patterns, “asking about the motivation behind them, testing and checking with further data, and then reading them for the culture that they represent” (Kozinets, 2010, p. 125). For this project, physical and virtual experiences were identified as broad categories of investigation during the first stage of analysis. During this first stage of data analysis, quotes or segments of the interviews and other documents related to physical or virtual experiences were noted and categorized as either netnography or sensory ethnography. Subsequent intense treatments began to reveal reoccurring key words, patterns and phrases, which became thematic categories. The data was coded and revealed six thematic categories: technology, communication, space/place, *Voice of Fire* and visual studies, senses and experience (specifically sight, sound, touch and movement), and institutional communication and collaboration. The themes and key words emerging from the textual and interview data

provided an analytical framework, which was then analyzed in light of my own field notes, reflections and observations.

### **3.7 Challenges & Limitations**

There were a number of challenges that helped to shape this research as the project unfolded. In the earliest stages of planning I hoped to conduct an analysis of internal National Gallery documents, including the formal usability studies, which chronicled the website redesign and decision making processes. However, this method of data collection soon proved problematic. Notes from meetings, internal documents and the usability studies were not housed in the National Gallery of Canada Libraries & Archives department as I had anticipated. Instead, they were considered internal business documents and portions of these reports were considered confidential, drastically limiting my access. However, NGC staff members kindly offered to speak to me about the usability studies and the redesign process, which would allow the necessary information to be relayed while omitting the segments of the reports considered sensitive. Due to institutional demands, this project was forced to evolve from one based on analyzing website development documents to one utilizing interviews.

Initially, my intention was to conduct interviews with staff members at the NGC using a phenomenological research method called ‘walking with video’. This method of data collection is meant to investigate the experience of moving through real and imagined spaces and is useful in uncovering the sensorial elements connected to events and places. Pink describes the method as “walking with and video-recording research participants as they experience, show and tell their material, immaterial and social environments in personally, socially, and culturally specific ways” (Pink, 2007, p. 240). It

was hoped that a combination of open-ended verbal questioning with physical and virtual movement could provide a means of accessing the sensory process and sensorial elements associated with experiencing artwork and exhibition spaces where *Voice of Fire* is displayed. One advantage of the walking with video method is that it allows the researcher and participant to “*continue to be active participants in their environments, using their whole bodies, all their senses, available props and the ground under their feet, to narrate, perform, communicate and represent their experiences*” (Pink, 2009, p. 85). After indicating that video and photographs would only be used for research purposes, this method was approved by the University of Calgary Conjoint Faculties Research Board (CFRB). On-site interviews with staff was also approved by the NGC however, the use of visual recording proved problematic. The NGC would only allow non-copyrighted material to be recorded using photography and other audiovisual technology. Video recording in gallery spaces would violate the copyright restrictions imposed upon the NGC. Further, this also eliminated the video-based methods described by Gjedde and Ingemann, as any video recording procedure in the gallery space would infringe the stipulations outlined by the National Gallery.

Since the option to video record interviews within the gallery space was unavailable, interview questions were purposefully structured to inquire about participant experiences in the exhibition space. Interviews in sensory ethnography emphasize the importance of the “performative nature of talk” and “sensing the body in relation to its total environment” where the participant and researcher create a shared place in order to “learn about other people’s worlds through the interview” (Pink, 2009, p. 82, 83). While the ability to video record interviews in the *Voice of Fire* exhibition space would have

been a revealing form of data collection, interviews are also a powerful method of discussing the sensory experience of participants. Further, the inability to video record or conduct still photography in the gallery forced me to reflect on the transient nature of the museum experience. Although it would have been useful to use the walking with video method or conduct still photography to explore what the interview participants found significant about the gallery space, this initial setback ultimately added another layer of realism to this project. Instead of referring back to my own photographs, I was left to reflect upon the experience, recall memories, refer back to field notes and when my memory fails, resort to the NGC website, an act which is likely repeated by general viewers as well.

Lastly, I intentionally limited the scope of interviews to those participants who work at the National Gallery of Canada. Although it would have been valuable to speak with NGC website users or members of the public about their experiences using the new website, I intentionally chose not to pursue this method of investigation for several reasons. Before the newest version of the website was launched the NGC conducted extensive usability studies with a variety of participants. The results of the usability studies, the reaction of participants to the new website and other museum commissioned studies were discussed during my interviews. Gathering a comprehensive sample of website users, conducting focus group interviews or administering surveys and then sufficiently analyzing the resulting data would be a significant undertaking that would not productively address my research question.

While conducting surveys or interviews with museum visitors or NGC website users about their lived experience would have been informative, undertaking a

comprehensive audience study is beyond the scope of this project. As a researcher, the museum is geographically remote and my time there was limited, making the process of organizing an appropriately sized group or gathering sufficient feedback logistically problematic. It would have been profoundly valuable to explore the entire communication circuit akin to Stuart Hall's notion of encoding and decoding, however conducting such a study would have proved too expansive to practically pursue. Instead, this project focuses on the production end of the communication circuit, examining the creation of messages and how the Gallery intends the content to be interpreted. Despite the limitations, the resulting project and interviews provide a comprehensive and extremely valuable study of the NGC's attitudes towards the sensory museum experience, digital reproduction and technology usage.

### **3.8 Summary**

Although this project utilized two methodological perspectives, the purpose of this research is not to divide descriptions of experiences into opposing categories for comparison and contrast. Viewing digital reproductions of art online is vastly different from seeing the same work of art in person, however it was not the aim of this project to demonstrate that one is inherently superior to the other. Rather, the objective is to deploy a combined sensory ethnographic and netnographic approach to uncover a more comprehensive exploration of what the virtual experience can tell us about the physical one. Similar to Pink's sensory analysis of the Slow City movement, which moved between different sets of research material, the following chapter will present an abridged history of *Voice of Fire* in Canada compiled from art history literature, archival documents and transcribed historical interviews. While much of the interview material,

discussion and subsequent analysis revolved around issues of contemporary communication strategies and spectatorship, a thorough understanding of the historical context is advantageous when studying *Voice of Fire*.

## Chapter Four: *Voice of Fire* - Historical & Artistic Context

### 4.1 Objective

In the spring of 1990, the purchase of *Voice of Fire* dominated the pages of newspapers and was discussed at length on radio and television programs across the country (O'Brian, 1996, p. 3). While the purchase price and aesthetic critiques were among the most dominant themes to emerge from the discussion, the controversy was actually much more complicated. While members of the public indicated that they objected to the price of *Voice of Fire*, it would be more accurate to say that the public actually objected to paying a large sum for a painting that was extremely difficult for the average viewer to understand. Barnett Newman's painting is a complicated piece of art. It is a work that requires a sophisticated understanding of art history and a high degree of visual literacy in order to understand the meaning of the work and the aesthetic motivation of the artist. Additionally, it is a work that does not lend itself to photographic reproduction. Some of the most impressive features of *Voice of Fire* are best seen in person and are dependent on the setting where the piece is displayed. When Canadians opened their newspapers and saw three tiny blocks of alternating colours meant to represent *Voice of Fire*, they were not privy to viewing the work the way the artist or the museum professionals who cared for the work intended. Yet, for the majority of Canadians who live outside the Ottawa area, viewing the reproduction was the only available option.

The ensuing debate that occurred between Gallery staff and the public provides a comprehensive example of how the sensory elements of museum experience are difficult

to communicate via digital reproduction. Although the debate surrounding the purchase of *Voice of Fire* is a rich and fascinating case study, this project will focus on issues of communication, the history of the painting in Canada, art history and modernism, and challenges with reproducing images of *Voice of Fire*.

#### **4.2 Historical Background: 1966-1990**

Looking at Barnett Newman's towering stripes of blue and red more than twenty years after the canvas was purchased in 1989, it is often difficult to understand the firestorm that was ignited when the National Gallery officially acquired the painting. Newman painted *Voice of Fire* in 1967 to be included in the American pavilion at Expo 67 held in Montreal. The exhibition, entitled *American Painting Now*, included works from twenty-two artists and was organized by art critic and historian Alan Solomon (Solomon, 1967, p. 4). *Voice of Fire* was first displayed in the U.S Pavilion at Expo 67 in a geodesic dome-shaped building designed by Buckminster Fuller. "Bucky's Bubble", as it was nicknamed, was a piece of 'non-architecture' that intentionally played with notions of scale and creating a "property of scalelessness" (Solomon, 1967, p. 1). The dome was an immense space and might appear anywhere between fifty and two hundred feet in height depending on the position of the viewer in relation to the structure (Solomon, 1967, p. 1). The large interior of the dome posed some difficulty for art historian Alan Solomon when curating the exhibition. Since there were no walls in the dome, Solomon decided to hang the works of art from the ceiling so that they would occupy the upper two-thirds of the sphere (Solomon, 1967, p. 2). To compliment the expansive space, Solomon chose large vertical paintings that represented three major contemporary artistic tendencies: geometric painting, pop art, and shaped canvases (Solomon, 1967, p. 3).

Solomon was interested in very large-scale vertical paintings and he soon realized that there were few readily available that would suit the scale of the building. Artists typically paint canvases to fit conventional gallery spaces leading Solomon to specifically request paintings that exceeded thirteen feet tall (Solomon, 1967, p. 3). Fortunately, Solomon found a sufficient number of artists “intrigued by the opportunity to explore these new possibilities of scale and height” who agreed to contribute pieces (Solomon, 1967, p. 3). This contribution was a great commitment on the part of the artists because it meant creating works of enormous size, which would likely be difficult to sell to an average collector or gallery (Solomon, 1967, p. 3). Newman’s *Voice of Fire*, along with twenty-one other paintings created a “soaring, airy structure” bringing “the interior of a visual climax” (Solomon, 1967, p. 1).

At the time, Newman had been experimenting with large-scale paintings and completed *Voice of Fire* during the winter of 1967 in his New York City studio. The painting measures 5.4 metres (18 feet) by 2.4 metres (approximately 8 feet) wide and consists of a strip of cadmium red flanked by two bands of blue ultramarine. The central red band consists of a layer of thickly applied acrylic paint, which “reflects cadmium red light very intensely” (Smith, 1990a). The outer sections of blue are painted in acrylic as well but show a different handling of paint. Instead of applying a similarly thick layer of paint, Newman opted for a thin coating of the ultramarine allowing the background of the canvas to shine through creating a “slightly purplish glow” (Smith, 1990a).

Brydon Smith, the former Assistant Director for Collections and Research at the National Gallery, was one of the hundreds of people to stream through the American pavilion and the effect of the towering vertical paintings had a profound impact (Smith,

1990b). In 1988 the National Gallery was scheduled to reopen their new building designed by Canadian-Israeli architect Moshe Safdie. When Smith saw Safdie's design for the new Gallery space he noted the huge second-floor rooms with the twelve metre high walls and recalled the display of canvases in Buckminster Fuller's geodesic dome (Smith, 1990b). The commanding size of *Voice of Fire* meant that there were few gallery spaces that could adequately display the piece. Prior to finding its home in Ottawa, *Voice of Fire* had only been included in five exhibitions<sup>2</sup>. The National Gallery redesign and expansion had led to the creation of several large galleries capable of displaying the eighteen-foot canvas of *Voice of Fire*. In a later interview, Smith recalled sitting in the Gallery, "... the concrete had been poured, and I was sitting in a room with no walls, a large space, and this painting came to mind as something that would look absolutely magnificent in that space" (Smith, 1990b). Smith felt that *Voice of Fire* would be "one painting that would hold that wall" and set about arranging for the work to be loaned to the Gallery for its reopening (Buium, 2010, p. 74). NGC curators arranged for the painting to be loaned to the gallery by the artist's widow, Annalee Newman, for the grand opening of the new building. Newman had died in 1970 from a heart attack and after his passing his remaining works were left to his wife. Sensing that the work would be a good fit for the space, Smith approached Annalee who agreed to lend *Voice of Fire* to Gallery for the 1988 reopening (Smith, 1990b).

While the painting was on loan, the Gallery began negotiations with Annalee to permanently acquire the work and expand the contemporary art collection. As negotiations unfolded, the painting was displayed prominently alongside other examples

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<sup>2</sup> In 1971, *Voice of Fire* was included in an exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art but technically it was installed off-site because of its size (Shiff, Mancusi-Ungaro & Colman-Freyberger, 2004, p. 334)

of American abstract paintings displayed in the Gallery's postwar art section. Despite the worldwide demand for Newman's work at the time of negotiations, Annalee believed firmly that the painting should become a part of the Canadian collection. Barnett Newman had a strong connection with Canada and other Canadian artists. He was an instructor at the well-known artist retreat at Emma Lake, Saskatchewan, and was invited by Smith to give the address at the first major retrospective of Dan Flavin's work at the National Gallery in 1969 (Buium, 2010, p. 74). While *Voice of Fire* was on loan to the Gallery, various boards and committees both inside and outside of the institution debated purchasing the work. Smith said the acquisition would be "tough sailing" but eventually the purchase was approved by the National Museums of Canada Corporation (Barber et al., 1996, pg. 27). Smith negotiated a final sale price of \$1.76 million (Canadian) for the painting. Arguably, if the work had gone to auction, it could have likely fetched twice the price paid by the National Gallery (Buium, 2010, p. 74). However, in light of her husband's strong relationship with Canada, Annalee elected to keep the price of *Voice of Fire* artificially low to ensure the work would become part of the Canadian collection (Buium, 2010, p. 74).

The acquisition was finalized in August 1989 and announced in a routine news release in March 7, 1990 along with two hundred and twenty-six purchases and one hundred and eighty-five gifts that had been added to the Gallery's collection the previous year (Barber et al., 1996, p. 27). When the purchase was announced Dr. Shirley Thomson, Director of the NGC, stated that the gallery was fortunate to have purchased such a historically important work in a time when the art market was so competitive (Thomson, 1990). Brydon Smith, who had worked diligently to arrange the purchase, said

that the work was a wonderful addition to the collection stating,

In the spacious, sunlight gallery where the work is presently installed, *Voice of Fire's* soaring height, strengthened by the deep cadmium-red centre between dark blue sides, is for many visitors an exhilarating affirmation of their being wholly in the world and in a special place where art and architecture complement each other. (Barber et al., 1996, p. 28)

After the press release was issued, the response from the media and public was almost immediate. To art historians, curators at the National Gallery and members of the public who were knowledgeable about modern art, the purchase of *Voice of Fire* was an obvious choice. *Voice of Fire* had a strong historical connection with Canada, would be a significant addition to the Gallery's collection and was reasonably priced given the art market at the time. Although the NGC expected the purchase to attract some attention, Brydon Smith said that the "depth of hostility" was a complete surprise to those involved in the acquisition (Smith, 1990b). Global Television in Ottawa interviewed Dr. Thomson, juxtaposing her comments defending the work with disparaging remarks from the public describing the painting as "a flag" or "something my son'll do in day care" (Barber et al., 1996, pg. 28). Condemnation over the piece also came on an official front. The national lobby group of artists, Canadian Artists' Representation/Le Front des artistes canadiens (CARFAC) was disappointed the gallery had chosen to spend such a large amount of their annual budget on an American rather than a Canadian artist<sup>3</sup> (Barber et al., 1996, pg.

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<sup>3</sup> In actuality, media outlets misreported this aspect of the purchase. Due to construction of the new building the NGC had made very few purchases and had "money in the bank" when the Newman work became available (Thomson, 1990). Secondly, the National Gallery budget for Canadian and international art is separate meaning the purchase of *Voice of Fire* did not come at the expense of purchasing Canadian work (Smith, 1990b).

28). One of the most notable detractors was Member of Parliament Felix Holtmann, chair of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Communications and Culture. On a radio program in Winnipeg Holtmann suggested the painting be put up for auction and questioned the artistic merit of the work famously stated, “it looks like two cans of paint and two rollers about ten minutes would do the trick” (Barber et al., 1996, pg. 28-29).

### 4.3 Art History & *Voice of Fire*

Despite being displayed at the National Gallery for two years, it was not until the purchase was officially announced that concerns began to emerge (De Duve, 1996, p. 85). De Duve notes that until the actual purchase of the work was officially publicized, the painting had only received attention from art lovers and had been largely ignored by the press and public (1996, p. 85). Although the cost of *Voice of Fire* received the most attention, the issue was less that Canadians objected to the purchase of expensive artwork, it was the purchase of a certain *kind* of artwork that drew ire. In 1991, the Gallery acquired an ‘old master’ painting entitled *Jupiter and Europa* by Guido Reni. Reni’s painting was purchased for more than double the price (\$3.3 million) paid for *Voice of Fire* but the acquisition received little attention from the public or the media (O’Brian, 1996, p. 7). Art historian John O’Brian argued that Reni’s mythological subject matter was more closely aligned with what the public believed an “expensive work of art should represent and of how it should look like” (1996, pg. 7). Similarly, when the National Gallery purchased a Flemish medieval painting by Van Orley in 1984 for \$1.2 million, Nemiroff observed that “nobody blinked an eyelash” (Kidd & Nemiroff, 1990). Arguably, the Canadian public felt that the substantial price of Renaissance and medieval paintings was justified but questioned the value of modernist works like Newman’s. In a

1990 radio interview, Assistant Curator Diana Nemiroff cited a lack of ‘visual literacy’ as one of the main reasons why Newman’s work had failed to immediately resonate with the public. She explained that visual literacy is the ability to find “visual forms meaningful”. Attempting to decipher a painting without a command of the visual language of art is akin to critiquing a book in another language (Kidd & Nemiroff, 1990). Newman’s abstract painting looks much different than other old master work in the collection and it also must be understood differently than other works of art that line the gallery walls.

Traditionally, art history is used to understand what paintings represent visually, stylistically and historically. One of the most common methods used by curators and art historians to ‘read’ a work of art is iconography. Iconography is “a branch of art history which concerns itself with the subject matter or meaning of works of art as opposed to form” (Panofsky, 1955, p. 26). Iconography was originally developed by art and cultural historian Aby M. Warburg as a way of categorizing visual motifs in sixteenth-century art (Müller, 2011, p. 283). Art historian Erwin Panofsky developed and popularized the method of visual analysis in America during the 1950s and 60s (Müller, 2011, p. 283).

Panofsky did not believe there were natural principles that could guide interpretation of an artwork and he was concerned with constructing a viewpoint of the past that was capable of revealing the inner structure of all works of art (Chaplin, 1994). In iconography, meaning is created when the subject matter of a painting is matched with symbolic syntax of meaning gleaned from other works of art and literature (Sorensen). Panofsky argues that there are three layers of meaning in paintings, the primary, secondary and the intrinsic meaning. Primary meaning is a way of understanding images at their most basic level. Images or artistic motifs are pure forms, which carry natural

meaning. These motifs can be collected and listed to form a “pre-iconographical description of the work of art” (Panofsky, 1955, p. 28). Secondary, or iconographical, meaning is when artistic motifs are connected with themes and the concept of cultural knowledge is introduced. The combination of specific sets of themes form pictorial stories or allegories, which will ultimately resonate with audiences possessing a specific culture knowledge. Intrinsic meaning, or iconology, is the most complicated layer and assumes that there is deep understanding in a work that might “reveal the basic attitudes of a nation, a period, a class, a religious or philosophical persuasion” and if a viewer is knowledgeable and qualified, these deeper meanings may be uncovered (Panofsky, 1955, p. 29). In order to access the deeper meaning found in art, a viewer needs to understand the code embedded in works of art. In her interview, Nemiroff argued that visual literacy is an acquired phenomenon and noted that viewers are not born with the inherent ability to understand art. Instead, Nemiroff suggested viewers could develop their visual skill by keeping an open mind about art and comprehending information from Gallery organized tours and lectures (Kidd & Nemiroff, 1990).

Although methods of ‘reading’ works of art in a singular manner have come to dominate the field of art history, these modes of interpretation can be problematic. Approaching an abstract work like *Voice of Fire* as simply a set of signs to be deciphered presents the viewer with a number of considerations. Panofsky’s method was developed to investigate the meaning in specific kinds of art. While layers of meaning can be extracted from a Renaissance painting, the visual signs that became the basis of Panofsky’s method are problematic when analyzing abstract works like *Voice of Fire*. Instead of using narrative or representational forms to convey meaning, the goal of

abstract expressionism was to convey feeling and emotion using the most rudimentary artistic forms: colour and form. In abstract expressionist works, the artist endeavored to create a complex visual experience meant to evoke deeper meaning, but Newman and his contemporaries intentionally rejected the systems of signs traditionally used to understand the message. This means that, while there is profound meaning in a painting like *Voice of Fire*, the viewer would not decode the visual experience in the same way as a work from the Renaissance. Panofsky's ideas still have application but his method requires some rethinking when dealing with modern, abstract works of art.

Difficulty appreciating and understanding modern, abstract works of art was not just a problem for contemporary Canadian audiences. Australians rallied against the purchase of Jackson Pollack's *Blue Poles* while Londoners went so far as to vandalize Carl Andre's exhibition at the Tate Gallery in 1976 (O'Brian, 1996, pg. 14). The term 'abstract expressionism' gained popular use in the 1950s and is used to describe this group of New York avant-garde artists who de-emphasized the importance of the finished product and rejected traditional styles and skills (Edgar & Sedgwick, 2006, p. 10). Newman, Pollack, Mark Rothko and several other artists in their collective, created art that was often "emotional, intuitive, spontaneous, autographic, personal, serious and morally committed" (Walker, 2001, p. 31). Abstract expressionism was meant to be a "revolt against traditional styles" with Pollack's "action painting" representing the expressionism while Newman "represented the more abstract side of the movement" (McLeod, 1990, B6). Although the style and composition of abstract expressionist art appears to be a radical departure from previous artistic movements, Smith argues that the group was actually referring to recognizable themes but in a much different way (Smith,

1990a). He argues that Newman was,

A part of a long 20<sup>th</sup> century tradition in art in which colour, line, form and structure are used not for representational ends but to express feelings and thoughts directly. *Voice of Fire* is not an abstraction of something, not does it refer to anything outside of itself. It is an objectification of thought—a concrete embodiment of Newman’s reflection in paint on canvas. Although its presence can induce different responses in each viewer, the resulting experiences will be grounded and focused in the work itself, and will correspond somewhat to Newman’s own feelings and thoughts at the time *Voice of Fire* was conceived and painted. (Smith, 1990a)

Newman, like countless artists throughout the ages was attempting to evoke an emotional response. However, instead of using narrative, rhetorical and figurative elements to relay a story to the viewer, Newman focused only on colour and form. This means that instead of seeing a host of airy angels floating across a canvas and feeling a sense of joy, viewers are left to meditate on the most rudimentary artistic elements. Rather than leading viewers to a predetermined conclusion like a Renaissance piece might, Newman’s work is meant to reflect his own feelings and allow a space for viewers to come to their own conclusions. Knowing this, we can begin to view Newman’s work in a different light and backlash against abstract works becomes more apparent. Instead of painting what happiness might look like, Newman paints what happiness might *feel* like. This means that, unlike artwork of the past, there is no one, singular ‘correct’ way to interpret his works.

In addition to challenging what kind of meaning is derived from artwork, abstract expressionists also challenged the concept of how a 'finished painting' should appear. *Voice of Fire's* relatively simplistic composition and uneven handling of paint was very much intentional. However, the unfinished look of Newman's mature works was, at first, accidental insight. Newman's painting *Onement I* (1948) was considered his artistic breakthrough and a style he continued to explore for the rest of his life. With *Onement I*, Newman reduced the composition to its most basic elements and in doing so heightened the importance of colour in the piece. The composition of the *Onement I* is relatively simple and comprised of a narrow orange-red band thickly painted on masking tape, which divides a dusty brownish-red background. The canvas is dominated by slabs of colour that appear to be 'stamped' out by the artist and are anchored by vertical elements Newman called 'zips' (Hess, 1971, pg. 55). The result was an original style of painting, which seemed to vibrate with light (Hess, 1971, pg. 55).

Newman originally intended to paint the edges of his 'zip' creating a smooth, straight line set against a textured background. Many of Newman's earlier works show him experimenting with textures, creating more three-dimensional surfaces. However, Hess argues that a stroke of insight interrupted the artist, leading him to leave the edges of the zip raw and the background un-textured (1971, p. 57). Although it was a seemingly simple piece, the impact was immense for Newman. He later said that, "This particular painting...changed my life" (Shiff, 2004, p. 45). Newman never meant for *Onement I* to be a prototype for his new style but his accidental creation led him to contemplate this new style of painting for several months. After he had, "studied it, confronted it, was confronted by it, for a period of some eight months" Newman decided that *Onement I*

was the solution to his problem with composition and subject matter (Shiff, 2004, p. 46). Although many Canadians have puzzled over the appearance of *Voice of Fire*, Newman felt that his colour planes and zips were, “an elegant solution to his problem of subject matter” (Hess, 1971, p. 55). These large blocks of colour represented Newman’s goal of creating a work that was free of any identifiable forms from the physical and cultural world (Shiff, 2004, p. 9). By avoiding shapes from nature and the “imagery of painting” Newman felt he would be free from constraints and able to make unencumbered artistic choices (Shiff, 2004, p. 9). The result, he hoped, would be a break from art of the past allowing him, “to paint as if painting never existed before” (Shiff, 2004, p. 9).

#### **4.4 Reproduction & Space**

Without seeing the work in person it is difficult to understand two of the features that make the work so unique. First, photographs of *Voice of Fire* vary greatly in size and often omit background features leaving viewers little sense of scale or of the setting where the painting is displayed. Canadian artist Robert Murray, a close friend of Newman, was critical of efforts to photographically reproduce images of his friend’s work. He writes, “Probably the hardest thing to appreciate when looking at a reproduction of a Newman painting is the phenomenal impact it has as a face-to-face visual experience. Its size is very important” (Heller, Murray, Friedman & Stone, 2005, pg. 16). The size of *Voice is Fire* is commanding but its scale is obscured when images are reproduced. The verticality and expanses of colour that make up *Voice of Fire* were meant to create an optical illusion and provoke thoughts of space in the minds of viewers. Newman’s zips and the scale of *Voice of Fire* are said to trigger an “innate need to mentally construct and define [our] place in space” for the viewer (Auping, 2007, p. 146).

Newman was immensely interested in space and was concerned with creating, “The kind of feeling that one feels when one sees all four horizons” (Shiff, 2004, p. 88). He found that he could create this feeling of vastness by creating large-scale, vertical paintings. He wanted the viewer to “feel the *vertical* dome-like vaults encompass him to awaken an awareness of his being alive in the sensation of complete space” (Shiff, 2004, p. 89). Newman called the encompassing dome-like effect of his works ‘spacedome’ and *Voice of Fire* is one of the best examples of this effect. Shiff explains when looking at *Voice of Fire* the painting, “will seem to arc over a viewer who moves close to it, as if it were forming a canopy or, as Newman would say, a dome. The viewer is within it, even under it, but also conscious of facing its obdurate flatness” (2004, pg. 89). The sensory paradox and contrast between flatness and dimension is uniquely suited to viewing this work of art in person.

Newman’s paintings were also meant to extend that sense of space beyond the borders of the painting itself for the purpose of crating a “sense of place” that extended into the gallery itself (Auping, 2007, p. 136, 144). The space that Newman intended to create extended beyond the edge of the canvas and he even went so far as to instruct viewers as to the best way to view his works. In his first solo exhibition, Newman advised viewers to stand between six and seven feet away from the canvas because he “considered that six-or-seven foot divide as part of the literal space of his works” (Auping, 2007, p. 148). Similarly, Newman often intentionally hung his paintings close to the ground to give the impression they were “anchored on the same ground as the viewer” instead of simply floating on the wall (Auping, 2007, p. 148). The physical space where the painting is displayed is an essential part of understanding the totality of a work

like *Voice of Fire*. When the painting is reproduced, the optical effects of the ‘spacedome’ and the enormous scale are altering the image and giving a very different impression of the piece.

Today, *Voice of Fire* hangs in the Gallery hovering a short distance from the ground dominating the expansive wall in room C 214. A viewer can move physically around the gallery observing the painting from various distances or angles. Seeing the illusionary features in Newman’s painting requires the viewer to move through the gallery space, which is something that can be accomplished with minimal success when viewing a reproduction of the work. Murray wrote that Newman’s paintings change when reproduced, “What happens when one of his paintings is vignetted on the printed page is that it becomes highly diagrammatic” (Heller et al., 2005, pg. 16). However, for many Canadians reproduction was the main form of dissemination. Small photographs that accompanied the onslaught of media coverage or images that are currently displayed on the NGC website pale in comparison to the original. When members of the public looked at reproductions of Newman’s work in newspaper and other print media and dismissed it as resembling a “flag” or a “ribbon of a military medal” arguably, they were alluding to the issues with reproduction described by Murray (Barber et al., 1996, pg. 28). When *Voice of Fire* is photographed, the scale is obscured and the monumentality of the piece is lost. Any optical effects are rendered static by photography and the painting becomes, as Murray noted, diagrammatic. When viewed in person, Newman’s swathes of colour are expansive, dynamic and constantly changing. Depending on the time of day and levels of light, the colours may appear more muted or saturated (L. McDougall, field notes, February 2, 2012). While the planes of colour are flat or diagrammatic when reproduced,

when viewed in person they create optical illusions for the viewer. In a radio interview, Smith explained that Newman's decision to paint the blue strips on top of the cadmium red created interesting "tensions" (Smith, 1990b). He notes that the colour blue tends to recess visually but the size of the painting and Newman's handling of the paint actually created an optical illusion in which "the blue is pushed forward" and acts "like a magnet in the room and it draws people towards it" (Smith, 1990b). The effect of Newman's work creates an experience that is difficult to replicate outside of the physical gallery space. Murray argues that seeing Newman's works in person is key to understanding their effect,

...his paintings have a passionate aura of color and light that he would talk about in relationship to [Claude] Monet's and [Camille] Pissarro's work. When you stand close to one of Newman's paintings you become enveloped in the whole aura of color, and it become a wonderfully sensory kind of experience. It's an experience you get first in your gut and finally in your head. But starting from your head and trying to go the other way around, you'll never get it to your gut. (Heller et al., 2005, pg. 16)

Murray's observations are important because he makes explicit reference to aspects of the work that are only communicable when the painting is viewed in person. Art historian Melissa Ho reinforces Murray's statement arguing in the opening pages of her essay that, "Newman's subtle, virtuoso works of art demand to be seen in person" (Ho, 2005, pg. 1). This belief that a viewer should see the original was echoed by several members of the National Gallery staff in their defense of the purchase in interviews immediately after the work was purchased. Nemiroff said that in order to understand the work it "can't be

judged in a newspaper reproduction. It's [sic] has to be judged face to face in terms of an experience of the work, and hopefully, in terms of some sense of its historical importance" (Kidd & Nemiroff, 1990). Shirley Thomson, the former Director of the National Gallery, also felt that reproduction failed to capture the essential aspects of Newman's work. During an interview, when a reporter indicated that he had seen the painting reproduced in a newspaper Thomson responded,

Thomson: Well, I can tell you not to look at the newspaper photo, because you do not get...

CFCF: You lose a bit of the quality.

Thomson: Yeah. Well of course! You don't experience the immediacy of the painting or the great red and blue mass settled in this light-filled hall. And it's a superb experience when you actually look at the painting in situ, in the Gallery. (Thomson, 1990)

The setting and all other facets of the physical encounter are an important part of the experience, one that might result in a different experience if these attributes are separated. Both Nemiroff and Thomson say that the 'experience' of seeing *Voice of Fire* depends on seeing the work in person, in the gallery setting. Similarly, curator Kidd argues that *Voice of Fire* "communicates things that are so unsayable in other ways, through colour and through size and through texture" emphasizing the importance of seeing the work in the Gallery (Kidd & Nemiroff, 1990).

Nemiroff argued that *Voice of Fire* should be judged primarily as an experience rather than an important historical artifact (Kidd & Nemiroff, 1990). Similarly, Benjamin

argued that exhibition and performance space both convey essential information. In his discussion of film, Benjamin stated, “The aura surrounding Macbeth on stage cannot be divorced from the aura which, for the living spectators, surrounds the actor who plays him” (Benjamin, 2008, p. 31). While the performance of the actor playing Macbeth can be recorded and played at a later date, the experience of seeing the actor perform live is unique, complex and one reserved for those in the audience. Issues can arise when attempting to communicate multisensory museum experiences via mainly visual media like print media and websites. The ability to see a painting in person allows the viewer to be privy to the sensorial aspects of the work. Different viewing experiences call for different modes of analysis and valuation. Benjamin described these different modes of valuation as ‘cult’ and ‘exhibition’ values. Cult value is assigned to goods which cannot be replicated and access to these objects is difficult. Cult objects were often inaccessible to most people, sequestered in cathedrals only available to priests, or were site specific like the sculptures on a building not visible from the ground (Benjamin, 2008, p. 25). Exhibition value is derived from the accessibility of the artifact. Some works of art, like busts and small paintings lend themselves to exhibition and transportation more than perhaps a “statue of a divinity that has a fixed place in the interior of a temple” (Benjamin, 2008, p. 25). Benjamin argued that when artistic practices were liberated from ritual, “the opportunities for exhibiting their products increase” (Benjamin, 2008, p. 25).

However, despite the best of intentions on the part of the NGC to share the painting with a Canadian audience, *Voice of Fire* cannot be easily displayed outside the walls of the NGC in Ottawa. This meant that most Canadians were forced to ‘see’ the painting using inferior reproductions. Instead of classifying events as ‘visual’ or

‘auditory’, sensory scholars prefer to treat the senses as “operating in relation to each other” (Pink, 2011, p. 265). Viewing a work in person then is a mixture of a number of senses. Pink argues that there is a relationship between senses and that none operate in isolation (Pink citing Kress, 2011 p. 263). Therefore, she argues that it is important to understand that communicating meaning is dependent on more than just the visual, that all senses must be considered (Pink, 2011, p. 263). A viewer might remark they are going to ‘see’ a play performed but taking in a performance of Macbeth involves more than vision and sight. Viewing a live play indeed involved sight but also the sound of the actor’s voices, their movement around the stage, the smell of the theater or the impact of dramatic setting on stage. Similarly, one can ‘see’ a reproduction of *Voice of Fire* in a newspaper or online but the experience of being in the gallery is very different. Images of *Voice of Fire* could be easily circulated but the vast disparity between the public and the Gallery on the artistic merit of the piece shows that there are some elements that are difficult to replicate mechanically or digitally.

Curators at the National Gallery suggested that a lack of visual understanding of abstract painters and their works was one of the main sources for the largely negative reaction the purchase of *Voice of Fire* received (Sudeyko, 1990). While Newman’s work is certainly complicated, in reality, the controversy is much more intricate. It would be more accurate to say that the lack of an understanding of the sensory complexity of *Voice of Fire* by the Canadian public and an insufficient explanation as to how reproduction changes the viewing experience is a large part of the misunderstanding. Benjamin wrote that the technological ability to reproduce “artwork changes the relation of the masses to art” (Benjamin, p. 36). Viewers who were not able to see *Voice of Fire*, the “great red and

blue mass settled in this light-filled hall” were not privy to the same experience as visitors to the Gallery (Thomson, 1990). As the controversy unfolded, a caller to the CBC radio show *Morningside* named Phyllis summarized the issue, “Living in Western Canada there’s not a hope in hell that I would ever get to see it” (Sudeyko, 1990). Phyllis and the majority of Canadians were not able to see the work of art in the manner recommended by curators and NGC professionals. Although, *Voice of Fire* is on public display and technically accessible to the Canadian viewers, the ability to wander through the Safdie designed hallways is not an experience available to everyone. Despite the proliferation of images after the purchase of the painting, ‘experiencing’ *Voice of Fire* was, and continues to be, a fairly privileged act available only to people who can physically visit the gallery. This left the public reliant on print and television as a sole means of communication, a mode of viewing deemed inferior by Newman experts and NGC staff alike.

#### **4.5 Summary**

The initial debate about the merit of *Voice of Fire* is important because it distinctly demonstrates the potential disconnect between the sensory experience of the museum and the technological reproduction of art images. The NGC staff, privy to seeing *Voice of Fire* in person and well versed in visual language and art history, judged the work from a professional and sensory standpoint. Although various modern works of art evoke praise or ridicule the world over, the dispute surrounding *Voice of Fire* is framed as a very ‘Canadian’ issue. In defending the purchase in the 1990s, museum officials announced the acquisition a natural fit given Newman’s connections to Canada. Curators argued that *Voice of Fire* was an important addition to the collection and described the

personal experience of seeing the piece in person. Alternatively, the public decried the ‘waste’ of taxpayer money on such a work and incorrectly believed the purchase came at the expense of acquiring Canadian works of art. Audiences were encouraged to develop a fluency in visual language in order to become better spectators and were dissuaded from judging the picture based on reproductions found in newspapers or on television. This however, is an explanation that was lost to most Canadians who failed to see the merit in the simplistic bands of colour that appeared in pages of newspapers and magazines. Since the gigantic size of the piece prohibits travel, Thomson’s invitation for viewers to come see the work for themselves in Ottawa did not sufficiently address the impossibility of this experience for many Canadians (Thomson, 1990). Further, since reproduction was deemed an inferior mode of gaining insight, there was no ‘place’ where viewers residing outside of Ottawa could learn about the national collection and work to hone the visual literacy skills necessary to understand *Voice of Fire*. In many ways, the website offers a solution to many issues arising from the 1990 scandal. It is a place where the NGC can present their own story about *Voice of Fire*, offer their own content and images without the many of the constraints presented by other forms of mass communication. Despite the technological advancements, *Voice of Fire* is an incredibly difficult work to communicate and it is important to critically assess if the current website technology can address, respond or alleviate some of these past issues of communication and spectatorship.

## Chapter Five: Findings & Discussion - The National Gallery of Canada Website

As outlined in the *Methodological & Research Context* chapter, interview and archival data was divided into broad categories of investigation identified as either relating to physical or virtual experience. Quotes, segments of the interviews, field notes, museum and archival documents were noted and categorized as relating to either netnography or sensory ethnography. The coded data revealed six major thematic categories: technology, communication, space/place, *Voice of Fire*, senses and experience (specifically sight, sound, touch and movement), and institutional communication and collaboration. Discourse related to the NGC website, apps, wireless internet, social media, technological change as well as themes related to accessibility and the structure of the website were coded under the category of ‘technology’. Communication was also a significant theme. Mention of conveying messages, description of audiences, language, creating written museum content, exhibitions, communications issues related to older versions of the website and dissemination of information was considered part of the ‘communication’ category. Description of online, virtual or geographic spaces was identified as a ‘space and place’ theme. Discussion of visual technology like zoom features, the visual design to the website, art historical material was identified as the ‘*Voice of Fire*’ category. The netnography category included reference to virtual or online communities, online learning, the ‘tour’ of the website, description of online experiences and cultural communication via computer mediated communication. The ‘senses’ category included participant’s recollections of experiencing *Voice of Fire* as well as description of navigating and developing the website. Lastly, the institutional

collaboration and communication section accounted for explanation related to institutional organization and division of labour and resources. The five categories, technology, communication, space/place, *Voice of Fire*, senses and experience, related most directly to the research question and are discussed and analyzed in the following two chapters. Although these categories were the most dominant themes that arose from interviews, it became apparent upon closer investigation, that these were not exclusive categories. Participants made it clear that viewing *Voice of Fire* online and in person were not the same experiences (Richardson, January 31, 2012) but subsequent treatments of the data revealed that there was considerable overlap amongst resulting themes and categories. Discussion of sensory elements was not exclusively confined to conversation about the physical gallery space and the use of technology bridged the physical and virtual museum experience. Themes often intersected or were represented in discussion about the virtual and physical experiences but in different ways. For example, the topic of technology underpinned much of the conversation regarding development of the NGC website however, technology in the form of audio guides can be used in the physical gallery to guide viewers towards a multisensory appreciation of *Voice of Fire*. Therefore, rather than think of the subsequent analysis as a linear description of concise, self-contained themes to compare and contrast, it is more helpful to consider the resulting data and discussion as “entangled pathways” where themes connect and diverge (Ingold, 2007, p. 103). Pink used Ingold’s concept of entangled pathways to explore urban tours as entwined ethnographic paths meant to be understood, “through its entanglements with the pathways of others, gathered memories, imaginings and the immediate present through multiple modes and media” and recognized that researchers are also “entangled

in place-making processes” (Pink, 2008, p. 179; 193). The first section of this chapter will present a chronological history of the NGC website where participants identify important technological milestones, institutional decision making and the usability studies which guided the 2011 redesign of the website. Second, is a ‘tour’ of the NGC home page and discussion of salient features, which draws from McLoughlin’s mapping of museum spaces and Pauwels’ work on websites (2011, 2012). In her article *Of Borders and Boundaries: First Nations’ History in Museums*, McLoughlin uses the metaphor of ‘mapping’ to “critically analyze how the spatial configurations and boundaries of museums continue to perpetuate colonial structures of power” (1993, p. 5). Similarly, this project uses participant’s discussion of the website to critically understand narrative related to structures of power, communication, spectatorship and conceptualization of boundaries and space on the NGC website.

### **5.1 Development and History of the NGC Website**

The NGC was amongst the first institutions in the world to create a museum website (Bhagrath, February 1, 2012). The first version of the National Gallery of Canada website was launched in 1998 with fairly basic functions, its purpose was to promote the collection online, display artifacts in the collection to the public and provide basic contact information and hours<sup>4</sup>. Teaming with a corporate sponsor between 2000-2001, the website was redesigned, expanded and an additional site called *Cybermuseum* was introduced. *Cybermuseum* was an educational website containing smaller sub-sites developed by educators to target several key viewer demographics (Bhagrath, February 1, 2012). These sub-sites were developed for four specific audiences: families, teens and

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<sup>4</sup> Table 1.1 presents an abridged chronology of website development.

youth, art enthusiasts and lastly, researchers and educators. In the early 2000s, *Cybermuse* “thrived” and was considered “the flagship web effort from the gallery”, offering viewers award winning exhibitions and content (Richardson, January 31, 2012). From 2001-2007, the corporate site, with the addition of *Cybermuse*, was the National Gallery’s main presence on the internet. However, in response to technological advancements, the NGC decided to redesign and rebuild the website in order to better meet shifting consumer demands. *Cybermuse* was “revamped”, an e-commerce website was developed and a separate website was created for the National Gallery of Canada Foundation, the fundraising branch of the institution (Bhagrath, February 1, 2012). The 2007 redesign resulted in what Bhagrath called “outward facing sites” where each major branch of NGC had a separate website which would open as an additional ‘tab’, or tabbed document interface, contained in a single window within the web browser (Bhagrath, 2012). Instead of the unified website the Gallery currently maintains, the Gallery had five different associated but separate ‘outward facing’ websites, each identified by a different web address or universal resource locator (URL) such as *cybermuse.gallery.ca* or *shopngc.gallery.ca* (Richardson, January 31, 2012).

Djonov describes websites as a “hypermedia text” which consists of webpages or, “nodes that incorporate visual, verbal and increasingly also audio and kinetic elements, and hyperlinks. A hyperlink is activated by selecting an anchor (a clickable webpage area)” (Djonov, 2007, p. 145). Viewers navigate websites by clicking on hyperlinks and moving from webpage to webpage using two types of hyperlinks, website-internal hyperlinks, which connect to webpages within the same website, and website-external hyperlinks which “transcend a website’s structure” (Djonov, 2007, p.

146). In the case of the NGC website, the ‘outward facing sites’ provided an organized, contained space for specific categories of information but Djonov explains that website-external links can be confusing for viewers and “may blur the boundaries of the website” (Djonov, 2007, p. 146) which proved to be the case with the 2007 version of the NGC website. One of the main issues of the 2007 version of the website was the use of the tabs or ‘outward facing sites’ for navigation between the various sections and webpages. Previously, if a viewer was looking for information about the collection they would visit the main NGC website, select *Cybermuseum* where they would be redirected to an additional ‘outward facing site’ which opened the desired content contained in a separate ‘tab’ in the web browsing window.

Usability studies<sup>5</sup> conducted in 2009 commissioned by the NGC found the design of their website was ineffective. These usability tests recruited a number of participants and studied their interaction and use of the website. The Web & New Media department found that the main concern was the format and navigability of the site. The usability studies determined that viewers found navigating the various tabbed document interface confusing and tests showed that some participants were unable to perform simple tasks such as finding specific information on the website. While the separate outward facing sites helped to organize content and information thematically, navigating the website was hindered due to a lack of integrated search tools that could explore the entirety of content offered by the NGC. Searches for particular information were only contained within each of the sub-section or ‘outward facing site’ and there was no singular method of

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<sup>5</sup> Interview participants described these studies as a series of tests that were alternately described as ‘usability studies’ to reflect multiple tests conducted or ‘the usability study’ to refer to the collective body of tests. This project will simply call the series of tests ‘the usability studies’.

comprehensively searching the entire website across the various sections of the website. For example, a viewer could search for educational content on ‘Van Gogh’ on the *Cybermuse* website but would have to search a separate page for information regarding upcoming Van Gogh exhibits. Each smaller sub-site was very self-contained and viewers were not “navigating intuitively amongst the tabs” (Richardson, January 31, 2012). In the case of the NGC website, the usability studies determined the design, structure and ultimate navigability of the website was confusing for viewers. In order to find specific information, the usability studies found that viewers would exit the site and enter the desired information into a search engine. When the search engine recovered the needed information the users would then re-enter the site at the specific location containing the information they desired using the search engine, a searching process not “best practice” in terms of “web standard” (Bhagrath, February 1, 2012). Studies found that content was difficult to find and viewers were confused about the “brand” or purpose of each of the different ‘outward facing site’ (Bhagrath, February 1, 2012).

In order to pinpoint the specific difficulties with the website, the NGC developed a “roadmap” from 2009-2010 to strategize how to address their communication difficulties. The roadmap was completed in November 2010 and the decision was made to redesign the entire website and merge the previous five outward facing sites into one comprehensive website. The goal was to provide viewers with a single entry point and allow them to access the information they needed easily and without confusion (Bhagrath, February 1, 2012). The usability studies confirmed that the website would benefit from a redesign with “one URL, one website and to integrate all of it” and the subsequent task became how best to implement the desired changes (Richardson, January

31, 2012). Broadly, the NGC had to choose between a “band-aid solution” which would make small immediate changes with the goal of making more substantial change in one to two years or to completely “rebrand, rebuild and re-launch everything” making substantial changes over a shorter period of time (Bhagrath, February 1, 2012).

The usability of the site was deemed highly problematic and as Bhagrath stated, “if your organization’s goal is to get people through the door and people can’t find you, it’s a problem” (Bhagrath, February 1, 2012). Ultimately, the NGC elected to rebuild and re-launch the entire website, a decision largely motivated by the significant communicative issues of the 2007 version of website. Keeping the results of the usability studies in the forefront, the Gallery purposefully decided to redesign the website with a user-focused approach, emphasizing the needs of viewers rather than selecting an organizational focus, to be used by museum professionals or academics (Chen, February 1, 2012). Rather than taking the internal structure and organization of the institution and pasting “it back outside” on the public website, the Gallery used the audience as the focal point of the redesign, emphasizing the needs of the viewer and subsequently building the new website around this focus (Bhagrath, February 1, 2012). The redesign project began in December 2010, was completed March 2011 and the website official launched in April 2011.

The main motivation for the redesign was to address navigational issues when accessing content but the redevelopment also presented an opportunity to enhance visitor experience. Redesigning the entire website rather than updating small segments systematically, resulted in a “flexible structure” which allowed staff to “add content to enrich the visitors experience of artworks in the collection” (Richardson, January 31,

2012). Additionally, the restructuring of the website allowed for the inclusion of technical features like high resolution “zoomable” images of art works, integrated search features, social networking capabilities, embedded video and allowed for “incredibly important” functionality within the website (Richardson, January 31, 2012). The decision to redesign the website resulted in streamlined technical maintenance, a more cohesive brand and provided the Gallery with a “good opportunity to keep up with the times” (Chen, February 1, 2012).

Officially, the website was launched in April of 2011, but Chen explained that the release of the newest version of the NGC website was considered “more like a milestone” than the completion of a finished product (Chen, February 1, 2012). Since the Web & New Media Department would “always be working on” the website, updating and changing content, Chen conceptualized the launch of the website as an opportunity to “just put up the house” or external frame where the interior ‘furnishing’ or content would constantly change (Chen, February 1, 2012). For Richardson, this constant change makes the website partially “a historical document” because content is always being added and changed (Richardson, January 31, 2012). Unlike in the physical gallery where artifacts are removed after an exhibit closes, “you don’t wipe a website from all it’s content and start over with fresh stuff” (Richardson, January 31, 2012). While the functionality and design of the website has been transformed, the Gallery has retained older material and has incorporated existing content into the redesigned website.

## **5.2 Tour and Discussion of the National Gallery of Canada Website**

Entry to the NCG website starts at the home, or the primary page of the website. Studies have shown that users rely heavily on homepages to provide to “establish the

identity and mission of the website, to show viewers its main parts and preview any popular or timely information, to reveal how the site is structured and what options for navigation it offers” providing “orientation into the website page as a whole” (Djonov, 2007, pg. 145- 146). Much like the information desk in a physical gallery, the NGC home page is the viewer’s first stop when entering the website and acts as a navigational focal point. The National Gallery of Canada home page is designed to provide clear, concise information to the general public while still offering specific content appealing to a research-focused audience (Chen, February 1, 2012). The home page endeavors to strike the difficult balance between being easily comprehensible while still communicating as much information as possible. It achieves this by highlighting information about the collection, exhibitions and institution in an organized, effective manner and refraining from inundating viewers with excess content (Chen, February 1, 2012).

Structurally, the National Gallery of Canada home page is divided into four areas or segments, organized vertically, each focused on a different topic or theme. Each segment is rectangular in shape and contains a mixture of images and text. Chen referred the upper portion of the home page as the ‘Navigation’ section and the lowest portion as the ‘Footer’. The middle sections are titled ‘Calendar’, ‘Online Features and Extras’ on the website. ‘Calendar’ and ‘Online Features’ are subsections of the ‘See’ section of the website but their inclusion on the homepage indicates their relative importance. The remainder of this section of the *Website* chapter will present a ‘tour’ of the homepage which will highlight and discuss technical features, communication, and navigation of the NGC website.



Figure 1: National Gallery of Canada. (2013). *Screen capture of 'Navigation' section of the homepage.* Retrieved from [www.gallery.ca/en/](http://www.gallery.ca/en/)

### 5.2.1 'Navigation' Section & Implied Audiences

The upper area of the 'Navigation' section is targeted towards non-academic visitors and clearly displays six 'mega menus' titled *Visit*, *See*, *Learn*, *Shop*, *Give* and *Join*<sup>6</sup>. Viewers can activate a drop down menu and preview the specific contents of the website section by moving a cursor over one of the six-mega menu headings (Chen, February 1, 2012). Mega menus are useful because despite their relatively small size, "they are very user-friendly" and capable of displaying a great deal of information in a concise and organized manner (Chen, February 1, 2012). These mega menus link viewers to website subsections of the main website.

The five 'outward facing sites' that made up the 2007 version of the website were amalgamated into one comprehensive website and existing content was reorganized to correspond with the new heading categories. Much of the content found on the old version of the website is still available but has moved locations to reflect the new organization of the website. For example, the educational content previously available at

<sup>6</sup>In the time between the data collection stage and the analysis, a seventh 'Magazine' category has been added to the homepage navigation menu. As with the other heading categories, hovering a cursor over the title will reveal a mega menu with information however, unlike the other sites, clicking on the magazine link will take a viewer to an entirely different website (<http://www.ngcmagazine.ca>).

the *Cybermuse* site is now largely divided between the 'Learn' heading and the 'See' section, specifically under the 'Collections' website section (Chen, February 1, 2012). The 'Shop' section of the website also received a significant update and was "overhauled on the front and back end" making it a "one stop shop" and a fully functional online store selling merchandise, exhibition tickets, publications as well as memberships (Chen, February 1, 2012).

The second objective of the home page 'Navigation' section is to provide easy access to a more advanced and knowledgeable audience. The NGC website is an important resource for art historians, curators as well as researchers from other galleries or museums looking for "in depth" material (Chen, February 1, 2012). The right side of the home page displays a 'Library & Research' heading, containing a mega menu with information about the library, publications and archival and database resources. The offset 'Library & Research' tab on the main section makes "in depth", academic based material readily available (Chen, February 1, 2012). Above the 'Library' section is an oblong search box which helps viewers search the entire website. Directly beneath the NGC 'Navigation' section and the six categorical mega menus is a widget, which scrolls through a selection of images. Widgets, also known as gadgets, are "small code objects that provide dynamic Web content" which are added with the intent of adding "interest or enhance[ing] your visitors' Web site experiences" (Shelly, Napier & Rivers, 2009, p. 165, 166). The National Gallery of Canada website is widget based and images are linked to different sections of the website making it is possible to click on an image where a viewer is taken to a different page with more specific information (Chen, February 1, 2012). This 'Navigation' widget is the most prominent on the website and provides

viewers with a visual snapshot about the most recent gallery news or exhibitions.

While some visitors to the NGC and the website are very knowledgeable about art, the goal is to also create content that is appealing to “visitors coming in off the street” or families visiting the museum (Chen, February 1, 2012, 2012). While there are large sections of the NGC audience who seek out advanced knowledge, the Gallery makes a conscious effort to create website content that is easily “digestible” for the average visitor (Chen, February 1, 2012).

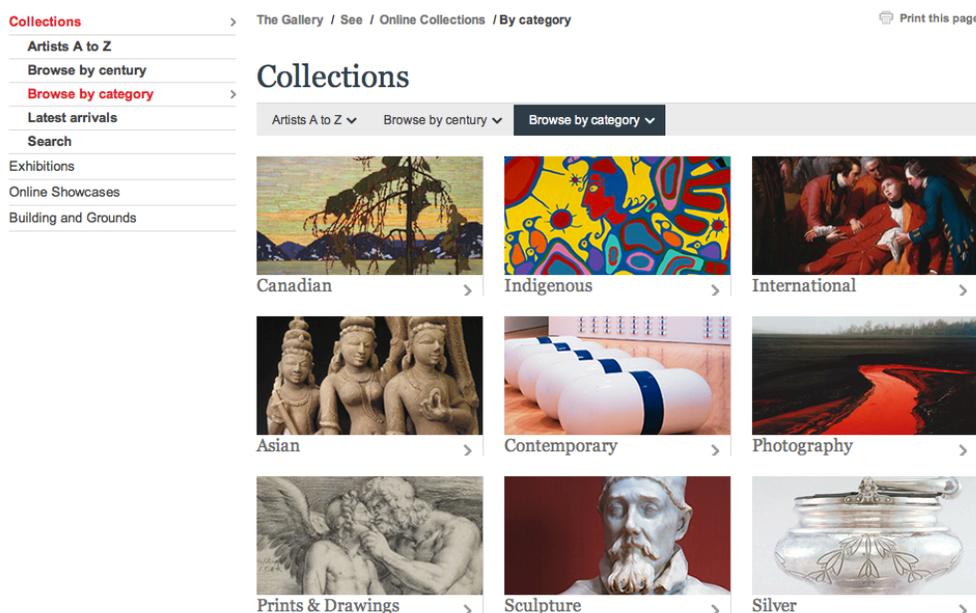


Figure 2: National Gallery of Canada. (2013). *Screen capture of 'Collections' webpage*. Retrieved from [http://www.gallery.ca/en/see/collections/category\\_index.php](http://www.gallery.ca/en/see/collections/category_index.php)

While the current website boasts a great number of organizational and technological advancements, one of the most glaring critiques is related to the internal search feature, the small text box located in the upper right of the homepage. Bringing the five outwards facing sites together into one comprehensive site allowed for internal searches of all the Gallery’s resources were dramatically improved as a result of the 2011

upgrade. Viewers are now able to perform a simultaneous comprehensive search of the Gallery's entire collections rather than having to search each outward facing site individually. Entering a specific name, title or catalogue information of an object into the internal search will display closely related results and hyperlinks allowing the viewer to access the information directly.

Conducting a search of the website by typing 'Voice of Fire' into the search box will yield approximately sixteen results. The first entry appears as a link to the specific *Voice of Fire* webpage where images, biographical and catalogue information can be found. In addition to the search box on the homepage, there is an alternative search method which systematically navigates the website sections and sub-sections. A knowledgeable viewer will either enter the information into the search field on the homepage or can quickly progress through the choices presented by the sections and subsections. This method allows the viewer to progress from the 'See' website section from the homepage, and then proceed to the 'Collections' website subsection. Knowing the title of the artwork, the artist, the medium or the time period when it was created will likely yield the most accurate search for relevant materials. Navigating via the 'Collections' page, the viewer then has the choice of searching for an artifact based on the name of artist, browsing by century or by theme using nine predetermined categories. The predetermined search categories found on the 'Collections' webpage are: Canadian, Indigenous, International, Asian, Contemporary, Photography, Prints & Drawing, Sculpture and Silver. Lacking these specific details about an artifact will result in less accurate searches. A viewer looking for *Voice of Fire* must know that Newman is an American artist making his paintings and sculptures a part of the International, rather than

the Contemporary, collection. Searching *Voice of Fire* using more colloquial or descriptive search terms like ‘red and blue vertical stripes’ will yield over 1,480 results. Similarly, searching for a historical painting like *The Entombment* by Rubens is as difficult as finding a modern work like *Voice of Fire*. Despite representing a specific narrative from the Bible, searching ‘Jesus’ as a subject in the Advanced Search webpage will not display the Rubens painting. This is because the description accompanying the image describes how Caravaggio’s work influenced Ruben’s style. While the 2011 version of the website was intended to be more user-friendly to allow viewers to “navigate intuitively” (Richardson, January 31, 2012), searching for specific information or works of art appear to still favour a particular type of audience. Viewers with the patience to sift through numerous results from the online archives and collections or those who possess some knowledge of art or art history are likely to have the most success searching the online collections. While the homepage itself is designed for both the general public and researchers (Chen, February 1, 2012), I argue the organization of the NGC website and the language and text which guide the search parameters favours viewers who have an understanding of museums, art and art history.

### ***5.2.2 ‘Calendar’ & Change***

Progressing vertically down the page is the ‘Calendar’<sup>7</sup> section displaying detailed information about current events, lectures, tours and exhibits. Over half of the ‘Calendar’ widget section presents images of current exhibits, while the smaller section on the right is a scrolling textbox displaying information on Activities, Tours and Upcoming events on linked tabs. These widgets are hyperlinked to other parts of the

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<sup>7</sup> This section is currently titled ‘Exhibitions & Collections’ however widget continues to display information regarding current exhibitions and calendar events at the National Gallery.

website which allows users to skip to current events or exhibits directly from the ‘Calendar’ section. The ‘Calendar’ widget is changed on a regular basis to reflect the most recent news, events, tours and exhibitions (Chen, February 1, 2012).

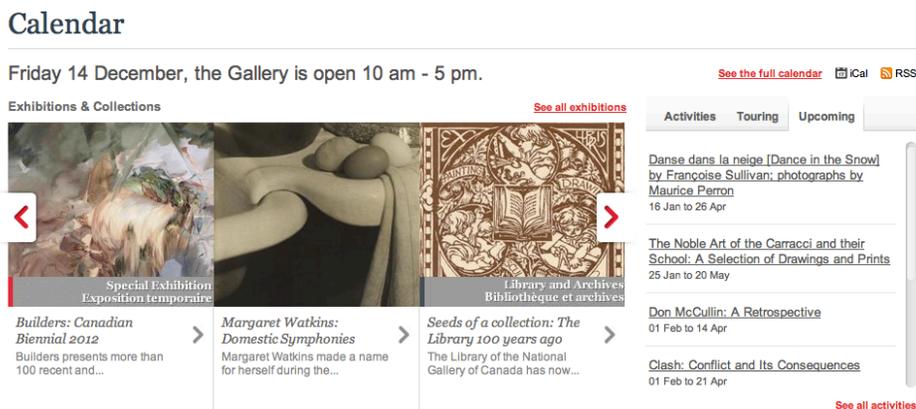


Figure 3: National Gallery of Canada. (2013). *Screen capture of ‘Calendar’ section of the homepage.* Retrieved from [www.gallery.ca/en/](http://www.gallery.ca/en/)

In 1997, Walsh suggested three guiding principles to facilitate museums to move from monologue to “infinitely richer and truer dialogue” (p. 81). He argued websites should “be built on the assumption of change”, websites should be interactive and “museums should exploit the Web’s ability to look below the surface, to present layers of knowledge that museums have not previously been able to show to the public” (Walsh, 1997, p. 84). Walsh’s first two points related to the website and are discussed in this chapter while the third point is discussed further in relation to audio guides in the following *Sensory Museum* chapter. His first guideline states that the museum websites should “be built with the assumption of change and provisionality. The Web is constantly changing and is never complete” (Walsh, 1997, p. 82). At a very basic level, the information found in the ‘Calendar’ section changes on a regular basis to reflect the most current events and exhibits that are continuously unfolding within the Gallery walls. As

participants noted in the *Development and History of the NGC Website* section of this chapter, technological changes are often needed for websites to continually meet audience needs and expectations.

However, the assumption of change and provisionality can also be a “real catch-22” from the perspective of those involved with the NGC website (Chen, February 1, 2012). The current flexible structure of the website means the NGC can respond to changing audience demands in order to “enrich the visitors experience of artworks in the collection” (Richardson, January 31, 2012). One notable example of this flexible structure is a recent reconfiguration of icons linking viewers to social networking sites (SNS) in the ‘Footer’ section of the homepage. During the data collection period, a Flickr icon was one of four SNS icons to appear at the bottom of the homepage (Figure 5). However, during the subsequent analysis phase of this project, the Flickr icon had been replaced with an icon linking viewers to *Pinterest*, an enormously popular photo sharing website, while the *Twitter*, *Youtube* and *Facebook* icons and links remain. In addition to adding content as exhibitions are developed, social networking links can evidently be rearranged too, ensuring that the website can be changed to accommodate changes in audience interests and attitudes.

However, the expectation that NGC will respond to change and implement audience demands can also put tremendous strains on institutional resources. Bhagrath observed that simply keeping the website technologically current is a significant undertaking, because it is a constantly evolving project “basically by the time you launch a website it’s time for a new redesign, that’s how fast it’s moving right now... It always has to be constantly updated, redesigned based on the new trends that are happening, new

technologies” (Bhagrath, February 1, 2012). Audio clips from visiting scholars “can go up very quickly” on the website but those projects, which seek to offer visual images online, like applications (‘apps’), are a significant undertaking (Richardson, January 31, 2012). While developing an ‘app’ for a mobile device may seem like a relatively straightforward task, in actuality it can take up to a year for these types of projects to reach completion (Richardson, January 31, 2012). Richardson noted that the speed of technological advancement outpaces the development timelines of the Gallery. Bhagrath indicated that one of the main concerns when developing new projects was not the technology itself but the ability to secure adequate resources, budget, staffing and “internal support” to maintain support of developing new technology (Bhagrath, February 1, 2012). As technological developments unfold even more rapidly, future trends are “becoming more and more difficult to predict” (Richardson, January 31, 2012) making website and technology development a constant “tightrope walk” (Chen, February 1, 2012).

### ***5.2.3 ‘Online Features’ & ‘Footer’***

The ‘Online Features’ section displays recently released media content, including new podcasts and video interviews that can be viewed on *Youtube*. This section contains information about the NGC’s social networking sites and displays recent Tweets, links of the NGC the blog, a place to sign up for the e-newsletter and a webcam with views of the outdoor space directly outside the National Gallery.

## Online Features

The screenshot shows the 'Online Features' section of the National Gallery of Canada website. It is divided into three main columns:

- Discover:** A video player featuring Maro Mayer, Director of the National Gallery of Canada.
- People's choice:** A section with three items, each with a 'Vote' button:
  - Croscup's Painted Room:** 849 votes
  - Inuit Galleries:** 674 votes
  - Library and Archives:** 888 votes
- Most Recent Podcast:** A section with a microphone icon and sound waves, indicating a podcast.

## Online Extras

The screenshot shows the 'Online Extras' section of the National Gallery of Canada website. It includes several links and icons:

- Blog:** The people behind the National Gallery of Canada share insights on art, their work, the Gallery or anything that crosses their mind. Read, learn and comment on their thoughts.
- Tweets from @gallerydotca:** A link to view tweets from the gallery's Twitter account.
- News Flashes:** A link to view news flashes.
- Newsletter:** Subscribe to our e-newsletter. Receive a monthly email summary of important information and current events. A great way to stay on top of everything that's going on at the Gallery!
- Webcam:** Find out what's happening on the National Gallery.

Figure 4: National Gallery of Canada. (2013). *Screen capture of 'Online Features' section of the homepage.* Retrieved from [www.gallery.ca/en/](http://www.gallery.ca/en/)

The 'Footer' section, located directly below the 'Online Features' section, is a reiteration of some of the important information to visitors such as hours of operation, address, a location map, an 'About' category and information relating to the Library & Research department. The four relatively small icons found in the 'Footer' section of the homepage, while unassuming, were identified by participants as some of the most important features of the entire website.

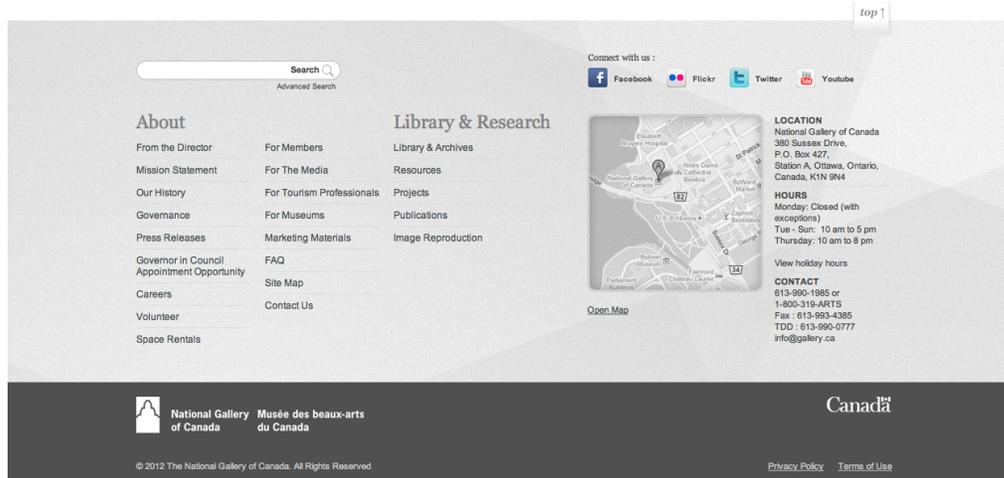


Figure 5: National Gallery of Canada. (2013). *Screen capture of 'Footer' section of the homepage.* Retrieved from [www.gallery.ca/en/](http://www.gallery.ca/en/)

#### 5.2.4 Social Networking Sites & Interactivity

Studies have shown that art historians have been “relatively slow and hesitant” to adopt new technologies citing lack of scholarly resources or poor image quality as some of the main reasons for abstaining from digital images and other e-resources (Beaudoin cited in Elam, 2007). However, as an institution, the NGC has a largely positive attitude towards technology used in museum practices. Members of the Web & New Media department noted that interest in the website had been increasing “over the last few years” and that staff at the NGC now viewed it as a powerful tool, particularly since the recent redesign (Bhagrath, February 1, 2012). In the six months preceding the interviews, participants noted the web has taken an ever more significant position within the Gallery (Bhagrath, February 1, 2012). Previously, the website had been considered an “on the side project” but the introduction of social networking sites has lead many within the Gallery to “embrace it [the website] even more” (Bhagrath, February 1, 2012).

Walsh’s second guideline in regards to improving museum communication online maintains, “the Web should exploit its powerful ability to be interactive” (1997, p. 82).

Walsh argues the type of interaction available on websites present an opportunity to address an important aspect of communication that is often ignored. Communication, he writes, “is not a monologue, but a dialogue. In order for true communication to exist, information must pass from both sides, like a conversation, so that each side can check and question the message” (Walsh, 1997, p. 83). Walsh argues that educational institutions often present information, respond to questions and evaluate how “effectively that information has been absorbed” however in the past, many institutions “by-pass the feedback approach”, presenting information to viewers but failing to respond to questions or reflect the adequacy of displays, texts and exhibits (Walsh, 1997, p. 83). In addressing audience feedback, the NGC has made significant advancements, conducting extensive usability studies with audiences and entirely redesigning the website to better suit the needs of viewers. Whether viewers are children learning about art for the first time or adult, professional researchers, NGC staff have created content, exhibitions, activities entirely redesigning website itself in an effort to fulfill the needs and expectations of various subsets of the Canadian public.

In the interviews, social networking sites were identified as key channels for engaging in direct dialogue and discussion with the public. Although SNS like *Twitter* could be used to exclusively promote National Gallery news, exhibitions and programs, staff endeavors to make online communication a two-way exchange. Richardson states that museums intentionally avoid engaging in one-way communication because “it quickly became apparent to museums that that they would not create lasting relationships, that would not engage people, that wouldn’t get buy in” (Richardson, January 31, 2012). Since, “people want to be heard and to have that kind of engagement and conversation

with the institutions that they care about” the Gallery uses social media to facilitate dialogue rather than as a marketing tool focusing solely on outward communication (Richardson, January 31, 2012).

The NGC uses four social networking sites<sup>8</sup> to communicate with audiences and broadcast information. Three of these social media websites, *Facebook*, *Twitter* and *Youtube*, were discussed at length by participants during interviews and identified as an important feature of the current website. Connection to social networking sites are integrated into the NGC website in the form of links to the corresponding sites. Kozinets observes, “social networking sites operate under the assumption that affiliates are already pre-existing, and use technological connection to intensify them” (2010, p. 32). Similar to the NGC website itself, staff feel that social media has the potential to appeal to an already captive audience by “preach[ing] to the choir on social media” by engaging “art aficionados” as well as potentially engaging entirely new audiences (Chen, February 1, 2012). However, while participants agreed with Kozinets’ assertion that SNS can be useful in connecting with knowledgeable art audiences, NGC staff also identified that sites like *Facebook* and *Twitter* could be used to attract new audiences. The Web & New Media department indicated that they were particularly interested in using social media as a tool to dispel misconceptions that the museum is only a place for “certain group[s]”, which caters to those viewers who are “well off, more educated” (Chen, February 1, 2012). While the focus will continue to be about sharing art and art objects, there is an interest in making the physical Gallery spaces themselves more multi-functional and

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<sup>8</sup> In the time between the data collection stage and the analysis, the *Flickr* icon has been removed from the ‘Footer’ section of the homepage. It has been replaced by a *Pinterest* icon which links viewers to an official NGC page hosted on the *Pinterest* website. *Youtube*, *Facebook*, and *Twitter* icons linking viewers to official NGC pages on these sites remain.

inviting to new and different audiences (Richardson, January 31, 2012). To help combat the misconception that the NGC is only for certain audiences and activities, interview participants noted that the Gallery was actively challenging public perception about museum spaces to make the public aware that the Gallery is a space which is “open to anybody, you can come and do anything you want here” (Chen, February 1, 2012). To the Web & New Media staff, social media has the tremendous potential to reach “those people who aren’t aficionados, who may enjoy the Gallery, maybe introduce them to art” with the hope that “they’ll start to love art or maybe we can introduce them to some of the other things that we offer that aren’t, that don’t have to be hard core art-like” (Chen, February 1, 2012).

### **5.3 Discussion & Summary**

Interview participants, curators and art historians (Heller, Murray, Friedman & Stone, 2005; Ho, 2005; Kidd & Nemiroff, 1990; Smith, 1990b; Thomson, 1990) agreed that the experience of seeing *Voice of Fire* is largely dependent on sensory features that are difficult, and in some cases impossible, to reproduce online (discussed in more detail in the following *Sensory Museum* chapter). While the sensory experience may not be replicable in an online setting, I argue that some essential contexts of the museum experience, the personal, physical and social contexts of the Interactive Experience Model (Falk & Dierking, 1992) do translate into an online setting. Duncan writes that museums resemble traditional ritual sites both architecturally and functionality, leading visitors to “bring with them the willingness and ability to shift into a certain state of receptivity. Like other traditional ritual sites, museum space is “carefully marked off and culturally designated as special, reserved for a particular kind of learning experience and

demanding a special quality of attention” (Duncan, 1991, p. 91). While online spaces may lack the physical structure that encourage certain kinds of attention and attitudes in viewers, participant descriptions of the website indicates that the similarly virtual spaces ‘marked off’, given boundaries and reserved for specific learning and viewing experiences.

The website is not adept at communicating many aspects of the sensory museum experience, and I argue its usefulness is in relation to its ability to communicate information to audiences. Interview participants indicated that the home page was designed to act as a ‘tourist destination’, a place where people go to see specific things as well as catering to research oriented audiences (Chen, February 1, 2012). Visitation to the website is therefore very purpose driven, meaning the general public and researchers are understood to visit the website to research materials or learn more about current exhibits.

Participants discussed the website itself and social media sites as the main forms of online communication. In regards to the communicative goals of the webpage, as described by interview participants, I believe the home page is very effective. Visitation, exhibition and event information is clearly presented to the two target NGC audiences in an organized, concise manner. The home page provides visitors from the general public with an excellent snapshot of current Gallery events, news and exhibitions while inclusion of the offset ‘Library & Research’ category allows researchers to move efficiently from the home page to areas of the website with more advanced content. The extensive use of large images in the widgets is enticing and appropriate for an institution focused on the arts. Additionally, the inclusion of hyperlinks within these images makes

navigating from the home page directly to an alternate page containing the desired information very simple for all types of audiences. However, moving outside the dedicated home page 'space' or searching for information that is not highlighted as curated or hyperlinked images on the home page requires a certain degree of artistic fluency. As previously written, locating a specific work of art using the search box on the main page or traversing the 'Collections' webpages in a more methodical fashion requires a viewer to 'speak the language' and favours viewers with a robust command of art and art history knowledge and terminology.

The language that defines the rest of the website may speak to a particular art-centric audience but staff saw potential in social media communication to cultivate new audiences. Building upon their already captive audience, staff at the NGC hope their efforts on social media would entice new spectators to visit their website and hopefully the physical museum itself. The NGC is very analytic in their use of social media and desire to engage audiences in dialogue using social media is reflective of decisive efforts on the part of museums to utilize more inclusive communication strategies. Overall, I think the NGC's migration to specific social media with the intention of connecting with audiences enthusiastic about art and museums is a positive trend. In some cases, a viewer might use social media by following the NGC on Twitter to move from a novice art spectator to becoming a more engaged one comfortable with visiting the website or even the physical museum itself. However, the NGC is concerned with the arts and their mandate explicitly specifies their institutional goals and values revolve around the arts and visual arts. The breadth of material communicated via social media is diverse and the Gallery endeavors to share not only information of their collection but also the news,

research, events and exhibitions from the art world at large. Given their area of expertise, any material shared on the website or on social media websites is almost certainly related in art, the visual arts or museums in some way. Kozinets identified that social media operates “under the assumption that affiliates are already pre-existing” and intensified through online connection and interaction (2010, p. 32). According to Kozinets’ observation, social media is best used for communicating with and strengthening online relationships with already existing audiences rather than forging entirely new connections.

The online Gallery space lacks the architectural features of a physical building but a visitor still makes a conscious choice to visit the NGC website and like the physical museum is “a setting that visitors, usually freely, *choose* to enter” (Falk & Dierking, p. 3). The personal context addresses viewer’s motivation for attending a museum, their interests, how these factors shape expectations. Importance is placed on personal experience, which “incorporates a variety of experiences and knowledge, including varying degrees of experience in and knowledge of the content and design of the museum” (p. 3). Interviews indicated that users are likely to use the website as a “tourist destination” (Chen, February 1, 2012), choosing to spend time on the NGC website searching for information about the artifacts in the collection or about the Gallery. While Falk and Dierking were specifically addressing viewer’s knowledge and level of comfort navigating the *physical* museum, similar statements could be made about the website as well. Those viewers with little interest in the national collection are unlikely to be motivated to visit the Gallery website or engage with the institution on social media. Rather than speak to all Canadians, the website is designed to fulfill the needs to

researchers will a specific art-based knowledge or those viewers who are motivated to learn more about art and museums.

## Chapter Six: Findings & Discussion - The Sensory Museum

### 6.1 Objective

The preceding chapter explored the development and the perceived motivations behind the redesign of the NGC website. At the forefront was resolving communication and usability issues. In addition to the website, social media was discussed at length and identified as an area of potential transformation. The *Sensory Museum* chapter will discuss the major, overarching subject matter and data related to sensory elements of the museum experience. The *Voice of Fire* chapter proposed that the unfavourable reception of Newman's painting is partially due to the inability of reproduction to accurately convey integral sensory elements. There were communicative issues which resulted in *Voice of Fire* being poorly communicated to the Canadian public as participants noted in the website *Findings & Discussion* chapter however, the National Gallery's use of their website has resolved some of these major communicative issues. Magnification and other technological advancements have improved the quality of images available, giving the Gallery their own space for developing their own resources to aid viewers in learning more about art, regardless of where they reside. While the website presents a significant advance from mass communication capabilities of the early 1990s, participants conceptualized their sensory understanding of *Voice of Fire* in person as a complex multisensory experience and one that cannot be recreated in its entirety online.

Interview participants agreed that the virtual setting did not fully replicate the physical experience however, they argued that there was still tremendous value and potential in websites as forums of communication and dialogue. While the website alone

cannot capture multisensory experience, participants assert that it is a valuable communicative tool. Rather than adopting a ‘top down’ approach based on lecturing, the museums have changed their communication strategies. Interview participants from the NGC argued that the website, and other forms of technology like audio guides, are useful for communicating textual information and creating spaces for this dialogue. I argue the website is a tool for translating and facilitating elements of the museum experiences in a virtual setting rather than ineffectively replicating or communicating the totality of the multisensory museum event.

Unlike Filippini-Fantoni and Bowen (2008), who asserted that the website could act as a substitute for the physical museum, NGC professionals felt that the virtual and physical were very different experiences. Richardson notes that the website has tremendous advantages, allowing audiences to consume and magnify images in ways that are unavailable in real life but asserts “you can’t say that you’ve seen the artwork online... even the best digital reproduction, even the highest resolution image” cannot completely replace the original (Richardson, January 31, 2012). While “the web can be really useful... you can’t say that you’ve seen the piece online in the same way that you experience it up close” (Richardson, January 31, 2012). Members of the Web & New Media team also shared this perspective, noting that while the text is explicitly written for the website with the intent to “bring it as close as possible to the experience you would get” at the museum, participants acknowledge that accurately recreating physical experience of seeing *Voice of Fire* is limited in an online setting (Bhagrath, 2012, p. 5). Despite the availability of photographs online, participants agree that the ‘experience’ of viewing *Voice of Fire* hinges on multisensory rather than simply visual attributes.

## 6.2 Movement

In her research on the Slow City movement in England, Pink endeavored to think of the town as a “multisensory environment” which she investigated through the “prism of a modern western sensorium” (2009, p. 129). Taking a similar approach, I endeavored to understand the museum, gallery and the website itself as multisensory sites, which could be understood as “the strange combination and interweaving of memory, imagination, embodied experience ... and more” (Pink, 2009, p. 120). Research participants categorized their experiences with *Voice of Fire* as relating most strongly to sight, sound and movement (Pink, 2009, p. 81). Some sensory ethnography research, like Tilley’s research on the sensory dimensions of gardening (2006) or Pink’s writing on the sensory aspects of place-making in the Slow City movement (2008), explore a full range of sensory material as the researchers tasted, smelled, touched, listened and viewed their research subjects. However, unlike the work of Tilley, Pink and other sensory ethnographers, participants did not recognize the importance of all aspects of the western sensory model equally. Interview participants did not identify taste and smell as important to the museum experience but movement, a feature not strictly associated with the five-sense model, was identified as essential part of the experience of *Voice of Fire*.

While not traditionally considered one of the five senses, movement was a significant topic of discussion by participants. Similarly, as a researcher, my memories of moving around the exhibition space and the gallery itself are a powerful contribution to the total physical, sensory experience. The painting itself is said to evoke a sense of movement in viewers and acts “like a magnet in the room and draws people towards it” (Smith, 1990b, p. 4). When inside gallery C 214 viewers have two ways of approaching

the painting, either through an entrance opposite the painting or through a side entrance perpendicular to the painting connecting to another gallery displaying Impressionist works. Richardson argues that the way a viewer enters the contemporary gallery can change the impact *Voice of Fire* has on the audience. Entering the gallery space from the side entrance has “less” of an impact whereas approaching the work from the entrance opposite the wall where the painting is displayed results in a more significant experience (Richardson, 2012, p. 18). The reason for this, she argues, is that the entire building was designed around the idea of “processing upwards to the art” (Richardson, 2012, p. 18). The National Gallery features a long ramp extending from the main foyer to the galleries, which creates a feeling reminiscent of a “church-y, kind of nave-y, ceremonial aisle” leading viewers to the galleries where the art is displayed (Richardson, January 31, 2012). In her study on the Slow City movement, Pink found that her tour guides “appeared to employ forms of knowing derived from their own embodied emplaced experiences” helping them to recall sounds and particularities of locations which proved “crucial to the organization of the event” (Pink, 2009, p.130). For Richardson, her own embodied encounters moving around the physical space, knowing what the painting would look like depending on her entry into the room and which would provide the most impact was an important aspect of her experience and memory of the painting.

Richardson observed that the ability to move freely around a painting and the space where it is displayed could provide a viewer with important tangible and experiential information. For those unable to physically visit the National Gallery, *Voice of Fire* is available for viewing on the NGC’s official website. Websites present considerable advantages (discussed further in the following *Sight & Setting* section) but

Pauwels explains that the layout or structure of the website can effect the way viewers move through virtual spaces potentially resulting “in a very rigid structure (predetermined categories and spaces and pathways) or embody a more open space to wander around” (Pauwels, 2011, pg. 580). A viewer to the NGC website has the ability to choose their own path when navigating the website, selecting which images to view in the desired order but views of the artwork itself are limited to the predetermined camera angles. The photograph of *Voice of Fire* is fixed leaving the online art spectator with no choice but to view a painting from a prescribed perspective limiting movement to a linear, grid-like pattern. However, when viewing certain works of art, the inability to see a painting at various angles online presents a significant disadvantage. For instance, the painting *The Ambassadors* by Hans Holbein the Younger can be seen in unprecedented detail on the Google Art Project website. Using the website, the viewer can virtually navigate the gallery space where the painting is displayed or see the work in incredible detail. However, one of the important aspects of the painting is an elongated, distorted skull appearing in the foreground of the painting. Holbein painted the skull in anamorphic perspective, meaning that when the painting is viewed at a specific angle or vantage point, the skull appears to be proportional (H.W. Janson & A. F. Janson, 2004; Lacan, 1973, p. 93). This is the precisely the sort of angular movement that is not currently available when looking at art on the Google Art or NGC websites. Like *The Ambassadors*, a viewer to the *Voice of Fire* gallery benefits from moving freely around the exhibition space. When *Voice of Fire* is viewed in person and from an acute 45-degree angle, irregularities in the surface of the canvas become apparent, the tonality of the paint is altered and the unevenness of the line between the red and blue stripes

becomes more evident (L. McDougall, personal field notes, February 2, 2012). Situating oneself close to the painting reveals the reflection of the light off the surface making the blue paint appear like satin stretched over a canvas frame. The retinal sensations and optical features that are such a unique part of *Voice of Fire* are not observed in photographs or on websites and are limited in their ability to capture the subtleties of texture, rendering the paint flat and uniform. Digital images might be able to give viewers “the *impression or sensation*” of moving through a physical space, allowing them “to use their existing experiences of environments to sense what it might be or how it might feel to move through the ‘real’ locality represented on the screen”, providing a helpful reminder of the experience for those who have been to a museum but are limited in their ability to fully recreate the multisensory experience (Pink, 2011, p. 11).

### 6.3 Sight & Setting

In the case of *Voice of Fire*, the sensorial, embodied experience is closely connected to the physical space where the work is displayed. As noted in the *Voice of Fire* chapter, Newman meant for his painting to extend beyond the frame of the canvas to create an all-encompassing “sense of place” (Auping, 2007, p. 136, 144). Painter Robert Mangold emphasized that exhibition space was an integral part of Newman’s work arguing, “When you look at a Newman, you often find yourself thinking about the room and your place in it” (Auping, 2007, p. 147). Since its purchase, *Voice of Fire* has been displayed in a room that was “more or less custom built to display” the painting (Richardson, 2012, p. 13). The combination of the high, barrel-vaulted ceiling, its position in gallery C 214 and the lack of other artifacts positioned near the piece ensures *Voice of Fire* “has a lot of visual impact” and “has the room to breathe and sing”

(Richardson, January 31, 2012). However, as discussed in the *Voice of Fire* chapter, many Canadians are likely to know the work through photographic reproductions in newspapers, television or from the NGC website itself. If the size of the photograph is altered or if the image is cropped removing the context of display, it is difficult to glean the size of the piece or interpret any of the sensory features that make the work so memorable. To overcome the limitations of reproduction, the painting is sometimes photographed with spectators positioned closely to the canvas, or the image is photographed from further away to include more of the background and setting. This can be effective for giving viewers both a sense of the size of the painting as well as some context about the exhibition space where the painting is displayed (Richardson, January 31, 2012).

Placing viewers in front of the *Voice of Fire* when using still photography can provide the audience with some clues as to the scale of the painting, but photography is still less effective when reproducing the colour, optical features and minute details of *Voice of Fire*. Battro observes, “photographic or digital reproductions are not original works but more or less successful replicas on different support systems” and that viewing “an album of reproductions or visiting a website are significantly different acts from walking through a museum” (Battro, 2010, p. 145). Digital images reproduced on the NGC website are an effective method of disseminating images from the national collection but mechanical reproduction cannot replicate certain aspects of the original. Richardson argues that one of the most important features of *Voice of Fire* is “the immediacy of the experience of the real work of art” asserting she would not recommend a viewer *only* [emphasis added] viewing the work in an online setting (Richardson,

January 31, 2012). Despite the availability of digital images on museum websites, Richardson argues that the “immediate experience of the artwork ... can’t be paralleled” and the value of the experience lies in “the idea of being in front of something that is unique that’s been made by a human being”, a feature that cannot be replicated in an online setting (Richardson, January 31, 2012). In the case of *Voice of Fire*, much of the experience of seeing the work is dependent on visual and sensory attributes that can only be experienced in person. Part of the value in the experience of seeing *Voice of Fire* in person is that the originality of the piece is evident, and a viewer can “appreciate how it was made and to examine it up close”, witness the optical illusions the colours create or reflect on, “What does the scale do? How does it make me feel?” (Richardson, January 31, 2012).

Recently, museum websites display high-resolution photographs and magnification features which allow viewers to ‘zoom in’ and see paintings in more detail. The NGC has incorporated high-resolution images and zoom technology into their own website, notably in conjunction with the 2011 exhibition, *Caravaggio and His Followers in Rome*<sup>9</sup> (Chen, February 1, 2012). Staff noted these zoom features are a significant development and hugely beneficial for spectators, providing detailed views of paintings and artifacts that often could not be obtained in person (Richardson, January 31, 2012). Rather than seeing a small image on a website or in print, the ability to greatly magnify an image provides unprecedented views of brush strokes and other minute details found in paintings. The ability to view high-resolution images online has quickly become an essential component of museum websites leading audiences to expect these types of

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<sup>9</sup> For more detail see Franklin, D., & Schütze, S. (2011). *Caravaggio and his Followers in Rome*. New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press.

magnified views (Chen, February 1, 2012).

The idea that reproduction allows for more detailed or ‘better’ views of works of art is a common rationale for using types of magnification technology but this argument merits further interrogation. In the case of *The Entombment*, the high-resolution photograph allows a viewer to see the work in unprecedented detail which might not be available in a gallery due to crowds of people or physical barriers. The crux of the magnification rationale hinges on the a premise that detailed, high-resolution images offer an advantage over seeing a work in person. Implicit in the use of magnification tools is an implication that *seeing* something in more detail is optimal and the opportunity to view art in this way will impart additional knowledge. The visual bias of museums is well documented (Candlin, 2010; Classen & Howes, 2006; Stewart cited in Classen & Howes, 2006, p. 200) and although current literature advocated for a more nuanced, sensory, bodily understanding of art and museums, the use of zoom features reaffirms the hierarchy of sight in relation to the other senses.

In the chapter five, I observed successfully searching for certain types of art on the NGC website favoured viewers with a considerable grasp of language and terms that guide search parameters. Similarly, a viewer must be taught what to look for or come with the predisposed knowledge in order to take full advantage of these magnified views. Simply looking at the magnified image of *The Entombment* on the NGC website can be a novelty for relatively new art audiences but the Gallery’s inclusion of a statement explaining that Caravaggio influenced the style of Rubens can provide some context for the painting and ideally, what spectators can learn.

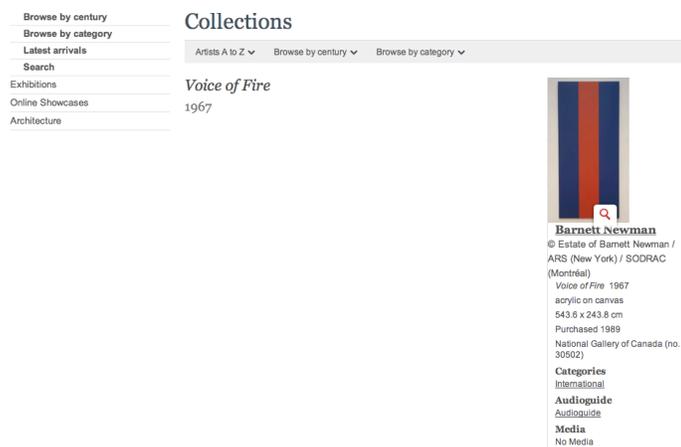


Figure 6: National Gallery of Canada. (2013). *Screen capture of Voice of Fire webpage*. Retrieved from [www.gallery.ca/en/see/collections/artwork.php?mkey=35828](http://www.gallery.ca/en/see/collections/artwork.php?mkey=35828)

While there are numerous photographs of artifacts and art objects from the national collection on the NGC website, *Voice of Fire* is uniquely positioned to highlight the limitations of using websites and digital technology to communicate sensorial information of works of art. Figure 6 is a screen capture from the NGC page dedicated to *Voice of Fire*. On the webpage, the painting appears relatively small in scale, roughly the width of a postage stamp depending on monitor size, and is accompanied by relevant textual information about the artist and the painting itself. While the dimensions of the piece are included, the lack of contextual information about the exhibition setting gives little information that would lead viewers to understand the monumental size of the painting. Using the magnification tool, viewers can choose to zoom in on the image to see the painting in more detail, as seen in Figure 7.

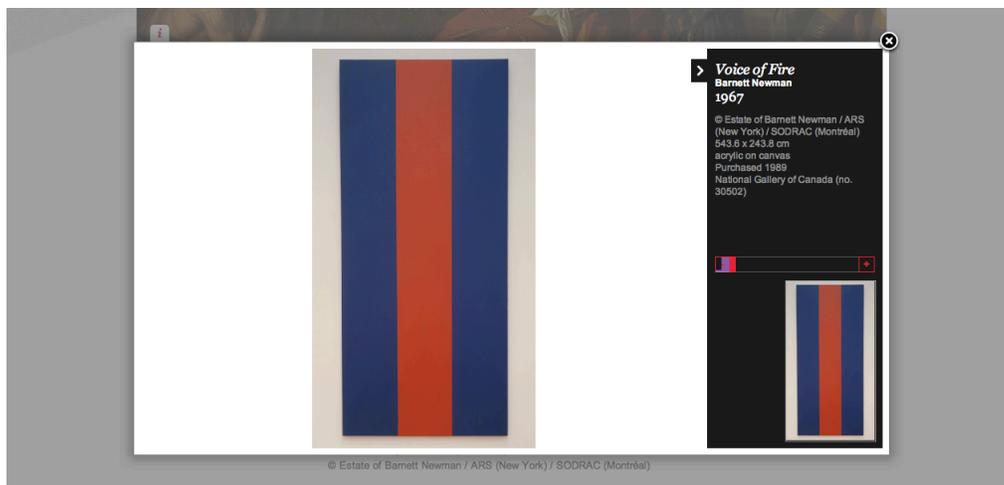


Figure 7: National Gallery of Canada. (2013). *Screen capture of magnification of Voice of Fire webpage*. Retrieved from [www.gallery.ca/en/see/collections/artwork.php?mkey=35828](http://www.gallery.ca/en/see/collections/artwork.php?mkey=35828)

Even if a viewer were to enlarge the scale of the painting, the optical effects that result of *Voice of Fire*'s striking size cannot be reproduced effectively. Newman's work is incredibly difficult to photograph and attempts to reproduce his work result in "highly diagrammatic" and often inferior photographs (Heller et al., 2005, pg. 16). Photographing Newman's work is inherently difficult because much of the painting's significance is tied to particular sensory experiences which create "fields of sensation" that are "infinitely encompassing" but also present "very finite, specific condition[s]" (Shiff, p. 90). While the website is an effective way to engage viewers, facilitate conversation and "provide all kinds of information", Richardson argues that viewing *Voice of Fire* online "tells you something intellectually... but the emotional impact of it and for a lot of people, the spiritual impact of it, in person, in that space, can't be captured online" (Richardson, January 31, 2012). While websites are useful in communicating certain kinds of information, Richardson argues that, "nothing online, I think, can compare to the experience of that work", explaining that photography does not give an accurate sense of scale or context of display ultimately changing the experience and impact of the piece

(Richardson, January 31, 2012). While there are undoubtedly certain advantages to using websites to disseminate digital photographs of art, “There is a long way to go before esthetic pleasure can equal gazing at the original art work” (Battro, 2010, p. 147).

#### 6.4 Online Movement & Space

While online representation of *Voice of Fire* may appear diagrammatic and movement in relation to the painting very restricted, viewing the painting online allows for greater movement throughout the entirety of the Gallery’s collections. The bottom of the *Voice of Fire* page displays rotating images of other Newman works in the National Gallery collection, allowing viewers to explore each artwork on a separate webpage. In total, the NGC has six Newman pieces in their collection: five paintings and one sculptural work. However, during my visit to the Gallery, only four works were on display: *Voice of Fire*, *Yellow Edge* (1968), *Here II* (1965) and *The Way I* (1951). A finite amount of space prevents the entirety of the Gallery’s holding from being on display at once, meaning certain works are chosen for permanent or temporary display. However, online a viewer can seamlessly move between separate spaces in the Gallery, viewing works not on public display, past exhibitions or entirely different branches to learn more about specific artists or conduct further research. On the right hand side of the *Voice of Fire* webpage is a hyperlink, which takes viewers to the ‘Library & Archives’ database where books and archival items related to Newman and his artworks from the NGC collection are automatically displayed. Books can be requested for loan and some archival entries are available online in portable document format (PDF). In Ottawa, the Library department is located on the second floor. To visit, a viewer must enter the main entrance, ascend the colonnade, proceed to the rotunda and climb the stairs where a

librarian must admit a viewer. While the Library is extremely welcoming to researchers, physically entering the space is a multistep process. Entry requires a visitor's pass, I was required to register my computer and all personal items, other than essential research materials, were left with security. Due to the sensitivity of items in the collection movement into the physical Library space was not as streamlined as movement through the rest of the public spaces.

There is a clear visual separation between the virtual exhibition spaces and the Library database, which cues a viewer that they are entering another section of the online space. For example, the Library page opens in another tabbed window, the webpage does not include any images and is organized like a database with numerous entries arranged vertically highlighting catalogue information. However, the online Library and exhibition spaces 'feel' much more condensed and easier to traverse. Instead of being located in an entirely separate section of the National Gallery, where entry is mitigated by a series of institutional checkpoints, the online Library space is simply one click away from the virtual space where *Voice of Fire* is displayed. While the sensory experience of seeing *Voice of Fire* or *Yellow Edge* in an online setting might pale in comparison to seeing these paintings in person, the online spaces provide a comprehensive view of the entirety of Newman's works in the National collection, an experience that was not available during my visit to Ottawa.

## **6.5 Sound & Spaces**

Contemporary museums are often considered "a paradigmatic visual institution" (Candlin, 2010, p. 1). While sight is undoubtedly important, Richardson noted that using predominantly visual technology like websites to look at *Voice of Fire* is challenging

because “so much of that work depends upon the physical experience” (Richardson, January 31, 2012). As noted in the *Voice of Fire* chapter, the display of Newman’s painting and its surrounding environment are an essential component of understanding the artist’s work. Newman’s goal was to create a “sense of place” an undertaking that would require him to “develop a new approach to space that would in fact place the viewer in a new relationship to the painting itself” (Auping, 2007, p. 144). Auping observed that “Newman’s paintings present us with slabs of colour that at times appear to have as much physical presence as they do retinal sensation” (Auping, 2007, p. 148). Newman’s intent was to explore optical features and challenge notions of space and presence. When I asked what it is like to see *Voice of Fire* in person, Richardson indicated the painting evoked an auditory experience. My question alluded to the visual aspects of *Voice of Fire* but Richardson remarked that the work “feels like music”, noting that she considered the piece to be very “aural” (Richardson, January 31, 2012). While the emphasis of art museums and galleries tends to be visual, Richardson’s response more closely aligns with Mitchell’s assertion that “all the so-called visual media turn out to involve the other senses (especially touch and hearing)” (Mitchell, 2005, p. 257). Mitchell advocated for the study of visual materials as “the intricate braiding and nesting of the visual with the other senses” (Mitchell, 2005, p. 265). This “intricate braiding” of visual and sensory elements closely aligns with how interview participants described the virtual and physical museum experiences. Richardson stating that “seeing” *Voice of Fire* made her “hear” and “feel” music indicating that her sensory elements intersected when seeing the painting in gallery C 214 (Richardson, January 31, 2012).

During my visit to the National Gallery the connection between *Voice of Fire* and

sound was quite literal given the placement of Janet Cardiff's installation *Forty-Part Motet* displayed in the reconstructed Rideau Chapel room directly below gallery C 214. *Forty-Part Motet* is a site-specific audio installation piece that plays a reworking of the choral musical composition "Spem in Alium" by Thomas Tallis. The installation is a "sculpturally conceived sound piece" where forty speakers, arranged in a circular fashion, play back the individual components of the song through the speakers. *Forty-Part Motet* potentially alters a viewer's conception of exhibition space. Like *Voice of Fire*, the experience of seeing *Forty-Part Motet* extends beyond the 'canvas' into extended gallery spaces and blurring the physical boundaries between the various rooms and exhibition spaces of the National Gallery. Physically, when Rideau Chapel felt removed from the rest of the Gallery and standing inside the closed space inside the exhibit felt very insular. The Chapel isolates viewers from the rest of the Gallery while the circle of speakers encloses the viewer in the music. However, the sound of choir music spills out of the Chapel and ultimately drew me from the second floor gallery where Newman's work is displayed to the Rideau Chapel. In this sense, the artist's use of sound allowed for the sculptural aspects of the exhibit to extend far beyond the physical confines of the gallery space. While Newman's paintings evoke feelings of space through their use of scale and colour, which extend beyond the frame and into the gallery space itself, Cardiff's work also invokes a sense of space through bodily, sensory experiences.

## 6.6 Experience

The persistence of traditional, museum-going spectatorship in a time when high-resolution images are easily available online suggests that photography and digital reproduction online have difficulty accurately communicating the sensory museum

experience. Reproductions have not replaced original works of art and fears that reproduction would negatively affect museum attendance have been largely unfounded. In actuality, reproductions have a positive effect on museums leaving viewers with the desire to “be in the *presence* [emphasis added] of the original work” (Anderson, 1997, p. 19). Pine and Gilmore state that experiences occur when an individual has “been engaged on an emotional, physical, intellectual, or even spiritual level”, a statement similar to how many viewers describe the experience of seeing *Voice of Fire* (Pine & Gilmore, 1999, p.12-13). Brydon Smith reported that seeing the painting was a “breath-taking experience” for viewers and one which invoked in him “a sense of contemplation and really begins to touch me in a...I would say spiritual way. It puts me in touch with the wonder of being alive in that place” (Smith, 1990b, p. 3, 5). Thompson also described *Voice of Fire* as possessing all the hallmarks of a “fine piece of art” arguing the work can be “awe-inspiring. It can be noble. It can be the ferocity of colours. It can be surface texture, the support. It can be due to the feelings of provocation and talents that a work of art creates in the viewer” (Thomson, 1990a, p. 3). In the case of *Voice of Fire* that ‘experience’ draws from a mixture of sensory experiences. According interview participants, archival documents and Pine and Gilmore’s model, *Voice of Fire* has the markers of a memorable experience weaving together sound, visual elements and movement. While it is possible to listen to the song “Spem in Alium” outside the gallery space or view *Voice of Fire* on the NGC website, the experience of moving through the physical exhibition space and subsequently around the entire National Gallery itself culminate to make a completely unique and memorable experience which “can continue to linger in the mind of the viewer long after the event is over” (Pine & Gilmore, 1999,

p.12-13).

### **6.7 Museum Communication**

The previous section established that the website is limited in its capacity to recreate the totality of the multisensory museum experience, particularly when looking at a work like *Voice of Fire*. However, museum websites have become a mainstay within the industry and the recent complete redesign of the NGC site indicates the National Gallery feels that these tools are worthy of significant investment of time and resources. While a website or digital image cannot recreate the experience of seeing an original work of art in person, analysis of digital reproduction of art on a museum website shows that communicating elements of the sensory experience, whether via digital photographs, websites or audio guides, is an essential component of facilitating the museum experience. Education, Battro writes, “has become one of the most important activities of a museum and takes multiple forms according to circumstance and place. The virtual museum has opened up this *educational* niche with enormous success” (Battro, 2010, p. 145) and within the physical museum, technology can be used to guide viewers in understanding the multisensory elements of *Voice of Fire*. While websites, digital photography and audio guide *cannot* give viewers a complete sensory understanding of the museum experience, they are an effective tool for communicating other forms of information. Technological aides are not intended to faithfully reproduce or recreate a multisensory museum experience, rather their function is to share as much of the collections as possible, the best that technology will allow, while creating a forum of dialogue, communication and exchange. Further, this current approach to museum communication reinforces a shift in museum communication of the 1950s where the

introduction of technology allowed for a dialogue-focused, ‘bottom-up’ approach emphasizing the facilitation of personal participation and learning needs of viewers (Bradburne, 2008; Breman, 2011; Falk & Dierking, 2000). The following section will outline the NGC’s current position on the *Voice of Fire* controversy in the 1990s and how technologies like audio guides and websites in particular can facilitate the learning needs of viewers both online and in the physical gallery.

### **6.8 The Historical Debate & Shift in Contemporary Museum Communication**

Traditionally, the ability to read a painting and understand its meaning has been a necessary exercise when attempting to understand the historical and artistic significance of a work of art. In the case of *Voice of Fire*, the audience’s lack of visual literacy was credited as one reason why the piece failed to gain support from the majority of Canadians (Kidd & Nemiroff, 1990). In response to the initial *Voice of Fire* controversy in the early 1990s, the NGC more closely aligned with a more ‘top-down’ lecture-based model of museum communication, appearing on radio and television to educate an irate public in regards to the significance of the piece. As written in the *Voice of Fire* chapter, the NGC justified the purchase from a more art historical perspective and encouraged viewers to come to the museum to hone their visual literacy skills. Since modern works often possess a lack of narrative qualities, they require a different set of ‘reading’ skills and must be appreciated in a different manner. Art historians, curators and staff at the NGC possess a high degree of visual literacy and knowledge about art and art history while the public is often encouraged to hone these skills in order to obtain a greater degree of visual literacy. The different levels of understanding between the NGC and the public during the initial controversy in the 1990s were the result of “cognitive

dissonance” (Richardson, January 31, 2012). Today, rather than thinking of the dispute as resulting from a lack of visual reading literacy, the interviews suggest the Gallery thinks of the miscommunication partially arising from difficulty of sharing and communicating individual experiences and the sensory encounters.

Although furor over the acquisition has largely subsided, the painting is still considered a polarizing piece. However, the interviews found that the Gallery does not view these feelings of discontent directed towards *Voice of Fire* as entirely negative. Rather than view the current debate about the painting as a public relations failure or miscommunication, the NGC frames the situation as an opportunity to talk with the public about art. Richardson argues that scandal and controversy are often beneficial for museums, fueling interest in collections and igniting conversation, dialogue and debate (Richardson, January 31, 2012). Acting as a mediator, the Gallery encourages dialogue in a “forum where you can somewhat safely explore some of the issues” where input of the public is important and encouraged and balanced by “professionals who have devoted their lives and careers to studying and thinking about, looking at art, and helping to build and shape that national collection” (Richardson, January 31, 2012). With the initial *Voice of Fire* controversy in 1990, the Gallery was largely unprepared for the “depth of hostility” directed toward the painting leading the NGC to justify the purchase retroactively (Smith, 1990b). Arguably, the resulting media appearances aligned with the traditional one-way museum communication, as curators appeared on radio and television to explain and justify the purchase to an audience with a limited understanding of art and visual language. Today, the Gallery takes a more dialogue-focused approach when introducing new contemporary works from the collection to the public. The NGC now

hosts the Canadian Biennial show where the National Gallery displays their latest acquisitions in contemporary art. The purpose of this exhibit is to show the public what “your museum bought with your taxpayer money” and demonstrate how the National Gallery is supporting Canadian and international artistic talent (Richardson, January 31, 2012). However, most importantly, it is a chance to engage in dialogue with the public and create a “real opportunity for debate” (Richardson, January 31, 2012). The role of the Gallery has shifted from more lecture oriented to one focused on mediation, leading the NGC to develop different types of programming like audio guides, tours and websites with the purpose of facilitating a range of abilities and desires.

### **6.9 Sensory Dimensions of Technology & Museum Communication**

Audio guides are used extensively by the National Gallery of Canada and include material exploring the permanent collection, including one segment on *Voice of Fire* (Richardson, January 31, 2012). While audio guides may appear to adhere to an older, lecture-focused model of one-way communication in actuality, the Gallery conceptualizes its vast audio guide offering as an opportunity to bring “different voices into the conversation” (Richardson, January 31, 2012). Rather than simply consult art historians and other art experts, the Gallery actively recruits participants who are “experts in their own right but may not be experts in the field of art” to contribute audio guide content (Richardson, January 31, 2012). While not exclusively available on the internet, audio guides represent a significant development in the museum’s ability “to present layers of knowledge that museums have not previously been able to show to the public” (Walsh, 1997, p. 84). One of their most recent projects is an audio guide tour conducted with well-known Canadian historian Charlotte Gray. Instead of discussing the artistic

significance of the paintings, Gray's tour presents the collection from a personal and historical perspective. At the time of interview, there were two other audio tours being developed which discussed objects from the collection from a non-art historical perspective. One of these tours will discuss the botanical elements that appear in the works of art in the National Gallery collection exploring the grasses, trees, flowers and shrubbery found in paintings. The second tour in development was crafted under the guidance of an expert on costume textiles and fabric in art. Cultivating the perspective of an expert outside the specific field of art history resulted in a fascinating perspective because the textile expert "was looking at the artworks in a completely different way" (Richardson, January 31, 2012). Instead of reading the painting as an art historian might, the textile expert consulted for the audio guide was "reading the clothing in the figures in the portraits" (Richardson, January 31, 2012).

In addition to bringing other 'voices' into the Gallery conversation and changing perspective of museum communication, audio guides can further develop the sensory experience for viewers when used in the physical gallery. As the main "voice" of the collection, the extensive audio guide program includes "hundreds of stops" throughout the physical museum and many of these audio guides are available on the NGC website (Richardson, January 31, 2012). In her article on the Slow City movement, Pink argued that in order to understand how the townspeople thought of 'slow' the ethnographer must become "attuned to certain ways of being" in the space that they are studying (Pink, 2008, p. 192). Similarly, an ethnographer and audience member might benefit from becoming "attuned to certain ways of being" when visiting the *Voice of Fire* exhibition space. Audio guides, either streamed from museum websites or used in the physical

gallery, can help viewers to better understand the sensory elements of *Voice of Fire*. The audio guide developed specifically for *Voice of Fire*, which is also available on the NGC website, leads viewers through the experience of *how* to look at the painting. The clip begins, “In today’s world of multiple images and innumerable objects we’ve learned to survive by seeing quickly, in fact almost instantaneously. In the context of this gallery, we should perhaps stop and look differently, or more slowly” (Voice of Fire, audio guide). The viewer is cautioned against looking at the work too briefly. Newman’s exhibitions instructed viewers where to stand during his first solo exhibition when looking at his works, and similarly the NCG instructs viewers about how best to view the painting using the audio guide. Next, the viewer is directed to focus their vision on certain part of the painting, alerting them to the optical illusion that Newman intended,

For example, looking at this painting look at the right side of the red stripe where the red touches the blue, anywhere on that edge but keep looking at that edge. What you’ll notice at first is that it is not a straight edge in fact, it’s quite rugged and the longer you look at it the more crooked it appears. At this point it even seems to destabilize and you get the illusion of movement or a kind of vibration of that edge. Just inside the red you should see appearing a bright red glow, like a flame. Don’t let your eyes go too much in the red. Stay on the edge between the red and the blue and you’ll see the same phenomenon in the blue as the blue edge lights up like a blue flame. Always looking at the same edge, now focus on one specific spot. Wait and see what happens. How these two colours intensify, flickering, almost as if they were competing. They become light, electric,

fire-like. (Voice of Fire, audio guide)

The audience is familiarized with ‘the event’, a fire-like, electric flickering effect and is cued toward the more painterly aspects of the artwork, features which might be overlooked without adopting a more contemplative gaze.

### 6.10 Technology & Viewing Practices

The scale, as well as the accompanying visual and retinal illusions, are some of *Voice of Fire*'s most striking attributes when viewed in person. However, effects like the ‘spacedome’ require a certain kind of *looking* and *being* in the museum space and properly facilitating this experience is a persistent consideration. In a world where “we’ve learned to survive by seeing quickly, in fact almost instantaneously” audio guides are extremely useful for instructing people on how to slow down when looking at the painting, a mindset that is sometimes in opposition to museum spectatorship (Voice of Fire, audio guide). Smith and Wolf found that while viewers indicate that they would prefer to concentrate on a few works of art at one time, in practice, spectators feel compelled to “see the Museum (or the exhibitions)” in their entirety (Smith & Wolf, 1996, p. 235). As a result, viewers rarely look at a particular work for “a full minute, and five minutes is rare”, and are instead more inclined to give “20 seconds to a Velasquez, then 15 to a Goya” (Smith & Wolf, 1996, p. 235-236). This type of viewing is not inherently wrong and in circumstances when time is constrained, it is logical to view many paintings as efficiently as possible. However, some works particularly *Voice of Fire*, require more than 15 or 20 second glance for the full impact of the piece to resonate with the viewer. A cursory glance at *Voice of Fire* as one quickly circulates gallery C 214 makes it difficult to assess the optical illusions the piece is meant to evoke and is not the

ideal viewing environment according to Newman. Richardson advocated adopting a more contemplative mindset noting that the tendency to briefly gaze at *Voice of Fire* is perhaps one reason why the work fails to resonate with some viewers. When asked to describe the work to someone who has never seen *Voice of Fire* Richardson notes that one of the important features is the “immediacy of the experience of the real work of art” and that “it’s a piece that you do have to spend time with” in order to understand the significance (Richardson, January 31, 2012). Some of the optical features of the work require the viewer to gaze at the work for an extended period of time. Richardson speculates that this unfocused or distracted viewing is perhaps the root of why the piece fails to resonate with some viewers (Richardson, January 31, 2012). The seemingly simplistic composition of the piece combined with a lack of understanding about the historical importance of the work makes it a difficult painting to access. However, despite the lack of narrative or visual stimulation, *Voice of Fire* is a type of painting which “rewards close looking” Richardson argues because a slow, contemplative gaze can create an optimal viewing setting (Richardson, January 31, 2012).

In addition to audio guides, a second way the NGC can help to facilitate viewing is through direct participation with audience members when conducting tours. Similar to the audio guide speech, Richardson notes that educators encourage specific ‘ways of being’ and interaction when conducting tours with children or adult viewers. When interacting with children, teaching young viewers about Newman’s optical effects is made into an entertaining activity. Children are asked to direct their attention to the line between the blue and red for a period of time before turning their eyes to a white wall (Richardson, January 31, 2012). Performing this viewing exercise results in a reversal of

colours or flickering ‘event’ that Newman intended. During the process of learning about the artistic goals of Newman and the complex optical effects of his work, audience members are presented with an opportunity for contemplation and dialogue. Viewers are encouraged to engage in viewing activities when they first see *Voice of Fire* because it is entertaining but also because it “slows them down” allowing for “all kinds of contextual information that can be ceded in a conversation about Barnett Newman’s significance in the history of art, and what kind of period and style of art this belongs to” (Richardson, January 31, 2012). The NGC relays artistic and historical information through conversational exchange rather than participating in a top-down lecture about the physics behind Newman’s optical illusions or drilling participants about abstract expressionism, which will ideally lay the groundwork for personal participation, facilitate different styles of learning and conversations about art, experience and personal meaning.

### **6.11 Discussion & Summary**

Falk and Dierking write that museum websites can serve as an additional tool to “reinforce the museum experience” (2000, p. 201). They recognize that websites are designed to help viewers plan their visit but argue that websites have tremendous potential to help shape “postvisit purposes for example, by providing opportunities for visitors to get more in-depth information, further explore a topic of interest, or engage in some related activity” (Falk & Dierking, 2000, p. 201). Content, audio guides, biographical information, online exhibitions, found on the NGC website can be used to enhance what Falk and Dierking call “postvisit purposes”. However, description by interview participants indicate that online content and technology can be used pre-visit or in unison with visitation to cultivate a certain kind of spectatorship in viewers. In

particular, audio guides and websites can be used to cultivate the particular kind of slow, contemplative viewing that is best suited to seeing *Voice of Fire*. Audio guides available on the website bring material from the Gallery into viewers homes and attempts to describe *how* to look at the painting by guiding viewers through the act of looking and describing the optical illusions that can be created.

While the experience is not the same, using audio guides and social media can bring elements of Falk and Dierking's social and physical contexts outside the confines of the National Gallery and into viewer's homes. In certain ways, technology can help expand specific elements of the museum experience beyond the Gallery. However, some sensory experiences associated with certain works cannot be reproduced or reinforced by the website before or after the visit. This is particularly the case of works like *Forty-Part Motet* and *Voice of Fire* where the space of the physical gallery is essential. It is possible to listen to "Spem in Alium" outside the gallery space or 'tour' a virtual 3D rendering of the Rideau Chapel on the National Gallery website but the experience of the work lies in the combination of movement, sound, setting and the creation of "intricate braiding and nesting of the visual with the other senses" (Mitchell, 2004, p. 265). The sound spilling out of the Rideau Chapel and into many other exhibition rooms in the National Gallery reconfiguring the physical and sensorial boundaries within physical museum spaces.

While certain elements of Newman's work could merit an iconographical spiritual interpretation, there is no obvious religious imagery found in the piece. Nor does the biographical information found on the website cite any spiritual connection between Newman or his painting. The placement of *Voice of Fire* in gallery C 214 is often described as one of the most impressive features associated with the painting. However,

since all the walls in the gallery are quite tall it would be possible to choose to display the painting in several other places within the room. Smith noted that the construction of the room predated the purchase of *Voice of Fire* claiming that the NGC chose to pursue Newman's work because it would look "look absolutely magnificent in that space" and would be "one painting that would hold that wall" (Smith, 1990b). This arrangement of gallery C 214 is very similar to floor plans of historical churches where viewers enter a long rectangular shaped space, decorated by smaller works lining the walls. Traditionally, the most important and commanding work dominates the largest wall, typically located behind the altar. Similarly, the choice to display Cardiff's work in the Rideau Chapel gave this work a spiritual undertone. "Spem in Alium" deals with spiritual subject matter however, the song is performed in Latin and dates from the Renaissance. Save for viewers with an impressive knowledge of Latin or Renaissance motets, displaying Cardiff's piece in a white, bare modernist gallery setting, would likely diminish the spiritual reading of the work. The association between these works of art and a spiritual element of the museum experience are constructed by their display within the Gallery and particularly within certain spaces in the NGC.

A painting's display can have a profound effect on the way it is perceived by spectators. When I saw *Voice of Fire* in Ottawa, the painting appeared slightly different depending on the time of day, it was possible to see the intended 'spacedome' effect, and the sound of "Spem in Alium" spilling into the room reinforced the spiritual undertones noted by Richardson and Smith. My experience of seeing *Voice of Fire* in a gallery setting with the sounds of Cardiff's exhibition filtering into the space is a stark contrast from viewing the same work of art online. Richardson noted museums are places where

people choose to spend their leisure time and technology ultimately “changes in the way that we communicate as human being” and “changes in the way we spend our leisure time” (Richardson, January 31, 2012). The Gallery is a place where people can spend an afternoon, learn about art and as Chen noted, there is interest in using social media to communicate the potential for communal spaces within the gallery to become more social environments. The *Voice of Fire* and *Forty-Part Motet* exhibition spaces are constructed to evoke feelings of reverence and awe appropriate for such important works. Online viewing elicits a certain kind of spectatorship as well. Richardson described online viewers as “swimmers, skimmers and divers” observing that audiences will often ‘skim’ content and ‘dive’ into learning more about a topic that is particularly interesting (Richardson, January 31, 2012). Websites are not spaces of leisurely activity, they are medium for communicating information about the National Gallery and the art in its collections. While they are very effective in communicating this type of information, the *experience* of viewing *Voice of Fire* is dependent on sensory features, and the context of display influences spectator expectations and ultimately how the painting will be understood.

## Chapter Seven: **Conclusions**

### **7.1 Findings**

Given the considerable time and effort dedicated to redesigning the National Gallery of Canada website, I anticipated interview responses dealing with the sensory relationship between the physical galleries and the website would be extensive. The Gallery's mandate is to share the collection with Canadians and one of the critiques leveled against the NGC during the *Voice of Fire* controversy was the considerable amount of money spent by the institution on a piece that could not leave Ottawa. In light of the historical context, the website seems like a possible solution in addressing some of the most grievous complaints voiced in the 1990s relating to accessibility, communication, display and reproduction. On the website, *Voice of Fire* is available from anywhere in the country and the Gallery can control its display online, how it is photographed as well as the accompanying content and information. However, rather than arguing that the website is comparable to the real thing, interview participants confirmed there are significant visual and sensory differences between experiencing *Voice of Fire* online or in the physical gallery.

This begs the question: why create a museum website? One answer is that it allows new opportunities for spectatorship. The National Gallery of Canada's mandate is to "develop, maintain, and make known, throughout Canada and internationally, a collection of works of art, both historic and contemporary, with special, but not exclusive, reference to Canada, and to further knowledge, understanding, and enjoyment of art in general among all Canadians" ("About, National Gallery of Canada", 2013).

Spectatorship online makes information more accessible by disseminating images and information about the collection available to viewers across the country and around the world. The NGC can continue “furthering knowledge of the visual arts” and “make art accessible, meaningful, and vital to diverse audiences of all ages” (“About, National Gallery of Canada”, 2013). The online environment also comes with an innate ability to control communication and information in regards to their collection. Nemiroff noted one of the main reasons why *Voice of Fire* failed to reach wider acceptance was a lack of visual literacy necessary to understand Newman’s painting. However, with the inclusion of resources like the *Voice of Fire* audio guide on the website, a remote viewer can quite literally walk through the process of how one might want to view the painting in order to understand the full sensory experience. Rather than appearing on a radio segment and responding to questions, the Gallery can present their own ‘story’ about *Voice of Fire*. The website cannot and is not meant to replicate the sensory museum experience instead, the website cultivates specific types of museum spectatorship.

Instead of looking at an image in a newspaper, a viewer today can listen to an audio guide on the NGC website, zoom in on an image using the website’s magnification features and work to develop the visual literacy needed to best understand Newman’s iconic work. One reason why photographs of *Voice of Fire* circulated in the 1990s failed to gain more wide spread approval was because Canadians knew the work through sensory deprived images. Although technology has made great strides in the past twenty years, viewers today are still subject to images that lack sensory context. Although the inclusion of high resolution and magnification features allows viewers to look at art closer than ever before, the work still appears as a two-dimensional photograph. Any

tactile element to the paint is flattened, the frame is removed and any surrounding context and display are cropped out of photographs. Movement in relation to the painting is prescribed and limited, only allowing spectators to navigate in a grid-like fashion. The type of solitary, distracted behavior commonly associated with online viewing also departs from museum literature which dictates museum experience is dependent on a mixture of social, personal and physical contexts (Falk & Dierking, 1992). In chapter five I argued the website was effective at communicating information, not artistic experiences, making visitation largely a purpose-driven activity. Contrary to a visit to a physical museum, spectators are understood by staff as visiting the NGC website to elicit specific information, ‘skim’ content until that information is discovered and ‘dive’ into viewing content that peaks their interest. Although there is an opportunity for dialogue on the affiliated NGC social networking sites, there is no ‘space’ for synchronous social exchange of the NGC website itself making online viewing a typically solitary activity. For a viewer new to art or the National Gallery, the webpage featuring *Voice of Fire* will scarcely prepare them for the experience of seeing the original. The webpage can provide a new viewer with sufficient historical information about the piece and the artists but the small, diagrammatic images on the website pales in comparison to the painting in Ottawa. The difficulty in communicating sensory information means that online spectatorship is vastly different than seeing a work of art in a museum.

One of the most fascinating aspects of the *Voice of Fire* controversy was the public’s objection to the purchase of non-Canadian art with taxpayer money. The public response was so hostile that Deputy Prime Minister Don Mazankowski threatened to rescind the acquisition and Holtmann suggested the piece should be sold at public auction

(O'Brian, 1996, p. 3). As written in the introduction, the *Voice of Fire* controversy was complex and displayed underlying issues of politics, control, power and representation. Newman's work was not what many public viewers considered 'art', it was not Canadian, photographs did not accurately represent the work and its size meant it would likely never leave Ottawa. Curators made numerous media appearances attempting to explain the significance of the piece to the best of their abilities, indicative of dialogue focused museum communication strategies. Although the Gallery is responsible for engaging in dialogue that facilitates the art education of spectators, the National Gallery is not an entirely equalizing, transparent institution. It is the Gallery's mandate to curate, collect and present the items that they believe best represent Canadian and international art and artists. Inherent in these activities is a sense of power and control on the part of the institution that also translates into online settings, "When social media such as blogs, podcasts and wikis are used by museums, they provoke the systems of authority and custodianship which museums have, over history, tried to establish" (Russo et al., 2009, p. 159).

There are certainly negative connotations with notions of power and numerous examples of galleries or museums exerting control in inappropriate ways. However, in the case of the NGC and *Voice of Fire* I argue that their exercise of control helps to facilitate museum communication. In her book *Projecting Canada: Government Policy and Documentary Film at the National Film Board*, film and media scholar Zoë Druick argued that the NFB "provided a way of seeing the nation" and her book examined "the emergence of both a cultural institution and a mode of communication" (Druick, 2007, p. 9). Druick writes that the films of the National Film Board "were used to create limited

and temporary publics, not the public sphere ascribed to broadcasting. These publics, or audiences, have been targeted and limited—not the absent mass audience, but the “specialize, needs-based community” (Druick, 2007, p. 9). Hooper-Greenhill identified that one predominant way museums connected and interacted with spectators was through the use of mass communication. As this research has demonstrated, communication related to *Voice of Fire* is inherently difficult and despite advances in technology there are sensory elements associated with seeing *Voice of Fire* that cannot be recreated on the NGC website. Although a mass audience can gain a certain degree of access to the national collection using the website and educate themselves using the available content, many of the most essential features of *Voice of Fire* cannot be communicated to all Canadians. Therefore, mass communication is not meant to connect with *every* Canadian viewer, rather it used to speak to viewers with a keen interest to learn more about art or those already possessing a certain degree of arts knowledge. This is seen in the construction of the website search parameters and home page which identifies their audiences categorically as ‘interested but non-expert’ and ‘research oriented’ and in the cultivation of engagement on social media with already captive audiences are on social media.

While statistics show that museum attendance is not negatively affected by reproduction and the development of websites, the experience of online spectators is undoubtedly different than those able to visit a physical gallery or museum. Instead of replicating the museum experience, websites offer an informational setting where spectators can expect to find educational content and cultivate their interests in art and museums. Subsequently, the online space is not perceived as a leisure space and online

activity is isolated, often distracted and purpose driven. As both online and physical spaces offer advantages and disadvantages, I do not consider either of these spaces, types of experiences or modes of spectatorship inherently 'better' than the other, simply different. Presently, the NGC sees both online and physical spaces as equally important and makes tremendous effort to provide institutional support for both. Museums have the dubious task of balancing technological innovation and tradition as well as communication strategies that must speak to expert and novice viewers across the nation among many other tasks. Providing the institution can maintain this balance, the online and sensory museums spaces can both offer meaningful experiences for many Canadians.

## **7.2 Limitations & Future Recommendations**

There were three noteworthy limitations which restricted the scope of this research project. First are the institutional restrictions outlined in detail in the *Methodological and Research Context* chapter. I was unable to access the original NGC commissioned usability studies which informed the redesign of the National Gallery website. Since these usability studies were considered classified business documents, the reports were not available for this study. Additionally, due to copyright restrictions, I was not able to use photography or video equipment in the exhibition spaces. Although I had intended to utilize Pink's walking with video method to record interviews with participants in gallery C 214, legal restrictions prevented this method of data collection. Therefore, participants were asked to recall their experiences with *Voice of Fire* rather than discuss their thoughts and experiences with the painting as they were unfolding. However, since interview participants had an abundance of experience with the painting, and consist of experts who have dedicated their livelihoods to museums and websites, the

resulting interviews produced a wealth of valuable and insightful research material.

Second, the interviews in Ottawa were conducted with individuals involved with the website and the creation of education content for both the online and physical museum spaces. The perspectives of professionals in the Web & New Media and Education and Public Programs departments were obtained however, I was unable to speak with an art historian or curator about digital reproduction and the sensory museum experience as it relates to *Voice of Fire*. During my time in Ottawa, curators or art historians knowledgeable about *Voice of Fire* were not available for interviews. A subsequent phone interview could not be arranged during my data collection period. It would have been beneficial to analyze the thoughts of curators from the 1990 media coverage and contemporary reactions but the majority of existing academic literature on *Voice of Fire* has been written by curators, artists, art historians or individuals very knowledgeable about art and art history spanning several decades (Auping, 2007; Barber, 1996; De Duve, 1996; Heller et al., 2005; Hess, 1971; Ho, 2005; O'Brian, 1996; Shiff, 2004; Smith, 1990; Solomon, 1967). The existing perspective of art historians, curators and artists on *Voice of Fire* is comprehensive making this project's discussion of the sensorial analysis of *Voice of Fire* and investigation of how it appears in an online setting, a departure from existing literature.

This project aimed to explore the perspectives of staff at the NGC, their thoughts about *Voice of Fire*, their sensory experiences in the physical gallery and their work communicating this information to viewers visiting the physical and virtual gallery spaces. As such, I focused solely on the production end of the communicative circuit and did not pursue an investigation into how the NGC and its online content is understood by

viewers. It would be beneficial to study audience reactions to the website and educational content in an effort to explore if the Gallery communicative goals are being met.

However, as noted in the *Methodological and Research Context* chapter, studying the entire communicative circuit from sender to receiver to better understand how website and gallery spaces are being interpreted by audience members is a project beyond the scope of this study.

This project offered a critical examination of spectatorship and the construction of online and physical museum experiences. However, online museum communication and the 2011 NGC website redesign is a rich subject which could be expanded into a number of larger projects. While beyond the scope of this project, future research and long-term study of the National Gallery of Canada website would be beneficial. Staff indicated that general feedback from the public about the 2011 redesign had been largely positive however, at the time of interviews no formal post-design usability studies had been conducted. Conducting usability tests similar to those that guided the pre-2011 redevelopment would allow for direct analysis between the original studies and the post-2011 redesign. The website *Findings & Discussion* chapter, revealed that NGC staff felt that social media could greatly enhance the Gallery's communicative reach and could be used to attract new audiences to the physical gallery spaces. Since the NGC's presence on Facebook and Twitter is a fairly recent development<sup>10</sup>, more research is needed to analyze the communication between the NGC and public to determine if the NGC is successful in attracting new audiences to the Gallery via social media.

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<sup>10</sup> The NGC joined Facebook April 14, 2009. First Tweets from the National Gallery date from April 15, 2009.

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