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**TATE ONLINE: TOWARDS A THIRD  
GENERATION MUSEUM WEBSITE**

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## Abstract

By focusing on Tate Online as an example, this paper will explore the range of online developments appropriate to the museum sector at this time.

A significant re-design for Tate Online is planned for 2004-5. This will be the third iteration of the Tate website and will provide the information architecture that will house Tate's public-facing digital activities for several years to come. This paper will present some of the conclusions we have reached internally with respect to what the appropriate direction is for Tate Online in 2004, as well as the methods we have employed to reach these conclusions. It will examine how the Tate website continues to evolve, its position and role within the organization, and suggest the type of content and experience it is likely to provide in the mid-term future.

**Keywords:** art museums, websites, 21 century, digital programmes, visitors

First generation museum websites predominantly consisted of listings type information relating to exhibitions and events at fixed, offline sites. With the launch of second generation websites, the range of information provided by the museum was increased; most notably to include collections based content, with a longer shelf life. Many international museums, including Tate ([www.tate.org.uk](http://www.tate.org.uk)), are now embarking on a redesign of their websites that will not only take further advantage of technical developments, but also improve the services offered and the management of those services.

An enormous amount has already been achieved by Tate in the digital arena. Tate won two interactive Baftas in 2002, for Accessibility (iMap) and Technical Innovation (Tate Modern Handheld Tour), and was specially commended for its ambition and achievements on public sector budgets. The entire Collection has now been digitized (over 60,000 works), and attention has moved onto the archive. The webcasting programme is thriving, with over 200 hours of events available, and new net art commissions are attracting 5000 visits a month. A number of successful partnerships have been formed, most notably Tate@BBC (<http://www.bbc.co.uk>) and the significant

sponsorship of Tate Online by BT (<http://www.bt.com>). A comprehensive site search, e-bulletins, an e-learning portal and discussion forums are all now operational. Tate.org.uk attracted over two million unique visitors last year, and according to independent statistics, it was the UK's most popular art site.

So what have we learnt and where do we go next? Where should we be directing our efforts in relation to Tate Online over the next 3-6 years? What will visitors to third generation museum websites be looking for and likely to find? And how will this experience relate to their visits to the fixed sites? To start trying to answer these questions it is worth understanding a little bit about Tate as an organization as well as how Tate Online has evolved to date.

Tate has a dual role as the National Collection of British art and as the National Collection of International modern art and is one of the great public museums of the United Kingdom. Tate cares for over 5,800 unique paintings and sculptures, as well as more works on paper, and the Turner Bequest; a total of over 60,000. The aim of the organisation is to create public awareness, understanding and appreciation of British art from the sixteenth century to the present day, and of international modern and contemporary art. The network of four offline galleries in London, Liverpool and St Ives attracted in excess of five and a half million visitors last year. The organisation not only cares for and displays an internationally significant collection, but also provides a range of educational and interpretation resources and activities for visitors of all ages, backgrounds and abilities. Tate's activities span across the areas of education, conservation, research, publication, exhibition and acquisition projects.

Tate was, however not particularly quick to get online. The first Tate website launched in February 1998, and was predominantly a brochureware offering, which covered from the outset all Tate sites under a single domain. A sole web editor working three days a week and located in the Communications department maintained the information. A selection of works from the collection were made immediately available, and Tate embarked on a massive digitisation programme. This programme, called Insight was supported by lottery funding (<http://www.hlf.org.uk>; <http://www.nof.org.uk>) and would result in virtual access to the entire Collection.

The first substantial re-design of the Tate website was in March 2000. This re-haul coincided with the opening of Tate Modern, the extension of Tate Britain and the launch of the new Tate brand developed by Wolff Olins (<http://www.wolff-olins.com>). 2000 also saw the development of an e-business joint venture with the MOMA (<http://www.moma.org>) called Muse, intended according to the press release “to create an independent for-profit e-business that would establish the premier destination on the Internet for individuals to access, understand, and purchase the best in modern art, design, and culture”. It was an undeniably ambitious initiative, determined to draw on “the museums' unrivalled collections and intellectual capital to expand the global audience for modern art, design, and culture”. Although a Muse site never actually materialized, the project focused Tate's attention on the viable opportunities internet technologies offer the organization to fulfill its central remit.

2001 saw the first sponsorship of the website by BT, and its related branding as Tate Online. Tate's ambitions for Tate Online were explicitly stated in the business plan which suggested that the website should “function as a sixth site for Tate, featuring a distinct and identifiable programme, appropriate to the medium”. The Tate Online sponsorship facilitated the establishment of a dedicated central team to lead the development of Tate Online. This new department was called Digital Programmes and reported to the Director of International and National Programmes. It assumed responsibility for setting high-level strategy and co-ordinating the delivery of Tate's public-facing digital content. It remains responsible for ensuring the sum of cross-Tate initiatives in this areas is maximised, and that Tate's website is developed as a destination in its own right. Earlier this year BT renewed its sponsorship of Tate Online providing a further £2,000,000 of support over the next three years.

Tate's attention over the past twelve months has moved beyond the digitization of the core Collection, onto providing additional contextual information for virtual visitors. This contextual content has included material from the Tate archives, the new TATE Magazine, the exhibition and events programmes, and even other organisations' collections. Above and beyond the provision of information directly relating to Tate's Collection, Tate has also commissioned art works exclusively for viewing on the website,

and initiated richer community based activities including forums, mailing lists, multi-media messaging, e-cards and online ticket and membership sales. Almost all Tate departments now generate public-facing digital content and the website communicates to the full range of visitors to the organisation, be they corporate partners, structured and non-structured learners, people seeking information on the exhibitions and activities at the offline galleries, or visitors wishing to view art online.

### **Tate currently has six key objectives for Tate Online. It should:**

Increase access to Tate's Collection and Programmes

Broaden, expand and diversify Tate's audience, real and virtual

Function as a sixth site for Tate, featuring a distinct and identifiable programme appropriate to the medium

Promote and enhance organisational efficiency

Generate revenue to support future Tate activities

Facilitate new partnerships to improve the range of content and services offered

These objectives have been formulated by the Digital Programmes team with input from the across the organisation, and are closely aligned to Tate's core objectives. As already suggested, Tate Online serves a huge range of functions and caters for numerous diverse audiences. There is no shortage of ideas on how to develop the site better to serve these audiences, but limited resources available to do so. As a result it is essential that the opportunities afforded are prioritised. The key objectives are crucial in informing the priorities for Tate Online and are therefore worth looking at a little closer.

## **1. Increase access to Tate's Collection and Programmes**

Firstly, this objective is about visits to offline galleries: about getting more people into the offline galleries, more regularly, by increasing and better targeting online marketing. Initiatives such as Explore Tate Modern which provides an interactive map of the displays

to facilitate planning a trip, along with microsites such as the Warholiser, and the monthly communications e-bulletins have all proved successful in this respect.

Secondly, the objective means improving the offering for visitors at the offline galleries, by providing increased access to digital content via handhelds and kiosks. The research and development into multimedia PDA tours at Tate Modern, as well the increase in use of in-gallery interactives by the interpretations teams at all sites are both examples of a growing interest in the use of new technologies to improve the visitor experience.

Thirdly the objective relates to online visits in their own right, stating a commitment to increasing the number of visitors and the visit lengths of people looking to engage with the Collection and Programmes from outside the gallery walls. Obvious existing initiatives that meet this objective are the ongoing development of the Collections section of the site, which attracts in the region of 30% of all visitors to Tate Online; an increasing focus on e-learning content which provides a more structured opportunity to engage with Tate's works; and the continued investment in the webcasting programme which enables people to attend Tate conferences and seminars from anywhere in the world at a time that suits them. But this aspect of the objective can not simply be met by creating ever more digital content, but rather must also be understood to mean improving the quality of the content already on. Tate is committed to improving accessibility to all content at the website, by adhering to government guidelines and where possible developing bespoke content for the socially excluded.

## **2. Broaden, expand and diversify Tate's audience, real and virtual**

The second objective announces that Tate's digital programmes should not simply focus on a general increase in visitor numbers to all six sites, but should also take advantage of the opportunities new media provide to encourage new audiences to engage with Tate activities. The objective is achieved by targeting under-represented audiences with specific and relevant content. Existing successful efforts in this respect include the promotion of Tate Online on 5,000 BT Vans; the ground-breaking iMap project focusing on works by Matisse and Picasso and developed specifically for the visually impaired;

and the creation of a e-learning content around Sonia Boyce's display at Tate Modern From Tarzan to Rambo which explored issues of race and identity.

Function as a sixth site for Tate, featuring a distinct and identifiable programme appropriate to the medium

The three key strands around which distinct programming is currently developed for Tate Online are e-learning, net art, the Collection:

**E-learning:** 21% of visitors to Tate.org.uk in June 2003 suggested e-learning as their reason for visiting. This combined with the clear seasonal trends in visitor numbers suggest that Tate is already attracting a significant learning driven audience. Furthermore, this is an audience that is certain to grow in the UK in parallel with government initiatives such as Curriculum Online and Culture Online and, and the roll-out of broadband to schools. This year Tate hired its first e-learning curator, charged with developing a cross-site e-learning strategy, intended to ensure that future initiatives in this area are not solely opportunistic, and that key educational audiences are both identified and catered for. All e-learning projects are currently based around, but not limited to the Collection and Programmes. Importantly, the initiatives are designed to be self-contained, and not to rely on the ability to visit the offline galleries.

**Net art:** The internet has developed in parallel with concepts of globalisation, the communication age and the information age, and is integral to their definitions. If Tate's job is not only to (re)think the past, but also to celebrate what's most vital and relevant now, then the internet can not be ignored as a valid location and focus for artistic practice. In fact, net art fits well into post 1960 curatorial debates about the death of the object, the erosion of media hierarchies, the expanded field and conceptual art. Tate has now displayed net art on four occasions: once at Tate Britain and three times online. Funding has been secured from the Daniel Langlois Foundation (<http://www.fondation-langlois.org>) for two further commissions at Tate Online which will launch in November this year. The next set of works will be by the Indian artist Shilpa Gupta, and by the American artist Natalie Bookchin in collaboration with the political theorist Jackie Stevens. Importantly Tate simultaneously commissions critical texts to accompany each

of the net art commissions and encourage a broader audience to engage with the practise. A related education programmes is also developed.

**The Collection:** The internet is unique and arguably unsurpassed in its ability to display the Collection as it is always ‘open’, offers limitless space, and has extraordinary reach. Now that Tate has its entire collection online, the organization is exploring what further information visitors would like and increasingly expect to find alongside the images. Some interesting recent initiatives in this respect include much of the work the Insight team are working on to digitise strands from the Tate archive, and to collate all the Turner works world wide and make them accessible at Tate Online. Content pertaining to the Collection in the new TATE magazine is now re-purposed for online distribution and better links are being implemented between the various resources already available and pertaining to each of the works.

#### **4. Promote and enhance organisational efficiency**

As well as serving the general public, Tate.org.uk also serves business related audiences including journalists, museum professionals, and job applicants. The UK directive that all government services should be delivered electronically, and in a customer-focused way, by 2005, suggests that the administrative functions of the Tate website will, like other areas continue to increase. Recent improvements in this area include membership renewals, ticket sales, monthly mailing lists, custom print sales and an initiative to develop further publishing tools for formulaic sections of the site requiring frequent updates.

#### **5. Generate revenue to support future Tate activities**

Tate Online offers a number of opportunities for revenue generation. The shop is now profitable, and sales continue to rise steadily month-by-month. The in-house online

ticketing service has also proved successful, with some events now only sold online, such as a recent PJ Harvey concert, where several hundred tickets were sold within half an hour of being released, with all the commission going to Tate. The longer-term vision is to enable cross-selling off the back of these initiatives, so for instance an exhibition catalogue might be offered at the online point-of-sale for the associated exhibition ticket.

All digital content at Tate Online is currently offered free, but consideration is now being given as to whether this can always remain the case. Both content syndication deals and micro-payments for some new content remain under discussion, although no decisions have yet been reached.

## **6. Facilitate new partnerships to improve the range of content and services offered**

A number of mutually beneficial partnerships have already been formed around Tate Online, not least with BT who provide both cash and technical expertise; with Groveart (<http://www.groveart.com>) who supply us with artist biographies; with links from Historyworld (<http://www.historyworld.net>); and with the development of the Tate@BBC site. Further partnerships will be explored and established to enable Tate to improve the range of digital services and content offered.

These six key objectives for Tate Online direct all developments at the site, and are unlikely to change radically over the coming five years. However, the enormous range of initiatives that have already been instigated to achieve these objectives over the last three and half years have now pushed the current site architecture to breaking point. The breadth and depth of content now on offer and the range of services now available are no longer easily contained within the 2000 design, and usability is therefore adversely affected. Arguably more problematic than this is that this design does not adhere well to industry standard guidelines and the site is currently not as accessible as it might be. Furthermore, Tate Online is currently difficult to maintain with only limited use of publishing tools and content management systems. Although Tate now has two full time web editors dedicated to maintaining the content, the requests for updates is increasing at

a speed that is impossible for two people to manage. The underlying page construction means that what should be relatively simple cross-site changes can take days to complete, and that re-purposing content for cross-platform distribution ostensibly requires starting from scratch. As people are increasingly accessing the internet via platforms other than their desktop PCs, this is a trend that Tate should not ignore.

All these issues together with the general ongoing increase in the number of visitors to the site, and the pressures this increase put on the site performance, combine to form a compelling argument in favour of a re-design for Tate Online. This high-level argument has now been presented and accepted by Tate's senior management. The current plan is therefore to spend this year clarifying the scope of the project, which will inform the implementation of the re-design next year. An initial requirements document is currently being compiled and will be presented for discussion at the end of this year. This requirements document will provide a better sense of the likely costs for the re-design, and suitable sources to approach for funding. Ultimate approval for its content will be sought from the Director.

At this stage in the proceedings it is already clear that fundamentally the re-design will not be about providing new content, but rather about improving the visitor experience and ensuring the site infrastructure is sufficiently scaleable and flexible to enable Tate to continue working to achieve the overarching objectives outlined above. A variety of methods have been agreed to establish exactly what is within the scope of the project and define the requirements. These include:

A benchmark report on art museum websites

Discussions with other museums

The establishment of an external advisory panel

Logfile analysis and online visitor surveys

Public focus groups in the offline galleries

Cross-departmental meetings

## **1. A benchmark report on art museum websites**

A benchmark report is planned on the content and services currently offered to online visitors interested in the visual arts, worldwide. The report will focus on international art museums and galleries but it is also likely to include other cultural organisations' websites, including broadcasters and newspapers, where their visual arts coverage is exemplary.

## **2. Discussions with other museums**

A series of discussions are taking place with other museums who have recently completed website redesigns or are themselves working towards one. Valuable lessons are already being learnt as a result of these talks about how to successfully deliver a site redesign and who to approach for help.

## **3. The establishment of an external advisory panel**

Tate intends to invite a small group of industry leaders with extensive online experience to advise on the high-level mission statement and positioning of Tate Online over the next three to ten years. The group's role will not only be to help ensure efforts at improving the website in the mid-term are appropriately targeted and that significant opportunities are not missed, but they will also serve as tremendous advocates for the site moving forward.

## **4. Logfile analysis and online visitor surveys**

Tate Online logfile analysis will be conducted to try and better understand current usage patterns and spot areas where improvements to the visitor experience can be made. This quantitative analysis will be supplemented with qualitative research into visitor attitudes and needs, undertaken through online surveys and visitor feedback.

## **5. Public focus groups in the offline galleries**

Public focus groups are planned to take place at each of the offline galleries to test the proposed new design and ensure it meets the objectives identified. An additional focus group will be held to focus on special needs, and ensure that the future design of the site is fully accessible.

## **6. Cross-departmental meetings**

A number of crucial, internal, cross-departmental meetings will take place in the run up to the re-design to ensure that the new website meets the ambitions of all divisions, and that parallel related initiatives are appropriately dovetailed. The focus for these meetings will be the core areas of focus for Tate Online over the next five years and listed below along with some of the key issues for discussion in each respect:

**E-learning:** What audiences should Tate Online focus on? Should Tate create digital resources which directly support the curriculum? Which other organisations should Tate partner with to increase the resources available?

**Galleries:** Is there any further content being created at other Tate sites that should be re-purposed for Tate Online? What content is currently available at Tate Online that should be made more readily available within the bricks and mortar galleries via handhelds and kiosks?

**Collections and Research:** Now Tate has digitised its Collection what is next? Should Tate be filling in the gaps virtually to include works from other collections and if so which? What should the focus be? Should Tate Online be the first place to visit online to find out about art, British art, 20th century art or all art?

**Members:** What information and services could Tate provide members online to improve the membership offering? Should Tate be offering a virtual membership package?

**E-commerce:** What further revenue generating opportunities exists at Tate Online? What can be done to improve existing sales? Should Tate be charging any visitors for any content? Is there any existing Tate Enterprises content that could be sold at Tate Online digitally?

**Net art:** What can be done do to raise the profile of net art at Tate? Is Tate doing enough to support this ever-growing practice? What should be the focus of these displays? Should Tate Online be commissioning works or creating online exhibitions?

**Corporate information:** What further corporate information should be provided at Tate Online? Are there any further business to business activities that should be facilitated? How should Tate corporate information be positioned alongside other content?

Many of the activities listed above and aimed at establishing the scope of the Tate Online re-design are now underway, but it is too early on in the process to share any significant decisions. One thing that is already certain however is that Tate remains committed to building on the success it has already achieved in this area. Tate.org.uk has come a long way in the first five years of its existence, but still has a lot further to go. While the emphasis for the latest re-design is on content management, accessibility and look and feel rather than new content per se, the intention is to put in place a third-generation framework will sustain the anticipated growth in content and services over the next three to ten years.

Above and beyond the immediate re-design, developments in digital technology, and not least broadband's rollout will result in further innovative ways for Tate to fulfil better its central remit of encouraging public awareness, understanding and appreciation of art. Not only does the whole online experience become smoother and faster with a broadband connection, but arguably more significantly, the connection is always on thereby radically improving the potential for museum websites to act as effective communication tools. It is now broadly accepted that museums are no longer solely about collecting and preserving cultural artefacts, but rather also act as important forums for learning and cultural exchange. In this respect Tate Online will certainly continue to provide tremendous momentum in the ever-evolving relationship between visitors, the collection and the six Tate sites for many generations to come.