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Impossibly distinct: On form/content and word/image in two pieces of computer-based interactive multimedia

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Abstract

Much that is written to assist students in composing with or judging the visual aspects of texts assumes that those visual aspects work as form or theme or emotion or assistance to memory; in such writing the visual is separate from and made to support the words or content or message or information of the text. Through a comparative analysis of two pieces of computer-based interactive multimedia whose words are similar but visual structures different, this article argues that the visual aspects of these texts are *idea* and *assertion*, doing the work of *content* and *information*. We need then to expand or modify the conceptual categories we use in our teaching about the visual aspects of texts.

Keywords: Composition; Interface design; Multimedia; Visual design; Visual rhetoric; Writer-audience relationships

Our screens and pages are haunted, I think, by certain assumptions in sentences and descriptions like these:

> Determine what content you need and how you will obtain it ...
> Determine a visual theme for your site based on the content. (Faigley, 2000, pp. 55–56)

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> Readers respond strongly to the way documents look. Certain features will trigger positive first impressions: text handsomely arranged under clear headings; pages that look open and inviting with lots of white space; straightforward typography without excessive boldfacing, italicizing, or underlining. Readers also respond emotionally to graphics and to colors.
>
> ... .
>
> Unfortunately, we can be so distracted by images that we fail sometimes to pay close attention to the messages with which they are associated. But like a film that has clever special effects but no plot, a document that relies on flashy visual elements will interest readers only until they catch on or grow bored. Visually literate readers expect the visual elements

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of most documents to be supported by clear and responsible writing. (Doherty & Thompson, 1999, pp. 323–324)

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In designing a document, you have five major goals... :

- To make a good impression on readers...
- To help readers understand the structure and hierarchy of the information....
- To help readers find the information they need...
- To help readers understand the information...
- To help readers retain the information... (Markel, 1998, pp. 309–310)

What the passages contain is important, certainly, and useful for people in our classes to learn, because the kinds of documents we all encounter and are increasingly expected to make have changed and are changing, given our restless culture and technologies: we do need to have understandings of how the visual elements of our texts work, and the handbooks and textbooks I have cited go a long way toward helping us make aware use of those visual elements. But, minimally, the above passages assume content is separate from form, writing from the visual, information from design, word from image.

I will not discuss head-on in this writing the time- and place-bound dichotomy of word and image, an inherited dichotomy that aligns so pleasantly and neatly among other dichotomies we have likewise inherited, such as those of reason/emotion, mind/body, male/female, time/space, or rhetoric/philosophy. Plenty has been written specifically about the word/image dichotomy as it plays among those other splittings (see, for example, Elkins, 1998, 1999; Mitchell, 1986, 1996; Lanham, 1993; Romanyshyn, 1989, 1993; Stephens, 1998; or Fleckenstein, 1996), and plenty more certainly remains to be said as all the various dichotomies are sieved through our arguments and time. What I hope to do here, though, is give counterexamples to the assumptions held by the texts I have cited: I give examples of how the word/image distinction—with its supporting architectures of content separated from form, writing from the visual, information from design—loses its distinction in two pieces of interactive computer-based multimedia.

There is neither time nor space here to propose new categories or new separations of terms; rather, I hope simply to indicate some of what the distinctions I have named cause us to overlook in these examples of screen-based communication.

I want to begin to indicate

what our teachings

about the visual elements of texts

(what our teachings

about composition in general)

perhaps should expand to include.

Implied similarities, visible differences

> The son of a grain merchant, Henri Matisse was born on December 31, 1869, at Le Cateau, in the Picardy region of northeastern France. He abandoned a career as a law clerk after taking up painting while convalescing from appendicitis. (Barnes)

o

> Born at Cateau-Cambrésis in 1869, Henri Matisse was the son of a grain mex\hant and hardware dealer. After brief law studies and a job as a lawyer's clerk, he started painting during a long period of convalescence. (Maeght)

If these paragraphs were printed in Times New Roman on two different sheets of white paper with the one-inch margins prescribed by so many writing handbooks, you would suspect the writers had used the same sources and were building towards sighingly similar chronologically structured biographies of Henri Matisse. Or if the original context of these words were a journal like the one now in your hands—with white page, black ink, and expected typeface and margins—these two sets of words would set us up, I believe, to develop similar abstract, distanced relationships with the artist and his works.

The words about Matisse, however, come from two different CD-ROMs, "A Passion for Art: Renoir, Cézanne, Matisse, and Doctor Barnes," about the Barnes Collection outside Philadelphia, and "A Stroll through Twentieth Century Art," about the Marguerite and Aimé Maeght Foundation collection in southeastern France. And, although the environment of CD-ROMs seems to offer an author more room for differing visual compositions than does the academic environment of writing on paper, the visual contexts of these two CD-ROMs are so similar that you might still on first pass think the two CDs were both encouraging you toward constructing similar relationships with art and artists. Both "A Passion for Art" and "A Stroll through Twentieth Century Art" are about private art collections that are open to the public; both multimedia pieces use the floorplans of the spaces in which the collections are shown—in the first, a private mansion, in the second, some gardens, a 12th century chapel, and several more recently constructed buildings—as initial metaphors for structuring what is on the CDs. In both CDs, a reader[❧] can click on a digitized photograph of an artwork to see it in more detail and to learn about who made it. In both, a reader can learn about the people who built the collections, about why they started collecting, about their

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❧ What to name the person in front of the computer screen? How to label the relationship between that person and what is on screen? This concern over naming in front of the computer is not new (see Joyce, 1995, p. 41, for example, for a quick statement of this concern from the 1980s) but neither is it settled. And I am not sure it should be settled.

The concern arises because (as I hope my particular arguments here indicate for the case of the visual) the ways we see and understand and respond to what is on screen include but are not limited to practices we have learned from looking into books. What other terms might I then use? I am not at ease with Espen J. Aarseth's (1997) argument for using *user*: I do not believe the term to be not as free of predispositions or as ambiguous as Aarseth would have it (see Aarseth, pp. 173–174). David Rokeby (1995) suggests *interactor*, which also carries for me a bit too much of machinic use-value in its tones but which nonetheless implies that all texts on screen necessarily ask interaction of us (see Rokeby, 1995, p. 157).

All these names are uneasy for me precisely because my considerations of multimedia pieces on computer screens indicate to me that some of what is at stake in how we approach the visual aspects of screens are the relationships—reflectively critical or (and?) pleasurably dependent or (and?) creatively participatory or (and?)...—we wish to establish with what is on screen. Because how we name ourselves represents the relationship that we wish to or think we have or have inherited, and because I would like those relationships to be subject of discussion, I have no wish to offer a term here as though it were set. Also, because my arguments on these particular pages have other specific focus, I wish to avoid the clang of a neologism—and thus I stay with *reader* here, but ask you to hear murmurings from other pages of writing when you see that term.

relationships with the artists whose work they collected, and about how they came to construct the places that serve as the metaphors for structuring the CDs.

But—in spite of all those similarities—there are such differences in the visual presentations of the CDs that they move me toward different ends. The first, "A Passion for Art," is designed to persuade me that art is about buying and collecting objects and that a collection is for celebrating one's wealth and monetary intelligences; the other, "A Stroll through Twentieth Century Art," asks me to celebrate the creative genius of individual artists. In addition, their variously composed presentations ask very different responses from readers even though their words are sometimes similar: the visual presentation of the first conceives of me as a passive recipient of its information; the second requires me to make effort to give shape to what I see. That is, I will be arguing in the next pages,

> if we hold to the notion of *content* suggested by the citations with which I opened my writing
>
> > —if we understand *content* as *words* and understand visual presentation as theme or emotion or useful only as pointers to or supporting information—
>
> then we remain unable to see or explain what is asserted in the visual compositions I am about to consider.

Differences of pushing and pulling

To indicate the differences between the two pieces of multimedia, I focus on several screens from the CDs where the pieces address similar topics, to get at how the CD's makers have used visual strategies to create their assertions✗ about relations between artists, collectors, and artworks. Using what would perhaps best be called a *phenomenological approach*• to describe how I understand and respond to what is on the screens before me, I write about the openings and about the screens designed to help me move through the art of the collections; I am also going to write about the screens that present me biographies of the artists. I then write about the overall visual structure of the two CDs, in order finally to write about how these CDs "see" us, their "readers," and thus finally to write about what we can take from these CDs into our classrooms.

Although neither screen on the next page is what I first see on opening the respective CD, each screen functions as does the title page of a book.

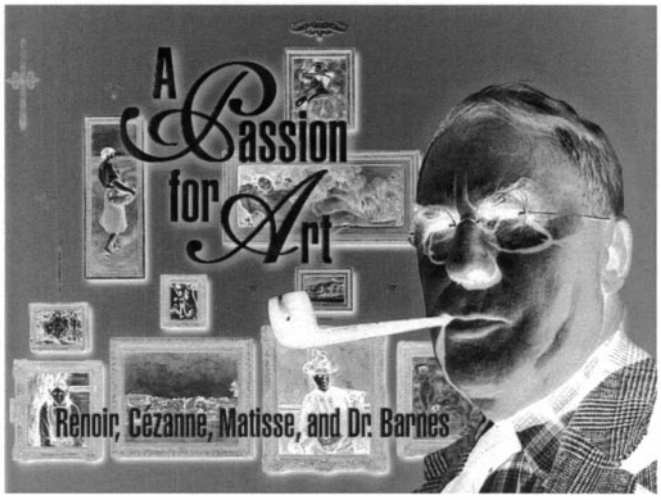
> The first screen on the next page is the title screen for the Barnes CD; the second is the title screen for the Maeght CD.

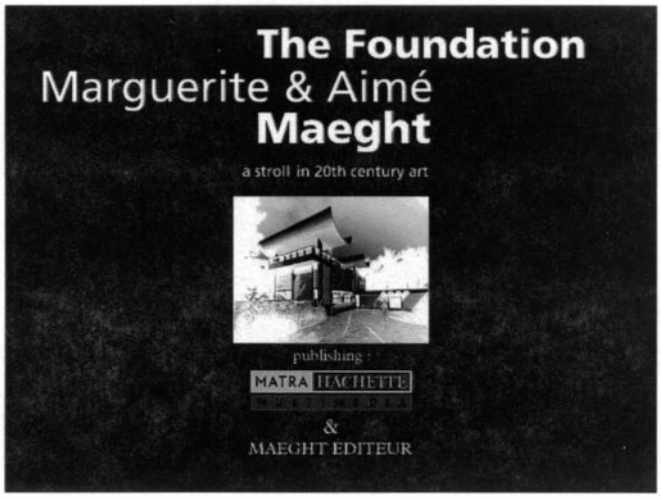
✗ I have been tempted to use "argument" instead of "assertion" throughout these pages but have not because the use of the "argument" could be distracting, given that the possibility of "visual argument" is still in debate. (See, for example, the special issue of *Argumentation and Advocacy*, vol. 33, Summer 1996, on the possibility of the existence of visual arguments.)

My purpose in these pages is not to argue how visual structures such as button arrangements, choice of animation or transition, or similar digital treatment of painting and invoice—or any of the many possible design decisions made by these CDs' creators—are claims, or are their supporting reasons, leading to a conclusion (definitional requirements, for some, of "argument"). Instead, my hope with this composition is to demonstrate how such visual choices function on these screens in ways often denied to the visual.

As with my footnote about *readers*, then, I hope when you see *assertion* on these pages you will hear the possibility of *argument*.

• By *phenomenological approach*, I mean that I am trying to reflect on my experience of moving through these CDs at the same time that I move through them.





The screen from the Barnes CD is preceded by a short animation showing the name of the company responsible for the CD and by a narrated animation of the temporal context of the collection in the 1920s; the screen from the Maeght CD is preceded by a screen-size color digitized photograph of the main building of the collection. In addition, the screen from the Barnes collection is only present for a few seconds, and then is automatically replaced by the main menu for the piece (which I will discuss next); I must click the Maeght screen to move into the piece proper. But what I want to emphasize here is that, even though what the words of each piece bring to the screen are somewhat similar—the titles of the pieces (with the Maeght piece adding the publishing information, which the Barnes piece had already given)—, the relationship each piece starts to establish with me is different, shaped by the visual compositions of each piece.

The opening screen to the Barnes piece uses generally warm earth tones, digitizations of paintings from the collection, and a noncentered arrangement of type that includes several calligraphic swashes and that rests over the paintings. It also has a large scanned photograph of a stern Doctor Barnes, the collector, on the right, where the lines of type and paintings direct my eye. The overall visual effect for me, then, is one of careful and warm informality underneath, behind the type swashes that copy 17th and 18th century calligraphic practice—a tie to tradition—, but all arranged to emphasize Doctor Barnes, not the art.

> It is as though he is moving toward me, looking at me, weighing and judging me—and demonstrating for me the way I am to see what is in this CD.

x

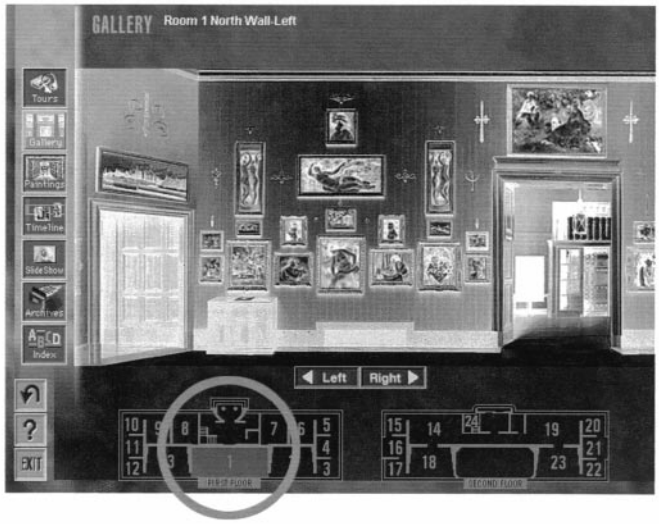
The opening to the Maeght piece is primarily black and white, the elements arranged around a central axis; the composition has the kind of open space that characterizes much modern art. This opening uses large blocks of sans serif typeface to name the foundation, with a smaller line of type to name the CD. A small, centered, digitized photograph of the main building of the Foundation shows the building on a sunny, cloudless day. I see the name of the Foundation first because it is large and at the top of the screen, but then I am drawn down to the colorful central photograph, which functions for me like a window opening into the Foundation.

> If the Barnes screen pushes out at me through the stern and large face of Doctor Barnes looking at me, this Maeght screen starts to pull me in.

Differences of perspective

I want now to discuss the screens by which I am first able to move through the art of the two collections because they are very different on the two CDs.

> In the Barnes CD, these screens are in the Gallery section, to which I come only after moving through several other screens. If I were to move through the CD in the order implied by its openings and the arrangement of the buttons I click to navigate, then after seeing the title screen but before I get to the gallery section
>
> I would have seen a narrated, animated preface,
>
> then a narrated, animated guide to using the CD,
>
> then four separate narrated, animated tours of the collection...
>
> After all that,
>
> I would click the Gallery button on the left side of the screen,
>
> and a new screen would appear:



This screen shows one wall of the collection. At the bottom of the screen is a floorplan of the rooms of the collection; in the screenshot above, I have circled a darker room in the floorplan, which is the visual indication of the room and wall I am currently seeing at the top of the screen. Some of the paintings on the wall are black and white, some color: when I move the mouse over a painting that is in color, the name of the painting and its painter appear at the top of the screen (along with a button I can click to hear the painter's name pronounced).

On screen, I can move through the shown rooms in three ways: I can click on any room in the floorplan to move to that room; I can click the "Left" or "Right" buttons that are below the wall to move in either direction; or I can move the mouse to the sides of the screen until the cursor changes to an arrow, and then click to move in that direction.

> On the CD, each wall of the Barnes collection looks very much like the wall in the illustration above: another wall's proportions may be different, or it may have windows, but the wall will be covered in paintings just like in the screen shot above.

x

In contrast, the Maeght piece opens to a picture of the central building of the collection and then a quick sequence showing who supported the creation of this CD

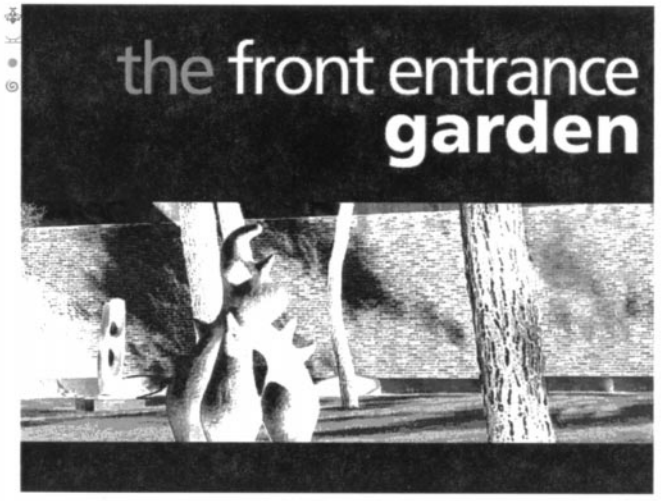
(all of this

has the sound

of cicadas

humming over it)

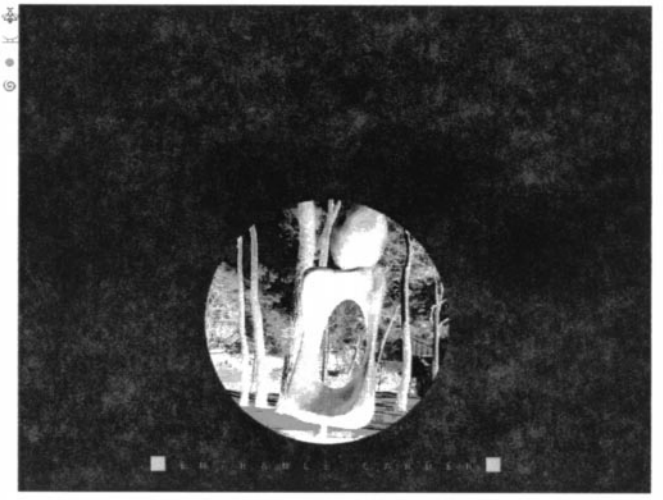
and then I come to this screen:



There is no narrated, animated introduction as with the Barnes Collection—instead, while a video sequence is loading into the computer's memory,

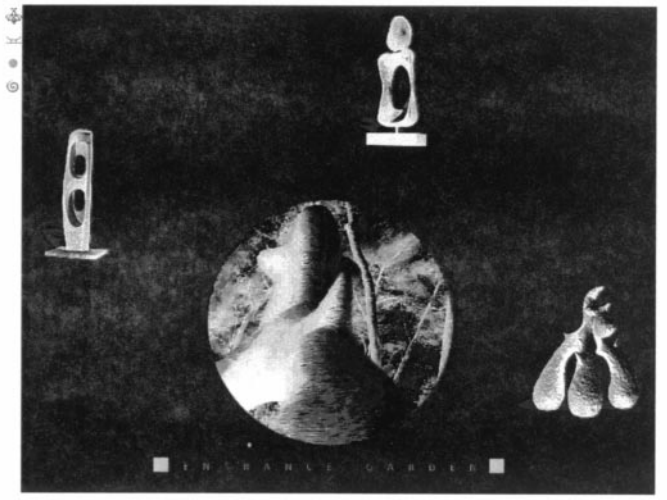
> the photograph at the bottom of the Front Entrance Garden screen changes
> to give me different perspectives
> on this sculpture garden.

Once the video is loaded, the screen changes to this:



The round opening at the bottom of the screen is a video window, with moving video in it.

The video moves as though I were walking through the garden, with the sound of footsteps on grass and of breeze and birds. As the video continues, the artwork in the center is always close-up; there are few longshots. Small digitized photographs appear around the video, placed into the flat white shape around the video circle:



The makers of this CD have designed it so that no more than three such small photographs ever appear: there's the piece of art I last saw in the video window, the piece now in the video window, and the piece about to be shown.

And, as in the Barnes CD, if I move the mouse over one of the small photographs I see the name of the piece, its artist, and size:

The Maeght CD has seven such video "strolls", each corresponding to a major section of the collection. Were I to click nothing on this screen, the CD would step me through each section in order, then start me over again at the beginning. There are various actions I can take to stop the video and learn more about the art, artists, and the collection—I'll write about some of them shortly.

To note here: The Barnes CD presents its art to me statically and from straight-ahead. The Maeght CD gives me multiple and moving perspectives.

Differences of scale, of time + space

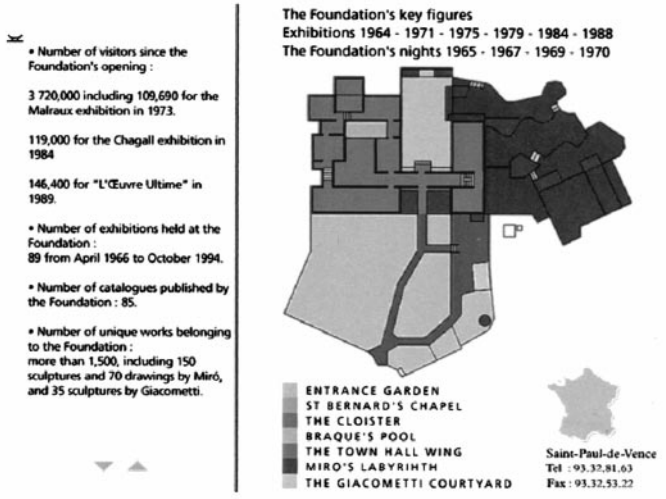
But for now, based on the screens I have shown, I suggest that the makers of both CDs are working to give us an overall sense of the collections by showing us the collections as we would see them were we to take our bodies to Marion, Pennsylvania, or Saint-Paul-de-Vence in France. The visual presentations of the art give me a sense of the scale of the art—and of the scale of the collections themselves—but how differently that scale is presented…

From the one collection screen I've shown you from the Barnes CD, I get a sense of the numbers of the Barnes Collection: I see how many pieces of art are on this wall, and I see down at the bottom of the screen how many walls there are, and I don't need to count anything to create for myself a sense of the voluptuousness of this collection. And so the first idea I build about the Barnes collection is the size of it. This collection screen doesn't ask me, I don't think, to consider the collection in terms of individual pieces;

instead, this visual presentation asks me to see these paintings as a collection, to see them in terms of these many walls of many, many paintings.

x

The people who made the Maeght CD could have used a visual strategy similar to the Barnes CD, giving me a map of the whole collection, encouraging me to move through the collection—and conceive of it—as a series of objects massed together in the space… and there is indeed a map on this CD, which I can access through clicking a small unnamed button tucked into the top left corner of the screens I've shown, but when I go to the map—



—and click a section of the floorplan, I go not to a wall of art but instead to the beginning of the corresponding video section,

and the visual arrangements and movements of these video strolls argue, I think, for a very different relation towards art than the Barnes's strategy of arrangement.

The video window acts like a piece of paper rolled up into a tube through which I look at the art, so that my attention is focused onto individual pieces... but the video is so constructed that it rarely presents me with a whole piece of art; instead, the video moves quickly, and it moves into and around the pieces of art: how much of a piece I will be shown, or from what angles, or how close I will be taken to it are all unpredictable:

I am shown each piece
differently, encouraged to
think about each differently.

Outside the video circle, I am given a small digital photograph of the piece—so I can see the whole, but only in the context of knowing that there are other possible views towards it.

Unlike the Barnes CD, then, which gives me a quick, spatial visual structure for comprehending the whole collection,

the Maeght CD gives me a long temporal structure: I can only begin to comprehend the whole collection if I am patient, letting the video unfold.

The Barnes CD asks me to see its pieces inseparably from the massive whole of the collection.

The Maeght CD would have me attempt myself to construct the whole—and to construct even the individual pieces that make the whole—out of multiple, small, incomplete observations of different pieces of art.

Life Differences

I turn now to the visual presentations of another set of screens from the two CDs, those designed to hold the biographies of the collections' artists. Again, the words each CD uses to tell about the artists are similar, but the visual presentation of those words is very different.

On the Barnes CD, on the screen I have shown several pages back of the wall of art, were I to click a Matisse painting,

I would come to a screen

where I see an isolated painting:

I can get a closeup of the painting by clicking it, or I can learn a bit about the painting—about its color and composition—by clicking "About This Painting." If I click "Portfolio," I can see all the paintings by Matisse that the collection owns. If I click "Biography," a small grey window comes up over the painting—

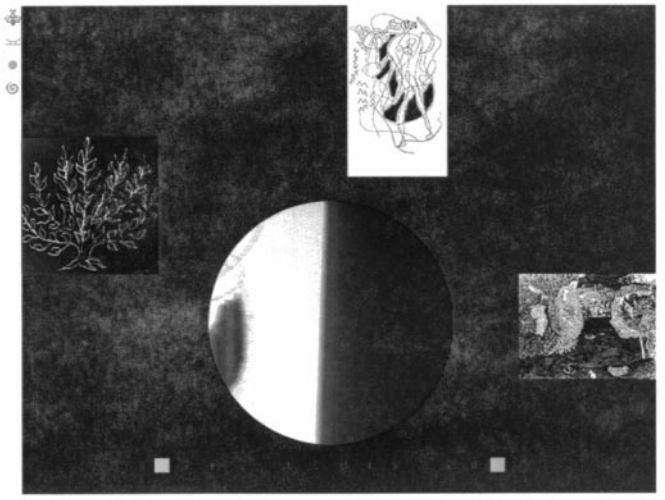
—obscuring the painting (and containing a small picture of Matisse and text about his life).

At the bottom of the screen there is an indication that there are two more screens of text, which look just as this screen does.

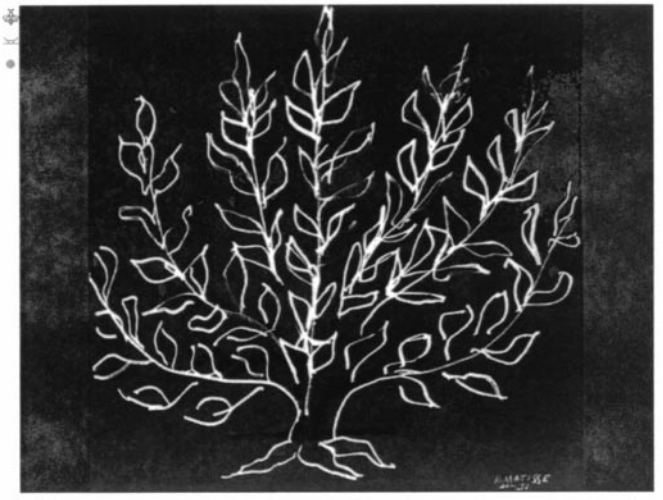
All the screens for all the different artists look just like the one above, with the same digitized photograph of Matisse. I can read, and then I can close the biography window by clicking the "Close" button at top left.

x

On the Maeght CD, were I to click on the small photograph of a Matisse painting of a tree when I come to it in the video stroll—



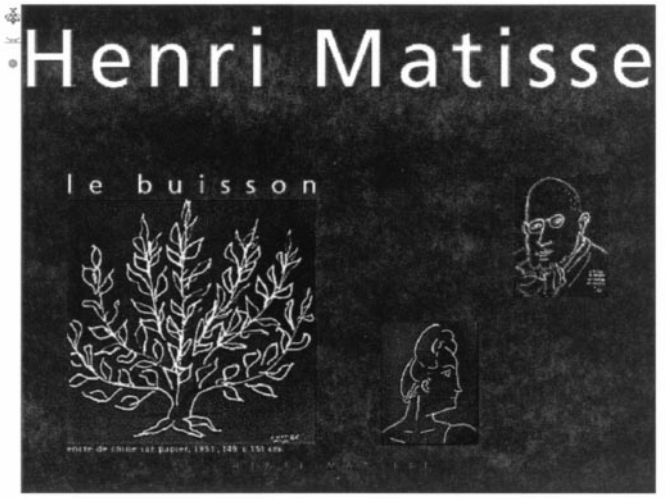
—I would come to this screen—



—which would eventually change to the next screen,

at the top of the next page,

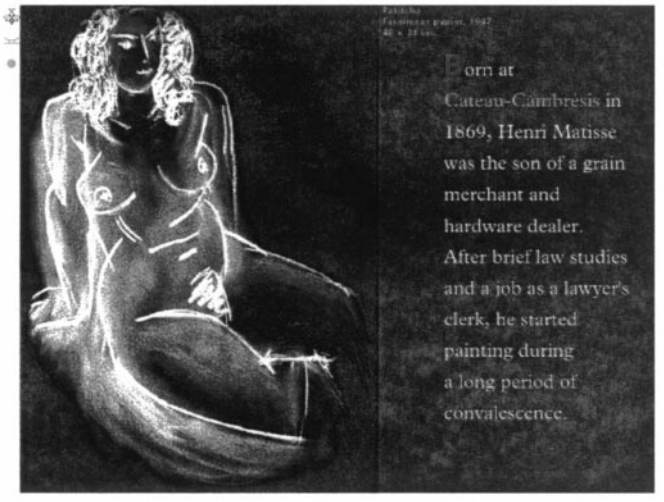
without my having to do anything …



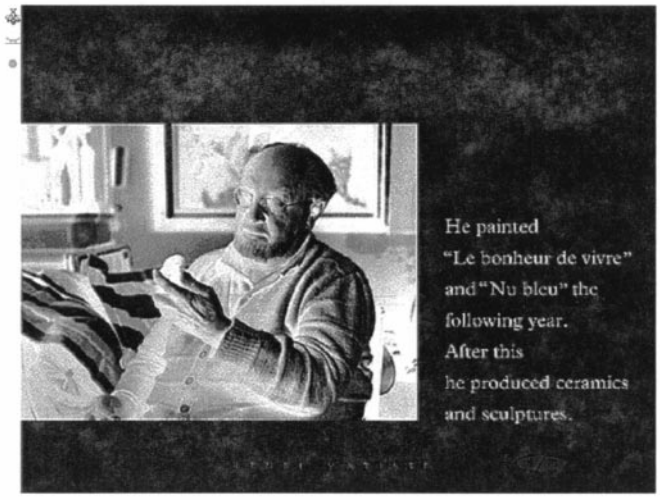
On this screen, I can look at a larger presentation of the picture I clicked.

I can also move the mouse over the smaller pictures, uncovering words: the self-portrait covers the words "Portrait" and the years of Matisse's life; the other drawing covers the word "Recollection"—clicking this would take me to a screen where I see a video of Matisse drawing a picture of Marguerite Maeght, one of the principals of the Maeght Foundation (I can also hear her talk about how she met Matisse during the war).

If I click "Portrait," on the other hand, I can move through screens like the next two:



On the screen above, different art appears as I linger to read.



As I linger on the screen with the photograph of Matisse, other photographs of the painter appear, without my having to click.

x

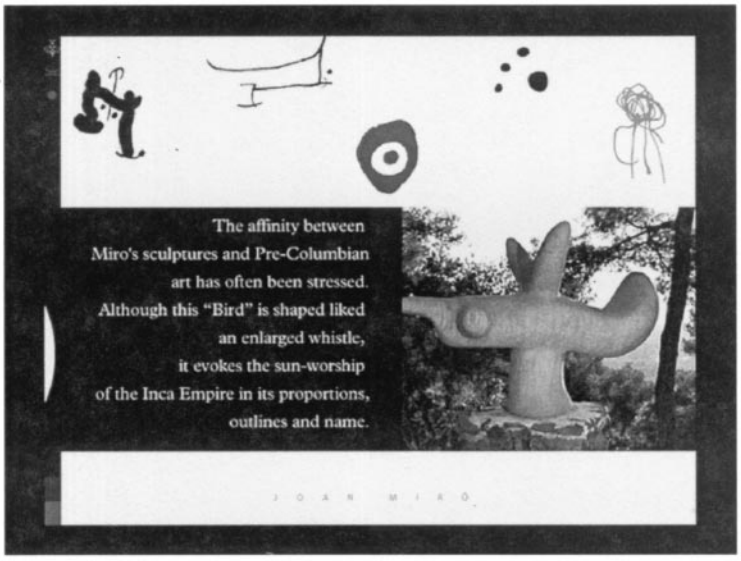
The two CDs thus ask us to consider their artists very differently.

On the Barnes CD, the biographical information is presented as if it were almost incidental to the painting: it comes up in a separate window over the painting, unconnected to anything else and obscuring the painting—as though the biography is only something that gets in the way of what is important under it. The words are presented in a default system typeface—and they are not laid out to be easy to read: the words are not given anywhere near the level of visual attention that the paintings in the Gallery are. In addition, the designers have formatted every artist's biography just like this one.

> The people who made the Maeght CD, on the other hand, have—obviously—made a very different assertion about artists.

The artists on the Maeght CD are given completely separate and multiple screens, with lots of different digitalizations and presentations of them and of their work—including works not in the Maeght collection. Although the words on these screens, if they are stripped of any materiality, are similar to what is on the Barnes CD, the playful, emphasized visual presentation encourages me to read; the words have been designed to be as much a part of this screen as the art and the photographs, making the words and photographs and paintings equally visual and equally visually weighted.

In addition, the screens on which different artists are presented have different layouts: the typefaces and proportion of words to digitized photographs are similar on all the artists' screens, but—when on a video screen I click a piece of art to learn about an artist (Joan Miró, for example) and come to a screen like this—



—I never know just how the screens will look, or even (beyond biographical information) what will be there: on some screens for some artists, photographs of the artist might dissolve into digitizations of the artist's work, or there might be links to video and audio recollections (as with Matisse), or there might be links that take me to screens describing an artist's working methods or an art historian's interpretation of the work.

Also on the Maeght CD, unlike the Barnes CD, I am asked not only to read these words but to see them connecting artists to place, time, and other artists: if I move the cursor over the place names on a screen, small maps pop up, showing locations important to the artist. On some screens some of the words are red: when I move the mouse over these words, the names of art movements or other artists appear; clicking these names takes me to a Lexicon explaining the art movement or to the portrait screens for the other artists.

When I compare the compositional decisions of those who made these CDs, then, I think that:

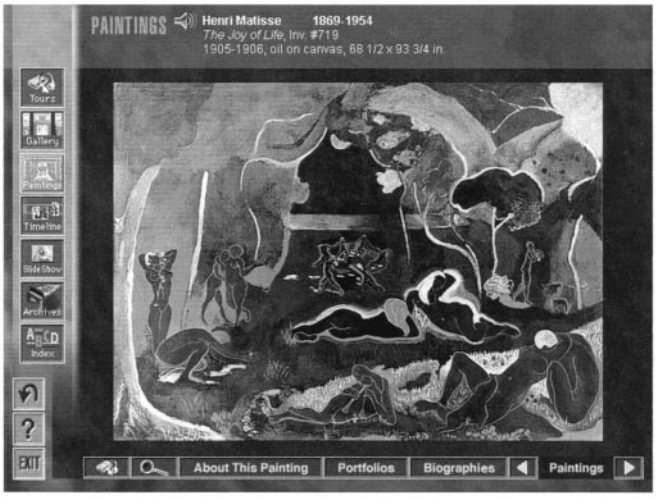
> The Barnes CD, through its visual presentation of artists' biographies, is arguing that artists are not worth much attention or differentiation; instead, what is important is the art, the paintings by themselves, as collected things.
>
> The Maeght CD, on another hand, gives equal visual weight to artists, to artists' lives, and to artwork—but is careful to help us see distinctions between artists even as it shows us how those artists shared places and times.

The differences between the visual presentations of these CDs are not then differences simply of form or theme or emotion or assistance to memory (the possible functions of the visual named or implied by the texts I quoted on my first page); the differences between the visual presentations of these CDs are differences of assertion and thought.

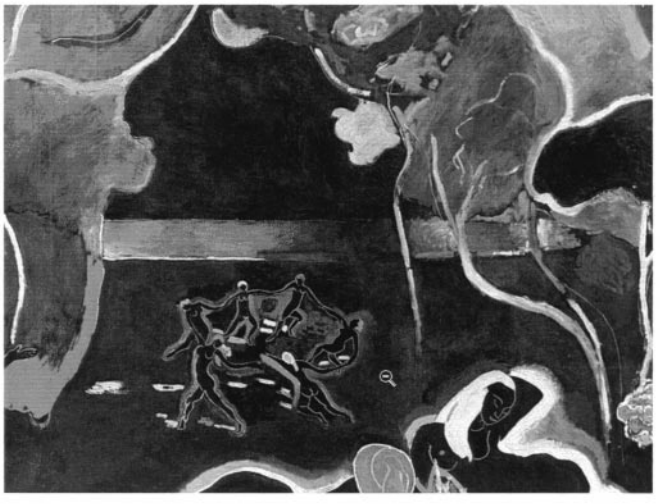
Differences in association

Let me emphasize one other visual difference between the CDs: in the Maeght CD, I never see a piece of art by itself; it always has some text or other art around it. The CD never lingers over any one piece, for there is always motion and change.

The Barnes CD, on the other hand, stops me on individual pieces of art, and allows me to look at pieces close up. My first view of a piece of art (if I move through the CD in the order suggested by its arrangement of buttons) is of it in its place amid other art on a wall, but then when I click it I see the painting in isolation, *presented as though I can take it in all at once*, something that can be comprehended with one straight ahead sighting:



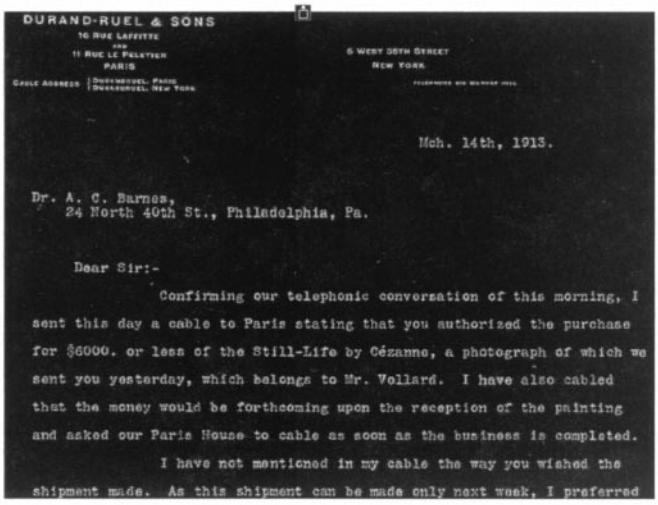
If I click the magnifying lens button at the bottom of the screen I see this:



I can scroll over this close-up of the painting, able to see even the brushstrokes. After I have seen the isolated whole, then, I can on this CD move in—still at the same, straight ahead angle—to look at the painting more closely, all by itself, in appreciative detail.

Let me also note that the Barnes CD has an archive of objects and documents related to Doctor Barnes's collecting activities:

If I click "Cézanne's *Oranges and a Bottle*" (for example) this screen appears:



DURAND-RUEL & SONS
16 RUE LAFFITTE
AND
11 RUE LE PELETIER
PARIS

6 WEST 56TH STREET
NEW YORK

Mch. 14th, 1913.

Dr. A. C. Barnes,
24 North 40th St., Philadelphia, Pa.

Dear Sir:-

Confirming our telephonic conversation of this morning, I sent this day a cable to Paris stating that you authorized the purchase for $6000. or less of the Still-Life by Cézanne, a photograph of which we sent you yesterday, which belongs to Mr. Vollard. I have also cabled that the money would be forthcoming upon the reception of the painting and asked our Paris House to cable as soon as the business is completed.

I have not mentioned in my cable the way you wished the shipment made. As this shipment can be made only next week, I preferred

This document—like the invoices that are included on the CD—has been digitized and presented just like any painting: I can scroll over this document and admire it closely. The invoices and the correspondence about money are given the same visual treatment and weight as the paintings, as if they all had the same value.

Preparing for a conclusion

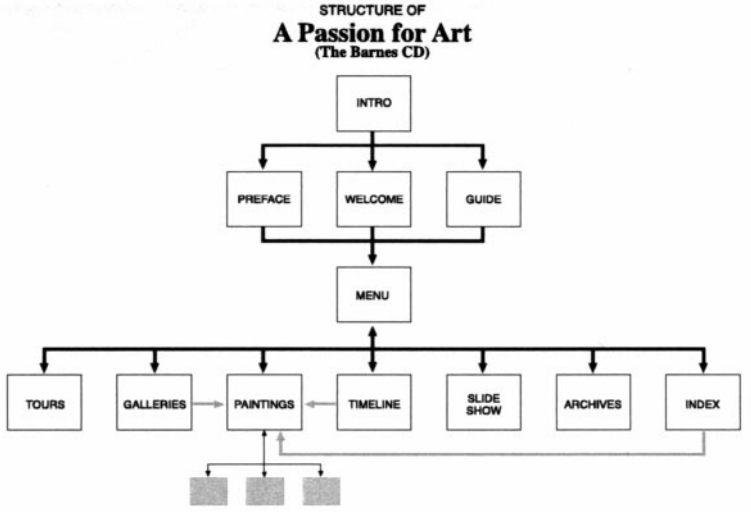
I hope you can see the argument I am making here, about the different positions constructed visually through these CDs. The Barnes CD wants us to think not of artists or art movements or the possible play of art; instead, it wants us to think of paintings as things to collect, to amass, as commodities: art here can be seen from one perspective only, a celebratory representation of Doctor Barnes's economic intelligence. Those who made the Maeght CD, on the other hand, show by their visual strategies that they want us to understand art as a temporal process pursued by artists in specific places at specific times alongside other artists—people whose creativity is worth celebrating on multiple linked screens, whose work is related, playful and pleasurable.

Respectfully composed

I think you can tell that I personally find the Maeght CD more appealing—but this is not because I think the other CD takes too narrowly mercenary a view of art. Although I don't think either CD works to encourage us to consider (as Richard Leppert, 1996, put it) "the central role that visual representation plays in the psychic, social, and cultural formation of consciousness and identity" (p. 274), I do think that, finally, the Maeght CD—because of its overall visual structure—begins to encourage us towards such thinking. It is with a consideration of how I think the CD does this that I will close this analysis.

I want to show you the main menu screen from the Barnes CD, to ask you to attend to the buttons along the left side:

When I am using the CD, these buttons serve as a menu, and are always present to orient me. They tell me the names of all the major parts of the CD, and they allow me to move between the parts of the CD. These buttons give me the visual means by which I can pretty much conceptually contain and exhaust the bounds of what the CD contains. Here is a schematic I have drawn of the CD—



—you can find hierarchical representations like this in almost every "designing multimedia" book (see, for example, Graham, 1999; Kristof & Satran, 1995; Mok, 1996; or Olsen, 1997). Each small box represents a set of screens that can be conceived separately from every other; the lines of connection and hierarchy are clear; a set of screens at one level of the hierarchy will have some visual equivalence with other screens at the same level.

> It is as though the multimedia piece were made from linked and static and clearly distinct pages.

Such a schematic allows me to conceptualize the relations between the parts of the CD. The arrows in this chart represent the jumps I can make between sections of the CD, and the arrows are all-inclusive: the CD is designed so that I can move between the linked sections, and no others. The CD comes completely pre-formed for me.

x

Most video screens of the Maeght CD have four little buttons at the top left of the screen (shown to the left) that work somewhat similarly to buttons on the Barnes CD, in that they are almost always present on every screen.

On the Maeght CD, however, these buttons are unlabeled and they do not give me a visual conceptualization of the whole CD.

To conceptualize the Maeght CD,

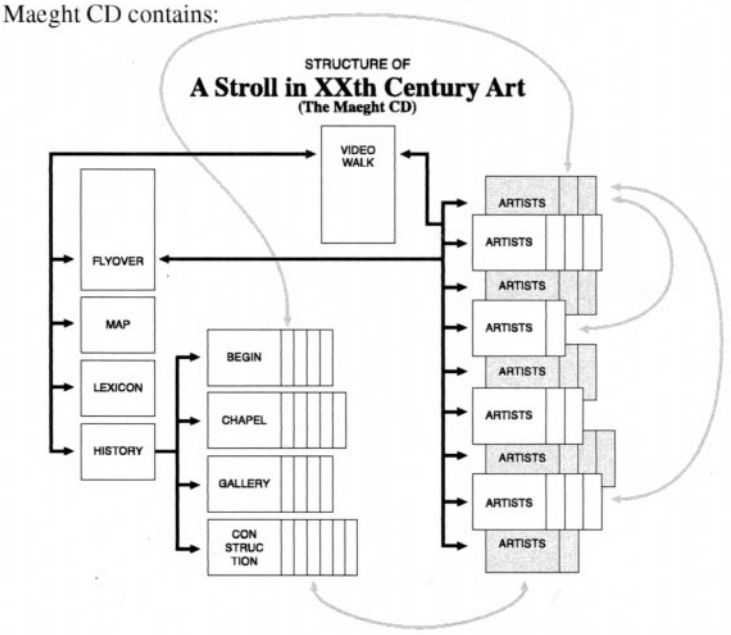
I have to move through it,

to figure out what those little buttons do

and

to construct my own sense of the piece's structure.

Here is the sixth draft of a schematic drawing I made as I tried to conceptualize what the Maeght CD contains:



This schematic works the best out of my six attempts, but it is still unsatisfying—it still doesn't visually capture my understanding of how I can move through the CD, my understanding of how the designers have structured it. The differently sized boxes are my attempts to represent the video sequences and "Flyover" sections of the CD (the "Flyover," as it is named on the CD, is a long scrolling screen that functions somewhat like an index): these sequences and sections do not seem like static, flat screens, but rather like large spaces through which I move through or over or in.

> It is in trying to represent these sections that I consider how diagrams like this—asking us to represent multimedia projects by small boxes—can limit our sense of what our media can be, both as we take it in and as we make it.

The arrows in the Maeght diagram are not inclusive: the black arrows do show that I can move back and forth between parts, but the grey arrows only suggest the number of possible, not strictly systematic or predictable-to-me, movements between different individual screens.

x

It is in working to make these drawings that I thought most

> about how these CDs "see" us,
>
> about the kinds of viewers the CDs ask us to be if we are to be moved by their assertions.

The Maeght CD gives us, through the video strolls, glimpses of the art, as though someone were moving around it, as though the art couldn't be taken in all at once but must be constructed from multiple positions—positions that include the full frontal views that are shown but that also include the kind of views given in the CD's video clips or photographs of artists working. We see that paintings are related to makers and are not simply and only artifacts clipped from larger context on a gallery wall. The Maeght CD requires patience

and work of its viewers; it is easy to be frustrated by having to figure out where you'll go when you click something, or by not easily finding your way back to a particular screen. Frequently, people in my classes, if they sit to look at this CD without prior discussion, will give up quickly; I have had discussions with others who received this CD as part of the software delivered with a new computer and who started to look at it and gave up quickly, unable to figure out its structure.

Nonetheless, I feel respected by the Maeght CD in a way that I am not by the Barnes CD. Although, as I have been arguing, the Maeght CD builds a definite attitude it would like me to take towards art, and although the parts of the CD have been given specific visual presentation by its makers, it is up to me to determine the relations between the parts: I have to think about why the CD has been arranged as it has; if I want to feel I have any sort of hold on the presentation, I have to make my own paths through it; they are not handed to me. Although the CD is not asking me to question my relationship to art—or to artists or to arts foundations—it is encouraging me to question how the arrangement of the CD contributes to my understanding of it... a first step in encouraging me to be aware of my interpretive part in moving through such a piece.

On the other hand, the Barnes CD hands me everything: all its information is circumscribed within the schematic I drew... and although I am free to move around within the bounds of that visual structure, examining art and reading about artists, I only see the paintings through the one straight-ahead perspective and I am not encouraged to consider the visual structure of the CD; the structure is pre-digested for me. I very quickly learn what will happen when I click a button. Nothing encourages me to consider the arrangement of this piece: it's presented as though the arrangement were completely natural, the best possible—only possible—arrangement for this art.

I have taken a strong negative position towards the Barnes CD, but allow me to temper that. As people in my classes have pointed out, there are some very useful features to the Barnes CD that are not present in the Maeght CD. The Barnes CD, for example, has an index—accessible from the buttons on the left of each screen—so that it is easy to find any particular painting, either by title or by artist. If I wish to find a piece in the Maeght collection, I have to go to the screen closest in functioning to an index, called the "Flyover" screen (which I reach by clicking the little bee button in the series of buttons I have shown to be on most screens): there, I can see all the pieces of art that are in the video strolls as they appear in the order of the strolls, and I must scroll through all the art trying to find the piece I want. The Barnes piece also allows me to set up a personalized "slide show" using any of the pieces of art in the collection. The Barnes CD, then, would serve much better as a classroom tool for giving a presentation, for example, on the paintings of Matisse or Cézanne.

And the Barnes CD does also makes visible how art is not a purely aesthetic activity but is in our times skeined up with commerce, the celebration of the object-owning individual, and representations of power. The Maeght CD has only a few screens (which require quite a few clicks to find) that address the collecting practices of the Maeghts, and on the screen showing the map of the collection it is possible to click to see the "key figures" of how many paintings the collection owns and how many people have come to see various temporary exhibitions there; nowhere are there digitizations of invoices or correspondence about who paid how much for what. Teachers could thus perhaps more easily use the Barnes CD to spark discussions about relations between art and money. But teachers could use the Barnes collection to start such discussion only if they were already skeptical about the purity of art, because, as I argued above, there is nothing in the composition of the Barnes CD that asks me to question the celebrations it presents.

> And so, finally,
>
> in spite of the particular advantages of the Barnes CD,
>
> it is because the Maeght CD encourages me to consider how its structure contributes to my experience and understanding of the CD that I find it more appealing.

The Maeght CD looks at me as someone who ought to be considering such constructions, as someone who is thoughtful and patient and intelligent enough to make the effort. This indicates to me that our teaching about the visual aspects of texts shouldn't be just about teaching people in our classes how to use the visual as theme or as first impression or as a guide to information; we need also, I believe, to be teaching how the visual structures of a text are, in addition to being assertions about artists and art and collectors (for example), also assertions about what kinds of readers we should be.

> We should be asking, along with people in our classes, how the visual aspects of these texts work to compose us and how we go about composing pages and screens that encourage us to be responsible and critical readers.✎⬲

A concluding visit to the distinctions

> Although we may tend to treat words as *content*, I hope I have here persuaded that the assertions of these CDs do not rest in *words* alone.

I hope I have persuaded that the assertions instead come to be out of the relationships the words (using *words* here to mean abstract, conceptual lexical units) have been constructed to have with and among the temporal arrangements of screens, colors, the relative sizes of visual elements (including *words* as lexical units given visual presence), the shapes of other elements, the placement of visual elements at the top or bottom or left or right of a screen, the movements of objects on screen, interaction, and so on. The things I have just listed might conventionally be called *form*, and yet clearly they too have carried significant argumentative weight; if the things I have listed were decoration or style or mood or theme or something added after the content had been decided then the assertions of the CDs about artists and collectors and artworks—given the similar words they carry—would have to be much more alike. But the assertions of the CDs are not similar, and hence I cannot here make any clean cut between content and form.

✎ This indicates to me also that our teaching about the visual aspects of texts shouldn't be just about teaching people in our classes how to create texts within the bounds of visual convention, or just about teaching how to judge texts within those bounds. If we hope to read and design texts that encourage us toward more active engagement, then we need also to teach people in our classes—and ourselves—to be readers of texts that do not fit the conventions we know (as the Maeght CD does not, for many) precisely because such texts might make visible new and fruitful kinds of engagement.

⬲ Perhaps you hear echoes of Michael Joyce's (1995) distinction between *exploratory* and *constructive* hypertexts in my arguments about the differences between the Barnes and the Maeght CDs. By Joyce's definition, however, I believe both pieces are *exploratory*: neither allows us to build alternative versions of the work on screen or add and shape our own commentary, which is my understanding of *constructive* for Joyce. Nonetheless, the Maeght CD does seem to encourage the active engagement with a text and with thinking that Joyce's distinction was designed to encourage; this indicates to me that we need to give more attention to the visual design of our works—on-screen and on-paper—and to the potential of that design for offering differing possible relations with our pieces of communication and so with each other.

Similarly, although what we might conventionally considwer to be the design of these pieces—the order of parts and their visual treatment—creates an impression on readers, and makes structure and hierarchy visible, and helps us find and understand and retain what is on the CDs,

> I do not think it is possible to make a clean distinction in these CDs between *design* and *information.*

If some of what I am supposed to take from the Maeght CD is an understanding of the creative ties artists have with each other and with their times and places, then can I really call this notion *information* because I learn it through the visual relations presented on screen? When I consider the Barnes CD, should I speak of the opening photograph of Doctor Barnes as *design*, even though it argues, visually, his predominance over the art he collected? Each decision about the visual appearance of these CDs helped determine the understandings I construct as I move through the CDs. I think then we should be trying to name other relations—besides the dichotomies I have listed—between our decisions about visual composition and what we hope others will learn or remember from what we make. I do not have terms to offer here, but I do not think the split between information and design gets at how strategies of visual composition contribute to the relationships we develop with what we offer each other on screen.

Finally, the relationships among the kinds of visuals elements and arrangements I listed above are not ones where the visual needs support by the words: not only are the words of these CDs (as of any Web page or paper page) always visual elements,

> but the assertions of these CDs cannot even be found primarily in "words."

As my use of quotation marks in the preceding sentences and paragraphs indicates to me, my use of *word* has been fishily slippery: *word* has not been a fixed category in my writing, but rather something that is sometimes conceptual but most often material. I have used *word* for something that is sometimes heard but most often seen on these CDs, something that can't be wrenched away from particular sizes and shapes and placements and typefaces and colors and relations to whatever else is on screen. I am not trying to morph *word* into *image* here, for I think *image* is as slippery as *word.* I have avoided *image* as much as possible in my writing about the CDs: I have instead worked to write about photographs and paintings and drawings as well as about maps and colors and typefaces and animations and digitizations and transitions between screens and the schematic arrangements of buttons and screens. All I have just listed are visual elements and choices, and they are only some of the possible strategies available for visual composition on screen: are we comfortable referring to all of these as *image*?

For me, then, the held-apart and clearly distinct relationships implied by form/content, design/information, and word/image are not sufficiently broad or specific or complex to describe and account for all the different assertive strategies and relationships on just the two CDs I have described here.

> Those terms also do not help me in classrooms
>
> as I work with others in figuring out
>
> *how to analyze and understand the texts I encounter*
>
> and
>
> *how to make responsible and critical and building-and-exploring-new-arguments use of strategies when I compose texts.*

I stop this writing then in edgy and ambitious frustration, hoping that I have indicated a need for exploring new concepts and terms for the thick and rich mix of visual potentials on screen and looking forward to discussions and writings with others who are likewise persuaded.

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