



It Will Be the Best of Times, It Will Be the Worst of Times Post-COVID Museums

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RESEARCH IN OTHER FORMS: REPORTS, ARTICLES, CONVERSATIONS ETC.

Museums in the Pandemic

A Survey of Responses on the Current Crisis

Joanna Copley with David Gaimster, Stephanie So, Ken Gorbey, Ken Arnold, Dominique Poulot, Bruno Brulon Soares, Nuala Morse, Laura Osorio Sunnucks and María de las Mercedes Martínez Milantchí, Alberto Serrano, Erica Lehrer and Shelley Ruth Butler, Nicky Levell, Anthony Shelton, and Da (Linda) Kong and Mingyuan Jiang.

Introduction

Building Cultural Resilience: We Are in This Together, and It Is Not Over Yet

Throughout human history, the spread of disease has closed borders, restricted civic movement, and fueled fear of the unknown; yet at the same time, it has helped build cultural resilience. On 11 March 2020 the World Health Organization (WHO) classified COVID-19 as a pandemic. The novel zoonotic disease, first reported to the WHO in December 2019, was no longer restricted to Wuhan or to China, as the highly contagious coronavirus had spread to more than 60 countries.¹ The public health message to citizens everywhere was to save lives by staying home; the economic fallout stemming from this sudden rupture of services and the impact on people's well-being was mindboggling. Around the globe museums, galleries, and popular world heritage sites closed (Associated Press 2020). The *Smithsonian Magazine* reported that all 19 institutes, including the National Zoo and the National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI), would be closed to the public on 14 March (Daher 2020). On the same day, New Zealand's borders closed, and the tourism industry, so reliant on international visitors, choked. Museums previously deemed safe havens of society and culture became petri dishes to avoid; local museums first removed toys from their cafés and children's spaces, then the museum doors closed and staff worked from



home. In some cases, front-of-the-house staff were redeployed to support back-of-the-house staff with cataloguing and digitization projects. You could smell fear everywhere.

Just before New Zealand's lockdown, Emeritus Professor Geoff Rice, a historian based in Ōtautahi Christchurch, spoke to Kirsty Johnston, an investigative reporter for the *New Zealand Herald* (Johnson 2020). Rice, who taught medieval history and wrote *Black November*, an exposé of the 1918 influenza pandemic in New Zealand, said that humans have survived pandemics before. And based on lessons from the past, Rice advised Kiwis to follow expert advice and not be seduced by fake news. For example, in 1918 there was much that scientists still did not know about how influenza first spread and about its debilitating effect on humans. Western newspapers reported rumors that “the influenza pandemic had its origins in the devilish ingenuity of the Germans ... [who then gave the germ] added virulence” (*Evening Post* 1918). While theoretically possible, this form of fake news serves to fuel public fear by creating the specter of a shared enemy. Similar rumors spread via social media regarding COVID-19, this time the enhanced virus supposedly came from a “secret” laboratory in China.

Another continuity between past pandemics and COVID-19 today concerns the efficacy of face masks. During the Manchurian Plague of 1910–1911, doctors observed how masks protected them from contracting the pneumonic plague, which spread by droplets (Honigsbaum 2019). Yet in 1921, the *New Zealand Journal of Health and Hospitals* still expressed some doubt about whether masks really protected caregivers and the general public from infectious microbes spread through the air, citing tuberculosis as an example (*Press* 1921). The range of advice, practices, and outlooks regarding the use of face masks during the COVID-19 outbreak has been equally perplexing. Nevertheless, Rice reassured Kiwis, the Director General of Health, Dr. Ashley Bloomfield, is a health professional and the Prime Minister, Jacinda Ardern, cares about her people and their safety. Together, this dynamic duo educated New Zealand's five million citizens about the virus, the state of the economy, and how to cope over the five-week duration of the nationwide level 4 lockdown.² Meanwhile, museums started collecting the memory of this lockdown experience as part of their function in building cultural resilience and taking care of their communities' heritage. New-Zealand-made memorabilia featured a miniature model of Bloomfield and Ardern made from recycled packaging by Colleen Pugh, and a flax mask made using traditional Māori weaving techniques by Matthew McIntyre Wilson (Moody 2020; Norman 2020), whereas the *New York Times* featured a six-year-old's drawing collected by the Autry Museum of the American West—Franklin Wong's illustrated story expressing his sadness because he could not go to the local park to play during the lockdown (Popescu 2020).

The lockdown also highlighted the already urgent need for universal and equitable access to everyday essentials like housing, food, and employment, as well as access to secure education and mental health services. These same themes arise in this special section on museums in the pandemic. Continuing on from the special section in *Museum Worlds 7* entitled “Aftermath of Cultural Disasters” (2019), which focused on earthquakes and fires, this special section reports on a sudden catastrophic biological disaster that ravaged the globe in 2020.

The call for short, rapid responses went out at the end of March. While not all contributors' submissions could be included in this survey, their ideas shape this introduction, as did other expert opinions (Reedel 2020; Spock 2020). This survey includes 13 short responses and one longer field report on art gallery education on the recent COVID-19 disaster. Each piece represents a snapshot of cultural resilience in action during an extraordinary time. The authors offer multilocal, regional, national and global viewpoints—from Canada, China, France, New Zealand, and South America. Vast regions such as the Pacific, India, Africa, and Eurasia are not represented, meaning that our *Museum Worlds* collective could be more comprehensive. That said, the respondents—museum directors, consultants, activists, curators, educators, academics,

museum and heritage studies students, and researchers—reflect a diverse range of museological philosophies. COVID-19 has amplified the social function of museums and reframed what safeguarding heritage and reaching out to communities actually means during a time of extreme duress, and it is not over yet. The subtitle of this introduction (or at least part of it), “We’re in This Together, and It Is Not Over Yet, comes from a statement in late June 2020 by Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, Director General of the WHO (e.g., RTÉ 2020). At the time of writing this introduction (17–23 July), the WHO reported a record two hundred thousand new COVID-19 cases worldwide in just 24 hours; the number of record new cases continued every day from 17–23 July 2020. Ghebreyesus stressed the importance of kindness, understanding, patience, and humility, attributes associated with caretaking, well-being, and resilience. For those involved in the wider museum and heritage sector, cultural resilience encompasses the ability to continue core functions while facing uncertainty, danger, *and change* (Holtorf 2018). Collectively, these responses serve as cultural resilience narratives. The driver of these narratives is the desire to encourage cultural workers to pause and reflect on their practice right now (*and even question if you really need to do things that way?*) and prepare for the next climate change catastrophe.

During New Zealand’s lockdown, David Gaimster, the Chief Executive of Auckland War Memorial Museum Tāmaki Paenga Hira, reflected on the institution’s civic function and its role in rebuilding a city and a nation. The sudden end to the international tourist market also heightened the need to bring the world to the local museum. Gaimster’s optimistic piece was first published in the *New Zealand Herald* and written for Auckland readers (Gaimster 2020). Victoria University of Wellington Museum and Heritage Studies students, doubtless like many young people studying the subject around the world, were ignited by debates about inequity, access, and the Black Lives Matter movement. One student, Greagh Smith, spent time walking through virtual galleries, and while she enjoyed having the chance to see works in closer detail, she missed the gallery atmosphere, which she defined as the physical spaces and the “texture of the artworks.”³ Stephanie So, an American studying in New Zealand, challenged museums to repurpose and reinvent their services to ensure all community members have a chance to safeguard their culture, art, music, literature, and stories so necessary for the “survival of the human spirit.”

Climate change, sustainability, and whether or not society can afford to run its museums in a post-COVID world, is a hot topic right now. Museum consultant Ken Gorbey expresses concerns about escalating costs associated with running museum buildings while continuing to safeguard their ever-expanding collections. In his response, Ken Arnold combines his experiences as Director of the Medical Museion, Copenhagen University (CBMR) and at the Wellcome in London, and believes that post-lockdown museums will have to be agile, online, and cheaper to run, and that they perhaps even to prepare for permanent closure. Arnold’s piece was first published online with the Museums Association’s *Museum Journal* in April 2020. Dominique Poulot, who wrote of the burning of the Notre-Dame de Paris Cathedral in *Museum Worlds* 7, provides an insightful critique of French government COVID-19 decisions that resulted in smaller, less visited local museums in the regions opening sooner than the larger, busier metropolitan museums. Poulot’s argument is that, in terms of restoring the national economy such decisions do not make sense, and that, at worst, they expose cultural institutions as nonessential “storage facilities” open to a few specialists each week. Bruno Brulon Soares, who we know from his in-depth analysis of the burning of the National Museum in Brazil in the previous issue of *Museum Worlds*, continues his critical appraisal of the lack of direction from the Brazilian government, which failed to ensure that the collective memory of the nation was preserved. Instead, the current pandemic has led to job losses for cultural workers, with little hope of redeployment or access to social services, which, Brulon Soares argues, highlights the precarious nature of museums and the livelihoods of

those involved in safeguarding cultural heritage. Themes of community engagement, economic recovery, and well-being are intertwined in Brulon Soares gut-wrenching reflection.

Nuala Morse from the School of Museum Studies at the University of Leicester shares some “care-ful” thoughts about how museums can create meaningful partnerships with public health researchers to support the health and well-being of the community. Morse’s ideas coincide with increased emphasis on transdisciplinary research in academia. Transdisciplinary research has no epistemologically dominant position. Instead, Gertrude Hirsch Hadorn and colleagues (2008) describe it as a reflexive, collaborative process focused on solving the world’s “wicked problems” with a high degree of complexity and uncertainty.

Laura Osorio Sunnucks and María de las Mercedes Martínez Milantchí from The Santo Domingo Centre of Excellence for Latin American Research (SDCELAR) at the British Museum share how they rapidly adjusted the delivery of a long-awaited exchange program for a group of Guaraní and Nivaclé artists who live and work in the Paraguayan Chaco. Their example demonstrates ways in which larger metropolitan museums can reach out to support Indigenous communities in isolated places, share resources, build new knowledge, and, at the same time, decolonize and decentralize the museum. Alberto Serrano, Director of the Martin Gusinde Anthropological Museum in Puerto Williams, Chile, explains what it means to reach out to remote communities. Serrano reminds us that, in order for heritage management to work, museums first must gain the confidence of the community. It must leverage the latter’s resources in order to ensure that it provides real tangible support to the community. Brett Mason, Director of Museums Wellington, held similar views: “We [museums] must support our community to rebuild through economic times that are looking tougher than ever before.” In his view, community engagement has to be a long-term and intergenerational commitment.⁴

Focusing on how to encourage visitors to come back to the museum after the lockdown, Shelley Ruth Butler and Erica Lehrer (2016) share their notion of “curatorial dreaming.” They see the disaster as an opportunity to challenge traditional ideas of curatorship and to open up talks about diversity, equity, accessibility, and inclusion. Lehrer is based at Concordia University and Butler at the McGill University Institute for Canadian Studies, both in Montreal, and their response was first published with the American Alliance of Museums, “Museums and Equity in Times of Crisis” series (Lehrer and Butler 2020). The authors stress just how important it is for audiences, when faced with trauma and shock, to slow down and deepen their “critical and creative engagement with museum collections,” explore those nuances, disagree, but at the same time feel energized by their experimentation.

Nicola Levell, lecturer and an independent curator at the Department of Anthropology at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver, was inspired by the Government of the People’s Republic of China’s direction to museums to engage audiences during the lockdown period via “cloud exhibitions.” In her piece, Levell playfully assesses the long-term success of cloud endeavors in the Anglophone world. Levell, much like Greagh Smith, concludes that the virtual can never replace “the sensation of the real.” This means that maintaining public interest in cloud exhibitions is the next big challenge. Anthony Shelton, Director of the Museum of Anthropology at the University of British Columbia, like Nuala Morse across the Atlantic, illuminates how cultural workers at a local level can work with other creative institutions and engage in interdisciplinary or transdisciplinary projects at a regional or international level. Shelton’s message is exciting: “The future awaits invention.” The last short piece, by Da (Linda) Kong and Mingyan Jiang from Fudan University, Shanghai, identifies two novel developments shaping museums in China, namely the rise in thematic museums and the move to collecting contemporary history, including artifacts that encapsulate the COVID-19 experience.

Written as notes from the field, Esther McNaughton expands on her recent PhD research findings about the readiness of art gallery educators to engage in fostering and creating a community of practice. She said that New Zealand's COVID-19 lockdown provided an opportunity to get that community online. McNaughton reports on the evolution of this project and embeds her experiences as "the local art gallery educator" in Nelson. Maintaining a student-centered focus remained central to this community, and during the lockdown their teaching practice expanded to educating the family using local, readily found natural materials. The art gallery educators described how their professional development involved a great leap in digital skills and a sudden focus on using local collections. Educators felt optimistic about the uncertain future. Operating online and onsite programs with diminished resourcing was not only a goal shared by New Zealand art gallery educators, but was an idea captured in a recent report released by Giasemi Vavoula and Stamatina Anastopoulou of the School of Museum Studies at the University of Leicester (2020). And based on Sheila Hoffman's analysis of museum exhibitions in the digital sphere during the COVID-19 lockdown (also in this *Museum Worlds* issue), it is time to upskill and embark on further digital innovation.

Ghebreyesus, the WHO's Director General, warns that "we all want to get on with our lives. But the hard reality is this is not even close to being over" (RTÉ 2020). Some museums have since reopened, and gift shops have taken advantage of new social rules with face masks featuring key icons from the collections, which have become bestsellers (Marshall 2020). The thread that binds all our voices is the genuine desire to use this sudden catastrophic event to co-create new museums of the future—this, to me, is cultural resilience in action.

Joanna Cobby,
University of Canterbury

NOTES

1. See, for example, MacKenzie and Smith (2020).
2. A recent Massey University survey found that many people experienced depression and/or financial problems during the lockdown, and that Māori were impacted more. See Leahy (2020).
3. Greagh Smith, Museum and Heritage Studies, Victoria University of Wellington, email, 13 May 2020.
4. Brett Mason, Director, Museums Wellington, email, 8 May 2020.

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Museums Are Social Anchors in Troubled Times

Tāmaki Paenga Hira Auckland War Memorial Museum, also known as the Auckland Museum, has closed its doors for an extraordinary situation once before.¹ In 1918, at the height of the Spanish Influenza pandemic, which caused the deaths of nine thousand New Zealanders, the Auckland Museum was closed from 3 November to 1 December, or nearly a full month. The Museum's 1918–1919 Annual Report notes that after reopening “it was at least another month before the attendance became normal.”

Auckland Museum too will open its doors again and play its part to help our city recover its equilibrium. In the meantime, during lockdown, we have been operating as an online museum, supporting the booming home education economy and maintaining our connectivity with Aucklanders and with our global audiences. Our Museum at Home web hub provides regularly updated stories, activities, videos, and puzzles designed to educate, stimulate, and entertain.

When we reopen, it may take a little time for Auckland Museum to reestablish its pre-COVID levels of just under a million visitors. We certainly will not see the return of our tourist visitors until restrictions on international travel are lifted some way down the track. Like so many public attractions, we are reviewing our business model, which will mean that in the near to medium term we will pivot strategically to the domestic market.

We look forward to the Museum's reopening, and know that in doing so we will play a part in reestablishing public confidence in civic life again. Market research across the globe tells us that museums are among the most trusted of public institutions. A poll of 3,500 adults in the United States published on 1 April suggests that many people trust that cultural attractions will not reopen unless they are a safe place for numbers of people to spend time. People said they would feel comfortable visiting again by the very action of the cultural entity reopening.

Auckland's Museum was one of the fledgling city's first public buildings, opening to the public in a disused farm building in 1852, and growing rapidly to require a purpose-built building on Princes Street by 1876. The present-day Auckland Museum was opened in the aftermath of World War II, largely thanks to public donations and subscriptions. In 2020, that social anchor role remains fundamentally unchanged. Auckland Museum has a responsibility to support the city's recovery following the decline of the COVID-19 contagion. Not only do large museums like ours have the floor space and facilities to enable continuing social distancing and the necessary health and safety conditions, they also offer people who have experienced weeks of isolation a safe place to visit and welcome respite from confinement. Our reopening will signal the gradual beginnings of a return to normality. What is more, we can serve as hubs of education, information-sharing, and collective reflection on the causes, responses, and impacts of this global crisis. Our curators are actively recording and collecting the social and material culture of the lockdown experience for future investigation, exhibition, and public debate.

The immediate post-COVID-19 period poses multiple challenges for museums, but also some interesting opportunities. While our bottom line has been severely dented by the loss of tourism revenues and our building transformation suspended, the lack of international visitors will enable us to refocus on our domestic audiences and local communities with new experiences and to return to our core function as an exhibiting, collecting, educational, and research museum.

If Aucklanders are going to be restricted from traveling overseas for some considerable time, the role of Auckland Museum in bringing the world to them is amplified further. Since its foundation, the Museum has enabled Aucklanders to access the world's human and natural cultures. In 1878, the Museum ordered 33 casts of Classical statuary for the art education of local citizens. Today, *Discobolus* (the “Discus Thrower”) stands above the north entrance of the Museum.

Despite the undoubted short-term logistics challenges, we remain committed to bringing a wide range of international cultural and natural history exhibitions for display in our new special exhibition suite. Loan exhibitions activate not only excitement and visitation among our local audiences, but also stimulate new connections and dialogues between collections separated by history and national borders. This initiative will coincide with the launch of a new Museum Membership offer that will provide opportunities to explore these and our own rich collections in greater depth.

The greatest dividend for the Museum in this post-COVID-19 scenario may be felt behind the scenes in the catalyzing of innovative responses and initiatives in the Museum's core digital, learning, and research functions. With the swift emergence of the home-schooling market, we are taking the opportunity to create new online education products for schools and families, including those supporting the new New Zealand history curriculum. We look forward to continuing to extend the Museum's reach and relevance when we return to the "new normal." The global reach and utility of the Museum's collections and expertise promises an exciting future as part of a well-networked community of cultural and scientific organizations. Meanwhile, the pandemic has created diverse opportunities for new collecting and research ventures, particularly in the domains of public health, social and environmental impacts, and community resilience. We will see the COVID-19 pandemic feature in our planned public laboratory space, Tāmaki Data, which forms part of our new galleries devoted to Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland, which is opening on the completion of our current works program.

Auckland Museum is closed as a cultural destination for the present. However, when the time is right it will be among the first visitor attractions to reopen to the public. When it does, it will spark hope, connectedness, and, like all great museums, renewed curiosity about the world in which we live—its past, its present, and, most critically, its future.

*David Gaimster,
Auckland War Memorial Museum | Tāmaki Paenga Hira*

■ **NOTE**

1. Auckland Museum reopened on 25 May 2020 as New Zealand moved to alert level two. All museums and galleries reopened at alert level one on 9 June 2020. This article was first published as David Gaimster, "Role of Museums in the Past, Present and Future," *New Zealand Herald*, 30 April 2020: https://www.nzherald.co.nz/travel/news/article.cfm?c_id=7&objectid=12328196 (accessed 24 September 2020).

■

(Re)imagining

Growing up in the United States, I adored museums and anywhere else that felt like sticking not just my nose but my entire brain in a book.

My family does not share this opinion. I am the bookworm of my generation, and my parents are immigrants. Why would they care for the gatekeepers of history when there were so many events in theirs to shield their children from, never to be shared in the hopes of never being

repeated, and so many more pressing priorities in building a new life? I did not love those places any less for inconsistent access, but they were rarefied, and I was always acutely aware of my privilege when I was allowed to experience them.

COVID-19 split the world along a new divide, essential and nonessential, but this is just a new name for our old friends: classism, racism, and sexism, among others. All of society's perils that blocked my consistent access to museums have been exacerbated for future generations. However, during this crisis museums have an opportunity to reimagine what they are and what purpose they serve.

Perhaps improbably, despite their locked doors and dark halls, museums have been wildly popular. Access to digital collections and Google's virtual visits are consistent list-toppers for quarantine activities. In a time of essentials, culture—art, music, literature, and, yes, museums—is being touted as necessary for the survival of the human spirit.

Yet, anything more than physical survival is exponentially a luxury. The pandemic has exposed the fault lines of society, widened existing gaps, and cast more and more people deep into the chasms. Even in wealthier countries, minorities disproportionately bear the costs of the virus. Not only are they losing more physical lives, but they are also regressing in socioeconomic measures and losing their way of life. More than just the pains of social/physical distancing, collective memories, oral histories, and customs not yet handed down are being laid to rest alongside a generation of elders.

Many community-focused organizations are doing their utmost to prevent these everyday tragedies. It is high time for museums to wholeheartedly join them. Food banks and donation drives do what they can to keep people physically healthy, and museums must do their part to preserve, conserve, and, most importantly, progress our societies, not only of the past but also those in the here and now. Otherwise, all we will have left are the artifacts of the peoples we silently watched die.

As headlines around the world demonstrate, communities rally around those who rally around their communities. Support for healthcare, restaurants, education, and other sectors pivoting to meet the urgent demands of this crisis has been rightfully overwhelming. But just as these actors adapt and innovate for their basic survival, so too must museums. If they hope to emerge from this pandemic with any chance of a sustainable and relevant future, museums have to seize this opportunity to redefine their purpose, reinvent their service to *all* community members, and reimagine their overall place—physically and figuratively—in the world.

Stephanie So,
Victoria University of Wellington

Fitting our plant to straitened times

Generally, museums require large subsidies to operate. These subsidies are allocated within the apparatuses of exchange and reciprocity and of trust between people that can be bundled under the term “economic systems.” When all is steady within these systems, our budgets tend to remain stable. Those subsidies might even grow when more wealth is created. However, the viability of the museum is sorely tested when those systems falter.

Currently, we are in a time of plague, and our societies are under stress as citizens lose jobs and nations face mounting debt levels. Here in New Zealand, successive governments have been united in holding debt down at around the 25 percent of GDP. We suffer special emergency conditions, like earthquakes and other natural disasters, which make this a prudent policy. In the face of COVID-19, that debt will now expand out to around 50 percent or more. In addition, we have the problem of a huge private debt, mainly in house-buying. Such levels of debt cause hesitancy within, and sometimes the collapse of, the critical ingredient that is trust.

It is impossible to tell the future, but we can read the signs. Our climate is changing, and by 2100 Planet Earth is likely to host 10 billion people. This suggests that a new reality for all future planning is assessing and mitigating shocks that will greatly influence, likely for the worst, the ability of museums to do “business as usual.” When we plea to our political masters that resource allocations go to us rather than be directed to other pressing needs, are we able to support the case to maintain the large piece of capital plant that is a central-place museum, to grow its collections, and to buy the energy to operate sophisticated climate control systems to keep those all-to-often passive collections in pristine condition against some use for another day? We know these questions are out there. Helen Wilkinson (2005) points out that museums need to be more open about the cost of housing collections that remain mostly invisible to the public. And our eminent colleagues, Sir Nicholas Serota and Sir Mark Jones, have pointed out that museums can be accused of boosting global warming through excessive energy use (Serota 2011).

I would suggest that over the next 80 years, and more, we will have to weather a slew of largely human-made shocks, COVID-19 being but one, but I also think about the 1918–1919 flu pandemic and the global financial crisis of 2007–2008. It is best that we plan for this future with a new archetype for the idea of the museum. How about something lighter on the ground and better able to react to the changes besetting human existence on our planet? We could:

1. reduce the capital plant that is the museum, in part by consolidation into a set of major national institutions charged with confronting issues of national importance, and in part by dispersing effort to cultural initiatives that are integrated within, and in-scale with the needs of, individual communities;
2. these last are likely to be, or be part of, complex entities, for example the Watts Towers complex of community-voice interpretation, arts enterprise, and historic monument;
3. rethink the idea of collections, moving away from “comprehensive” toward the much more limited and exacting concept of “significant cultural property,” and reducing collection “weight” by gifting and sale into the private sphere; and
4. have some research efforts (e.g., natural science collections) be governed by national policy and reside outside the idea of a museum.

*Ken Gorbey,
Wellington*

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It Will Be the Best of Times, It Will Be the Worst of Times

Post-COVID Museums

I wonder, typing this in my locked-down state, how many museums around the world are shut today. Never have there been fewer visitors.¹ I have spent my working life in them; and as I begin to contemplate what they might be like when their doors reopen, I find myself pulled toward two very different visions of the future. Will their public role become more important and popular than ever; or might they be eclipsed as a pre-corona indulgence?

Some very big practical and financial questions will, of course, hang over them when the cultural world does begin to turn again. But it is also likely that public behaviors and cultural appetites will have shifted by then. This is what fills both my dreams and my nightmares.

It will be the best of times: maybe the clearest lesson to emerge from our experiences of physical distancing will be that social gatherings are an essential centrepiece of meaningful lives. Reopened museums and galleries will provide trusted institutions in which to remind ourselves of that. Tentatively at first, people will gradually be drawn in greater and greater numbers to spaces where they can be in company, next to strangers, sharing a similar experience. Museums will become symbols of the reinvention of social closeness.

Most people, particularly the young it turns out, will relish a release from the virtual overload of zoom-employment and, after supper, social lives negotiated through the same equipment. Stepping into museums, first-time—as well as veteran—visitors will willingly abandon their mobile equipment at the entrances—a post-COVID innovation. They will eagerly seek out the stickier, slower, and less distracting experiences on offer: looking at, learning, thinking, and talking about stubbornly unmovable things, feeling their gravitas. Among many, it will reinforce a growing realization that they will recall from before coronavirus—namely, that we seemed already to be making ourselves sick and stupid with relentless waves of new technology.

And at a subtler level, gallery audiences will increasingly arrive with big questions about meanings and values that have crammed their minds while cloistered at home. A close encounter with a sculpture or installation, a guided historical tour, a multiperspectival debate about dying well: these museum experiences will reassert themselves as irreplaceable opportunities to enhance enthusiasm and well-being. Increasing numbers will turn to museums, and other public cultural activities, as a viable alternative to relentless worries about the future and those feelings of guilt that rush in when not trying to make it better. Visitors will be grateful for the opportunities offered by museums to be interested, thoughtful, and playfully engaged without purpose or goal. Or, maybe not.

It will be the worst of times: maybe months of learning to treat all but our nearest and dearest as potential grim reapers will, instead, make places where people gather permanent sources of anxiety. Museums and galleries will carefully curate upbeat programming and relaunch with optimistic marketing. And at first a few braver souls will try them out. But the difficult-to-shake habits of two-meter-queuing in enclosed spaces will blunt people's willingness to spend time getting up close to exhibits. And new safely distanced, semi-outdoor events, produced by canny cultural innovators, will prove too much competition.

And actually, on reflection, even the most techno-innocent or -phobic citizens will recall from lockdown times that much, indeed most, of life was pretty effectively conducted from home behind glass. Gatherings of sometimes quite large groups effectively did come together

online, all able to attend the same points of interest, simultaneously imbued with a modicum of shared atmosphere. To survive, curators and museum makers will increasingly think online first, realizing that resources required to maintain buildings and collections can efficiently be diverted to digital content. Running these slim-line, agile, cultural offers will be cheaper; and sometimes they will reach far larger, but also crucially broader, more inclusive audiences.

Sure, sentimentality will enable some museums to keep struggling along for decades. But the laziness of short attention spans and a clamor for everything publicly supported to have direct relevance, along with some pre-considered utility, will gradually push through the nostalgia associated with those baggier pre-corona institutions. Fittingly maybe, three hundred years after its founding, the British Museum will be the last permanently to close its doors in 2053.

Ken Arnold,

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■ **NOTE**

1. This text was first published as Ken Arnold, “The Best of Times, the Worst of Times,” *Museums Journal*, 29 April 2020, <https://www.museumsassociation.org/museums-journal/comment/29042020-best-of-times-worst-of-times> (accessed 24 September 2020).

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Too Small to Fail?

On the Bizarre “Privilege” of French Unsuccessful Museums

The pandemic closed French museums, before the relaxation of COVID-19 lockdown measures led to their reopening. Prime Minister Philippe announced on 28 April 2020 that “big” museums would remain closed after May while “small” museums could reopen, fearing that the big museums would attract “a large number of visitors from outside their catchment area.” But, it was objected, is a small museum defined by its size? By its attendance? By its collections? There are small museums that pose a health risk, while there are large museums where space is not a problem. In fact, the Prime Minister was referring to museums with such a limited audience that it is safe to open them, in the hope, or certainty, that they will not attract any large numbers of visitors. The political diagnosis takes note of the popularity deficit of most museums and accepts (if not rejoices in) it in the name of the health security of solitary and risk-free visits. The reasoning is, of course, absolutely paradoxical and counterintuitive from the point of view of pro-market policy, which the present government claims to follow.

This decision in fact refers, as in many French cultural situations, to the divide between Paris and the provinces. We have to face the figures: in 2017 the 1,218 certified “museums of France” welcomed 63 million visitors, but seven museums had more than one million visitors each and totaled nearly 26 million. This leaves 17.6 million visitors to 927 museums, giving an average of just under 20,000 visitors for 76 percent of the museums. The French museum landscape thus includes a large number of museums that only have a small number of visitors every day and that are therefore hygienic environments.

If the pandemic is to mark a new cultural era, in favor of museums whose influence is local or citizen-centered, and which are not subject to strong tourist pressure, a reconfiguration of their purpose and existence should be imagined. For the moment, we see nothing that would encourage visitors to come to museums to see things that, politicians say (if only implicitly), deserve the indifference of large crowds. On the contrary, to uphold the idea that these museums are *really* of interest and to acknowledge their (perhaps limited but real) potential audience would be a true challenge. Otherwise, another radical position is to be feared, namely that such establishments really are of negligible value and that they may be closed down in favor of storage facilities that are safely open for only two or three specialists each week.

*Dominique Poulot,
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NOTE

Press release: Édouard Philippe, Prime Minister, Hotel de Matignon, “Présentation de la stratégie nationale de déconfinement Assemblée nationale,” 28 April 2020, https://www.gouvernement.fr/sites/default/files/document/document/2020/04/discours_de_m._edouard_philippe_premier_ministre_-_presentation_de_la_strategie_nationale_de_deconfinement_-_assemblee_nationale_-_28.04.2020.pdf (accessed 24 September 2020).

Pandemic Museums

Symptoms to Reflect on

Museums were introduced in contemporary times as open institutions with a social role. As a public service, the museum is currently being defined as a democratic and inclusive platform for the preservation and communication of cultural heritage. The current pandemic poses structural questions for museums around the world, aggravating a global crisis that was already haunting the cultural field even before the spread of COVID-19.

From the point of view of museums and museum professionals, the coronavirus pandemic is more than a sanitary crisis, with thousands of victims who have been infected in different countries. It is already a crisis with implications for the lives of the most vulnerable professionals involved in museums’ basic functions. Such a crisis is related to an economic recession and a political catastrophe that reaches liberal nation-states, exposing the precarious condition of human life. In the context of the pandemic, the priorities for the governance of society and the maintenance of basic human rights—key values in the foundation of any democratic institution—are being stretched to their limits in some parts of the world.

The first symptoms of social isolation and the recent change in museums’ functioning were rapidly realized by their core personnel. For many museums in different parts of the world—from Rio de Janeiro to New York City—the uncertain scenario resulted in massive layoffs, immediate cuts in salaries, and the interruption of ongoing projects for 2020. In Brazil, for instance, institutions that depend on private investors to exist in the neoliberal cultural market had to dismiss

their most vulnerable workers, the majority of which were hired on temporary contracts, but also laid off their entire workforce of educators—personnel whose functions were considered to be strictly oriented to physical visitors. While museum workers faced abrupt unemployment, the Brazilian government refused to establish any policy to prevent layoffs or take any measure to protect the institutions responsible for safeguarding the country’s cultural heritage and the lives of those involved in its preservation.

If before the pandemic the future of cultural policies for Brazil and the management of our museums was an unresolved issue for the Bolsonaro government—after the extinction of the Ministry of Culture in 2019 and the subsequent significant cuts in culture and education—now, the prospect for our cultural field and its professionals is even more uncertain. While policies were put into effect to protect banks and corporations, no discussion has been had at a national level regarding the survival of cultural institutions after the pandemic or while the period of social isolation is in force. And already we know that resources will be even scarcer in the near future.

Museums serve societies by maintaining their relation to the past and present, helping us to deal with loss through preservation, memory, and continuity. Cultural institutions are also places of collective transmission and reflection that are necessary for any sense of the future we may cultivate today. As the recent past has shown, museums may serve a politics of death or a politics of life. The role of these institutions in the future will depend on how governments act for the preservation of the cultural sector and its professionals right now.

Bruno Brulon Soares,

Universidade Federal do Estado do Rio de Janeiro, Rio de Janeiro

Care-ful Cultural Work and Health Inequalities

What Roles for Museums? A UK Perspective

Earlier this year, a follow-on report to the Marmot Review was published, ten years from the original landmark review on health inequalities in England (Marmot et al. 2020). The report is unequivocal: health inequalities are growing wider, and in some parts of the country life expectancy has stopped improving. The effects of the coronavirus pandemic will likely exacerbate these existing health inequalities further.¹ Coronavirus is not a “great leveler”—it will hit the most vulnerable hardest. Evidence is emerging from ONS data of inequality in COVID-19-related mortality based on existing ethnic and socioeconomic inequalities. Other research is investigating the psychological and social impact of the pandemic to identify groups at greatest risk.²

Recent years have seen an increase in museum partnerships in the United Kingdom with health and social care providers in order to develop programs focusing on health and well-being outcomes. Museums have looked to their collections for their therapeutic powers and to their buildings for their restorative qualities, devising bespoke activities to support people living with dementia, stroke survivors, mental health services users, and those in need of care. The lockdown has seen this work urgently adapt online.³

Before the pandemic, I was writing about the idea of the museum as a space of social care⁴—a version of the museum where practices and relations of care are central: care for objects (well-

established of course), but also care for people, care for the community, care for staff, care for the present and the past, and care for the future. The concept also presents a fundamental role for the museum sector in networks of formal health and social care.

Museums and the arts provide some of the vital resources we will need to heal after the pandemic. There will likely be an outpouring of the language of care, compassion, and kindness as some of the key values that should reorient the work of culture. But we will need to anchor these feelings practically, to assert the role of culture in nurturing a caring society. Crucially, we need to recognize the inequalities that the pandemic is so brutally revealing. This will require rethinking the infrastructures through which culture is linked into formal and informal care provision, especially at a local level, to explicitly address health inequalities, broaden the reach of cultural work, and consider the potential/limits of the digital.

This approach needs to be central in shaping the future of museums' health and well-being work and research in the United Kingdom and beyond. We will need care both as a driving value and as a set of concrete actions, to be established through funding, public policies, and partnerships, in order to support the health and well-being of our communities now and in the future.

*Nuala Morse,
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■ NOTES

1. Sir Michael Marmot makes this point in a recent piece by Beth Staton (2020).
2. "COVID-19 Social Study," University College London, <https://www.covidsocialstudy.org/> (accessed 23 July 2020). ONS = Office for National Statistics.
3. For instance, the Holburne Museum's Pathways to Wellbeing program has moved online with weekly Wednesday activities (<https://www.holburne.org/learning/community-engagement/pathways-to-wellbeing/>); the Stirling Smith Art Gallery and Museum has devised online mindfulness sessions using its arts collections (<https://www.museumsassociation.org/museums-journal/news/04052020-stirling-smith-online-mindfulness-sessions/>); the arts organization 64 Million Artists is delivering daily creative activities for the local community (<https://64millionartists.com/>); and the Culture, Health and Wellbeing Alliance is collating resources for practitioners and organizations, including creative home-based ways to support mental health (<https://www.culturehealthandwellbeing.org.uk/resources/coronavirus-resources-practitioners-and-organisations>). An online United Kingdom-wide survey is currently gathering the sector's response in this area of work. I expect it will show a wealth of creative activity as museums aim to remain connected to their communities (<https://www.culturehealthandwellbeing.org.uk/surveys-and-research-relating-covid-19>).
4. Forthcoming as a book, *The Museum as a Space of Social Care* (Morse 2021).

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Artists (not) in Residence at the British Museum

The Santo Domingo Centre of Excellence for Latin American Research (SDCELAR) is currently codveloping an artist residency based on a network built between London, the Paraguayan Chaco, and Winnipeg. This project was planned to take place in person this summer (2020) but has been adapted to a digital residency due to COVID-19. We have invited to take part in this residency a collective founded by Osvaldo Pitoe and Jorge Carema, a group of Guaraní and Nivaclé artists who live and work on Indigenous territory occupied by Mennonites in the Paraguayan Chaco—many of whom had emigrated from other parts of the Chaco—as well as Miriam Rudolph, an artist who was born on this territory and was a member of the Mennonite community there before moving to live and work in Canada. The work of the “Chaco collective” explores deforestation by Mennonite settlers and the attendant erasure of Indigenous socio-economic and religious structures, while Rudolph uses Indigenous representational styles to call out dispossession and cultural effacement. She also reflects on the relationship between ideology, territory, and transnationalism. The artists will work with the objects acquired by Anglican missionaries Barbrooke Grubb and Hawtrey from the peoples living in the Chaco at the beginning of the twentieth century. These collections, associated with the benign study of cultural knowledge by anthropologists, are a by-product of colonial networks. This project aims to challenge this legacy by creating a critical disorder between the layers of meaning associated with missionary projects existing in various Indigenous territories in the Chaco at different points in time.

As the project was devised before the global ramifications of COVID-19 became clear, the fact that the Chaco collective’s work touches on the relationship between deforestation and diseases such as malaria, which are relatively new in the area, is incidental. The artists will decide whether to include coronavirus and the product of agricultural incursions into new ecosystems in their work. SDCELAR will provide the artists with materials, digitized British Museum collections, and equipment with which to document the residency. The majority of the artists in the “Chaco collective” do not own computers or smartphones, and have no access to the Internet, either in their homes or in nearby public buildings. The Centre will experiment with different avenues of communication such as sending images digitally through an intermediary, or in print through the mail. The process of communicating images and information between the three locations will necessarily highlight some of the injustices of creating digital programs to resolve the issues arising from COVID-19. These issues have already been raised and disputed in museums in relation to calls for the democratization of collection access and the climate emergency, as there is some irony in using technological advancement and expensive equipment to counter an epistemicide that is closely linked to neoliberal markets. However, the aim of this particular project is to take the collection to researchers in other parts of the world, in order to facilitate work in their own territorial context and at the same time establish transnational relationships. This work will decentralize the museum and thereby hopes to counteract the siloing of knowledge taken through colonial processes.

*Laura Osorio Sunnucks and María de las Mercedes Martínez Milantchí,
SDCELAR, British Museum*

Pandemia in the far south

In the specific case of the Martin Gusinde Anthropological Museum, situated in the Navarin Island on the *Onashaga*, beneath the Cape Horns, in the southern tip of Chile, far from more populated urban centres, it has become clear—with the pandemic and all of its effects—just how precarious the ways in which we carry out our activities are. The crisis has to some extent enabled us to reflect on our work and on how we have “made a museum in isolation.” But, amid severe budget cuts, we have seen that what we have built is not being taken into account, and this is rapidly leaving us in a precarious position.

We have, of course, had to close our doors to the public. But the imposition of social distancing measures and quarantine has prevented us from performing what has possibly been some of our most valuable work—that is, the work we do with the local community and in particular with the Indigenous community. Furthermore, our particular local circumstances, in which we have very limited Internet connectivity, do not allow us much contact with the outside world, which means that we have become extremely isolated. Unfortunately, we cannot do much about the Internet problem, and this has become a challenge for our institution if we are not to be left “behind” in terms of a virtual link to the public. This crisis has underlined the great importance of the Internet in facilitating communication with the local community and the general public. We have put our efforts into maintaining contact, and the quality of our ties, with the community, as the importance of this emotional link with the community has become more evident than ever as we develop our activities in isolation in the archipelago.

This situation has also enabled us to confirm that the museum needs on occasion to go beyond just maintaining a link with the community based on heritage, and that it needs to play a more active role in other aspects of society, for example in terms of social and logistical aid for the people we work with. This work may be in response to the needs and demands of the organizations we work with, but it also implies support for and participation in their management, their activities, and their strategies for problem-solving—indeed in whatever way we can offer institutional support. This museum is an institution that can deploy various resources to support these aspects of community life, and it should be prepared to offer that support. Sooner or later, this work will reap positive rewards for the museum’s work in heritage management. We are currently at a crossroads in terms of how, and in conjunction with whom, we can best provide this support, as well as in terms of the criteria we need to establish to earn the confidence of the community. Now is the time for our aims of safeguarding heritage to focus on those links we want to strengthen, as it is these links that will allow us to amass valuable political capital that can benefit the local community.

Alberto Serrano.

Martin Gusinde Anthropological Museum, Puerto Williams, Cape Horn Region

Curatorial Dreaming in the Age of COVID-19

As museums around the world have temporarily shut their doors in response to public health calls for physical distancing,¹ many have rallied to develop new ways to keep museums accessible (Keates 2020). These have focused on online exhibitions, tours, and other creative strategies (Ciecko 2020) to keep audiences engaged, entertained (O’Neill 2020), and inspired (Elassar 2020)—or ease

anxious minds with their most calming art (Romano 2020). Such initiatives are admirable, even crucial, during this unprecedented social upheaval. But we would argue there is an opportunity for museums to go deeper rather than shrink into a *status quo ante* where only “highlights” and permanent exhibits go online. Just as the pandemic is laying bare stark global (Vera 2020) and national (Pilkington and Rao 2020) inequalities, museums must recognize that they themselves are woven into a social fabric that is proving to be woefully frayed. As we anticipate the social and institutional effects of the novel coronavirus, it seems worth asking: how can we, as teachers, scholars, museum visitors, and community members, engage *critically* with museums that are closed?

We hope museums will take this opportunity to use their collections to stimulate creative engagement with pressing issues such as social inequity, the rise of populism, and global warming—as well as with internal institutional issues like object restitution (Ellis 2019), community consultation (Sarna et al. 2017), and the gendered hierarchies (Chalabi 2019) in and overwhelming whiteness (McCambridge 2017) of museums. Thanks to community activism, critical scholarship, and a changing public culture, many museums have become more democratic in the last few decades, departing from their history of serving the elite and aiding in the reproduction of the social order. The process is ongoing, and has intensified in the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom, recently with calls for institutional “decolonization” and for cutting ties with donors linked to issues like the opioid crisis (Woodyatt 2019) and fossil fuel extraction (Garrard 2020). Can this moment of forced distancing provide new angles of view on these difficult discussions? Can museums spur quarantined publics to contemplate museums’ entrenched biases, critically engage with their collections, and invent new ways to relate to them?

As we argue in the introduction to our book *Curatorial Dreams: Critics Imagine Exhibitions* (Butler and Lehrer 2016), exhibitions naturalize particular ways of looking at the world, but they can also clear paths for new ways of seeing. People’s relationships to museums—how we are asked, taught, and permitted to use these spaces—should also be open to the most radical rethinking. We urge museums to view the current “state of exception” not only as a constraint (which it obviously is), but as a moment to experiment. For instance, museums could offer design software that allows exhibitions to be recurated on a web platform, or recaptioned with new interpretive texts. Imagined shows could be curated by aspiring curators, museum critics, students, and community groups (Kinsella 2020). The interactive online game-in-development *Occupy White Walls* (Occupy White Walls n.d.), for example, sidesteps artworld gatekeepers by allowing users to not only curate virtual exhibits, but build and populate whole virtual museums. Thematic shows cutting across traditional taxonomies could address such pressing topics as empathy, global interconnectedness and the viral quality of ideas, the vulnerabilities of aging, notions of sickness and healthcare, and why inequality exists. Rapid-response collecting (Victoria and Albert Museum 2017) has been on the rise since 9/11 (and is gaining steam in the current pandemic; see Abend 2020), but how about “quick curating”?

What might museums do to connect, sustain, and—most importantly—diversify their audiences during this crisis? Are they willing and able to open their collections and archives more deeply, in order to support opportunities for radical rethinking? Might they anticipate the memory and mourning of this current event? How can they center, enfranchise, and invest in the most marginalized individuals, whose precariousness has suddenly been made so much more visible? This is also a moment to consider just how accessible museums actually are to a full range of citizens (and noncitizens) in various national contexts, in either digital or analogue form.

In our teaching, and in Curatorial Dreaming workshops (Butler 2018), we have witnessed how students, researchers, artists, docents, and curators can design powerful and moving imagined exhibitions for specific museums, as well as for civic spaces such as airports, hospitals, festivals, and shopping centers. At a time when socializing in public endangers our communities, it could

be energizing to dream of innovative ways to bring together objects, art, knowledge, and people. Teachers could use virtual museum tours to instill critical museum visitorship skills, increasing students' sense of ownership and agency in these institutions that should serve them. Community members could be given micro-grants to mobilize museum collections—or assemble new ones—and invent exhibitions that creatively address issues that concern them. Museum–university partnerships and community-based experiments are increasingly common, but are often devalorized, exhibited in out-of-the-way galleries. With all museum real estate suddenly virtual, this is a moment that is ripe for inversion.

To be sure, imagining the exhibitions we want, even designing them in cyberspace, cannot replace real, concrete physical changes on museum walls, in their collections, or in their staffing. But as social activist Naomi Klein recently stated, quoting economist Milton Friedman: “Only a crisis—actual or perceived—produces real change. When that crisis occurs, the actions that are taken depend on the ideas that are lying around” (Goodman 2020). What we dream today could become reality later, rather than a postcrisis return to business as usual. We hope that museum leaders will use this unanticipated upending of our relationships to time, space, and technology—and each other—to invite and support the widest range of constituents in deepening their critical and creative engagement with museum collections and galleries. If they do, when these key civic institutions reopen, audiences may come to them not only with new enthusiasm, but with new eyes.

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Shelley Ruth Butler, McGill Institute for Canadian Studies

■ NOTE

1. This response first appeared as a blog for the American Alliance of Museums' “Museums and Equity in Times of Crisis” series, and was first published on 4 April 2020 at <https://www.aam-us.org/2020/05/04/curatorial-dreaming-in-the-age-of-covid-19/>.

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Cloud Exhibitions

In January 2020, a couple of months before COVID-19 was declared a global pandemic by the World Health Organization, and as many cities in China were facing lockdown, the PRC govern-

ment issued a letter directing museums to “enrich the people’s spiritual and cultural life during the epidemic [with] cloud exhibitions” (Goldstein 2020). Since then, around the world, museums on lockdown have been fast-tracking and expanding their digital content in the hope of engaging audiences, maintaining a public presence, retaining staff, and satiating the documented cravings for cultural nourishment during this time of social distancing and self-isolation. Clearly, cloud or digital exhibitions are a significant constituent of these online offerings (see, e.g., Jones 2020; Wilson 2020). Yet, how effective have they been in attracting, enriching, and sustaining visitor engagement? What form and role might digital exhibitions take in museums, both now and in the future? To begin, it is important to recognize that “digital exhibition” is a descriptor that encompasses a diverse range of online products. I suggest that it is useful to identify three broad digital-exhibition types: the linear, the virtual, and the game. Like all typologies, this is unavoidably reductive in nature, but it provides a base and structure for thinking critically about the possibilities—the scope and limitations—of these different digital iterations that have become increasingly visible in the time of COVID-19.¹

The linear narrative type of digital exhibition has arguably been around for the longest time. It generally combines text and image, with the possibility of audio and audiovisual components. With a narrative, two-dimensional, and didactic rather than an immersive orientation, the online visitor generally explores objects, extended labels, and captions, moving forward and backward in paginated order, rather than seeing exhibits positioned in three-dimensional gallery space. The Virtual Museum of Canada (est. 2001) provides hundreds of examples of this type of linear narrative exhibition.² Whereas some exhibitions of this type have only ever existed in digital form, others have had a physical precursor like the British Museum’s (2020) *Egypt: Faith after the Pharaohs*.³

In contrast to the linear, the virtual exhibition is more experiential, immersive, and multi-modal. Visitors are invited to explore three-dimensional gallery space with the freedom to wander, zoom in, and scrutinize exhibits and texts, and related media. Google Arts and Culture has effectively colonized this field of production, harnessing its Street View technology and partnering with museums around the world to create virtual iterations of real display spaces, while other institutions, including smaller museums, have creatively harnessed real-estate and virtual-tour technologies to produce affordable digital simulations. For example, during lockdown, in April 2020, the Museum of Vancouver (2020) created and uploaded a Matterport virtual tour of its temporary exhibition, *Acts of Resistance*.⁴ Another innovative approach in digital-exhibition development is the mobilization of gaming technology. In lockdown mode, the Centre Pompidou (2020) in Paris released *Prisme 7*, a video game in which online “visitors” travel through the tubes and walkways of the iconic architectural space, connecting with artworks and related texts while hunting down hidden gems and power-ups.

Whereas publics eagerly sourced online cultural content in the initial weeks of lockdown, their interest has been waning (Frontline 2020; see also Alexis 2020; Unitt 2020). One of the reasons may be the documentary and didactic flavor of the majority of digital exhibitions, wherein emphasis still rests on passive consumption (looking, listening, reading). Even virtual reality (VR) assets are largely replicating the “real” and not capitalizing on the hypermediated potential of the digital realm to capture the multidimensional facets of exhibition atmospheres. To seduce visitors, museums may need to reimagine the digital exhibition, creating an innovative and hybridized assemblage of activities, programs, conversations, talks, tours, and participatory events to recreate, but never replace, the sensation of the real.

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NOTES

1. Please note: this short response is Euro-American-centric and focuses on English-text projects and platforms.
2. See <http://www.virtualmuseum.ca/virtual-exhibits/type/virtual-exhibits/> (accessed 18 May 2020).
3. Google Arts and Culture (formerly Google Art Project), which is involved in the exhibit, launched in 2011 in cooperation with 17 international museums, including the British Museum.
4. See <https://museumofvancouver.ca/acts-of-resistance> (accessed 18 May); also see <https://www.shadowstringthings.com/> (accessed 15 September).

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The COVID Rupture?

After a week of repeatedly reorganizing staff to maintain operations and ensure their safety, like most museums in Vancouver, the Museum of Anthropology (MOA) closed on 17 March 2020 due to the threat of COVID-19. We transitioned surprisingly smoothly to reposition operations; strategic, curatorial, and exhibition planning; editorial work; as well as weekly happy hours and coffee breaks onto digital platforms. Early on, we appointed an online curator who, after we realigned our communications team, helped elicit, coordinate, and shape digital content to keep our voice alive.

The lead organizations in sharing information on emergency preparedness, staffing, protection of collections, logistics, and new sources of financial assistance have been the Canadian

Art Museum's Directors Organization (CAMDO) and the University and College Art Galleries Association of Canada (UCAGAC). Reopening strategies have been benchmarked with guidelines posted by Quebec and Berlin museums, both of which were among the first to reopen their facilities. Navigating our current unprecedented situation reveals the limitations and sometimes ill-preparedness of our organizations, but it also unexpectedly illuminates new possible regional, international, and interdisciplinary networks and even political affinities between creative institutions. National and international professional associations might sometimes have failed to provide the leadership expected of them, but others adroitly have filled their place. New practices in developing online programs and planning are being made possible by quickly forged relationships among cultural workers (researchers, artists, novelists, educationists, organizers, filmmakers) who have transcended their usual disciplinary or professional boundaries to jointly act in defending the sector. The time is right for museums to shed their exclusivity and become part of wider cultural alliances that surpass the limitations of discipline-based curatorial authority. Although some museologists have raised the alarm over the decimation of the sector based on a few institutions, others are directing attention to the wider rearticulations occurring throughout the field. These diverse and complex reactions certainly reveal entrenched professional self-interests and institutional deficits, but more importantly they also demonstrate the integrity, commitment, and resilience of the majority of cultural workers everywhere. COVID-19 has made us all activists, if we so chose.

While these tendencies have surely been widely noted, it was the development and enhancement of museums' online presence and the realization of the need for future sustainability that has elicited the most attention. Here too, once we get over our initial makeshift responses, we should think about how to avoid reproducing a binary model that separates the digital from the physical, and develop new models that transcend Cartesian dualism and Baudrillardian simulacra. The future awaits invention.

Having entered an age of insecurity and unpredictability in which testing and experimentation might become our sole guide and method, we are poised at a rupture that is no less significant than that described by Michel Foucault for the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Experimentation, by its very nature, will become politically manipulated and breed competing social, ethical, and existential threats, and will require a critical voice that art and cultural expressions must provide. We should look again at our arts and cultural institutions. And we should drop the brand names, suspend copyright and commodity entanglements, and reject professional silos and their disciplinary rhetorics that maintain our professional solitudes. Cultural work now requires an interdisciplinary realignment to protect both its integrity and its commitment to universal and fundamental human values. We have been given the possibility of a new, less encumbered beginning. The next few years will decide whether we squander or seize the frightening opportunity presented to us.

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COVID-19 Bears Witness to the Achievement of Chinese Museums and Their Social Responsibility

The global spread of COVID-19 has brought huge impacts and challenges to all countries and industries. The world is experiencing the real meaning of the idea of a “community of common destiny” for humankind. This sudden outbreak of the epidemic turned pandemic also provides an opportunity for institutions in all walks of life to rethink their values and future directions. This is also true for museums in China. The pandemic is a periodic test for Chinese museums, which have experienced a boom over the past decade, and it should also be a “catalyst” for the development of Chinese museums from quantity to quality in the next decade.

Chinese museums’ responses to COVID-19 demonstrate their social responsibility and the gradual achievements of the past decade. In late January, all museums in China were closed due to the outbreak of the coronavirus. It was not until mid-to-late March, when the pandemic gradually stabilized in China, that Chinese museums started to reopen, though with certain restrictions. Since 1 February, the State Administration of Cultural Heritage has gradually released six batches of museums’ online resources including over four hundred virtual exhibitions, panoramic exhibition halls, and data platforms. These resources cover large national museums like the National Museum of China and the Palace Museum in Beijing, the Shanghai Museum, as well as those smaller and specialized museums dealing with China’s revolutionary history. The online exhibitions contain permanent displays, temporary exhibitions, and those popular traveling shows brought to China most recently from different countries, like exhibitions about Egyptian culture, which have been very rarely picked up by Chinese museums. In addition to these online resources, there have also been other offerings available for the Chinese public ranging from virtual exhibits, to academic lectures and general courses, to online games and TV documentaries and concerts. Staff training programs for museum professionals have also been regularly organized online, which are also open to the public.

Meanwhile, using new media like Tik Tok, Weibo, and Taobao, more and more museums have tried live streaming to take the public to “cloud visit” museums. This helps museums to better interact with the public and interpret those behind-the-scenes stories that are often ignored during onsite visits. This will also help museums to increase their sales of creative products. In addition to these online services, museums around the country are also collecting relevant objects to record this tragic yet important event in the history of China and humanity. Experts and scholars have proposed standards and principles for collecting, introduced case studies and experiences of similar museums abroad, and even called for the establishment of thematic museums. Most recently, Chinese museums have hosted thematic exhibitions memorializing those who lost their lives to the pandemic.

In fact, long before the pandemic, some Chinese museums had already launched online exhibitions and actively explored new media. Chinese museums have been working on building smart museums for the past several years, and they proved themselves during the pandemic by providing cultural comfort for society. Now by mid-2020, everything is getting back to normal in China, and museums will be gradually allowed to hold large-scale events. What will the legacy of this pandemic be for Chinese museums? In the near future, Chinese museums will definitely continue to go digital. And there is no doubt that this pandemic will push Chinese museums to pay more attention to contemporary history and to think more about their social responsibility.

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