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# Museological Review: (Re)visiting Museums

The Peer-Reviewed Journal edited by the PhD Students of the School of Museum Studies, University of Leicester



# *Museological Review*, Issue 25

## (Re)visiting Museums

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# Editorial: (Re)visiting Museums

Welcome to Issue 25 of *Museological Review*, '(Re)visiting Museums'. This year's issue has been entirely conceived, created and launched during the pandemic times. As museums across the world were being closed or forced to operate within restrictions at the beginning of 2020, we also witnessed the incredible resilience and creativity of a sector that had to face tremendous challenges at an economic, social and human level. As the Editorial Team of a peer-reviewed journal that celebrates its 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary this year, we decided to seize the moment to reflect collectively upon the challenges, struggles and opportunities that were unfolding in front of us and across the museum world. While aware of the fragilities, complexities and inequalities of the cultural sector that COVID-19 undeniably exposed further, we wanted to provide a space for young academics and practitioners to reflect positively on the questions that arose from these times.

In 2020, many museums shifted their programming from onsite to online, finding themselves suddenly able (theoretically at least) to cater for local and existing audiences as well as for new publics worldwide. They have had to rethink creatively their institutional practices and strategies of engagement, deal with new tools and platforms, find different ways to stay relevant and reach their audiences, at times defend or prove their role within society. On the one hand this has shaken profoundly well-established practices, the use of social space and the traditional ways to relate to the communities, on the other it has opened new paths. All the contributions in this issue explore novel solutions, tools, and perspectives on museum practice. Some articles question the limitations and barriers of the recent digital turn, while others suggest ways to overcome them; some reflect on the societal

role of museums in times of crisis from a theoretical point of view, others engage with social issues and human rights through the lens of practice. They all succeed at reminding us of the unlimited creativity and committed dedication to the public that lie at the heart of museum work.

Issue 25 features academic articles, interviews, exhibition and book reviews, as well as visual and short contributions, with the aim to include a variety of formats that serve different purposes. In particular for the latter, the Editorial Team invited researchers and practitioners to submit short submissions on the role of museums in challenging times, as a way of capturing immediate responses to the contemporary events. The short contributions include reflections on visitor services, wellbeing, digital design, cultural democracy and social justice. The visual submissions' section features the original works of the contributors responding to the theme of 'If your home was a museum, what object would be on display?'

The articles explore the core themes of the issue more in depth and are divided into different sections, as detailed below.

The first section, 'Digital practices and engagement during lockdown', addresses the changes and practical adaptations the museum field had to implement over the past year by thinking creatively about new ways to engage with audiences remotely and conduct visitor studies. **Sophia Bakogianni** critically reflects on the digital methods she employed to study the followers and non-followers of museums on social media. She proposes an exploratory methodology that combines mixed methods with online digital tools, also taking into account ethics considerations. The article explores the potentiality of making meaning of the users'



behaviour by fully utilizing social media as an efficient online research tool. **Jessica BrodeFrank and Samantha Blickhan** reflect very honestly on the successes and failures of the pivot to digital programming at the Adler Planetarium in Chicago. They share concerns about equitable access alongside valuable lessons about supporting existing communities, connecting with new ones and identifying the gaps in audience reach through the digital tools. As the Planetarium prepares for hybrid programming as a result of the public's responses to the formats implemented during the pandemic, the article provides fertile ground for further reflection on the long-term impact of the forced digital experimentation witnessed during the last year. **Madeline Duffy** demonstrates how three American museums (that is the Washington State Historical Society, the Tacoma Art Museum, the Brigham Young University Museum of Art) engaged new audiences through online programming during COVID-19. She suggests that to define museum publics on the basis of common interests rather than mere geographic location could provide important implications for institutions in the era of globalisation and help museum professionals to cater for the global public as well as the local community so to facilitate intercultural dialogues. **Ana Gago and Laura Castro** explore the potential of artist-in-residence programs for strengthening local partnerships and reconnecting audiences to art and heritage beyond the pandemic times. Building on the findings from Gago's extensive research project on artistic residencies in Portugal, the authors bring the discussion further by reflecting on three residency programs carried out during 2020 in Portuguese museums. The study shows that supporting contemporary artistic creation is an effective strategy for museums to foster deeper community engagement and diversify their educational offer. Finally, **Amy Hondsmmerk** makes a compelling case for the potential of digital game-based projects for museum outreach

and interpretation by focusing primarily on the successful example of *Animal Crossing: New Horizons*. She argues that while the pandemic acted as a catalyst for the already emerging interest in digital practices – and videogames in particular – these tools could open new paths to meaningful interpretative processes and engagement with collections in the future.

The second section, 'Museums and society through times of crisis', deals more broadly with the role of museums in the face of crisis. Contributors reflect on the long-term implications of the tensions and structural issues that emerged clearly through the pandemic, both at the institutional level but also more widely across the cultural sector. **Alejandra Crescentino, Inés Molina Agudo and Lola Visglerio Gomez** offer insights into the current state of the art of Spanish cultural institutions after a year of severe restrictions, both physical and economic. Through an ecofeminist approach, the authors analyse the broader political implications of considering culture as a 'non-essential activity' in neoliberal models. Instead, they advocate for the institutions to be caring and situated, that is, connected to their communities in ways that adhere to equitable and supportive social models. **Juan Gonçalves** mobilises Bauman's concept of liquid modernity to advance the idea of the liquid museum. In particular, the article considers the fluctuations of the museum's communication strategies at all levels. By adopting fluidity as the starting point for the definition of museums, Gonçalves weaves in the digital turn so heavily witnessed in museum practices over the past year. What emerges is a theoretical model of porosity and flexibility deemed apt to respond to the ever-changing complexities of the contemporary world. Finally, using two contemporary art museums as specific cases to study, **Stella Toonen** analyses how co-creating with communities has prompted museums' organisational change and how the pandemic has influenced the staff's view on co-creation.

The final section of the academic articles, 'Museums and human rights', includes two contributions on the role played by museums in advocating for human rights. Although this is not new, the events of 2020 stressed the inequalities in our society further and confronted museums with the responsibilities they have as public-facing institutions. **Isabel Dapena** proposes a fascinating case study of human rights museology through the engagement practices of Museo Casa de la Memoria in Medellín, Colombia – the only public memory museum ever built in the country. She focuses on the collaboration between the museum and the marginalised weaving communities, that resulted in strong bonds of trust, solidarity and collective empowerment. She argues that by recognising the political value of weaving as an act of resistance (usually associated with the private space of the home and the feminine world), the museum opens a space where the recognition of collective memories is made possible. This is likely to promote opportunities for collective healing, bonds of trust and collective empowerment within the framework of a rights-based museological approach. **Susanna Jorek and Finn White's** research stresses the increasing calls of decolonisation in museums. In particular, they discuss a collaborative digital project between community partners and the Bristol Museums, designed to produce new online content on local Black history.

Two interviews examine the novel practices developed in museums and art galleries in China and Spain during the pandemic. **Xueer Zou** discusses the new online engagement formats implemented during the lockdown with the curatorial team of OCT Art and Design Gallery and OCAT Shenzhen. The interview explores the choices behind these strategies and the potential of the digital space for museum engagement even beyond the pandemic year. The second interview between Professor **Jesus Carrillo** and the editorial team dives into *Museo Situado*, the

citizen assembly that sits within the broader public program of Museo Reina Sofía in Madrid. This assembly is one great example of the partnerships established by the museum to engage with its immediate surroundings in ways that embody a tangible idea of collective care. In this interview, Carrillo suggests that a radical democratisation of the institution can only be achieved (or rather attempted) through open-ended negotiations with civil society and collective public debate.

The review section features book and exhibition reviews across Europe and the United States – virtual, in person and through a hybrid approach. **Maxie Fischer** offers a review of the highly experimental digital adaptation of Steirischer herbst, the contemporary art festival held annually in Graz, Austria. The 2020 edition, *Paranoia TV*, brought together newly commissioned works including films, TV series, online games or talk shows. The online delivery of the festival was also an opportunity to reflect on the numbing power of these popular media. **Lisa Gordon** walks us through *In Prison: Detained and Deprived of Liberty*. The exhibition, held at the German Hygiene Museum in Dresden, explores the idea of the prison and the socio-cultural frameworks around incarceration, drawing a parallel with the experience of confinement during lockdown. **Chiara Marabelli** reflects on the integration between the digital and the physical in *Raffaello. 1520-1483*, an exhibition hosted at Scuderie del Quirinale in Rome on the 500th death anniversary of the Italian master. **Viviana Guajardo** captures the timely response of the History Colorado Center in Denver to the racial justice movements marking 2020 through the temporary exhibition *American Democracy*. **Megan Schlanker** accompanies us on a virtual tour of *The Tweetside Hoard*. The exhibition was hosted by the Museum of London entirely on their Twitter account, including a traditional exit through the (online) gift shop. Finally, **Yanrong Jiang** critically examines the book *Art Therapy in Museums and Galleries: Reframing Practice*

(Coles and Jury, 2020) exploring the growing partnership between museums, galleries and art therapists. This compelling publication offers a timely perspective on the value of cross-agency collaboration, especially after the recent global events.

We hope that the articles of *Museological Review* Issue 25 can contribute to the ongoing debates on the future of museums and suggest ways forward. We believe that these unprecedented but profoundly transformative events can be an opportunity for collective transformation and healing, solidarity and authenticity, through creative and cultural practices, in the museum sector and beyond.

Finally, we would like to express our most sincere thanks to our Editors – Niki Ferraro, Isabelle Lawrence, Pelin Lyu, Blaire Moskowitz, Jianan Qi, Xiangnuo Ren – and the anonymous peer-reviewers for their contribution to the journal during these challenging times. We also appreciate the help and support offered by the staff members and the PhD community in the School of Museum Studies.

Lucrezia Gigante and Mingshi Cui  
Editors-in-Chief, Issue 25, *Museological Review*, June 2021

# Exploring and reflecting on digital methods to study followers and non-followers of museums on social media

Sophia Bakogianni

The aim of this paper is twofold: first, to present and suggest an exploratory methodology to study social media users who follow museums (or not) on three platforms, such as Facebook, Instagram and Twitter; and second, to offer an example of practice of mixed methods and online research tools in digitally rich environments. The methodological approach taken was mixed as it adopted a combination of both quantitative and qualitative online research methods that complemented and informed each other. This cross-platform, multi-site, empirical study concerns the conduct of surveys, online interviews through social media messaging services and online observation analysis of posts and comments from two case studies in art museums. It also stresses that ethical considerations should inform all the stages of online research caring first for participants in the research.

*Keywords: social media, methodology, museums, online research, ethics*

This paper presents and discusses the design and methodology for an ongoing PhD research project, which investigates the experiences of social media users when they interact with museums on Facebook, Instagram and Twitter. To pursue a comprehensive understanding of users' experiences that shape their following of museums on social media, the notion of "experience" was conceptualized as a complex phenomenon of actions, thoughts and emotions, as was suggested by Hassenzahl (2013a, 2013b). To address these issues, three research questions were asked:

1. What are the users' perceptions towards interaction with museums on social media?
2. What do users prefer to do on museums' social media?
3. What feelings do users have towards museums on social media?

An online, triangulated mixed-methods approach (Morse, 1991; Johnson, Onwuegbuzie and Turner, 2007; Hesse-Biber and Griffin, 2013) was employed, combining both quantitative and qualitative research methods that complemented and informed each other. Both online surveys and online interviews (through instant messaging services) were conducted to examine people's communicative practices, their views and emerging feelings through their interactions with museums on social media. Finally, this research was accompanied by the observation and analysis of museums' social media posts and users' comments, providing an enriched and elaborated understanding of the investigated phenomena.

From the beginning, this study was designed to be conducted online on the three platforms: Facebook, Instagram and Twitter, aiming

to potentially strengthen and validate the findings by contacting social media users in their 'natural setting' (Hesse-Biber and Griffin, 2013: 53). When the pandemic hit the whole world in the spring of 2020, it became obvious that this kind of method was the only means of conducting the research. Furthermore, in these times of 'constant connectivity and digital saturation in all spheres and moments of everyday life' (Markham, 2020: para. 3), and recently, in the era of social distancing as a precaution measure to the COVID-19 pandemic, the need for many researchers to move towards online methods, or at least be aware of the digital tools or alternatives that could be used for research purposes, has become obvious. However, the most important thing that a researcher should focus on is to understand the overall aims and objectives of the research and how to employ digital methods and tools to achieve them.

The following sections present the research design of this particular study, discuss the strengths and weaknesses of the digital methods followed, and refer to the ethical issues that researchers who conduct online research should consider. Finally, the paper concludes by presenting the advantages and potential drawbacks of conducting research online.

## Background

The popularity of social media platforms has grown during the last years and this fact has led museums to adapt to this new reality. According to the Arts Council England and Nesta's (2019) longitudinal survey concerning the usage of digital technologies in the arts and cultural sector in the UK from 2013-2019, it is estimated that the four most popular social platforms are Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and YouTube. Consequently, the prevalence of social media has enabled museums to reach more people and become an integral part of the social media ecosystem, although they represent only a small part of it (Dawson, 2020, 2021).

Two edited volumes that were published approximately at the same period indicate the emerging approaches as far as the social media use in museums is concerned. In particular, Giaccardi (2012) examines the impact of social media on cultural heritage with emphasis on participatory aspects. Also, she argues that what makes it remarkable is the formation of a new public within a digital environment which leads to a widespread museum transformation. The second volume edited by Drotner and Schrøder (2013b) emphasizes diverse means of communication offered by social media and new connections between actual and potential visitors. Furthermore, it demonstrates potential and realized benefits, debates, obstacles, and challenges for museums. Drotner and Schrøder (2013a) expressed their concerns about the fact that museums were using social media services owned by large, corporate companies. Thus, they discussed issues of transparency and accountability for users in terms of data ownership and management. Some of the issues raised are disputable practices of social media companies offering data mining for sale and their extended options of surveillance.

Drotner and Schrøder (2013a) do not discard the innovative ways of communication that social media offer to museums. However, they urge practitioners and scholars to study them in the context of museum and media studies, which could provide them with conceptual and methodological tools for further empirical analysis and interpretation of user involvement and public engagement. In addition, they recognize that such approaches should be 'forged in more systematic ways' (Drotner and Schrøder, 2013a: 8) in the future. Thus, they provide the basis for a museological and communicative perspective towards the use of social media in museums, aiming to repurpose social media communication from 'a transmission model defined from an institutional perspective...to a user perspective (what people may want to know)' (Drotner and Schrøder, 2013a: 3).

On the one hand, the above collections indicate a great potential of museums concerning the participatory aspects of social media. On the other hand, the difficulties and challenges to develop substantial and meaningful digital engagement are also raised. Thus, the need of further research examining the potentials existing in the use of social media along with the challenges emerged, for both their staff and audience, both online and offline, becomes evident.

Despite the fact that empirical research is limited on this field, it has taken a variety of methodological approaches including surveys (e.g., Fletcher and Lee, 2012), interviews (e.g., Chung, Marcketti and Fiore, 2014), case studies (e.g., Lazzarotti, Sartori and Innocenti, 2015), analysis of posts and comments on museums' social media (e.g., Kidd, 2014; Langa, 2014), using a range of methods from quantitative and qualitative methods to social network (Espinosa, 2015) and cluster analysis (Zafiroopoulos, Vrana and Antoniadis, 2015) methods.

Nevertheless, it is notable that the majority of the empirical studies examining the museums' use of social media have followed a research approach that includes either asking museum professionals about their motivations and types of engagement they pursue or analyzing the actual engagement through content analysis (quantitative or qualitative) of museums' posts and material published on social media (mostly by Twitter and Facebook).

Recently, there is an interest in the user perspective on museums' social media and this has been realized through different research approaches: for instance, by conducting online surveys of museums' social media followers (Bonacchi and Galani, 2013; Walker, 2016), by analyzing users' comments and responses (sharing/retweeting, liking, tagging/mentioning, replying etc.) to museums' posts on social media (e.g., Villaespesa, 2013; Gronemann, Kristiansen and Drotner, 2015;

Baker, 2016; Gerrard, 2016; Laursen et al., 2017), or by analyzing users' photos from their museum visits posted on Instagram by tagging the museum and/or using relevant hashtags (e.g., Budge, 2017, 2019, 2020; Arias, 2018). There are also some studies that include interviews with museums' social media users in person and/or focus groups (Bonacchi and Galani, 2013; Holdgaard, 2014), providing interesting insights towards their stance and thoughts regarding their interaction with museums' social media. Two more studies examine the use of Instagram for publishing photos (either on their Feeds or Stories) from a museum visit by interviewing visitors at the museum settings (Weilenmann, Hillman and Jungselius, 2013; Villaespesa and Wowkowych, 2020).

The majority of these empirical studies use online methods only to conduct surveys, while interviews that take place are conducted offline. In other words, 'the use of Internet-mediated research approaches to support qualitative research has lagged behind its application in supporting quantitative methods' as Hewson (2014: 423) contends. To our knowledge, the only study that uses Instagram messaging services to conduct online interviews with social media users regarding their posts of images of an art gallery exhibition on their Instagram accounts is that of Suess (2020). Thus, using social media to collect users' responses and communicate with them for research practices is a new terrain and novel possibilities are emerging for the museum sector.

## Research design and methodology

The research design of this study adopted digital tools early on, not only because the research was about users' digital interactions, but also because of the aims of the study. It concerned users' perceptions, practices and feelings, which could be elicited through digital methods overcoming physical barriers of distance, time and social hesitation, offering people a 'space' to express themselves

beyond the biases and limitations that exist in physical interactions. From the beginning, this research aimed to use the advantages of digital tools and try to mitigate other barriers. To understand how social media users experience museums' accounts, a three-stage project was developed comprising online surveys, semi-structured online synchronous interviews through social media instant messaging services, and an observational analysis of social media data (Figure 1). The case study approach was employed to explore in-depth users' experiences when they interact with two selected art museums (Bryman, 2012; Simons, 2014), which were the Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam and the Museum of Modern Art in New York. The particular museums were chosen because it is generally known that they are among the most well-known art museums worldwide, with exemplary use of social media, and with accounts that attract a large number of followers (Dawson, 2020, 2021).

Furthermore, it was considered as important to address social media users of the three selected platforms who do not follow museums, so that it can enhance our understanding of what could motivate social media users to experience museums' accounts. To achieve this, two more studies were designed and conducted. These studies were not related to any specific museum but were intended to identify potential users of museums on social media and, for the first time as far as we know, to give them the chance to express their views on the subject. Hence, four studies were conducted, each of which comprised three online surveys and interviews, suitably adjusted for each of the three examined social platforms. Thus, the research included the following four studies:  
 Study 1 - For users of Facebook, Instagram and Twitter who follow museums on each of these platforms.  
 Study 2 - For the MoMA Museum of Modern Art and its official accounts on Facebook, Instagram and Twitter.  
 Study 3 - For the Van Gogh Museum and its

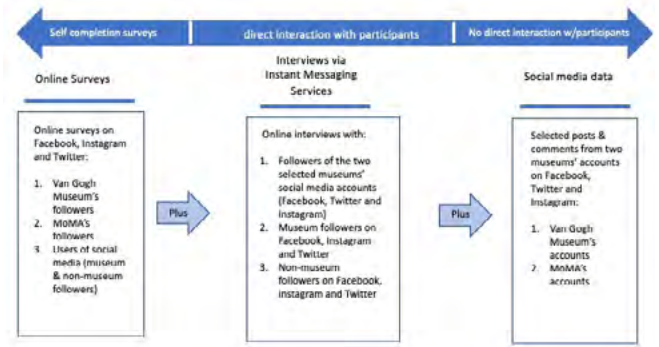


Figure 1: Research design and stages of the data collection.

official accounts on Facebook, Instagram and Twitter.

Study 4 - For users of Facebook, Instagram and Twitter who do not follow museums.

Prior to commencing the study, the entire research protocol was reviewed and approved by the Cyprus National Bioethics Committee (Ref. EEBK E[ 2019.01.107/13-06-2019).

### Online surveys stage

Two survey instruments were designed for the needs of this research; the one used for the surveys addressed to art museum followers on the three investigated platforms, and the other used for the surveys addressed to social media users who did not follow museums. Both instruments were appropriately adjusted to the affordances of the investigated platforms and the specific studies and were used as a base for the design of all the surveys. In total, twelve online self-completed surveys were designed and distributed through Facebook, Instagram and Twitter, to collect data from social media users who either follow or not follow museums, aiming to target users who were familiar and comfortable with the investigated social media platforms (see Table 1).

It should be clarified that the surveys addressed to users who either follow or not follow museums were combined in the online software tool used to design

and run the online surveys. For instance, using the Survey Monkey platform and the feature of “Skip Logic”, the two surveys addressed to Instagram users were joined into one. When users responded that they followed (or not) museums on Instagram, they were automatically transferred to the corresponding one for their case. Using this customization method, it became feasible to simultaneously address both followers and non-museum followers.

All surveys consisted of a variation of multiple-choice, scaled, closed and open-ended questions. The closed-ended questions had either the form of forced-choice (yes/no) questions or the form of select-all-that-apply lists. The suggested multiple responses were driven by observations on museums’ accounts on social media, previous survey instruments, and the relevant literature. A sample of the survey addressed to MoMA’s Instagram users is available at the following link: [https://sophiakogianni.net/moma\\_instagram\\_survey/](https://sophiakogianni.net/moma_instagram_survey/), while a sample of the survey addressed to Instagram users who do not follow museums can be accessed here: [https://sophiakogianni.net/instagram\\_users\\_survey/](https://sophiakogianni.net/instagram_users_survey/).

The welcome page of the surveys gave an introduction to the goals of the study and provided contact details in case respondents had any questions to ask. It was noted that participation in the survey was voluntary and anonymous, and that all the personal data collected would be kept strictly confidential and conforming to the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and the research ethical requirements. It also provided a link to the participant information sheet for each study (Figure 2), including further information about the surveys (see, for instance, the one addressed to participants of the MoMA’s study: <https://sophiakogianni.net/phd-survey/>). Finally, people were asked to give their consent to participate, in order to proceed with the survey. All the surveys were distributed between the end of March 2020 and the

Study 1 - Museum social media users (they follow art museums)	Study 2 - MoMA	Study 3 - Van Gogh Museum	Study 4 - Social media users (they do not follow museums)
Online surveys			
Survey of Facebook users who follow art museums	Survey of MoMA’s Facebook users	Survey of the Van Gogh Museum’s Facebook users	Survey of Facebook users who do not follow museums
Survey of Instagram users who follow art museums	Survey of MoMA’s Instagram users	Survey of the Van Gogh Museum’s Instagram users	Survey of Instagram users who do not follow museums
Survey of Twitter users who follow art museums	Survey of MoMA’s Twitter users	Survey of the Van Gogh Museum’s Twitter users	Survey of Twitter users who do not follow museums

Table 1: Online surveys undertaken for the four studies of the research project.

end of July 2020 and were conducted only in English. The main eligibility requirement for respondents to participate in the surveys was that they should be users of the corresponding social media platforms (Facebook, Instagram and Twitter). However, for respondents of the two case study museums, one more eligibility criterion had to be met: to follow the respective museum (Van Gogh Museum or MoMA) on the corresponding social media platform. Although the surveys were addressed to social media users in general, at the same time, they targeted only a specific and very small population – those who follow a museum in one of the three social media platforms were investigated. Hence, there were specific limitations during this project. First and foremost, it turned out to be really difficult to find the specific targeted populations, and second, to convince them to take part in it by filling out the surveys.

Although the researcher addressed written requests to both case study museums to support her research and distribute the surveys through their social media accounts, this turned out to be impossible. More specifically, the Van Gogh Museum expressed its current inability to provide any kind of assistance, while there was no response from MoMA at all, despite multiple efforts. Thus, it was clear that a recruitment and sampling strategy was needed. This strategy involved many dissemination and recruitment processes in tandem, and it was an ongoing procedure that needed a lot of effort, continuing attention, and readiness



to deal with the unexpected. All the surveys were promoted through multiple channels, including posts on the researcher's personal social media accounts, her personal network of friends and colleagues on social media, and targeted advertising on Facebook, Instagram and Twitter. For the surveys run for the Van Gogh Museum and the MoMA, the researcher also posted occasional comments on their official social media accounts informing users about the study and prompting them to follow the link to the survey. It should be noted that no reactions received from both museums on comments publicizing the surveys.

It is evident that the methods used resulted in a sample of convenience, which was formed by participants who opted-in and voluntarily took part in the surveys. Because the relationship between the sample and the targeted population is unknown, there is no basis for estimations of the representativeness of the sample. Thus, this survey project is

The total number of responses received for all the surveys conducted are 911. There are 711 complete responses corresponding to 78% of all. The number of responses received along with the number of the complete and partial responses for all twelve surveys are detailed in Table 2. Incomplete responses were included in the analysis, in which case the respondent answered at least one question. There are 200 incomplete responses corresponding to 22% of the overall responses received. Although these people ultimately dropped out of the survey, they dedicated their time and effort to answer some questions and express themselves through them. Thus, the inclusion of these responses is considered to complement the analysis and understandings of the investigated phenomena. Furthermore, it was also encouraged by the fact that each question corresponded to a different issue and did not depend on one another.

### Online interviews stage

The cross-platform, multi-site, empirical studies through online surveys were complemented with synchronous, semi-structured interviews via the instant messaging services (chat tools) of the three respective platforms (that is Facebook Messenger, Twitter Direct Messages and Instagram Direct) to gain a better understanding of the findings from the survey data and enrich them with qualitative data.



Figure 2: A screenshot of the Participant Information Sheet addressed to participants of the MoMA's study.

subject to potential biases and limitations of nonrandom and nonprobability samples. Consequently, the research does not claim to represent the characteristics and diversity of the social media population who follow museums, and it makes no estimations of this population as a whole. Instead, it is an exploratory study, which offers a snapshot of the activity surrounding museums' social media and their users and has no claims for generalizability.

For each study, online interviews were designed for the users of the three platforms, but in some cases, it was not feasible to recruit interviewees from some platforms for three of the four studies (see Table 3). The interviewees were recruited via the surveys conducted for the four studies and for each platform. One exception was the first eight interviews with Facebook users following the Van Gogh Museum, which functioned as a pilot for the interviews, conducted in August 2019. The survey respondents who expressed an interest to participate in an interview

were also asked to give their emails and/or social media usernames/handles used for the selected platform. Then, they received a message from the researcher with a link to the interview consent form (see, for instance, <https://sophiabakogianni.net/interview-consent-form/>), specific to each platform and each study. The welcome page of the consent form provides basic information on the purpose of the research and contact details, in case respondents had questions. There was also a link (see, for instance, <https://sophiabakogianni.net/participant-information-sheet-for-online-interviews-via-instagram-direct/>) to the participant information sheet for the online interviews, specific for each platform (Figure 3). Furthermore, in the consent form, participants were asked to indicate the time and date convenient for them to conduct the interview, and their time zone. The interview participants were asked to give

profile was added, to build rapport with participants before the actual interview. Moreover, the researcher aimed to balance the power differential between herself and the interview participants, by revealing her identity and sharing the rationale for conducting the interviews and assuring participants that their privacy would be protected, including who would have access to the data gathered from them and what procedures, such as using pseudonyms, would be taken to protect their identities.

Instant messaging interviews enabled respondents to participate from their own environment and better manage their time and their terms of communication. Interviewees were able to terminate communication whenever they wanted without giving any explanation, and had time to reflect and edit their responses before sending them, as instant messaging etiquette accepts a delay between receiving a message and replying to it (Fontes and O'Mahony, 2008).

In total, 73 interviews were conducted. Specifically, 65 of them were carried out between early April and end of July 2020, while the rest were held in August 2019. The consent of all the interviewees was obtained before the interview. The number of all interviews conducted for each study and each platform are detailed in Table 4. The decision to use instant messaging services as a tool to conduct interviews was based on two considerations: first, because it would enable reaching social media users who either follow or do not follow museums from diverse geographical locations without leaving the platform of study; and second, because it was an easy and cost-efficient method. Furthermore, it was believed that this text-based mediated tool would cause less pressure to participants compared to the respective media using video and/or audio, and would enable both the researcher, whose first language is not English, and the participants to express themselves better and

	Surveys conducted	Total responses	Complete responses	Partial responses
1	Van Gogh Museum's Facebook followers	25	19	6
2	Van Gogh Museum's Instagram followers	153	107	46
3	Van Gogh Museum's Twitter followers	19	15	4
4	MoMA's Facebook followers	23	18	5
5	MoMA's Instagram followers	103	93	10
6	MoMA's Twitter followers	60	41	19
7	Museums' followers on Facebook	137	111	26
8	Museums' followers on Instagram	102	80	22
9	Museums' followers on Twitter	96	74	22
10	Facebook users (non-museum followers)	107	91	16
11	Instagram users (non-museum followers)	30	22	8
12	Twitter users (non-museum followers)	56	40	16
	All surveys responses	911	711	200

Table 2: Number of total, complete and partial responses for the twelve surveys.

their personal data (name, age, location, etc.), which would be kept strictly confidential, along with their consent. Thus, the interviews were conducted with people whose digital and physical identity was known, enhancing confidence to the participants and giving validity to the research. The researcher used her personal social media accounts, where photos and information about her research

Study 1 - Museum social media users (they follow art museums)	Study 2 - MoMA	Study 3 - Van Gogh Museum	Study 4 - Social media users (they do not follow museums)
Online interviews			
Online Interviews with <b>Facebook</b> users who follow art museums	<b>No interviews</b> conducted with MoMA's Facebook users	Interviews with the Van Gogh Museum's <b>Facebook</b> users	Interviews with <b>Facebook</b> users who do not follow museums
Interviews with <b>Instagram</b> users who follow art museums	Interviews with MoMA's <b>Instagram</b> users	Interviews with the Van Gogh Museum's <b>Instagram</b> users	<b>No interviews</b> conducted with Instagram users who do not follow museums
Interviews with <b>Twitter</b> users who follow art museums	Interviews with MoMA's <b>Twitter</b> users	<b>No interviews</b> conducted with the Van Gogh Museum's Twitter users	Interviews with <b>Twitter</b> users who do not follow museums

Table 3: Online interviews undertaken for the four studies of the research project.

have effective communication. All interviews were in English, both with native and non-native English speakers, except seven interviews, which were conducted in Greek because this was the mother tongue of both the interviewees and the researcher. This was an online written interaction, but there were also similarities as much as differences with spoken interactions, and especially with phone calls due to technological constraints and affordances of these messaging services (Meredith, 2014).

The interviews took place in a friendly and pleasant atmosphere. Since both the researcher and the interviewees experienced the same stressful situation of the recent global pandemic, they shared a common experience and interest for museums. Specifically, one interviewee expressed this openly:

*Thank you. I felt like communicating with a friend of mine; I really felt very comfortable. Have a nice day!*  
(Lucy, between 18-24 years old, translated from Greek).

The interviews in most cases lasted more than one hour, although at first, they were designed for only half an hour, to enable more participants to be involved, meaning that participants found the whole experience interesting, which as they said, made them think:



Figure 3: A screenshot of the Participant Information Sheet for online interviews via Instagram Direct.

*Thank you for the interesting questions! They've made me think :)'*  
(Molly, between 18-24 years old).

*Your questions have made me think...'*  
(Mary, between 35-44 years old).

During the interviews, the researcher confronted many challenges, such as the lack of face-to-face cues (facial expressions, tone of voice, body of language), delays in typing or responses, as well as the fact she was communicating with strangers. But the overall experience of the researcher was really positive, and, in most cases, she felt connected with the participants, demonstrating as Markham (2020) asserts that 'sociality and a "sense of presence" does not require physical presence' (para. 33).

Issues of accuracy and reliability by users interviewed via messaging, which are among the key concerns (Hewson, 2014), were mitigated by the fact that interviewees had completed the online consent form, revealing their identity, and by the exchange of personal details from their everyday life (e.g., moving to a new city, searching for a new job, etc.), which helped to achieve a feeling of social presence. Concludingly, it should be acknowledged that although these interviews were private messages exchanged between the researcher's and the participants' profiles on Facebook, Instagram and Twitter using the respective

chat software tools provided, there is the risk of being accessed by the platforms or hacked by third parties, because these are not end-to-end encrypted services. However, given that the content of this project's interactions was not confidential, sensitive or potentially harmful to any of the groups, no negative

	Interviews conducted	Number of interviews
1	Van Gogh Museum' s Facebook followers	10
2	Van Gogh Museum' s Instagram followers	12
3	Van Gogh Museum' s Twitter followers	0
4	MoMA's Facebook followers	0
5	MoMA's Instagram followers	12
6	MoMA's Twitter followers	4
7	Museums' followers on Facebook	4
8	Museums' followers on Instagram	16
9	Museums' followers on Twitter	8
10	Facebook users (non-museum followers)	4
11	Instagram users (non-museum followers)	0
12	Twitter users (non-museum followers)	3
	<b>Total number of interviews conducted</b>	<b>73</b>

Table 4: Number of interviews conducted for each study and each social media platform.

consequences are anticipated, even in the unlikely event of a data breach.

### Online observation stage

Observation in social media often takes the form of archiving (Markham, 2013). However, in this research, the observation of the two case study accounts (the Van Gogh Museum and the MoMA), on Facebook, Instagram and Twitter, was primarily focused on understanding the ways users interact with and approach museums on social media and contextualizing their engagement with the museums. The observation stage concerned the posts and comments on these two accounts on Facebook, Instagram and Twitter, to discover patterns in museum posts and

patterns in the communication evolved in comments, both among users and towards the museum. Participation of the museum social media managers in discussions in comments and exchanges with users were also of great interest.

The observation stage was effectively continuous, from the moment the researcher started thinking about this project, however, for a four-month period it was more structured. This period included the conduct of surveys and interviews for the project; two-months before and two months after them. Some of the museum posts with accompanied comments from the three platforms for the two art museums were collected manually by the researcher. The focus of this stage is on gathering small data (and not big data), aiming to glean 'human scale readings of other human groups, people and practice' (Kozinets, 2015: 175), in order to uncover people's attitudes, motivations, values and perceptions. It should be noted that this manual approach (Radford, 2019), meaning observing and recording interactions on social media for research purposes only and without publicizing any identifiable data of the users, is conceived as "fair use" towards publicly-facing social media data and is a common practice amongst researchers. In total, the amount of data collected does not exceed a few hundred posts and comments.

These two museum accounts are public, across all three social media platforms, and all posts and comments published there are moderated by the social media managers of the museums, which are also publicly available. However, this does not mean that followers of these accounts consent that researchers can use their comments. According to Fiesler and Proferes' study (2018), most people do not think that researchers can use their tweets for research without asking them first. Despite this, they also revealed that users' responses and attitudes depend on various factors, such as how the research is conducted or disseminated,

who is conducting it, and what the study is about. In general, the study concludes that respondents are positive towards participating in research for the benefit of science, considering scientific research as 'a noble pursuit' (Fiesler and Proferes, 2018: 10). Nevertheless, more empirical research is needed to understand how followers of museums' accounts on social media feel about using their comments, posts, tweets for research purposes.

Regarding the ethical issues that have been raised recently by surrounding the use of public information from social media information for conducting research (Fiesler, 2019), it is an obligation for all researchers to protect the privacy of all users, and no personal identifying information should be used or revealed. Although the risk of harm from the specific research is very low, all the data obtained during the observational period will not be made available publicly, and they will be presented only in aggregate form. In case that certain specific data will be used for research or dissemination purposes, they will be presented only partly, briefly and anonymously.

### **Advantages and potential drawbacks of online research**

Self-completion surveys are characterized by convenience, both for the researcher to administer and the respondent to complete it. Researchers can reach a very dispersed sample of respondents at low cost and almost immediately. Respondents can complete the questionnaire at their convenience and may not be affected by social desirability to give the 'correct' answers. But respondents cannot ask for extra clarifications. Likewise, researchers cannot collect additional data (Bryman, 2012; Hine, 2015). In Internet studies, however, it is very difficult to achieve a random sample for generalizing purposes, both because the investigated population is hard to determine,

and because of biases resulting from under coverage and nonresponse (Pew Research Center, 2012).

Semi-structured online interviews in a real-time, synchronous mode are a cost-effective tool to reach people in different locations, despite any restrictions in travelling and mobility. People with disabilities (e.g., hearing or mobility problems) can participate. Text-based interviews create less pressure for both participants (the researcher and the interviewee), but they should be familiar both with the medium used and the typing. People can participate in the interview in the comfort of their own homes or of venues of their choice. Furthermore, it does not need extra requirements in software technologies and Internet connections (bandwidth). These are basic standard operating systems both to mobile devices (smartphones, tablets) and desktops. Adding a sense of humanity and verifying the credibility of the study are the issues of which the researcher should be aware.

Online observation provides researchers some extra information about the studied population and enhance their research approach and contact with both survey and interview respondents. There is a need for ethics to be readdressed and informed in order to allow researchers to collect valid and reliable data and conduct valid online research without violating participants' rights online.

### **Conclusions**

This paper focused on the possible benefits of using mixed-methods and online research tools in digital and data rich environments, by presenting the example of a specific study on social media users who either follow or not follow museums' accounts there. One of the main takeaways for a researcher is to always consider different ways to accomplish

her research goals and adjust her strategy, including online and digital tools, in 'digitally saturated contexts' (Markham, 2013: 442). Furthermore, bringing research online gives the possibility for researchers to ask 'new' questions, offering new potential for researchers to make better meaning of users' behavior in social media and online, by stimulating, as Hine says, 'the imagination of the researcher in new directions' (cited in Hesse-Biber and Griffin, 2013: 55).

Addressing ethically informed decisions and practices is a fundamental part of online research. Three principles should be at the core of online research: a) respect for persons, b) justice and c) beneficence (minimizing harm) (Markham, Buchanan and AoIR Ethics Working Committee, 2012). 'Respect for persons' is commonly secured through practices such as informed consent, identity-protection procedures (e.g., usernames, pseudonyms), and opt-out options at any stage of the research. The principle of 'justice' concerns the distribution of the benefits of the research in a fair way, the equality regarding participation in the research, and avoidance of any discrimination or exploitation of participants (Office for Human Research Protections, 1979). The principle of 'beneficence' concerns avoidance of harm, minimizing risks and maximizing benefits for participants, and helps the research community with findings and results to improve services or solve problems. Finally, users are also interested in learning about the findings of the research, either for the sake of knowledge or for curiosity reasons (Fiesler and Proferes, 2018). Beyond ethical guidelines, it is important for researchers to take additional, proactive measures not only to protect their participants' privacy, but also to shape various possible futures regarding more secure online exchanges.

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# A place for everything: Adapting content across platforms and audiences – A series of case studies at the Adler Planetarium

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As COVID closures persist among cultural heritage institutions, the rapid 'pivot to digital' has necessitated new approaches to present cultural heritage collections to the public. Museums have presented content in various ways onsite to target specific audiences, but when moving to a digital-only format many lost this nuanced approach to content creation due to limited resources, lack of staff availability, or tight timelines. This paper advocates for diversifying the experiences and delivery methods for content to maximize engagement and reach, also suggesting these methods can benefit institutions even outside a pandemic year.

In this paper, we present a series of case studies involving the Celestial Cartography Collection at the Adler Planetarium. The authors deploy an action research methodology to this paper; it is performed to identify solutions for a specific problem within the Adler, but it also documents a progressive process of problem-solving with a focus on reflection and iteration (Pringle, 2020). The case studies will examine how the Celestial Cartography materials were incorporated across Adler audience-driven programming in YouTube-hosted content and virtual exhibitions, as well as digitally-enabled participation through volunteer crowdsourcing efforts.

*Keywords: adaptability, crowdsourcing, engagement*

## Celestial Cartography Collection

The Celestial Cartography Collection is a part of the Adler Planetarium's historic collections, spanning both the rare book library and the scientific instrument collections. Between 2014 and 2017, the entirety of the collection was digitized under a National Endowment for the Humanities grant (PW-51687-14), resulting in over 4,000 digital constellation depictions; this grant supported photographing of the entire collection as well as expert level metadata creation.<sup>1</sup> The collection incorporates a variety of media types, and spans over 600 years as well as a range of cultures and geographic locations, making it a particularly appropriate microcosm of the Adler's collection at large. In addition to being fully photographed this collection has embedded metadata, and

the images are included on the online public access portal of the Adler's public website. Because this collection is fully digitized and accessible online, it is often used throughout onsite and online programming as a way to introduce museum guests and online visitors to astronomical ideas.

Though this collection focuses mostly on European astronomy, it includes significant examples from China and the Islamic world. The intellectual content of these maps reaches well beyond the history of astronomy. On the most fundamental level, they illustrate the relationships between objects in space (Raposo, 2016). With a perspective embedded in time and place, the artist or astronomer understands and portrays the universe based on the surrounding society and culture.

The Adler Planetarium closed in March of 2020, due to the coronavirus pandemic. After closing, the Executive Team made the decision to increase online programming, both in terms of existing digital programs as well as several new initiatives. With the closure also came an attempt towards more equitable access to collections and content. When we speak of equitable access in this paper and within our institution, the two biggest definitions are an economic equity to access (onsite and pre-pandemic this included free resident days, reduced price ticketing, and online experiences such as virtual exhibitions hosted on Google Arts and Culture)<sup>2</sup> as well as intellectual access to content (aligning to our institutional mission and values by ensuring there is content available to all interested people regardless of where they are in their science education journey).<sup>3</sup>

It is important to note that the pivot to digital came with its own issues for equitable access, in particular due to the digital divide. As of 2019, approximately 90% of Americans reported using the Internet, but only 73% had access at home (Pew Research Center, 2019). Recognizing that digital programming is not a universal access panacea, we will discuss below how the Adler staff running these digital programs worked to serve not only a worldwide audience (though predominantly an English speaking audience) but also to continue to serve the local Chicago community.

Below, we will look at digital programs which utilized the Celestial Cartography Collection, including those adapted from onsite programming as well as those planned to be digital from their conception. By framing these case studies around a single collection, we endeavor to show how the same content can be adapted for a variety of audiences, educational purposes, and institutional goals, while highlighting the positives and negatives of digital programming.

## Projects Originally Designed for Online Engagement

### *Google Arts and Culture*

The Adler Planetarium's partnership with Google Arts and Culture began in March of 2018. Since 2011, Google Arts and Culture has provided a free online platform that is accessed by hundreds of thousands of people across the world. We found that the platform was not only an easy space to build exhibitions to share with the Adler's public online, but also allowed us to open collections to an entirely new community of Google Arts and Culture users who can discover the Adler and its collections organically while browsing the site. The draw of a global audience, and in particular an audience geared towards arts and culture, expanded the reach of Adler content to those who may not be able to travel to see exhibitions onsite in Chicago, or who may not initially think of a Planetarium as being aligned with their interests.

From March of 2018 to March of 2020 the Adler created and shared eleven unique exhibitions on Google Arts and Culture. Of these exhibitions, seven featured a total of 30 objects from the Celestial Cartography Collection. One exhibition, *Pictures in the Sky*, was designed around the Celestial Cartography Collection itself, providing a space where the Adler could provide viewers with a deep dive into the history, art, and cultural significance of the constellation depictions that had previously only been displayed onsite in a limited manner. The success of this exhibition, and others, helped to affirm to the Adler the need for an ongoing virtual exhibition program. The third-party hosting on Google Arts and Culture meant that this was a feasible goal for our limited staff capacity and budget.

During the initial (pre-COVID) period from 2018 to early 2020, the Google Analytics provided by the Google Arts and Culture site showed that 17,875 unique users had accessed

Adler content over the course of two years, with 74.5% of those users accessing from outside the United States, and only 26.7% accessing using the direct link shared by the Adler. The Adler Collections team saw this as a successful demonstration that the content was reaching users who were unlikely to have been onsite guests of the Adler. When the Adler closed in March of 2020, the Google Arts and Culture program was accelerated to fill the gaps in programming and visitation. Instead of producing exhibitions quarterly, the schedule increased to monthly. Additionally, a programmatic shift helped to ensure that the majority of exhibitions highlighted a more diverse range of scientists currently working across the STEM fields. With COVID closures preventing programming like onsite lectures, and scientist talks this inclusion in the Google Arts and Culture program allowed Adler staff to continue to push for representation which continues to be a key aspect of making content accessible and mission critical.

Between March and December of 2020, the Adler Planetarium launched nine exhibitions on Google Arts and Culture. During this time period we saw 32,034 unique users access Adler content, with 58.5% of them accessing outside of the United States. With lockdowns and museum closures, online exhibitions became more popular with internet users, and also more integral to museums. In their 2020 'Year in Search' report, Google noted that 'virtual museum tours,' 'virtual field trips,' and 'virtual learning' all spiked to record highs; though notably 'virtual museum tours' peaked highest during the weeks of March 15-21st, and leveled to pre-COVID search levels for the rest of the year. The Adler's experience showed that the public accessed our exhibitions on Google Arts and Culture at a rate almost 5x the pre-COVID levels. However, critiques of the Google Arts and Culture platform have long circulated with a focus on the experience and interactivity of the so called virtual exhibitions (Chance Coughenour, 2018). With an eye to this criticism, and the critique that the platform

unfairly limits non-English users, the Adler focused on incorporating multimedia as well as translations, in particular for Spanish speakers, a large portion of Chicago's population. These efforts have been noted, with Steven Johnson (2020) of the *Chicago Tribune* stating, "the online version of the space museum's recent exhibition '13 Stories with Captain James Lovell' is one of the better digital takes on a museum show I've seen."

In 2021, the Adler's Google Arts and Culture exhibitions remain a priority, but the pace will be scaled back to bi-monthly to better adapt to staff capacity. Upon reopening of the physical building, a review of staff capacity and user metrics will determine the continued cadence of exhibitions as well as resource allocation for equity initiatives like translation services.

### *Mapping Historic Skies*

The *Mapping Historic Skies* project<sup>4</sup> was a collaboration between the Adler Planetarium's Collections Department and the Adler Zooniverse team. Zooniverse is the world's largest platform for crowdsourced research, with over 2.2 million registered volunteers and more than 80 currently-active research projects on topics ranging from astronomy to history to zoology. Since March of 2020, when the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a pandemic and institutions around the world shut their doors, Zooniverse has seen a massive increase in participation, peaking to a 10-fold increase in the spring of 2020, and holding stable at almost a 4-fold increase in participation since; with over 200,000 classifications contributed each day (Johnson, Trouille, Fortson, and Lintott, 2021).

After the NEH-funded digitization of the Celestial Cartography Collection, the Adler collections team began to think about how we could harness the in-house expertise of the Zooniverse team to create a project that could transform the state of the collection for further use, while allowing volunteers to engage more deeply with this historic collection of images.

The crux of the idea was ultimately: 'What if a researcher could compare depictions of a single constellation across hundreds of years, and from all over the world?'

*Mapping Historic Skies* invited volunteers to help us segment and identify images of individual constellations from the digitized Celestial Cartography collection. The two tasks were designed to be achievable by anyone—no previous knowledge of astronomy required. The end goal of the project is to transform these images of historic star maps into a corpus of cropped digital images of individually identified constellations.

The first workflow was designed to be an onsite activity, as part of the Adler's Chicago's *Night Sky* exhibition that opened in November 2019. We installed iPads in the walls of the museum with the app installed, and guests were invited to simply use their finger to draw a box around each individual constellation within the image presented on the screen. When they were finished, another image would pop up, and they could help to segment as many images as they wished. After the images were cropped, we aggregated the guest-generated markings and used that output to create individual, cropped constellation images. We then uploaded the processed images into a second workflow, which invited online volunteers to identify the constellation. In the identification workflow, volunteers were asked to type the name of the constellation (if known). Otherwise, they were taken to a decision tree that helped them determine the constellation name by answering a series of questions about the image, starting with 'Choose the option that best represents the figure in the image: Human; Animal; Object', and becoming more specific as the questions continued. The constellation name submitted by the majority of volunteers was then added to the metadata of the cropped image in question, thereby generating this corpus of cropped, identified constellation depictions.

This project proved very successful at engaging with new audiences, as well as with existing Zooniverse volunteers. As of the 23rd of February, 2021, the volunteers completed the *Mapping Historic Skies* project, almost a year earlier than our estimates. The project had over 122,273 unique pageviews since its launch, with 7,663 registered Zooniverse volunteers participating. *Mapping Historic Skies* volunteers submitted over 306,131 classifications to the project. Not only has the project been successful by engagement markers, but also in outcomes. So far the project has produced 7,663 individual, identified constellation images out of 2,127 pieces in the Celestial Cartography Collection, with more data awaiting processing in the coming weeks. These images have already been through a quality control process and uploaded to the Adler's Digital Asset Management system, where they are sorted by constellation and soon will be browsable by the public.

This project also helped to assert the importance of presenting collections in an active and participatory way. The *Mapping Historic Skies* project allowed users to engage with the images as the subject of active research, allowing them to become part of the Adler's research team. *Mapping Historic Skies* demonstrated the possibilities for participatory programs as an additional level of accessibility and a step towards more equitable experiences. Not only is it participatory but it also opens up authority and power over collections to include users. As Kenderdine and Cameron stated, 'whilst we only remember ten percent of what we read, we remember ninety percent of what we say and do.' Many educational institutions have focused on creating hands-on, participatory experiences for learners who thrive within this kind of environment, but the *Mapping Historic Skies* project demonstrated a similar success for museums in creating engaging participatory projects that not only create a new level of experience for guests, but that also allow for usable end products for the

museum.

## Adapting Onsite Programs for Online

### *Skywatch Weekly*

Upon the Adler's closure, one of the starkest losses was the use of one of our most powerful tools for sharing the wonders of the night sky: the planetarium dome. Had this occurred even 10 years earlier, we would have been hard-pressed to recreate in digital form the experience of getting to know the night sky with the same quality, fidelity, and rapidity as we can do now. The Adler theaters were updated in the late 2010s, making it possible to use the same software that runs the theaters to create an at-home stargazing experience for our global audience.

*Skywatch Weekly*, a weekly virtual program shared on the Adler's YouTube channel, was born out of this pivot. The original program, *Skywatch Live!*, ran onsite as a dome theater show. During the show a live presenter demonstrates a view of the stars that light pollution has made impossible. The show taught viewers how to navigate by starlight and told them stories behind their favorite stars, planets, and constellations. *Skywatch Weekly* has the same goal of helping viewers get to know their own night sky.

One of the challenges with any astronomy presentation is achieving variety in the visuals, and the Adler's digital collection has provided a unique solution. The ability to incorporate pieces from the Celestial Cartography collection has allowed our Manager of Theaters to talk about many more constellations in the sky than those visible from within city limits. Showing an artistic representation of a star pattern helps to ignite the viewer's imagination and leave them wondering what else they might see or imagine in the sky above.

Creating a weekly show is time-consuming work, especially when creating many assets from scratch and needing to render and

export astronomical content for editing; this is particularly true when reliant on a home Internet connection. Though the feedback from *Skywatch Weekly* has been positive, and viewership has consistently ranged from 600-900 people per episode, it is substantively different than producing a live show for an audience, which allows the presenter the freedom to improvise based on real-time audience feedback.<sup>5</sup> However, the reach of the program still strongly supports the public's desire for, and response to, this kind of digital programming; over 34 episodes the program has generated 305,400 impressions, with the majority of the audience in the United States,<sup>6</sup> and trending older than our other virtual programs (on average 35-65 years old). Interestingly most viewers of *Skywatch Weekly* episodes do not subscribe to our YouTube channel, but there are more subscribers that typically watch this program repeatedly than our other YouTube hosted programs.<sup>7</sup>

The metrics reported above, and in fact in the following sections, do not come without their own caveats. In this article we include impressions and metrics as a way to track user engagement with the Adler's content. However, we recognize that this tracks only one aspect of engagement — opening the tab — but does not track quality of engagement. Relying on these statistics alone to gauge engagement with content would be akin to considering guest count onsite as the only measure for engagement. Discussions on these metrics have been taking place in the museum community for almost a decade, with Elena Villaespesa (2012) stating that, "reporting solely on the number of visits and time spent on a website fulfills funding bodies' requirements, but such statistics are unlikely to help the museums and other public institutions evaluate and improve their online presence against their organisational objectives." We use these statistics in this article to demonstrate the reach of the content, and they can still be useful metrics when reporting to boards and to donors, but as we look at how digital programs continue

to iterate and evolve post-pandemic, there will be a need to define a better digital engagement reporting strategy.

As we tentatively plan for physical reopening, we will need to consider the question of access that arose with our pivot to YouTube. *Skywatch Live!* as an onsite show was an additional cost above museum admittance, and as such could be out of reach for guests. *Skywatch Weekly* on YouTube is available for free, with the option of donating to the Adler. As we look at how to best adapt our workloads and our content for an eventual reopening, we are cognizant of the opportunities that digital programs presented for sharing Adler content to audiences who cannot afford to attend museums, let alone ticketed experiences, or who do not have access to Chicago site-specific content. The process of evaluating which programs to transition to hybrid onsite/online, however challenging, presents new opportunities for our institution, and the consistent engagement from online viewers has shown us that audiences appreciate the online option while unable to physically attend shows.

#### *Sky Observers Hangout*

Before the pandemic, Adler had both daytime and nighttime telescope observing opportunities at the museum and around Chicago through the 'Scopes in the City' telescope outreach program, where anyone was welcome to look through a telescope and chat with Adler astronomers and volunteers about what they were seeing. A particular strength of this project was in bringing opportunities for observing and engaging with Adler experts to Chicago neighborhoods that have been traditionally underserved, especially neighborhoods with higher percentages of Black and Latinx populations and statistically lower incomes. In this way 'Scopes in the City' helped the Adler bring mission-driven content to people who often cannot attend museums due to cost or distance, or who may not attend because

they do not feel welcome in cultural heritage institutions — issues many institutions face (Smithsonian Institution Office of Policy & Analysis, 2001).

Once the pandemic hit, we could not continue these observing activities safely. It became clear from messages received on social media that guests wanted to fill the void left by the cancellation of observing projects, so the Adler began experimenting with broadcasting live telescope observations on YouTube. Once it was evident that the shutdown would be long-term, the Adler's Public Observing team developed a biweekly live YouTube program. *Sky Observers Hangout* (SOH) was born out of a desire to keep people connected to their night sky, to the Adler community, and to each other while physically apart during the pandemic. The goals of the program are not dissimilar from its in-person counterpart.

Many aspects of the virtual program were translated directly from our in-person programming. The conversational and informal aspects of our programs have been maintained through the live chat on YouTube. Guests are encouraged to talk with our staff, ask questions, and socialize with other audience members. The SOH hosts respond to guest comments in real time, so guests can contribute to and guide the experience. We also prioritize giving viewers something they can see or do themselves without any special tools, an analog of our in-person programming style of encouraging guests to 'do science' alongside Adler staff.

While SOH episodes have featured collections such as historic telescopes and rare book illustrations, the use of the digitized Celestial Cartography collection has been a staple of episodes focused on seasonally-visible constellations —for example, in the September 28, 2020 episode, 'The Fall Sky'.<sup>8</sup> An episode on February 8th about the Zodiac Constellations featured representations of constellations from the past. Collections items bring to life prior explorations and

interpretations of the sky.<sup>9</sup> Showcasing our collections also serves the goal of enticing guests to return to our physical museum and explore our collections on display once we reopen to the public.

The most remarkable thing about pivoting to this digital format is the ability to reach people from places all over the world, in larger numbers than were ever possible for our in-person programs. At the time of writing, our SOH program about the Jupiter and Saturn Great Conjunction has over 849,000 views on YouTube; within the YouTube chat for that program, as people shouted out their locales, we were able to track viewers across Chicago, the United States and Canada.<sup>10</sup> In contrast, via in-person telescope observation programming throughout 2019, we engaged roughly 32,000 people. While we cannot speak to the depth of engagement for the over 301,000+ viewers of the SOH programs in 2020, it remains a remarkable feat to have engaged more people with one program than we were able to do in a full calendar year, reaching outside of our city and across the continent as well.

Hosting these programs on YouTube also provides participant statistics that were previously unavailable. With 'Scopes in the City, staff were not only facilitating the events but also counting numbers of participants—often resulting in estimates and anecdotal data. Through YouTube the team has been able to track user data to see that 51% of viewers are 25-44 years old,<sup>11</sup> 80% to 95% of viewers who watch do not subscribe to the Adler YouTube channel, the majority are female, and though most viewers are US-based,<sup>12</sup> there have been viewers from over 50 other countries. This data helps shape the tone of the program, as well as demonstrate the reach a virtual program can have.

Reaching a global audience through the SOH program has also led our Public Observing team to rethink what a post-pandemic observing program should look like; raising

the likelihood of continued virtual programs alongside in-person opportunities to increase the equitable access to our programs and experts. Currently these plans include a push for *Scopes in the City* throughout the summer and fall months, with SOH in the winter and spring months when bad weather means telescopes cannot be used with the same frequency or dependability. The team is also developing live-broadcasting capabilities from the Adler's Observatory telescope, and will engage with local Chicago communities to continue to serve observers who are unable to visit onsite. Similarly, now that the team has been able to identify demographic information for viewers through YouTube statistics, there is a push to try to find ways to collect this information during in-person programming, as it helped the team not only plan around who the audience actually is, but also identify gaps in our audience reach.

#### *Adler Astronomy Live*

One of the key programs that makes the Adler Planetarium's onsite experience unique is the Space Visualization Lab (SVL). SVL is a working laboratory on the floor of the Adler Planetarium where scientists, technology experts, collections experts, artists, and educators can work together to create new ways for guests to explore the universe using state-of-the-art digital tools. Opened in 2007, SVL brings cutting-edge research from scientists around the country—as well as new immersive and interactive technologies—to the Adler, allowing guests to engage via presentations, visualizations, and face-to-face conversations included in the price of admission to the Adler.

As part of SVL programming, Adler held a daily program called Astronomy Conversations, involving Adler's Astronomy, Visualization, and Collections teams, as well as researchers from local universities and laboratories. *Astronomy Conversations* provided an opportunity for Adler guests to ask experts about their latest work and novel research taking place in



Chicago. When the Adler closed, these teams worked to find a digital programming option that would similarly showcase new research and storytelling, but in the same personalized and conversational way that was a staple of *Astronomy Conversations*.

Pivoting to digital, the Adler launched the Adler Astronomy Live (AAL) program in July 2020. AAL began as a biweekly program that gave science enthusiasts and amateurs alike the unique opportunity to interact with astronomers and historians. Through this program, we were able to showcase diverse voices in STEM, eye-popping space visualization, as well as spotlight newly-published research and space news. The programming varied from rapid response episodes covering phosphine on Venus,<sup>13</sup> to collections-based conversations on sundials<sup>14</sup> and constellations, with episodes on light pollution,<sup>15</sup> exoplanets<sup>16</sup> and more. On August 27, 2020, the Adler Collections team participated in an episode titled “Adler Astronomy Live: Constellations” which featured over 20 pieces from the Celestial Cartography collection.<sup>17</sup> The response to this episode helped to demonstrate the popularity and excitement for these visual collections pieces as part of the AAL program, resulting in pieces from the collection also being included in the episodes on sundials and on the Gaia telescope project, ‘Mapping the Galaxy’.<sup>18</sup>

AAL was co-hosted by Meredith Stepien, the Adler’s Manager of Experience Development, and Dr. Aaron Geller, an Astronomer jointly appointed through the Adler and Northwestern University. The hosts were responsible for guiding the speakers in conversation and responding to questions asked in the YouTube chat. Stepien served as the resident ‘non-expert’ to ensure the program was accessible to a range of viewers. The live Q&A format sparked conversations between the viewers in the chat and the panelists, and visualizations provided by the Adler Visualization team helped to illustrate

the topics being discussed.

AAL was among the first of Adler’s new virtual programs to launch. The reach of our AAL episodes varied from around 300 views up to 1,400 views, significantly more than the number of guests who could comfortably participate in an *Astronomy Conversations* session onsite (roughly 40-50 guests at a time). However, digital astronomy ‘talking heads’ programming is a relatively saturated market, with NASA, universities, etc. worldwide supporting their experts in providing these experiences. While the Adler has a unique voice and approach, AAL did not quickly find its niche and audience. The in-person *Astronomy Conversations* experience serves our museum guests in a clearly valued and impactful way; it wasn’t as obvious that AAL was serving a need for digital audiences that they weren’t able to find elsewhere. In late Fall, the team decided to shift their focus to other Adler digital programs that were launching (including the programs highlighted here, as well as others like the Adler’s *Wow! Signal* space comedy show and our new 3-D immersive Virtual Field Trip experiences); weighing reach, mission impact, and revenue opportunities.

As the team and the program move into 2021, AAL is being redesigned for rapid response engagement; serving instead as a responsive program to cover developing news and events as they break and enter the public purview. The success of the “Life on Venus?” episode, which had the highest engagement with 1,400 views and over 200 live viewers, showed that the program is at its best when it is responding to breaking news or current, ‘trending’ topics. With this pivot, Collections-focused episodes will be suspended, and collections content will fit in to upcoming episodes as they are applicable. But because there was significant positive feedback during Collections-focused episodes, with live participants sounding off with their favorite constellations and their excitement to learn the backgrounds and history of these constellation pieces, similar content

of 'behind the scenes' or 'explainer' videos of the Celestial Cartography collections, and the Adler's Collections at large, are now being investigated as part of shorter form content to be used on social media sites like TikTok, Instagram Reels, and Facebook where they can be accessed, shared, and consumed but do not need to have a 'live' and 'responsive' feel. The hope is by transitioning content into these shorter formats, they will be more accessible to audiences who are not, or do not identify as, science enthusiasts; allowing for an easy entry point to Adler content with links to more intensive content available.

### **2021 and Beyond: a Focus on More Equitable Access**

These case studies show how the Adler's Celestial Cartography Collection has been used not only to showcase cultural heritage collections materials in their own right, but as a way to enhance our virtual museum experiences as a whole. Similar to the ways that collections pieces are used to enhance exhibitions within the physical space of the Planetarium, the programs discussed above show how the incorporation of heritage materials is an effective way to bring humanistic inquiry and understanding into programming. Though these case studies were all based at the Adler Planetarium, it is our belief that these examples of digital programming can be useful to a wider museum audience.

These case studies show both successes and failures that will inform the Adler Planetarium's digital programming goals and actions not only during the phased reopenings but also in the longer term. We have already used the successes of the *Mapping Historic Skies* partnership on Zooniverse to create a new project that will take additional Adler visual collections materials and allow Zooniverse participants to add their own terms and tags that will be used to enrich the Adler's cataloging data, thereby providing richer search terms and

accessible entry points to the collections. This project is designed around the success of earlier participatory projects, but also around a need for transparency and authenticity with the public—in this case focusing on the equity of language and who gets to decide what terms are searchable via online catalogs and search engines. We are interested to see how this project (arguably more focused on digital humanities than astronomy) will engage our audiences, as it launches in March of 2021.<sup>19</sup>

As we have learned from the 'pivot' to digital necessitated by COVID closures, using our mission-driven content online is most successful when the content is particularly fitted for a specific audience, presentation type, and platform, and this type of planning needs to continue as we move forward. We have also viewed these programs as a way to serve not only our existing communities but also people across the globe who may not have otherwise become a part of the Adler's public.

However, for all the successes, we have seen that the major downside to 'digital only' programming is the inability to provide equitable access to the Adler's experts, collections, and assets without a physical format. As the closure of the Adler's building continued, we recognized that our digital programming was leaving certain populations behind. Whereas programs like *Scopes in the City* excelled by taking Adler content into neighborhoods that overwhelmingly account for the underprivileged populations in Chicago, the closures amplified stark a digital divide. Upon closure, and at the time of the Adler's digital only pivot, one in five Chicago students did not have access to broadband Internet to support streaming, limiting their access to the case studies shown above. This divide was also most evident in specific neighborhoods, including four predominately Black Chicago neighborhoods in which 37-50% of students lack Internet access (Block Club Chicago, 2020). As of this publication Chicago Public

Schools have launched Chicago Connected, a program that helped ensure that two thirds of students lacking access to the Internet at the beginning of in person closures had broadband access, with a goal of having full coverage by the end of the 2021 school year (Chicago Public Schools, 2020). Accessibility issues are further raised with respect to the bias towards English language throughout museum websites, crowdsourcing platforms, and these third party sites (ttnrob, 2015), and the Adler is investigating ways in which translations and other initiatives could help combat this exclusionary sharing of content.

With this in mind, the Adler is actively looking into ways in 2021 to increase access to collections in an off-site physical format as well. One project in the works is to take images from the Celestial Cartography Collection that were processed through the *Mapping Historic Skies* project to create Constellation Coloring Books. Though the books are being designed so they can be accessed digitally, future phases of the project will include printed versions, with an eye towards distributing these in Chicago neighborhoods that have the hardest time accessing digital content.

As we imagine what the Adler—and the museum field as a whole—will look like after the effects of COVID, we believe it is imperative to understand the need to diversify content not just across digital platforms but also across physical formats to ensure maximum equity and accessibility, befitting the mission of the institution. In this regard, we are committed to evaluating ways in which to continue digital programming in the long term, and reimagine engagement tracking to focus on qualitative data as well as the quantitative metrics. The lessons of the last year will have a lasting impact on not only the Adler, but on the audiences we serve and the cultural heritage sector we are positioned within, and we are committed to continually iterating our programs to best serve the communities we serve.

## Notes

1. <https://securegrants.neh.gov/publicquery/main.aspx?f=1&gn=PW-51687-14>
2. <https://artsandculture.google.com/>
3. <https://www.adlerplanetarium.org/explore/about-us/adler-mission/>
4. (<https://www.mappinghistoricskies.org>)
5. With a peak in December of 5,500 viewers from a show on the Great Conjunction - Adler Planetarium, "Skywatch Weekly: Jupiter-Saturn Great Conjunction," December 16, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u7ij2NrVJYs&t=2s>
6. Typically 40-60% of the audience is based in the United States depending on the episode.
7. Between 65% - 77% of viewers who watch typically do not subscribe to the Adler Planetarium YouTube channel.
8. Adler Planetarium, "Sky Observers Hangout: The Fall Sky," September 28, 2020, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uh2DX\\_acJ3k&t=2326s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uh2DX_acJ3k&t=2326s)
9. Adler Planetarium, "Sky Observers Hangout: Constellations of the Zodiac," February 8, 2021, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nHd\\_cgDIHrw](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nHd_cgDIHrw)
10. Adler Planetarium, "Sky Observers Hangout: The Jupiter-Saturn Great Conjunction," December 20, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=irrbKCy9R7E&t=3534s>
11. The average age for YouTube users is also 25-44 years of age.
12. Typically the USA range is anywhere between 40% to 60% depending on the episode.
13. Adler Planetarium, "Adler Astronomy Live: Life on Venus?", September 17, 2020, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_IQVbmYjbRs&t=9s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_IQVbmYjbRs&t=9s)
14. Adler Planetarium, "Adler Astronomy Live: Sundials," October 8, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xfo9ifTixlg>
15. Adler Planetarium, "Adler Astronomy Live:

Advocacy in the City," December 3, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2X0Yil54GMl>

16. Adler Planetarium, "Adler Astronomy Live: Exoplanets," July 30, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TuFREPPA2CQ>

17. Adler Planetarium, "Adler Astronomy Live: Constellations," August 27, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CNSHT7BkEd4&t=1669s>

18. Adler Planetarium, "Adler Astronomy Live: Mapping a Billion Stars," August, 13, 2020, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dHy\\_-23Qb5g](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dHy_-23Qb5g)

19. *Tag Along with Adler* launched on March 23, 2021. <https://www.zooniverse.org/projects/webster-institute/tag-along-with-adler>

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# Portuguese museums in pandemic times: Change and adaptation through heritage-based artist-in-residence programming

Ana Gago, Laura Castro

Commissioned by the Portuguese Government, the November 2020 field report, *Museus no Futuro* ("Museums in the Future"), mentions the programming of co-curated artist-in-residence programmes as one of the recommendations for engaging local publics, particularly younger visitors. This recommendation seems of special relevance in the aftermath of extensive lockdowns due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and in the face of an increasingly bleak scenario concerning the recovery of international tourism.

Drawing on the analysis of the preliminary results derived from the doctoral project "(Re)creating Heritage", an inquiry into heritage-based artist-in-residence programming practices in Portugal over the last decade, the article at hand will specifically focus on three artist-in-residence programmes hosted by Portuguese museums located in some of the regions hardest hit by the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. By doing so, we aim to promote the discussion of the potential of artist-in-residence programmes for improving resilience and participation at a local level in (post-) pandemic times.

*Keywords: museums in the future, proximity-based work, community engagement, artist-in-residence programmes, Portuguese museums.*

## Portuguese museums in (post)pandemic times: an overview

The disturbances caused by the COVID-19 pandemic on a global scale are well-known by now. Similarly to many other countries, Portugal adopted very restrictive measures, which had a significant impact on many cultural organisations, including museums and monuments.<sup>1</sup> In March 2020, following the declaration of a state of emergency, Portuguese institutions had no choice but to close doors, symbolically having reopened again on the 18th of May of that same year, just in time for International Museum Day. However, a considerable number of restrictions were kept in place throughout 2020, including a reduction of opening hours and capacity limitations for museums

and other cultural spaces. Moreover, due to a dramatic peak in the number of COVID-19 cases in January 2021, Portuguese cultural organisations were once again forced to close doors for a three-month lockdown period.

The constraints imposed by COVID-19 have pushed museums and galleries to rethink their practices concerning the programming of exhibitions, cultural events, and supplementary activities, as well as to redesign engagement strategies that are geared towards local publics and communities. Furthermore, in what concerns Portuguese museums, the need to reconnect with local publics is of utmost urgency, especially considering their dependence on international tourism<sup>1</sup> a sector also heavily impacted by the pandemic in recent years.<sup>2</sup> In addition to the aforementioned structural

issues, several others were identified in *Museums in the Future*, a field report promoted by the working group of the same name (Grupo de Projeto Museus no Futuro, 2020). Commissioned by the Portuguese Government in 2019, the initiative brought together a wide range of experts in the museological, cultural and political sectors, aiming to improve public policies in the management of national monuments and museums.<sup>3</sup> In this sense, the report highlights the importance of ensuring that greater autonomy and financial independence is given to directors of national museums and monuments, in order to, for instance, enable the diversification of fundraising strategies, and recruitment in much needed areas, such as security and assistance (Grupo de Projeto Museus no Futuro, 2020: 42-45).<sup>4</sup>

Additionally, in consonance with recent controversies in the media surrounding the precarious working conditions of gallery educators, both in public and private organisations, the report signals fragilities in the labour conditions of many professionals in technical categories.<sup>5</sup>

Concerning the recommendations pertaining to one of the strategic axes outlined in the report, expressly, 'Publics and Mediation', foreign visitors continue to be viewed as a potential audience in a post-COVID scenario, especially in what concerns museums located in less populated non-urban areas, far removed from more habitual tourist attractions. Nonetheless, the main emphasis is given to domestic visitors, specifically, local publics and communities (Grupo de Projeto Museus no Futuro, 2020: 70).

As a first step towards a greater involvement of local organisations and communities in the definition of long-term strategic and financial planning aligned with local or regional expectations, the report suggests the creation of consultation groups. (Grupo de Projeto Museus no Futuro, 2020: 54). In addition, the promotion of volunteer programmes as a way to engage elderly visitors – a target group which presents enormous potential for

growth and mobilisation – is also suggested, taking into account the country's high population ageing rate. Considering also growing levels of education and cultural diversification within this particular group, and ever-increasing concerns with the promotion of well-being, senior audiences present additional 'challenges to museums and monuments in the context of non-formal education' (Grupo de Projeto Museus no Futuro, 2020: 13).<sup>6</sup>

Taking into special consideration the need to strengthen collaboration practices between museums and universities and extend the potential collaborations to the creative industries sector, the report encourages the co-hosting of 'fab labs, residencies, workshops and awards' (Grupo de Projeto Museus no Futuro, 2020: 61). These initiatives, working in close relation to another strategic axis identified in the report, that of 'Digital Transformation', could be reoriented not only towards the promotion of academic research linked to museums, but also towards technological developments with potential applications in areas such as collection management, and communication, interpretive and pedagogic content production.

Finally, as a way of bringing back local schools – whose number of visits to museums has steeply declined since 2011 – the co-curatorship of artistic residencies and exhibitions specially designed to engage secondary school students, within the scope of the National Plan for the Arts, is suggested.<sup>7</sup> With regard to this, the report specifically highlights the inherent potential of artistic and research residencies to foster 'creation, diversification in collections management and interpretation, and new ways for mediation and non-formal education'. (Grupo de Projeto Museus no Futuro, 2020: 74). Additionally, special emphasis is placed on the role of heritage education as an 'instrument with significant potential for the conscientization and mobilization of young people in the promotion of sustainable

practices’.

Considering the high number of art collections, managed by 82% of national Portuguese museums and monuments (Grupo de Projeto Museus no Futuro, 2020: 21), according to the report, the co-curatorship of artist-in-residence programmes combining artistic and heritage education goals seems like an appropriate proposal. Nonetheless, Portuguese museums have been a place for experimentation in artistic and heritage education long before these critical times, as evinced by previous examples of collaboration between schools and museums focusing on heritage education promoted by public initiative. An example of this was the creation of a toolkit for the collection of intangible heritage, specifically aimed at secondary school students, resulting from a protocol signed in 2013 by the governmental agency for Education and the governmental agency for Cultural Heritage.<sup>8</sup> In much the same way, Portuguese museums are not entirely new to the promotion of heritage-based artist-in-residence programmes.

Despite representing a small group, museums were among the 148 Portuguese promoters of these programmes over the last decade. In the section that follows, some of the preliminary findings from the inquiry carried out within the scope of the ‘(Re)creating Heritage’ doctoral research project, will be analysed, opening the way for discussion of the potential benefits of heritage-based artist-in-residence programmes in museums, throughout (post-)pandemic times.<sup>9</sup>

**Heritage-based artistic residencies: a growing trend**

Having begun in 2019, ‘(Re)creating Heritage’ is an ongoing doctoral research project developed within the scope of the doctoral programme in Heritage Studies at the Catholic University of Portugal (more specifically, at the School of Arts’ Research Centre for Science and Technology of the Arts), its two main objectives being as follows: 1) the identification of contemporary practices

and trends in the programming of heritage-based artistic residencies in Portugal; 2) designing, testing and implementing an artist-in-residence model programme aimed at heritage education and community engagement in a specific territory yet to be determined.

As part of the research, an initial inquiry on 148 Portuguese promoters and/or hosts of artist-in-residence programmes was carried out,<sup>10</sup> through means of an e-mail questionnaire,<sup>11</sup> covering aspects such as: the duration and in-person regime of the residencies; the identification of promoters and their main funders/partners; the financial, logistical, and technical support provided to artists; the level of participation/co-creation by local communities; thematic focuses, heritage typologies and artistic practices covered by the programmes; and, programmatic/institutional contexts. The inquiry was conducted between March and September 2020, resulting in the identification of 58 artist-in-residence programmes and initiatives, which included both single and multiple edition programmes – either completed or ongoing during this period – and almost covered the totality of national territory.<sup>12</sup> The main selection criterion for the final sample was based on programmes/ initiatives’ relationship with heritage management, heritage valorisation, and/or heritage education objectives.<sup>13</sup>

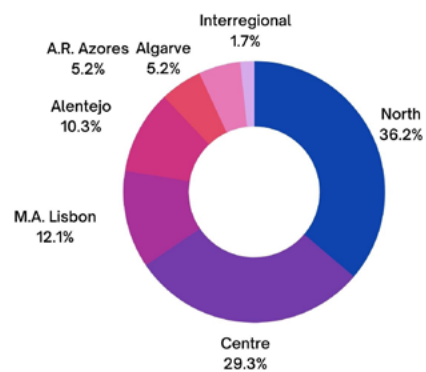


Figure 1: Territorial distribution of artist-in-residence programmes per Portuguese region

The information collected during the inquiry was statistically organised and some of the



preliminary findings already presented.<sup>14</sup> Although further analysis must (and will) be conducted, these findings allow us to identify tendencies in the programming of this type of initiatives within the context of Portuguese museums.<sup>15</sup>

The first potential conclusion drawn from the inquiry pertains to the relatively recent nature of heritage-based artist-in-residence programmes. Even though the survey identified 58 artist-in-residence programmes/initiatives carried out between 2004 and 2020, the vast majority date from the last decade, especially the latter five years (2016-2020).

The results also point to the importance of the public sector, more specifically of local authorities, given their crucial role as promoters and funders of heritage-based artist-in-residence programmes/initiatives. Similarly, museums and art centres, which represent a considerable slice of the group of partner or host entities, mostly identified as public or public-dependent institutions.

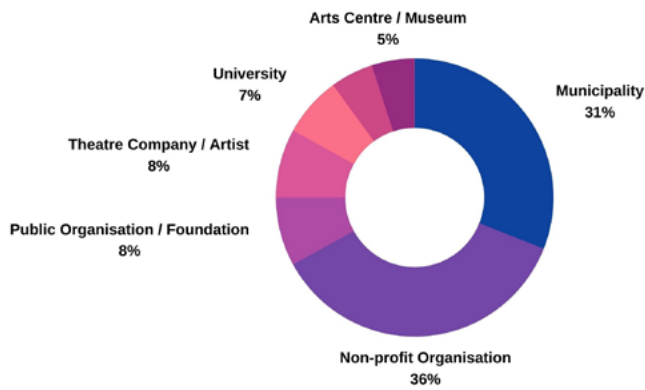


Figure 2. Percentage of promoters per typology

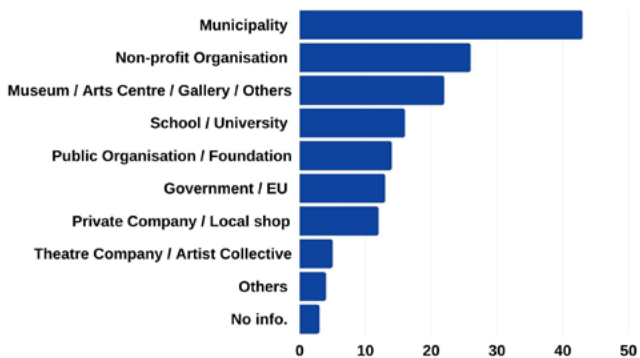


Figure 3. Typology of funders/hosts/partners per number of occurrences

In fact, all of the five museums identified as promoters, were public institutions.<sup>16</sup> Publicly managed or financed museums, art centres and galleries, were also identified as either partners or hosts in 16 out of a total of 17 programmes/initiatives.

In terms of the roles assumed by the museums and art centres identified, most concerned the hosting of public events associated with residencies, such as exhibitions, musical and other performative presentations, artistic interventions, and educational activities complementary to most of the programmes or initiatives analysed.



Figure 4. Typology of activities/events per number of occurrences

With regard to some of the tendencies identified through the inquiry, initiatives and programmes may be grouped into two predominant, and sometimes coexisting, categories: a) single edition initiatives, associated with the commission of a particular show, performance or exhibition, as well as the development of cultural, or in fewer occurrences, research projects; and, b) regular initiatives, integrated in the annual programmes of cultural organisations including museums, art centres and non-profit organisations, or as part of regular cultural and scientific events, for instance, music and arts festivals, conferences and seminars.<sup>17</sup>

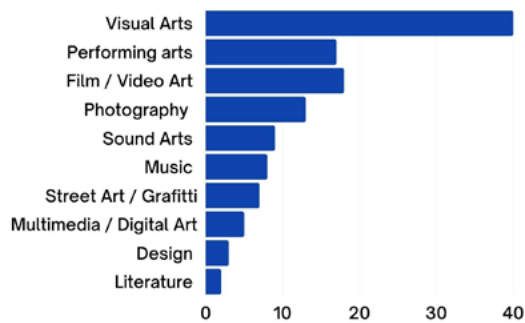


Figure 5. Typology of artistic practices identified per number of occurrences

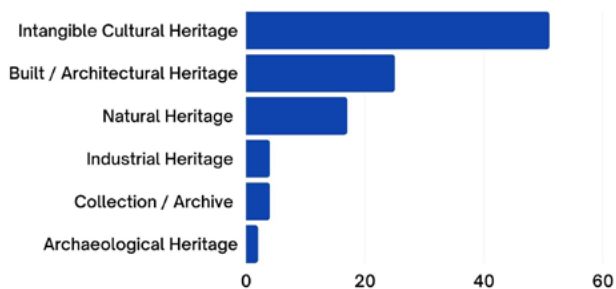


Figure 6. Typology of heritage practices identified per number of occurrences

Moreover, the inquiry revealed heritage-based artist-in-residence programmes' potentialities in the cross-fertilisation of three different, but complementary, dimensions: a) artistic experimentation with a high degree of interdisciplinarity, including practices that border on the sector of the creative industries; b) the use and valorisation of heritage, particularly of an intangible nature, a motivating theme for a large percentage of the artist-in-residence programmes; and, c) the promotion of cultural participation through the arts.

However, it also highlighted some of the structural vulnerabilities identified in *Museums in the Future*, namely, the precarious working conditions of participating artists, who in at least 50% of cases were not financially compensated for their work, even when assuming traditionally non-artistic functions linked to production, communication, or gallery education. Other critical aspects of this type of initiatives include: the short duration of residencies; the restriction of community participation in their initial and/or final stages; and, most

commonly, the lack of educational activities relative to these.<sup>18</sup>

Nevertheless, the data collected during the inquiry revealed several examples of artist-in-residence programmes developed within the context of Portuguese museums, which showed promising results, having had a significant impact on collection management, programming of exhibitions, and cultural and educational events/activities. Furthermore, because it coincided with the first nationwide lockdown due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the inquiry carried out allowed for the identification of the distinctive qualities of artist-in-residence programmes, namely, their capacity to adapt and inspire alternative ways of engaging with the public, thus serving to maintain and diversify museums' activities in unimaginably restrictive times.

### Heritage-based artistic residencies: change and adaptation during COVID-19

The main selection criteria for the examples here presented, had mostly to do with the fact that all of the host institutions were located in some of the hardest-hit Portuguese regions during the first and second waves of the COVID-19 pandemic, expressly, the northern and central regions of continental Portugal, including Ovar, the only municipality that was placed under a *cordon sanitaire*.<sup>19</sup> Accordingly, all of the selected examples intended to illustrate different adaptation strategies for the constraints caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

In the first example, the latest edition of a museum's annual artist-in-residence programme was examined. In the second, three editions of an artist-in-residence programme hosted by the museum in question, but external to its programming activity, served as the focal point for analysis. Finally, the third and last example, consisted of two individual artist-in-residence programmes selected due to their relation to heritage valorisation objectives, as well their temporal proximity to the present moment.

Notwithstanding, all three examples have shared characteristics, including the fact that they all took place in public museums or art centres. However, while the first two examples occurred in two distinctive typologies of non-artistic museums – the former in a municipal housemuseum, and the latter in a municipal museum of archaeology – the third example involved a contemporary art centre. Furthermore, each of the examples here presented serve to spark a discussion on the various possible impacts of this type of initiatives at both an institutional and programmatic level, taking into consideration different typologies of museums, and envisioning a broader timeline (beyond the current pandemic reality).

### **I always wanted to be something else: adaptation and digitalisation**

On 20 September 2020, at 10.15 p.m., a queue near the Júlio Dinis House Museum in Ovar had formed, for the second presentation of *Sempre quis ser outra coisa* ('I always wanted to be something else'), a performance by actor Pedro Damião, artist-in-residence at the HouseMuseum, from May to October 2020. Contrary to the expectations (and especially considering the extremely restrictive measures adopted by local authorities, who had implemented a cordon sanitaire due to the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic just a few months before), the opening of an additional session of the performance at such late hours, did not discourage the audience of a small town in central Portugal.

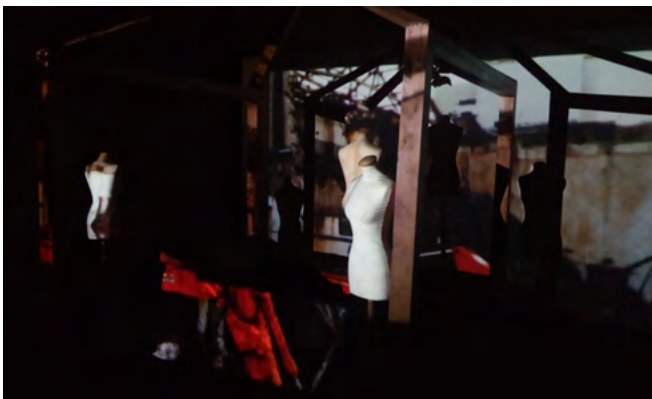


Figure 7. *Sempre quis ser outra coisa* – Live performance at Júlio Dinis House Museum, 20 September 2020

Credits: Museu Júlio Dinis - Câmara Municipal de Ovar (Júlio Dinis House Museum – Municipality of Ovar)

The pandemic, however, had a significant impact on the development of this artistic residency, compromising some of the activities previously programmed, namely, public workshops, cancelled due to the challenges relative to, for instance, the mandatory use of protective equipment such as masks, which would have severely limited the necessary interaction and participation with/from participants.

Moreover, the first public presentation, a performance titled *Pedras na Boca* ('Stones in one's mouth'), had to be entirely adapted to an online format, consisting in its recording and subsequent livestreaming via the project's Facebook page<sup>20</sup>. In addition, the original draft for the presentation was completely reoriented, incorporating the artist's own experience of confinement at the museum, which was forced to close to the public during the initial stages of the residency.



Figure 8. *Resquícios* – Final exhibition at Júlio Dinis House Museum, 7 October 2020

Credits: Museu Júlio Dinis - Câmara Municipal de Ovar (Júlio Dinis House Museum – Municipality of Ovar)

Coincidentally, the theme of artistic creation during a health-related period of confinement, resonates with the experience of the first unofficial artist-in-residence at the HouseMuseum, expressly, Júlio Dinis, a pseudonym of Joaquim Coelho (1839-1871), a young doctor whose stay at an aunt's house during a short period of convalescence in 1863, motivated a process of self-discovery – and subsequent consecration – as a writer, and ultimate musealisation of the house by the Municipality of Ovar in 1996. Just as Júlio Dinis had done during his 'artistic residency', more than one and a half centuries before, Pedro Damião observed the city through the window of the HouseMuseum, confronting the current reality with that of his childhood and adolescence in that city. At the same time, the writer-performer reflected on the process of writing, or more precisely, 'self-writing', within the context of an artistic residency.

Besides the connections between Pedro Damião and Júlio Dinis, we may also draw a parallel between the work of Pedro Damião and that of Xavier Almeida in the first edition of the artistic residency programme promoted by the HouseMuseum in 2014. During his residency, the visual artist documented what he described as a 'return to his parents' house'. Adopting a similar point of view as Damião's, of (non-)participant observation, the exhibition facilitated a critical and particularly ironic reflection on some of the town's trademark cultural events, such as the annual Carnival festivities.

In this sense, the primordial function and intrinsic historical value of the house museum as a place of memory is expanded, increasing its value and granting it another function, that of a place of inspiration for artistic (re)creation and critique. Furthermore, in addition to assuming a commemorative function relative to the life and works of Júlio Dinis, through its artist-in-residence programme the museum has also managed to position itself as an art centre, actively supporting local artists and enabling the promotion of contemporary arts.

Ultimately, as the significant number of

visualizations of the online performance demonstrate (having reached a total of 5059), the artistic residency of Pedro Damião serves as an example of the inherent potential of this type of initiatives to promote change, enabling artistic and cultural resilience from within museums, even behind closed doors.

### **Displacements: from the gallery to (other) reading formats**

Similarly to the aforementioned initiatives which took place at the Júlio Dinis House Museum, *Deslocações* ('Displacements') also took place at a municipal museum, namely, the Abade Pedrosa Municipal Museum, located in northern Portugal and dedicated to the safeguarding and display of an archaeological collection of items dating from the Neolithic period to the Middle Ages, which belonged to a local abbot and amateur archaeologist, Joaquim Pedrosa (1848-1920). However, unlike the previously cited examples, in this case the museum was not the promoter of the initiative, the artist-in-residence programme having been designed as a curricular project developed by Samuel Silva, Professor at the University of Porto's Faculty of Fine Arts, and curator of all of the programme's three editions thus far.

The first edition resulted in the programming of a collective exhibition, bringing together the artworks of thirteen Fine Arts and Multimedia undergraduate students from the respective faculty. For a period of two months, students were accompanied in guided visits to the museum's collections, as well as to Monte do Padrão, an archaeological site dating from the Neolithic period. The final exhibition of the artworks took the form of an in situ multimedia installation, in dialogue with the museum's permanent exhibition.

In the second edition of the residency programme, which took place around the same time in the following year of 2019, a group of twenty-five students were challenged to produce a sculpture illustrating the spiritual dimension of an object of their choice from the museum's permanent collection. The



Figure 9. *Padrão* – Group discussion at the Abade Pedrosa Municipal Museum, 3 April 2018  
Credits: Samuel Silva

final outcome was a new *in situ* installation featuring the artworks, titled *Religar* ('Reconnect'). Resorting to the use of different materials and textures – dirt, plants, ceramics, coal, paper, and even edible materials – the artworks reflected both a conceptual and aesthetic correspondence to their chosen archaeological objects, providing them with a symbolic value beyond their functional role, without losing the connection to their material and formal aspects.



Figure 10. *Religar* – Exhibition at the Abade Pedrosa Municipal Museum, 23 May 2019  
Credits: Abade Pedrosa Municipal Museum

Unlike its previous counterparts, the 2020 edition of the artist-in-residence programme was met with the additional challenge of having had to adapt to the various constraints

caused by COVID-19. Dedicated to the memory and work of Daniel Faria (1971-1999), writer and, at the time of his death, novice at the Monastery of Singeverga in Santo Tirso, this edition sought to give continuity to previous ones. After a long series of delays and postponed field visits, and the fact that students had executed their artworks solely through remote tutoring, the exhibition was cancelled even before having had the chance to open to the public in November 2020, as had been intended.

Nevertheless, as of the time of writing this article (March 2021), a (re)adaptation of the exhibition exclusively for publication is in course. This adaptation will (re)enable the presentation of the artworks, leading the artists to creatively rethink their artworks both individually and collectively, as part of another type of 'installation' – one that is to be read. Additionally, this format will provide the opportunity for the organisation and public dissemination of some of the results from students' historical and artistic research on the life and works of Daniel Faria, as well as the documentation of creative and production processes that also encompasses previous editions.

On the whole, *Displacements* is demonstrative of how artist-in-residence programmes, particularly those promoted by non-artistic museums, are able to attain four main objectives, namely: a) to contribute to socialising the collections; b) to strengthen institutional partnerships in the field at a regional level; c) to promote the diversification of exhibitions and activities; and, d) to position museums as privileged spaces for the promotion of interdisciplinary, hands-on, research practices, in the cross-fertilisation between heritage and artistic creation.

In what concerns the latest edition of Abade Pedrosa Municipal Museum's artist-in-residence programme, *Displacements* is yet another example of museums' ability to adapt while simultaneously supporting artistic creation and research. Occurring outside the physical space of the museum – although counting on its collaboration and support –

the resulting publication will nonetheless enable the museum (once again forced to close doors in January 2021), to act as a cultural agent for local heritage, by providing an opportunity to document the creative, historical and empirical research developed during the three editions of the programme.

### Stories of a Place: supporting artistic creation through heritage-making

Contrary to the preceding examples, the last two programmes here presented were hosted by an art museum, expressly, Quinta da Cruz – Centre for Contemporary Art, in Viseu, a historical town in the central region of Portugal. Inaugurated in 2014, the story of the Centre begins with the acquisition by the municipality of an old rural property and its subsequent conversion to a multifunctional space, dedicated to the promotion and exhibition of contemporary arts. Moreover, besides having its own exhibition and educational programme, the Centre is host to two partner institutions, namely, the Serralves Foundation, and, the national Visual Expression and Communication Teachers' Association, both having greatly contributed to the Centre's cultural dynamics and institutional relevance in recent years.

Although the Centre has yet to formalise an official artist-in-residence programme, it has already commissioned and/or hosted a few short-term residencies, as well as related exhibitions and activities. One instance of this was a short stay at Quinta Da Cruz in December 2018, by the visual artist António Silva, who was challenged to create ten large format drawings and a mural painting, inspired by different arboreal species in the forest and gardens that surround the main building.

The final exhibition, titled *Try Thinking like a Tree*, was inaugurated as part of Viseu's Festival of Artistic Practices, EDUCARTE, an annual initiative organised in partnership with the Visual Expression and Communication Teachers' Association, taking place in various museums and exhibition spaces managed

by the municipality. In this way, the artistic residency greatly benefited from the accompanying pedagogical initiatives aimed at promoting artistic education and artistic practices, always in close relationship with local heritage, which throughout the festival's history, both in in-person formats (the last having been in 2019xxi), and onlinexxii editions, has been the source of inspiration for many of the festival's activities and featured artistic interventions.



Figure 11. *Try thinking like a tree – Exhibition at Quinta da Cruz - Centre for Contemporary Art, 15 June 2019*

Credits: *Andrea Couceiro, Câmara Municipal de Viseu (Municipality of Viseu)*

Additionally, the residency provided an opportunity for the artistic cataloguing and valorisation of the arboreal heritage surrounding the arts centre, some of the drawings produced during the artist-in-residence programme having been acquired by the municipality, and being now part of the Centre's permanent collection.

Much in the same manner, the artist-in-residence programme, *Histórias de um Lugar* ('Stories of a Place') – hosted by Quinta da Cruz in February 2020 – also contributed to the valorisation of the institution's heritage, more specifically, of the history of the building and its previous residents. Over the course of ten days, visual artist María Jesús Agra, collected testimonies of former residents, caretakers and neighbours of the country house, some of whom are now part of the museum's staff, blending the oral retelling of their stories

with sound recordings of the river that runs alongside the property<sup>xxiii</sup>. The culmination of the artist's findings resulted in their conversion into a multimedia art installation that combined natural elements, collages, sound recordings and photographs from the family archives of some of the interviewees.



Figure 12. *Histórias de um Lugar – Exhibition at Quinta da Cruz - Centre for Contemporary Art, 27 July 2020*

Credits: *Andrea Couceiro, Câmara Municipal de Viseu (Municipality of Viseu)*

Inaugurated in June 2020, and thus in the aftermath of the first nationwide lockdown, the exhibition was able to remain open to the public for almost the entire duration initially expected, along with its respective complementary public and educational activities such as workshops and guided tours. In addition, the artworks produced within the context of this artistic residency will also be acquired by the municipality and incorporated into the Centre's permanent collection.

On that account, besides supporting the programming of exhibitions and activities, this initiative also actively contributed to the development of the Centre's permanent collection, bringing to it artworks that combine both artistic and historical value. Moreover, both local communities and some of the Centre's employees, were involved in this artistic self-valorisation and heritage-making process. This example thus demonstrates artist-in-residence programmes' potential to promote the participation and the valorisation of local heritage, including that

of museums: their buildings, surroundings, and the memories of present and former inhabitants.

Additionally, this example illustrates an alternative strategy for resilience in (post-) COVID-19 times. Through the acquisition of artworks produced by commissioned artists, not only is Quinta da Cruz supporting contemporary arts and artists, but also its own future role as an exhibition space for contemporary arts. During the lockdown periods, for instance, the Centre was able to maintain its online presence by providing filmed guided tours of outside spaces, where some of its collection's artworks are installed<sup>xxiv</sup>. In this way, by focusing on the development and socialising of its collection, in close tandem with local history, the Centre is also asserting its role in the community: promoting heritage valorisation and education through the arts.

### **Museums in the Future: a place for (re) connection through heritage and the arts**

Despite the limitations in its scope, the inquiry carried out as part of the '(Re) creating Heritage' research project, revealed the role of Portuguese museums in hosting and supporting artistic residencies. Often functioning as an interface between local heritage and contemporary artistic creation, the museums and art centres identified in the inquiry also played an important part as institutional and physical facilitators between artists and local communities, mainly by providing artist-in-residence programmes the pedagogical framework needed for both artistic and heritage education, through the hosting of cultural, scientific and educational events and activities associated with the programmes.

The selected examples of artist-in-residence programmes that took place during and between the first and second waves of the COVID-19 pandemic in Portugal (the first having occurred from March to April of 2020, and the second, from October to November of that same year), indicate

that this might be a relationship of mutual benefit. All three examples illustrated different strategies adopted by participating artists and programme coordinators in adapting to harsh restrictions, constant delays and reconfigurations. Whether by adjusting to other formats or platforms for mediation – from digital to printed editions – or by guaranteeing the future valorisation of the artworks produced during the artist-in-residence programmes, all were able to reinvent practices and fulfil their goals. Moreover, two of the artist-in-residence programmes examined, happened behind closed doors, the museums involved having been able to maintain some level of public activity by adapting and rethinking modes of presentation, and, to some degree, participation. A clear demonstration of this may be observed in the first example, where the online performance reached a number of visualizations that far surpassed the physical capacity of the museum's auditorium/exhibition room, especially considering the safety guidelines imposed to contain the spread of COVID-19.

Further analysis is currently underway, in the form of a multiple case study involving different types of promoters, so as to evaluate the potential of artist-in-residence programmes not only relative to the management and socialising of collections, but also for improving community engagement, extended to include museums' personnel and associated professionals. In relation to the benefits that may be gained at an institutional level from the programming of artist-in-residence initiatives, these include: the strengthening of institutional partnerships; the reinforcement of museums' cultural and educational activity; and the reinforcement of their prominence at a local, regional, and even national level.

Overall, the three cases discussed had an observably positive effect on their host institutions, promoting collaborative practices such as those between museums and universities, and enabling community engagement. In this sense, they mirrored the

analyses and recommendations provided by the *Museums in the Future* field report, in which the potential of artist-in-residence programmes to stimulate 'infrastructural optimization, as well [institutions'] ability to reinvent and innovate' are highlighted (Grupo de Projeto *Museus no Futuro*, 2020: 61).

If financial and political conditions are actually met so as to allow greater autonomy and proximity to the educational sector, namely, through the National Plan for the Arts, it can then be expected that Portuguese museums will come to assume a more proactive role in promoting heritage-based artist-in-residence programmes. This could be done, for instance, by ensuring the continuity of single edition initiatives (which represented the majority of initiatives identified in the inquiry), strategically integrating them into museums' regular activity. In the aftermath of consecutive COVID-19-related lockdown periods and faced with an increasingly distant scenario of recovery for tourist activity, this may prove an adequate strategic move for Portuguese museums and monuments to follow. Moreover, the need to attract local publics may also serve as an opportunity for Portuguese museums to reaffirm their historical responsibility for the study, safeguarding and valorisation of heritage, always through the inclusion of local communities, a role that, to some extent, within the context of artist-in-residence programmes, has been transferred to artists, whose work connected to museums and heritage has paradoxically failed to be sufficiently valued. In 'Ten Principles of Values-Based Heritage Practice', Kate Clark affirms: 'Heritage practitioners come from many different backgrounds. In addition to those who hold traditional knowledge, or who are passionate about local places or things, there are many others. They include anthropologists, architects and surveyors, curators, planners, archivists, ecologists, landscape architects, archaeologists, and conservators' (Clark, 2019: 151). From what we have discussed thus far, artists could also undeniably be added to that list.



Following the same line of thought, various international studies, publications, research, and/or artistic projects, have been exploring the potentialities inherent to the association between artistic creation and the valorisation/education of heritage.<sup>25</sup> In the opening chapter of *Heritage in Action*, the authors state: 'Heritage is produced and mobilised by individuals and communities in any number of actions, including remembering, forgetting, generating, adapting, and performing' (Waterton, Watson, Silverman, 2017: 3). As has thus been demonstrated, creating, or re-creating, through the lens of museum collections, is yet another relevant means for the production and mobilisation of heritage.

If, as argued in the *Museums in the Future* field report, artistic, cultural and heritage education programmes can act as 'powerful mobilizer[s] for younger people, educators and teachers, and families' (Grupo de Projeto Museu no Futuro, 2020: 74), addressing the promotion of contemporary artistic creation could provide an opportunity for Portuguese museums to not only reinvent themselves as unique vessels for artistic experimentation, but also, as privileged spaces for the participation of local communities through artistic practices. By doing so, and in consonance with the 2030 Agenda's goal (Culture 2030 Goal Campaign, 2019) pertaining to 'cultural localisation', Portuguese museums will be able to, in post-pandemic times, actively contribute to both their own cultural and economic resilience, and to that of the territories in which they operate, supporting artistic creation, and ultimately, reconnecting with the places, people and heritage that sustain them.

## Notes

1. Multiple inquiries on the devastating impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on museums and monuments have been published. Two examples of preliminary analysis on the topic at an international level include UNESCO's report, (May 2020), and ICOM's survey on

'Museums, museum professionals and COVID-19'. In the case of Portuguese Museums and Monuments, accordingly to information provided by the Portuguese Observatory on Cultural Activities, in 2020, visitors numbers have significantly decreased, up to less 80% of visitors in previous years. Furthermore, national museums have been struggling with long-lasting financial constraints, currently presenting a serious threat to the safeguard of collections.

2. According to official sources, in 2019 the number of foreign visitors represented a total of 52,3% of visitors to Portuguese Museums, a percentage that reached 65% in what concerns national monuments and museums.

3. The *Museums in the Future* commission, constituted by eight elements from the cultural sector, six government representatives from various areas, and two museum directors, arose due to the implementation by the Portuguese Government of resolution no. 35/2019, on 18 February of that same year. Its main outcome was the production of a field report that included the conclusions of a survey on 37 national museums and monuments, and 52 recommendations for public policies in five structural axes, expressly: the management of museums and monuments; networks and partnerships; digital transformation; the management of collections; and, publics and mediation.

4. The recent and much-anticipated regulations on the administrative regime for National Museums and Monuments (Decree no. 78/2019, 5 June), are expected to provide museum directors with a much greater degree of autonomy, although on a practical level this is yet to be fully implemented.

5. Two examples of problematic situations that were denounced in the media were those related to the working conditions of gallery educators in two prominent publicly funded foundations' museums and cultural venues, both located in the city of Porto. In March 2021, the Portuguese Government announced the

intention to appoint an official representative for the gallery education sector at policy-making level.

6. Translation provided by the authors.

7. The [National Plan for the Arts](#) is a joint initiative by the Portuguese Ministries of Culture and Education, currently in place as the national strategy for the promotion of the arts and artistic education, in effect for a ten-year period (2019-2029). One of the Plan's most significant lines of action is the implementation of artist-in-residence programmes in secondary schools.

8. The toolkit and further details on the project may be found at the Portuguese governmental agency for Cultural Heritage's [official website](#).

9. '(Re)creating Heritage' is an ongoing doctoral research project developed within the scope of the doctoral programme in Heritage Studies at the Catholic University of Portugal's School of Arts, expressly, at the Research Centre for Science and Technology of the Arts. This project is publicly funded by the Portuguese Foundation for Science and Technology, through a three-year individual research grant (2019-2022) attributed to the author, Ana Gago. The co-author, Professor Laura Castro, is part of the project's mentoring team, conjointly with Professor Helena Silva (University of Porto).

10. The 148 Portuguese institutions identified as promoters of heritage-based artist-in-residence programmes or initiatives, including municipalities, universities, non-profit organisations, cultural associations, artist collectives, and theatre companies, were previously selected through online research, through the use of keywords and Boolean operators, and search engine optimization tools, so that the results compiled websites and documentation in the Portuguese language, within the desired time period (2020-2020). The results were then fine-tuned through a search on Arquivo.pt, an online archive of discontinued Portuguese webpages, as well as via means

of an exploratory search in the documental archive of a private collection managed by the Catholic University of Portugal, centred on cultural programmes, leaflets and other communication materials, dated from the first decade of the period in question: 2000-2010.

11. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic and consequent restrictions on mobility and physical contact, the questionnaire was exclusively conducted online/remotely.

12. COVID-19's impact affected promoters' ability to respond in due course, especially smaller institutions such as regional museums, artist collectives, cultural associations, and non-profit organisations, given their reduced human resources and greater susceptibility to financial constraints. These constraints may also have affected territorial representativeness. As a result, it was not possible to include any programme or initiative developed in the Autonomous Region of Madeira, for instance.

13. This relationship was sometimes directly perceived from the thematic orientation of the residencies, although very often, the themes and objects that were the focus of residencies were not officially classified as heritage sites or practices.

14. Some of the preliminary results from the inquiry were presented during an oral (online) communication at the 2nd Memory for All Conference on 18 November, 2020, titled '(Re)creating Heritage: Artist-in-residence programming for local development'. Presentation available in Portuguese [here](#).

15. During the following stage of the survey, a multiple case study analysis will be conducted, combining field work and qualitative methods such as semi-structured interviews and focus groups. Exploratory interviews have already been conducted in order to pre-select case studies.

16. The museums and art centres identified as the main promoters of the selected artist-in-residence programmes/initiatives were as follows: Arquipélago – Contemporary Arts

Centre (São Miguel Island, Autonomous Region of the Azores), which promoted two of the selected single edition initiatives; José de Guimarães International Arts Centre (Guimarães, Northern Region of Portugal), promoter of two of the selected single edition initiatives; Júlio Dinis House Museum (Ovar, Central Region of Portugal), promoter of a multiple-edition artist-in-residence programme featured as one of the examples analysed in this article; Douro Museum (Northern Region of Portugal), promoter of an intermunicipal cultural project's artist-in-residence programme; and, Quinta de Cruz – Centre for Contemporary Art (Central Region of Portugal), promoter of two single edition initiatives also examined in this article.

17. 55% of the heritage-based artist-in-residence programmes were single edition initiatives such as commissions of exhibitions/shows, or less frequently, cultural/research projects. 44% of the identified initiatives with multiple editions were part of the regular (annual or biennial) programming of music and art festivals, or other types of cultural/scientific events. Further information may be found in a project-related conference poster presented at the Encontro Ciência 2020 science and technology conference, in November 2020, available [here](#).

18. Although 60% of the identified artist-in-residence programmes comprised in situ or in-person moments, the majority were short in duration, lasting less than one month in 62% of the cases. Furthermore, only 19% of the artist-in-residence programmes included co-creative practices, expressly, those involving the participation of local communities during the creation of artworks/performances/artistic interventions.

19. The municipality was put under a strict cordon sanitaire between March and April 2020, during which the circulation in and out of that territory was prohibited, and a mandatory curfew for the residents of that municipality was in place. Nonetheless, the severe limitations to mobility, economic, and cultural activity, remained after the lifting of

the cordon, following an extension of a state of emergency at a national level.

20. The video-performance may be found [here](#).

21. Link to the 2019 edition's programme may be found [here](#).

22. Link to video with information on the festival's online activities may be found [here](#).

23. Video from the opening, including a testimony from the artist, may be found [here](#).

24. Video tours and other online activities may be found at the Municipality's Facebook page, [here](#).

25. Some examples being: *Quand la création contemporaine réactive le patrimoine rural – Rencontres Art et Culture en Territoires Ruraux* (2017), *Contemporary Art in Historic Contexts* (2018), *Mapping contemporary art in the heritage experience* (2017-19), or *World Heritage Artists in Residence Program* (2015-2020).

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# Let's play in lockdown: Museums, interpretation, and videogames in convergence during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Amy Hondsmerk

As museums moved their work online in response to the pandemic, one question that arose was that of interpretation. The sector faced the challenge of interpreting their collections in difficult times and under unusual restrictions, requiring museums to rapidly adapt and evolve practices to engage visitors in a digital environment. During this period many museums explored how videogames could respond to the needs of museum outreach and interpretation, increasing the prominence of games in regular museum work. Particularly, this study explores the development of new games by and for museums using freely available game-making tools, and the continued adaptation of existing videogames within a case study of the variety of sector engagements with *Animal Crossing: New Horizons*. Through these examples the ways in which videogames can meaningfully develop museum practice and interpretation are examined, and how the increased museum engagement with videogames contributes to overcoming barriers to their future use.

*Keywords: Interpretation, Videogames, Digital, Participation, Creativity*

## Interpretation with/through videogames

Interpretation within a museum context is ever-evolving, as the sector continually develops and adapts interpretative tools and methods to reflect changes in theory and society. Whilst the theory underpinning interpretation in museums is often traced back to Freeman Tilden's work *Interpreting Our Heritage* (1957), there have since been many valuable contributions from researchers, which have addressed the impact of emerging theories in different fields of study upon our understanding of interpretation. As a result, modern interpretative theory has advanced considerably from the traditional museum 'pedagogy' wherein each visitor was presumed to arrive as a 'blank slate' that took away the same information (Hein, 2006: 7). Particularly relevant to the study of videogames have been discussions in

museum interpretative theory around the changing roles of the museum, object and visitor, and on the impact of the rise of the digital and new media, which will briefly be covered here.

In particular, the works of Lois Silverman, Eilean Hooper-Greenhill, George Hein, John Falk, and Lynn Dierking, have shaped much of the contemporary conversation around the interactions between the museum, visitors, objects, and interpretation. Silverman, drawing upon postmodernism, constructivism, and literary theory, positions interpretation not as a product but rather as a 'meaning-making process', in which there is a negotiation of information between the museum and the visitor, who becomes an active participant. As a result, the construction of meaning is recognised as subjective depending on the knowledge, memories, and experience

brought to the process by the individual visitor - an observation often reflected in the work of other scholars (Silverman, 1995: 161, 164). Interpretation as an individualised process of meaning-making is reinforced by the theoretic principles of the constructivist theory of learning, which Hooper-Greenhill draws upon, alongside theories of hermeneutics and visual culture, in her work exploring how objects can carry different and multiple meanings and perspectives based upon the frameworks through which they are viewed (Hooper-Greenhill, 2000:111). Hooper-Greenhill also notes that it is through the process of interpretation that visitors make sense not only of the object, but also of the wider relationship between objects and the broader narratives and meanings associated with them (Hooper-Greenhill, 2000: 116, 124). Also drawing upon constructivist theory, Falk, Dierking, and Adams explore how the constructivist model of learning, and its exploration of cognitive processes, impacts upon the learning experience in museums. Specifically, they note that in this model of learning the knowledge constructing and interpretative process is visitor-led, where museums act less as the 'authority' and more as facilitators of individualised meaning-making. Additionally, they too acknowledge the personalised nature of interpretation (Falk, Dierking and Adams, 2006: 325; see also Bedford, 2014: 62). Therefore, in contrast to the traditional museum 'pedagogy', modern interpretative theory built upon these studies encourages the democratisation of museums away from the authority of the museum voice (Hein, 2006; Staiff 2014), visitor participation in the interpretative process (Mason, 2005; Fraser and Coulson, 2012; Kaplan, 2013), the inclusion of multiple perspectives (Nielsen, 2017; Hansen and Johnson, 2013), and a move towards more experiential, affective methods (Hein, 2006; Dorsett 2010). Yet, whilst influential in shaping modern interpretative theory and practice, Hein's work into the practicalities of applying constructivist methods often highlight the difficulties faced by museums in building

exhibits, experiences, and interactions that could cater to the needs and knowledge of visitors of different backgrounds (Hein, 1992; Hein 1995, 21-23). Arguably, however, the interpretative understandings resulting from this evolution of theory are well suited for digital tools, tools which could also help address some of the issues in the translation of theory into practice.

Indeed, over the last few decades, there has been an increasing interest in digital tools for museums, including how the digital can be applied in museum interpretation (Staiff, 2014; Kidd, 2016; Rahaman, 2018). Unlike physical labels, digital tools are often designed explicitly for participatory or interactive engagement (Jenkins, 2014; Staiff, 2014; King, Stark and Cooke, 2016: 85). Therefore, the use of digital tools aids in the process of encouraging visitors to become active in the interpretative process. Furthermore, the potential flexibility of digital interactives has been recognised as a key method through which visitors can personalise their museum experience to suit their individual learning needs (Proctor, 2015: 501). As Ross Parry comments, the rapid development of new technologies enables visitors to have the means to 'initiate and create, collect and interpret in their own time and space, on their own terms' (Parry, 2007: 107). Indeed, even before many museums had embraced the inclusion of digital technology within their spaces, visitors were already integrating the digital into their visiting experience, most commonly by using the phones in their pockets. The arrival of the digital has also been seen as a key player in the ongoing democratisation of the museum. The participatory nature of many digital initiatives has resulted in increased opportunities for visitors to contribute their voices and ideas to the museum-led narratives in participatory and co-creative practice (Staiff, 2014: 118; Proctor, 2015). Simultaneously, the reach of social media, websites, and other online communication methods has allowed museums to reach visitors beyond their physical walls and engage with both

new and existing audiences (Parry, 2007: 109; King, Stark and Cooke, 2016: 85). That is not to say that the digital is without its problems. There are often limitations in the design of digital museum tools for interpretation, as recognised by Hafizur Rahaman, whose work provides a useful and comprehensive framework for digital interpretation designed with end-users in mind (Rahaman, 2018: 211; Liu, 2020: 2). Indeed, one significant barrier to the wide-spread use of digital tools is cost, in terms of both finance and labour. As Laura King, James Stark and Paul Cooke comment, many of the projects that form case-studies in academic literature are simply beyond the reach of most institutions (King, Stark and Cooke, 2016: 94). This is perhaps especially true of videogames.

Videogames have also received increasing attention from a diverse group of scholars in museums and heritage. However, as Jenny Kidd notes, online gaming and more traditional videogame projects are, in contrast to other forms of gaming such as augmented reality (AR), virtual reality (VR), and gamification, 'significantly under-researched' (Kidd, 2016: 103). Furthermore, as Xenia Zeiler and Suzie Thomas comment in their introduction to the special issue of the *International Journal of Heritage Studies* on videogames and cultural heritage (2021), the ways in which scholars have previously approached videogames has remained somewhat limited. In particular they highlight the numerous critiques of the depiction of history and heritage in videogames, and the explorations of videogames as platforms for representations and recreations of history and heritage artefacts, whilst broader explorations of the complex interrelation of videogames and heritage remain rarer (Zeiler and Thomas, 2021: 265-267). Similarly, explorations of the potential of specific videogame mechanics and design methods for responding to and facilitating contemporary interpretative practice, is also currently under-represented in research.<sup>1</sup> As the study of videogames continues to come

into its own within museums and heritage, the argument of Andrea Witcomb for multimedia and digital interactives to be seen less as 'tools' and more as an integral part of new interpretative practice, as objects and creative responses in their own right, seems increasingly relevant for videogames in the sector (Witcomb, 2007: 37-38).

Hence, with the arrival of the Covid-19 pandemic in the UK, many of these issues and barriers were brought to the forefront of the sector's attention, conversation, and developing practice.

### **A Pandemic Problem**

When the first lockdown was announced in the UK towards the end of March 2020, museums and heritage sites were required, with little notice, to close their doors and move their regular work online, even as many members of staff adjusted to reduced hours or furlough schemes. The digital, therefore, rapidly became the main communication channel for the sector through which museums could remain in touch with their visitors. Museums began experimenting, exploring, and taking risks as they worked out how best to adapt. As a result of this, both the practical and academic sides of the sector became more involved in discussion and debate on the digital. Conferences, themselves now held online, included themes and topics which reflected situations and issues in the contemporary world. Many conferences placed a focus on justice, social action, and representation in light of the Black Lives Matter protests, whilst also making space for sessions focusing on responses to the pandemic, including sustainability and digital practice and, in some cases, videogames. In particular, the Museums Association and MuseWeb conferences for 2020 both featured a number of talks that dealt with undertaking museum work digitally, the MuseUnconference included numerous sessions dealing with elements of digital heritage, and the Museums+Tech conference in 2020 was dedicated to exploring specifically

how the digital could be used to respond to and help 'museums in crisis' during the pandemic. Furthermore, with digital-focused training needs becoming apparent, many institutions, such as the Heritage Alliance, expanded upon their existing offer to provide sector-appropriate training and advice. The pandemic had museums thinking about the digital and the best ways to achieve digital practice, including interpretation, in ways they never had before.

Alongside the shift to the digital, the circumstances of lockdown presented the sector with an interpretative conundrum – how to undertake interpretation when the visitor was not able to interact with the physical object. Objects are important element of museum work, and the collection, preservation, and display of objects, or 'tangible heritage' has long formed a part of museum practice.<sup>2</sup> That the materiality and presence of the object plays a role in the processes of interpretation is often recognised in academic studies (Hooper-Greenhill, 2000: 108-109; Hein, 2006: 14; Mason, 2005: 225). For example, Annabel Fraser and Hannah Coulson write that 'there is a space between an image or object and its label, between a narrator and their audience, and between history and our imagination' in which the interpretative processes take place (Fraser and Coulson, 2012: 223). It is through objects, in combination with interpretative information and tools, that abstract ideas can be given material form, understood, and debated (Hooper-Greenhill, 2000: 108). So, what does it mean for museums when objects are inaccessible? Of course, in the case of intangible heritage - that is, heritage which is not easily represented in objects such as practices, traditions, beliefs, and similar - museums and heritage sites have been tackling this question for some time. The ways in which intangible heritage has commonly been displayed and interpreted, through films, talks and first-person accounts, are perhaps more easily adapted to online environments. Yet, whilst attempts have

previously been made to move objects online – through initiative such as digital museum galleries and 3D modelling for augmented and virtual reality devices, these were often not intended as substitutes for the real thing. As such, the question of how to engage and undertake interpretation with visitors during lockdown is one that museums approached in many different ways, from online tours and exhibitions - which proved very popular - to Twitter posts highlighting particular objects. Yet, one method for interacting and interpreting objects with visitors produced particularly interesting responses which are worth exploring further – games.

### **Museums as Game Makers**

Games and museums are increasingly in convergence. The intersection of videogames and museums has a rich history and the use of videogames by the sector has become increasingly common in recent years. This includes original online games developed with games companies, such as High Tea from the Wellcome Collection, and various projects utilising the mechanics and creative possibilities of existing games, in particular Minecraft; which has been used to portray the Great Fire of London by the Museum of London, for building tutorials based upon Kenilworth Castle on the English Heritage YouTube channel, and in community projects re-creating museum sites such as the 'Museumcraft' project at the British Museum. The circumstances brought about by the pandemic has undoubtedly raised the prominence of the use of online games by the sector, further accelerating the convergence of the fields, but it has also highlighted some of the barriers to more regular and widespread use of online games, problems to which the increased awareness of projects using free, open-access tools responded.

The videogame industry, already prevalent with millions of regular players, experienced something of a boom at the arrival of lockdown. Perhaps, therefore, it is not a coincidence



that online games became one of the ways in which many museums chose to remain engaged with their visitors throughout the pandemic. Where before, videogames were often an addition or supplement to other forms of interpretation as part of an exhibition or educational program, or intended more to entertain,<sup>3</sup> for many institutions during the pandemic, online games became a part of their regular work and outreach. A quick search of the '#museumgames' hashtag on Twitter provides a plethora of examples of museum artefacts and interpretation adapted for playful purposes. From crosswords to quizzes, puzzles to challenges, museums were taking advantage of the participatory nature of the medium in order to keep visitors in touch with their collections. Alongside these, a few interesting videogame-like experiences were also emerging, created by and for the cultural sector which, rather than requiring expensive tools and equipment, were made using free, online game-making tools. Of particular note was the 'British Library Simulator', a short tongue-in-cheek game created using Bitsy. The simulator re-created the experience of visiting the British Library, complete with information about the 'Emerging Formats Project' of which the game was a part, and contained jokes and fourth-wall-breaking comments which were likely to be relatable to frequent visitors of the British Library's physical site. The British Library Simulator went on to jointly win the BL Lab Awards, which recognised the value of the game as part of the Library's public program in 2020 as a way of helping regular users of the library remain connected to the site. Furthermore, John Sear, a self-described designer of games for museums, built a framework for museum-based online escape room games during lockdown. The example escape room built by Sear, based upon the Natural History Museum, explores how museum objects can be integrated into the escape room format, forming clues and puzzles for the visitor to unravel, thereby encouraging players to interact with items from the museum's collection, albeit in a different manner to

standard interpretative practice. The result of the project, in addition to the example game, was a blog post providing guidance and information about game-making platforms and apps that could be used to build similar games, as well as a guide to Sear's own webapp 'Yourmuseum.guide' upon which his escape room was created; both enabling and encouraging museums to create their own games.

The wide variety of game-related projects and interactions highlights the heightened engagement between the sectors during the COVID-19 pandemic. Indeed, one of the outcomes of the pandemic experience on museums may well be a change in attitude towards videogames, from a peripheral and often expensive endeavour to games as a more regular part of online museum work. The examples we have already explored highlight how some of these common barriers towards games in museums – that of easily accessible expertise in game-making and of financial resources – have been challenged during lockdown. Where before, lack of knowledge about game coding and design may have presented a problem, there is now increased awareness and use of the considerable game-making resources available, including guides to free, online, game-making tools such as Bitsy (as used for the British Library Simulator) and Twine. Indeed, one museum, The National Videogame Museum, ran a series of educational videos on getting started in game design.<sup>4</sup> Museums themselves are becoming game-makers, and the pandemic may well have accelerated the trend.

### **New Horizons: Adapting Videogames for Interpretation and Engagement**

During lockdown, many videogames, from Fortnite to Fall Guys, both long-established and newly released, experienced a rapid growth in players. As previously noted, museums have interacted with the wider videogame industry for many years, including the adaptation of currently popular releases for exhibitions

and outreach, such as with Second Life and Minecraft. This trend continued during lockdown, with, for example, the museum level in *The Last of Us Part II* attracting commentary from museum professionals.<sup>5</sup> However, it is *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* (henceforth AC:NH) that drew considerable attention from museums during, and beyond, lockdown. Indeed, the game series was well positioned for engagement with museums sector as it included a museum and collecting mechanics as a vital part of gameplay, and the game's calendar of events included the celebration of International Museum Day. The prevalence and variety of interactions between museums and AC:NH make it an especially interesting case study for museum practice and interpretation through videogames during the pandemic.

On the 20th March 2020, the latest instalment in the popular Animal Crossing series was published. Whilst the developers of the videogame could never have predicted the global pandemic into which their videogame would be released, AC:NH quickly became one of the most popular games for the Nintendo Switch and, having sold over 30 million copies in the twelve months since its release, now stands in the top 20 best-selling videogames of all time.<sup>6</sup> The success of the game has been at least partially attributed to the timing of the release, which came a mere six days before the UK entered its first full lockdown.<sup>7</sup> Of course, as previously noted, AC:NH was not the only game to come out during the pandemic - notably *Doom Eternal* was released on the same day - but the calm gameplay, relaxing pacing, and charming design of AC:NH provided - for the people now working from home in a world of uncertainty - a gaming experience that many felt was sorely needed.<sup>8</sup> The premise of the game follows the prior instalments in the series. AC:NH does not have a clear 'end' goal, and has few set objectives for the player to complete. Instead, the player is introduced to the game-world, some animal neighbours whom they can befriend for certain benefits,

and are given relatively free rein to build, design, and develop their island as they see fit. At a time when players desired escapism, AC:NH provided, allowing players to create their island paradise as a way to escape from the reality of the pandemic. The only restrictions upon the player are those imposed by the game's mechanics, such as real-time play progression, meaning that obtaining objects, bells (the in-game currency), and DIY recipes is a slow, but steady, process. And, importantly, at a time when people could no longer connect in person, the multi-player capacity of the game came into its own, with players hosting virtual parties, work events, and, following the summer 'wedding season' event running throughout June, even weddings.<sup>9</sup> Additionally, AC:NH is also an excellent example of a game that allows for what game scholars describe as 'emergent gameplay'. That is, the manipulation of the game's systems for purposes not originally intended by the game's developers, often as a result of player self-expression (Salen and Zimmerman, 2003: 190; Juul, 2005: 76-77; Holmes, 2012). AC:NH gives its players a wide variety of tools that make emergent gameplay particularly accessible. The principle of island modification at the heart of the game allows players to shape their island not only to reach the coveted five-star island rating, but also to work to specific themes or tell personal stories. Similarly, the in-game custom design tool encourages players to create original works of art to be displayed in their homes, or worn as clothing by their avatar. Indeed, this adaptability of AC:NH's mechanics is precisely what made it such a popular resource for museums during the pandemic.

The sheer breadth of museum engagement with AC:NH is fascinating. In the first instance, the in-game museum and International Museum Day event provided a clear opportunity for museum professionals to engage with the game. Arguably, in many ways, AC:NH reflects museum practices. There is a focus on collecting, of items to decorate the player's home and island, or of

bugs, fish, fossils, paintings, and sculptures with the intent of contributing them to the in-game museum. Museum professionals took the opportunity to comment on the practices of Blathers the owl, the in-game museum director, and on the design of the in-game museum in comparison to the realities of real museum work. 'I have some serious questions about the conduct of the museum's sole employee,' Dr Laura Humphreys from the Science Museum writes of Blathers, in a guest article for Eurogamer discussing, amongst other things, ethics, museum regulations, and the history of private collections (Humphrey, 2020). Other museum professionals have written about the attention to detail and similarity to real-world exhibition design, especially in the fossil gallery, highlighting the way the game gallery builds the story of evolution.<sup>10</sup> Engaging with a wide variety of readers, insights in these articles may help readers to demystify the common processes and practices of modern museums which are often unknown to the visitor, thereby making museums as institutions more accessible, and opening avenues to dialogue. Similar insights were provided in a more informal manner during the Monterey Bay Aquarium's 'let's play' livestreams of AC:NH. Inviting subject experts from the Chicago Field Museum to play, the aquarium undertook some fossil hunting whilst discussing how the Field Museum dealt with the collection, display, and interpretation of fossils in real life.<sup>11</sup> The nature of the livestream and the platform upon which it was hosted, Twitch, allowed visitors and non-visitors alike to ask questions of the museum professionals directly. In this sense, the livestream allowed the visitors watching the stream to engage in interpretative conversation with the institution, in response to the participatory, democratising, and communicative elements identified in interpretative theory. Equally, these livestreams and articles also allowed museums to take advantage of the interest in AC:NH and provide avenues to reach out and engage visitors through the game, even if the visitors did not have access to the game

themselves.

Another way in which museums engaged with AC:NH during the pandemic was through the use of the island design and the custom design tools. The ability to change the design of building interiors and island landscape, and to display custom designs, enabled museums to continue the practice of re-creating displays, exhibitions, and collections within games. Combined with the multi-player element enabling people to visit other's islands, this allowed museums to build experiences which they could share with visitors. The artist Shing Yin Khor took advantage of these tools to re-create real artworks from the Museum of Modern Art in New York City on their island, which they then opened for people to visit. The artworks included Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty*, Christo and Jeanne-Claude's *The Umbrellas*, and, in a clever twist upon the concept, the artist invited players to take a seat with them at a table in their Animal Crossing house, allowing players to become active performers in constructing their understanding of Marina Abramovic's *The Artist Is Present*. Shing Yin Khor's experiment explored one way of addressing the problem that museums faced of representing physical objects online. Along similar lines, The Getty Museum in Los Angeles made 70,000 works of art from their collection available by utilising a tool that converted real paintings into the pixelated images used by the custom design app. This let visitors download museum artwork for their Animal Crossing homes and may have led players to consider their interpretation of the artworks by inviting them to become participants in the process of display. Finally, a later update to the game introduced the character of Redd, an art-dealer, and added a series of real-world artworks and sculptures to the game, available to all players. Not only did this update encourage players to interact with these objects and the interpretative information provided about them in Blather's museum, but AC:NH also included a challenge of acquisition. Not all of Redd's

wares are genuine articles, requiring players to sort fact from fiction, either by using their own knowledge of the real appearance of the artworks, or by developing their understanding of the original object.

### **#AnimerlCrossing: Interpreting the Smock**

Of particular interest when considering videogames in relation to museum interpretation in lockdown is the #AnimerlCrossing project run by The Museum of English Rural Life (henceforth The MERL) on Twitter. The MERL is well-known for its engaging Twitter activity, which has previously won the Museums & Heritage Award for 'Marketing Campaign of the Year' with the viral 'absolute unit' sheep tweet.<sup>12</sup> As lockdown arrived in the UK, The MERL, as many other museums, took advantage of the popularity of AC:NH and the possibilities offered by its mechanics, in this case the design tool, to present a challenge. Drawing upon The MERL's existing online exhibition 'Smocks, Smocking, Smocked', the museum asked its followers to use the exhibition as inspiration to design their own rural smock in AC:NH, and to share their design under the hashtag #AnimerlCrossing. The original tweet thread encompasses a number of elements that we previously identified as part of modern interpretative practice which were especially applicable to the digital realm. Most clearly, the museum invited players to take on the role of museum curator and become active participants in the interpretative process, in essence, to become 'co-creators' or 'co-producers' (Waterton, 2014; Blackman, 2016). This was achieved in a number of ways. First, by encouraging players to interact with the online smock exhibition, wherein players could undertake the individualised and personalised process of meaning-making to arrive at their own understanding of the traditional rural smock. Player/visitors could explore the idea of the 'smock' through the framework of both the museum's materials and their own pre-existing knowledge and cultural experience, all of which could then

feed into the creation of their design. This process was encouraged with a prompt for players to provide their own interpretative text to accompany their submission to the challenge, 'We wanna know things like what your smock is made of.'

The variety of responses received by The MERL over the following months reveal the multiple narrative paths that players had taken when interpreting the theme of the smock. Whilst only a few of the designs sent in appeared to be directly inspired by a particular item in The MERL's collection, with a few submissions attempting to accurately re-create a smock from the exhibition, many more of the submissions showed how players had variously interpreted the theme to relate to their own stories and experience. A number of the submissions portrayed, or were inspired by, the traditional clothing of the player's home country, providing useful context and comparison with the English examples in The MERL's exhibition, whilst simultaneously reflecting the wider multi-cultural and international reach of the challenge. Equally, a number of the submitted designs responded to other, less well represented elements of intangible heritage, with smocks referencing particular cultural moments, including a notable entry which based its design upon The MERL's own Twitter history with a re-creation of the viral 'absolute unit' sheep meme. Whilst not of typical historical provenance, these examples perhaps provide an insight into the cultural heritage of the 'everyday' which is often overlooked in museums (Highmore, 2011; Pamuk, 2012; Levine, 2015). Other submissions captured the contemporary, a sense of the current time. Similar to the ethos of the V&A's 'Rapid Response' collection, they reflected major moments in history as they occurred. One design that was particularly striking in this sense was a player that responded the global pandemic itself and re-created a 19th century traditional nurse's apron (for which they helpfully included a link to the design's red cross inspiration), in tribute to the medical

staff combatting COVID-19. These different representations of the smock reflect many of the understandings of modern museum interpretation, that people relate objects to their own experiences during the process of personalised meaning-making, that visitors are participants in the process, that there are many possible narratives around a single object, and that visitors are increasingly recognised as co-authors of interpretation. A further element of this project which is relevant to videogames as museum interpretation is the subsequent online gallery. Within the original tweet challenge The MERL addressed their intention to create an online exhibition to accompany the original smock exhibition, consisting entirely of player-submitted designs. This represents an interesting idea related to Witcomb's observations on the potential of digital and multimedia, that the videogame-based visitor created artefacts can become museum objects. It has been argued that when museums collect objects, they assign a certain value or meaning to them that elevates them above other objects (Dickinson, Blair and Ott, 2010; Tolia-Kelly, Waterton and Watson, 2017; Wetherell, Smith and Campbell, 2018). In collecting these submissions, The MERL is signifying that these designs, created in a videogame as part of a process of interpretation, are equivalent to the original collection of smocks, worthy of the status of 'museum object'. Their intention to create this exhibition was later realised in the 'A Gallery of Smocks' which is now available upon The MERL's website. To further the comparison between the AC:NH designs and the original gallery of smocks, the exhibition displays the designs with their own interpretative text reminiscent of the typical object label. These interpretative texts combine information provided by the players that designed them, with contributions of additional historical information and related objects by the museum, raising the profile of the player/visitor's voice as co-author. Whilst not all entries to the hashtag made it into the museum's exhibition, the response to the

#AnimerlCrossing hashtag gives an excellent insight into the active participation of the players, the interpretative process at work, the creativity of those who considered and answered the challenge, and the broader potential of videogames as part of the interpretative process.



Figure 1. An image of some of the designs that were submitted to the @AnimerlCrossing hashtag and shared with the AC:NH community on Twitter, by the Author. Original design credit (top to bottom): @\_plum\_\_tree\_, @Cynotherium, @kiitanni

### The Future of Games in Museums

Now, over a year on from the first lockdown in the UK, as museums prepare to re-open their doors once again, the impact of the growing interest in online and videogames

continues to become clear. For instance, AC:NH continues to be used by museums to reach audiences and explore the impact of the pandemic. In particular, the National Videogame Museum's project 'Animal Crossing Diaries' seeks to gather stories from players on how the game affected their experience of the pandemic.<sup>13</sup> Evolving from a legacy of interaction between museums and gaming, the COVID-19 pandemic has enabled many museums to engage in an increased amount of playful game-based interactions. The circumstances of lockdown and a digital-only focus encourage museums to become game facilitators and game-makers, and, through the raised profile of free, easy-to-use game-making software and guides in their use, explore how they could build their own games without the barriers of cost and specialist knowledge. The fortuitous timing of the release of AC:NH, and the possibilities offered by its mechanics for engagement, exploration, and creation, also allowed the sector to further consider the potential of videogames more broadly in interpretative practice. Therefore, as museums consider the impact of the pandemic on their organisations and consider the future, we hope that the prevalence of, and new opportunities offered by, videogames have become clearer than ever before.

## Notes

1. Some recent articles in this area include:  
LaPensée, E. (2021). 'When rivers were trails: Cultural expression in an indigenous video game', *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, vol. 27, no. 3, pp. 281-295.  
Malegiannaki, I., Daradoumis, T & Retalis, S. (2020). 'Teaching cultural heritage through a narrative-based game', *Journal on Computing and Cultural Heritage*, vol. 13, no. 4, pp. 1-28.
2. ICOM Museum Definitions: <https://icom.museum/en/resources/standards-guidelines/museum-definition/>
3. For example: 'Design a Wig' as part of a family trail at the V&A (<https://www.vam.ac.uk/designawig>, <https://www.vam.ac.uk/articles/va-trail-explore-as-a-family/>); 'Rizk' at the Science Museum as part of the 'Climate Changing' exhibition series (<https://www.gamesforchange.org/game/rizk/>)
4. The National Videogame Museum: <https://thenvm.org/learning/learn-at-home/>
5. 'Museum Curators React to 2020's Best Video Game Museums' <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vAJrVXaPe9s>
6. All figures correct at time of writing.
7. 'Animal Crossing is letting people live out their wildest fantasy: Normalcy': <https://edition.cnn.com/2020/03/30/us/animal-crossing-mental-health-escape-coronavirus-wellness-trnd/index.html>
8. 'Why Animal Crossing is the game for the coronavirus moment': <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/07/arts/animal-crossing-covid-coronavirus-popularity-millennials.html>
9. 'Animal Crossing: Couples hold wedding ceremonies on New Horizons after coronavirus cancellations': <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/games/news/animal-crossing-new-horizons-weddings-coronavirus-acnh-reddit-twitter-a9440781.html>
10. 'Museum experts weigh in on Animal Crossing New Horizons' Museum': <https://kotaku.com/museum-experts-weigh-in-on-animal-crossing-new-horizons-1843613946>, 'Animal Crossing gets the real-life museum details right': <https://www.polygon.com/2020/5/25/21269550/animal-crossing-new-horizons-museum-curators-report>
11. 'The Monterey Bay Aquarium goes fossil hunting with Emily Graslie of the Field Museum in Animal Crossing': <https://www.twitch.tv/videos/591381757?collection=B2eYd5CdAxZ8DA>
12. See: <https://awards.museumsandheritage.com/feature/marketing-campaign-of-the-year/>, <https://www.reading.ac.uk/news-and-events/releases/PR799999.aspx>

13. The Animal Crossing Diaries: <https://thenvm.org/the-animal-crossing-diaries/>

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# Culture and COVID: a public debate about artistic spaces and practices in Madrid

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This paper proposes an analysis of the impact of COVID-19 on Spanish cultural institutions based on the reflections that arose from the public meeting 'Culture and COVID: a conversation about artistic spaces and practices in Madrid' (November 14, 2020). The authors addressed this debate as a case study, which is considered a result of a broader discussion about the challenges and issues facing art and cultural spaces today. Historical, institutional, and temporal contexts are provided to situate the debate and further discussions. Key concepts such as culture as 'non-essential' activity, the 'caring' role of cultural institutions, and the conversion to virtualization are integrated, through an ecofeminist approach. The notion of 'good life', which emerged from Spanish and Latin American ecofeminisms, is proposed as a transversal axis to think about the different challenges hatched by the pandemic in the cultural sphere.

*Keywords: Cultural Sector; Public Institutions; Ecofeminism; Madrid; COVID-19*

## Traces of a debate<sup>1</sup>

In March 2020, the Spanish government decreed a state of alarm to control the COVID-19 pandemic, which lasted three months. One of the consequences of this emergency measure was the immediate interruption of all activities considered 'non-essential'. Concert halls, theatres, museums, and art centres were closed, and events were cancelled. In this context, this paper proposes an analysis of the impact of the pandemic on Madrid's cultural scene by exploring the outcomes of the debate that arose from 'Culture and COVID: a public conversation about artistic spaces and practices in Madrid' (Carrillo et al., 2020). The conversation builds on a broader national debate about the transformations, reconversions and/or continuities of cultural institutions, as well as cultural work during the COVID-19 crisis.

This event, held in Madrid on 14th November 2020, brought together four agents linked to three fundamental institutions of Madrid's cultural ecosystem: Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Intermediae | Matadero, and Centro de Arte 2 de Mayo.<sup>2</sup> Each participant provided a situated point of view, based on their personal and professional experiences regarding the impact of the health crisis on these institutions. Nonetheless, it is important to note that the institutions to which they belong are very different from each other and so are their responsibilities within them, a distinction that we seek to highlight in the course of our analysis. The aim of this paper is to provide a critical reading of the meeting's contributions and examine to what extent the adaptations undergone by institutions are a reflection of a general change in their infrastructures and practices. Drawing on Spanish and Latin American ecofeminisms, we

will consider whether these transformations could represent a reorientation of cultural activity that leads institutions towards a more sustainable and horizontal relationship with their environment, their audiences, and life in general.

The choice of this theoretical lens can also be seen as a political stance. The analysis presented here addresses the ravages of a health crisis that has made social, economic, political, and ecological impact. The pandemic has given us the image of a transnational capitalist system, which, although already in a phase of collapse, has further deepened its contradictions and inequalities (Herrero, 2016; Segato in Pikielny, 2020). In this sense, the ecofeminist gaze developed in our local context, embodied by authors such as Amaia Pérez Orozco or Yayo Herrero, is a direct legacy of the movements for the defence of public services, radical democracy and material dignity that emerged in Spain in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis. In this context, the ecofeminist struggle and its consequent theoretical proposals are closely linked to the defence of natural but also social rights, understanding them as parts of the same problem: the threat posed by markets, extractivism and, ultimately, the neoliberal reason for the sustenance of life. The ecofeminist perspective proposes some 'criteria of justice' to govern this new crisis, drawing a possible transitional route towards a sustainable model that prioritises living conditions of all beings (Carrasco, 2001: 44; Pérez Orozco, 2017: 35-41). However, we are not referring to just any kind of life, but a 'good life', a notion linked to Latin American feminisms that has permeated Spanish ecofeminism, which will underpin our reflections throughout this article.

The 'good life' ('buen vivir' in Spanish; 'sumak kawsay' in Quechua) is proposed as an alternative to the consumerist and developmental framework of capitalist modernity, opting for solidarity and harmonious social coexistence with the

environment, and delving into the discourse of radical democracy and universal social rights (Acosta and Martínez, 2010). A 'good life' that sees its needs, both material and immaterial, met, and which considers its co-dependence with the environment and the non-human life forms that surround it. In this way, Spanish and Latin American ecofeminisms not only contemplate the impact of gender relations in the natural world, but commit to a project of life in common, an alternative political, social, and cultural framework that should guide the steps of our societies in the face of this crisis. It is to the 'immaterial' dimension of this project that culture and its institutions have much to contribute, especially, in relation to notions such as sensitivity, affectivity, relationality, and imagination (de la Torre, 2020a). Through the notion of 'good life', issues such as care, interdependence, vulnerability, and sustenance of life intertwine to shape a different organisation of the world, in which cultural institutions could make a relevant and significant contribution.

Based on these coordinates, the discussion is structured into four parts: i) the institutions and agents involved in the conversation and the general cultural debate are introduced; ii) focus is placed on the 'caring' role of cultural institutions during the pandemic, insisting on its importance for the sustenance of life; iii) the debate on culture as a public service in the wake of the health crisis is addressed, highlighting the renewed associationism and solidarity movements within the cultural world; iv) the discussion focuses on bodies and digitisation but also on resistance to 'compulsory virtualisation' during the pandemic, pointing out the importance of presence, contact, and interdependence. By way of conclusion, we argue that the debates and suggestions presented in 'Culture and COVID', analysed through an ecofeminist lens, offer a necessary and urgent framework of action in order to reorient the role of cultural institutions in the post-pandemic scenario.

## 1. Small cartography of Madrid

Thinking about cultural institutions in Spain implies reflecting about the democratic transition processes the country went through after the end of Franco's dictatorial regime (1975), supported by the arrival of a socialist government in 1982. The so-called 'transition' was accompanied by a massive implementation of cultural infrastructures, mobilised as a strategy of political modernisation and symbolic legitimisation (Quaggio, 2015). However, from the 1990s onwards, an 'alternative' cultural scene gained strength, outside these large infrastructures. This independent scene would later help to create, in part, the new model of the post-industrial, creative, and flexible city, pertaining to neoliberal modernity (Florida, 2002). Nevertheless, the economic crisis of 2008 opened a new historical cycle marked by austerity policies, the withdrawal of public services, and a major social mobilisation. Although the models of leisure, entertainment or creation of symbolic capital were maintained, the growing mobilisations of the last decade activated another type of imagination in some institutions, facilitating a certain amount of experimentation and closeness to the social fabric. In this sense, the work of the agents gathered for 'Culture and COVID' offers a privileged framework for understanding these negotiations between civil society and the public-institutional sphere.

The Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía (MNCARS) is undoubtedly the best example of the early infrastructure policy characteristic of the democratic transition. Inaugurated in 1992, the MNCARS is considered the 'flagship' of contemporary art in Spain, articulating its collection and programme around the figure of Pablo Picasso and his *Guernica*, probably the most recognised Spanish personality and artistic work outside Spain (Carrillo and Manrique, 2020: 107). Nonetheless, the museum underwent a major transformation following the arrival of Manuel Borja-Villel as

director in 2008. Villel's work at the museum began to embrace the 'new institutionalisms', opening different dialogues with society, the museum's environment, and contemporary critical debates. Among these changes, new areas of institutional practice have appeared, such as its online presence or new community projects. Related to the former, and key to the conversation, was Olga Sevillano, Head of Digital Projects at MNCARS, in charge of website, newsletter, radio and online projects (e.g., *Repensar Guernica*). The panel discussion also included Jesús Carrillo, Professor in the Department of History and Theory of Art at Universidad Autónoma of Madrid. As one of the greatest references in the field of theory and history of cultural institutions in Spain, Carrillo was instrumental in the meeting due to his experience as Head of Cultural Programmes at MNCARS (2008-2015) and General Director of Culture at Madrid City Council (2015-2016). Carrillo's contribution was even more important given his role in the Museo Situado (MS). MS is a community network drawn up between the MNCARS, local associations, and global social collectives, seeking to connect the institution with its most immediate surroundings.

The Centro de Arte Dos de Mayo (CA2M) was the second institution taking part in the conversation, represented by its director (2015-present) and independent art critic and curator, Manuel Segade. Based in Móstoles, a city in the south of the province of Madrid, CA2M was created in 2008 within the emergence of New Institutionalism, with the aim of promoting contemporary creation in the region and housing the Community's contemporary art collection. It is also the repository of the ARCO Foundation Collection, Spain's most prominent contemporary art fair. The creation of the centre was an attempt to 'activate' culture on the outskirts of Madrid, outlining the Regional government's own strategy in terms of cultural policy in contemporary art. Since its inauguration, CA2M has been a space for experimentation and research, interweaving its exhibition policy

and public activities with the social fabric of Móstoles. Over the last decade, it has thus become a fundamental point of reference in the field of cultural mediation.

Another institution born amidst cultural mediation and social intervention was *Intermediæ | Matadero* (2007-present), which is part of the Culture Area of the Madrid City Council. Located in the former slaughterhouse and livestock market of the city, it stands as a paradigmatic example of an 'emptied industrial factory' converted into a 'cultural factory' (Carrillo, 2020). Azucena Klett, programmer of this experimental space, provides an experienced look from a public institution founded as the epitome of the 'creative city'. However, the City Council itself conceives it as part of an 'institutional periphery' (Klett in Carrillo et al., 2020), and it has not paid much attention to its activity. *Intermediæ* seeks to activate projects that appeal to the residents of the neighbourhoods surrounding Matadero, increasing citizen participation from the standpoint of art and culture, as well as working directly with the city's own artistic and cultural fabric. Klett's participation was also relevant given her experience working with different cultural centres in Madrid, as well as in the Culture Area of the Madrid City Council, linking up with the social movements that have emerged in the wake of the austerity policies in 2011. The rich professional background of all participants provided us with a valuable prism of experiences to approach these social/institutional exchanges.

## 2. Caring institutions

The outbreak of the COVID-19 crisis highlighted the need to put the most basic necessities of people, such as the rights to decent housing, health, and well-being, at the forefront. The pandemic revealed a structural precariousness of the Spanish public services that was deeply rooted in the so-called 'welfare state', weakened by austerity policies implemented in 2008, and

which affected particularly the lower classes in the big cities. Against this backdrop, a whole wave of support and solidarity networks emerged in 2020. They helped to organise food banks, childcare, psychological care, home shopping, support for the elderly, and many other services (Canales, 2020).<sup>3</sup> In other words, it rapidly built a whole self-managed network, which took over the 'care' of those sectors of the population that the pandemic had left most exposed. 'Care' is understood here to encompass all those activities that 'regenerate people's physical and emotional well-being on a daily and generational basis', from an ecofeminist perspective, which appeals to both material-bodily and affective-emotional necessities (Pérez Orozco, 2017: 106). In the absence and overflow of public social services, this self-management of care became essential; moreover, its locally-based action facilitated its immediacy and flexibility. Through a structure based on mutual support and active participation, the networks dissociated themselves from charity to underline the agency power of communities and their bonds of interdependence.

Faced with this flourishing of self-managed initiatives, a pressing question arose in the cultural sector: what is the role of culture and its institutions in this scenario? As De Diego (2020) and Paniagua (2020) explain, culture became central during the lockdown, not only due to its ability to serve as relief and entertainment, but also to its capacity to create support networks and encourage aesthetic experiences. As the conversation 'Culture and COVID' highlighted, the nature and characteristics of each institution placed them in positions that were more or less conducive to adapting to the new circumstances. The experience of MS, the collaborative network activated in the MNCARS during 2018, is particularly significant in this regard. Its name derives from Donna Haraway's feminist formulations (1991), which argue that all knowledge is circumstantial and can never be neutral because it is always affected by its context (Museo Situado, n.d.). Although

the initiative arose because of the wave of evictions that impacted the neighbours of Lavapiés, besieged by gentrification, with the advent of the pandemic it redirected its objectives towards emergency solidarity networks.

MS proved to be vital in giving visibility to the extreme situations experienced in Lavapiés, such as the need of food supply for undocumented migrants who cannot find any income to survive, and in promoting initiatives to help – or at least alleviate – their multiple daily struggles. Carrillo of MS mentioned Dani Zelko's telephonic artistic project, developed within the network. It was based on the tragic death of one of the neighbourhood's residents, Mohammed Abul Hossain, who died from COVID-19 six days after trying to contact health care services. The difficulty in making himself understood in Spanish, a foreign language for him, had fatal consequences. Many other projects were launched, such as #IntérpretesParaSanar, to call for the presence of interpreters in hospitals and to draw attention to the difficulties of language barriers; and #RegularizaciónYa, to call for an extraordinary process to guarantee legal residency and social rights for all migrants and refugees in the face of the health crisis.<sup>5</sup> These campaigns, among others, were promoted under the umbrella of MS and used the resources of MNCARS to reach a wide audience.

In this sense, MS is a good example of how, in many cases, the solution was not about creating new structures to meet the challenges of the pandemic but adapting existing ones to new needs. In this case, the care was redirected; it was already there, but the assembly and porous structure of MS allowed for a faster and efficient adaptation. This could be read as part of an ecofeminist turn of the institutions, with more agile, localised, and autonomous structures that allow the environment to re-appropriate them. That is to say, to move away from the 'big airports of culture' to a more interrelated, horizontal, and sustainable relationship of the

institutions with their social environment. As Blanca de la Torre points out, the pandemic has shown that 'it is not possible to talk about cultural institutions while separating their eco-social competences' (2020b: 216).

A 'caring' role is now popular among many major Spanish cultural institutions and not only small or alternative initiatives.<sup>6</sup> However, there is a risk that 'care' is just another discursive turn, unable to permeate the administrative structures of museums (Martínez, 2020). Faced with this possibility, Carrillo advocated promoting a radical transformation of institutions that would extend to what has been called 'the city of care' (Chinchilla, 2020). This model implies a radical transformation of cultural infrastructures, one that overcomes the logics of extractivism, so firmly established also in the field of culture (Carrillo et al., 2020). As Klett stated at the meeting, it is not only desirable to redirect efforts towards actions such as those implemented by MS, but also to identify when it is necessary to take a break in order to assess the physical and affective consequences that the unstoppable process of productivity has on our bodies. Therefore, the substantive implantation of ecofeminist horizons in the cultural sector, in terms of 'good life', would not only involve a reorientation of the activity of the institutions towards smaller and more discreet actions, but it also advises stopping the activity when necessary. As Carrillo warned, if this transformative change is not implemented, the current institutional concept is likely to fade away because it does not fit in the 'new normality' (Carrillo et al., 2020).

### **3. Culture as a public service, or as a 'non-essential' activity?**

As demonstrated in the previous section, during the pandemic, the fundamental function of care in the social fabric became evident, along with the role that culture can play in it. In this sense, the debate about culture as a 'non-essential activity' was one of the key concepts of the conversation, as a result of its intense resonance during

the lockdown, since the confinement has been enormously damaging to the cultural sector and its workers in economic terms. Once the government's 'new normality' was implemented in June 2020, the health containment measures (e.g. reduction of capacity, curfew, selective confinement by neighbourhoods, regions, or municipalities) did not facilitate the recovery of the cultural world. In addition, there was an obvious lack of support for the sector in the social measures designed by the government to contain the crisis.

Nevertheless, this is not an unexpected situation in Spain. As a premonition, in February, a month before the lockdown, the newspaper *El Salto* published a special issue dedicated to cultural workers, providing figures and analysis of their complicated situation in the country. In this sense, the health crisis added to the precariousness of the sector since the economic crisis of 2008. The pandemic simply made even more visible what was already a structural reality: culture in Spain exists in a fragile stability through insufficient subsidies and commercial circuits. Segade insisted on CA2M's strategy in this regard, by formulating a series of measures in order to support creators and workers during the pandemic, such as digitisation of programming and purchase of works (Carrillo et al. *Ibid.*). Nevertheless, these are isolated initiatives that cannot rescue such a damaged sector from wreckage. Campaigns in defence of cultural work were carried out over the last months, articulated through meetings, forums, and publications, which facilitated the emergence of an extensive awareness about the situation of the sector.<sup>7</sup> As a result of this social dialogue, it became visible that, for a part of Spanish society, culture was considered mere entertainment, something accessory or frivolous that could be expected to be 'kept in a drawer' while the storm passed. The lack of discursive support, together with the absence of a plan to rescue the sector by the Spanish Ministry of Culture, strongly aggravated the situation. In this sense, once the pandemic had broken out,

the government shifted resources towards those considered 'priority areas' for sustaining life, such as health or production, showing that culture was not among them.

This has led professional associations in the country to demand specific support measures. In this respect, the Red de Espacios y Agentes de Cultura Comunitaria ('Network of Community Culture Spaces and Agents', REACC), an assembly of cultural workers made up of more than 150 agents, groups and organisations from all over the country, was mentioned in the meeting (Klett in Carrillo et al., *Ibid.*). As pointed out in their manifesto, they have come together 'in a moment of total uncertainty' to highlight a series of aspects such as the invisibility of cultural work, reinforced by political and administrative indifference (REACC, 2020). Nevertheless, as Carrillo and Klett stressed, it would be desirable for this new wave of associationism to abandon corporate positions, which have traditionally isolated the cultural sector from the rest of society (Carrillo et al., *Ibid.*). On the contrary, they argued in favour of extending solidarity and situating these problems on a wider map, one that defends dignity and social justice for the whole population.

At this point, it could be productive to link the problems of the cultural sector to a broader demand for dignity and well-being. The emergence of the platform Plan de Choque Social ('Social Shock Plan'), made up of different groups (trade unions, feminist organisations, environmentalists, those working for the right to housing, etc., to which MS also adheres), must be highlighted, proposing a series of urgent measures in the areas of health, employment, migration or education. These demands, fuelled by the heat of a movement in defence of public services activated by the pandemic, can be read from the ecofeminist approach proposed: the consideration of the State as the main collective institution of mediation in the 'capital-life' conflict (Pérez Orozco, 2017: 277). Although neoliberal policies have redirected public activity towards

the markets, it is worth reclaiming the contribution that public services can make in the process of sustenance of life. It would not be so much a matter of relaunching a defence of the Welfare State, which still continued to be articulated around the markets, but rather of carrying out a reversal of what was privatized, and an expansion of the areas forbidden to profit (Pérez Orozco, 2017).

Placing cultural institutions in this framework means moving them from their usual place as 'accessory' industries, such as leisure or tourism, and locating them next to services that are indispensable to life, such as hospitals or schools. Within this associationism, forged in a pandemic, a striking proposal along these lines emerged: the initiative in defence of basic income, launched by the *Nativa* cultural criticism magazine, entitled 'People who work in culture, for a universal and unconditional basic income'. Defined as 'an individual, universal and unconditional transfer of income to cover basic needs' (Laguna, 2017), it does not demand any requirement, being assigned by the State in order to guarantee the material freedom of all citizens. The debate on it was strongly revived during the lockdown and supported by many cultural agents: in just one month, *Nativa's* proposal received almost five thousand supporters among creators, companies, and associations that sought to put pressure on the administration.

According to *Nativa*, basic income is a feasible way to tackle this crisis and it can be considered as 'the best cultural policy', since we cannot consider culture to be built solely by cultural agents, but 'it depends on all its aspects on a social spectrum that includes what we usually call the public' (2020). This reflection is also based on the social approaches of ecofeminism, since it is understood that each one of us is interdependent; if social life, of all and for all, is not sustained, culture ends up being an elitist article or ends up not being viable (*Nativa*, 2020). Moreover, this proposal prioritises

universality over the so-called 'contributory rights', which requires the contribution of the citizens to the socioeconomic system through their workforce, deepening notions of growth and expansion; or assistance, of poorer quality, which entails a strong vigilance on the people who receive it. Universal rights ensure the material, relational and affective necessities of subjects, moving towards the framework of a 'good life' guaranteed by a legal framework (Acosta, 2010).

As a space for the imagination, sensitivity, and interrelation, for a 'good life' in ecofeminist terms, culture should therefore be inserted within a society by the equality and material dignity of all citizens. *Nativa's* manifesto, and the public outcry that accompanied it, managed to re-situate the debate on public services and 'essential activities' in Spain, looking at culture and its institutions in a radically different place to that of the entertainment industries. This initiative managed to lay on the table the interdependent quality of the cultural sphere, allied with the movements in defence of public services.

#### **4. Bodies, virtualisation, and its resistances**

Reclaiming culture as a public service seems to be a seed of possibility for cultural institutions, at a time when the number of visitors to temporary and permanent exhibitions are no longer a valid unit of measurement. The health and social crisis opened by COVID-19 placed institutions in a new territory that forced them to take sides and to think about where they belong and what social impact this belonging has. In this context, calendars were reformulated, and the format of the activities reframed digitally. As a result, while some of them intensified or became more visible, others suffered a forced adaptation so as not to disappear. Noting this ambivalent transition, Carrillo detailed how the move towards virtuality has not simply been a change in formats, but it has permeated a much deeper debate within institutions, related to their self-definition and the possibilities and limits that



conditioned their performance during the pandemic (Carrillo et al., 2020).

In contrast to the 'standstill' of activities that confinement entailed, some institutions opted to increase the development of activities rather than to stop them, as it has become clear in the case of MS. It seems that the pandemic exacerbated this need for virtual presence, although not all institutions are able or even interested in developing one. As the ecofeminist perspective has taught us, production should not be driven solely by a constant need for 'growth' and 'progress' but must always be linked to sustaining the life and wellbeing of people. A 'pause' in activity thus helps to determine what the urgent and not-urgent needs are, that is, to distinguish between the production that 'satisfies needs' and that which only 'makes the economy grow' (Herrero, 2016: 127). An institution guided by this perspective tends to address the urgent needs in more precarious situations, where virtualization is not the answer. *Intermediæ* is one of those spaces which 'resists virtualisation', from a feminist position –as Klett argues– that guides the institution's action to 'care perspective' (Carrillo et al., 2020). This view is aware of the institution's own limits and those of its employees and does not force its members to embrace a digital transformation at all costs.

Likewise, what we miss when bodies do not physically come together cannot be forgotten and, as authors like Judith Butler have reflected, the assembled gathering of bodies 'brings into play political signifiers that go beyond discourse' (2017: 15); signifiers which, as we defend in this text, appeal to the 'immaterial' dimension –care, solidarity and relationality– which is essential for a 'good life'. According to this, many of the activities undertaken by institutions were assumed as actions of resistance to an unprecedented situation. Nonetheless, faced with the new scenario, the virtual prevailed as the best possibility to give continuity to institutional programs and agendas –to maintain this public mandate for culture–

given the inexistence of efficient alternatives for identity modalities that are defined by presence. Maintaining community gardens, collaborating with solidarity networks that are woven from institutional events, or offering meeting spaces to groups that need it, are actions that can only take place through the physical presence of bodies.

Klett and Segade defended this need for corporeality, indicating cases that are closely linked to the profile of spaces such as *Intermediæ* and CA2M (in Carrillo et al., 2020). In this pandemic framework, the CA2M's *Unmetroymedio* project was born<sup>8</sup>, consisting of artists from Madrid explaining and showing their artistic work during the lockdown through any available means. From the very beginning, there was a contradiction between resistance to the virtual and the need to generate digital proposals that would make it possible to maintain ties and care. As the CA2M director explained, the participants of *Unmetroymedio* had always put their entire body into the activity, a body that is now no more than the reflection of an unbridgeable distance. However, Segade argued that 'as a place for the reinvention of a symbolic space and common thought, we have tools to bridge that distance' (in Carrillo et al., 2020). The initiative, as others like the Under-21 Team or the Amateur Choir, were conceived, on the one hand, under the imperative of saving, at least symbolically, the spaces and regulatory distances that keep us apart, and, on the other hand, of granting time and institutional support for the development of already programmed projects<sup>9</sup>. These projects are just a few of the many that were carried out during the pandemic, but they could be considered representative of a form of care from the institutions, since on a moment of crisis, 'patience, cooperation, tenderness and tolerance are required', so that both the means and the ends can coincide (Petra Kelly in de la Torre, 2020a).

Other virtual experiences must also be taken into consideration as they have led to

collective reflections on the challenges and threats facing not only society as a whole, but particularly its most fragile and exposed sectors. In this respect, reference has already been made to MS and the relevance acquired by cultural mediation instances in lockdown. During those months, the assembly format of MS intensified, unexpectedly, with the incorporation of new active voices.<sup>10</sup> According to Carrillo, at the same time as the obligatory shift to virtual formats was taking place, the 'situated voices' multiplied and the notion of the 'situated' was broadened. The concept, which emerged from the social-situational context of Lavapiés neighbourhood, shifted its focus during the pandemic to the presence –no longer physical but virtual– of the voice (Carrillo in Carrillo et al., 2020). In this sense, voices from different parts of the world were reunited, minorities had a space to be heard and taken into account, making it possible to listen and share views on other experiences and other ways of dealing with the pandemic. Closely related to this collaborative network is the active work performed by MNCARS. As Sevillano pointed out, the museum has long had a very solid website, where all the departments involved have accumulated experience in thinking digitally. This already long digital trajectory, together with the necessary financial and human resources, facilitated the task of going beyond physical space through digital means. Thus, as the closure of the museum was imminent, the virtual spaces offered a firm foundation on which to continue building. In this situation, some projects took a prominent role over others. As an example, Sevillano brought up the importance of the museum's radio<sup>11</sup> in the articulation of new voices and the visibility of the networks, since it allowed the exploration of the sound dimension on the axes marked by exhibitions (Sevillano in Carrillo et al., 2020).

This brief review points to an inevitable reflection, namely, that even for institutions with the best possible digital infrastructure, it is necessary to think about new forms of presence that include – and are also capable

of going beyond – the digital world. Evidently, many of the activities shaped by digital media are here to stay, however, it is becoming increasingly clear that they cannot replace the performativity of the bodies (Butler, *Ibid.*: 15-17). In this regard, we believe that initiatives underway, such as collaborative networks or face-to-face activities that respect existing protocols, are more necessary now than ever.

### **Post-pandemic projections, between the possible and the desirable**

In relation to the previously referred 'imperative of virtuality', the visible notoriety that some activities linked to mediation and education gained during the lockdown has been emphasised. Such activities were previously overshadowed by certain spectacular dynamics operated around emblematic exhibitions. In any case, this recent visibility also raises the concern of whether their protagonism is temporary or if it will really have a place of importance in the post-pandemic period, alongside the usual main activities of major museums.

In addition to this, it has become evident that many of the virtual activations carried out by the institutions examined here have articulated a creative response, in an ecofeminist manner, to the pandemic. Nonetheless, it is also necessary to weigh up to what extent these activations have represented an excessive effort to support structures that must be rethought. Sustaining an uninterrupted activity, despite the unprecedented and unforeseen conditions of the situation, is a practice too close to neoliberal productivism.

In this regard, the pandemic situation has polarised the reactions from the cultural spaces. On the one hand, we find actual 'creative forces' (Morin, 2020), lucid and binding projects, such as those carried out by MS or CA2M. On the other hand, there are some very valuable spaces that, after the pandemic, are still too weak to undertake new projects, as the standstill has not meant

a moment of creative leisure but rather a circumstance of precariousness and unusual collapses (emotional, health, economic, etc.). In a context that forces us to stop, it is necessary to 'question the new normality' and ask ourselves what normality we want to return to, since this was part of the problem (as Situated Voices #16 proposed).

Furthermore, there was a reflection on which institutional profiles and initiatives are desirable to maintain after the pandemic. As it has been pointed out, it is necessary to promote situated institutions, connected with their immediate environment through spaces for dialogue, support and negotiation. However, it is clear that the greater the infrastructure, the greater the inertia, and in this sense the scales and institutional agencies diverge greatly. Changing large structures also means thinking about more sustainable institutions; in any case, it is both feasible and desirable to put into action articulation mechanisms that allow for an approach at different scales, capable of transforming the ways of knowledge and relationship.

Ultimately, we have argued the notion of 'good life' as a horizon of utopia, a vanishing point for future actions and institutional designs. Understanding this text as a space for dialogue with the international community, we have tried to permeate the debates that took place in our context, woven through the ecofeminist proposals, in order to situate the importance of governing the crisis that our societies are going through with more equitable, sensitive, and supportive social models. In this sense, it is essential that the cultural world acquires a commitment to the challenges opened by the present crisis, positioning itself as one of the fundamental spaces for the achievement of these horizons.

## Notes

1. This work was carried out within the framework of the R&D Project The publics of contemporary art and visual culture in Spain.

New forms of collective artistic experience since the 1960s, PID2019-105800GB-I00.

2. 'Culture and COVID' was part of the Science and Innovation Week 2020 programme promoted every year by the Autonomous Regional Government of Madrid. This conversation was the first public activity promoted by the research project The publics of contemporary art and visual culture in Spain, directed by Professors Noemí de Haro and Patricia Mayayo, from the Autonomous University of Madrid. This research project brings together researchers and professionals from the cultural sector, including the authors of this text and those invited to the conversation that gave rise to it. Its main objectives are to analyse the characteristics that have defined the relationships between artistic practices, policies and institutions, and their relationships with the public, as well as to investigate new forms of collective artistic experience in contemporary Spain. As a hybrid platform between cultural management and the university, the project is ideally suited to address a debate on the political and social consequences of the pandemic on the Spanish cultural sector.

3. The Regional Federation of Neighbourhood Associations of Madrid launched #DinamizaTuCuarentena (#RevitaliseYourQuarantine), creating a list of all the mutual support networks that were active during the quarantine in the neighbourhoods of the capital: <https://dinamizatucuentena.wordpress.com/2020/03/25/listado-de-las-redes-de-solidaridad-y-apoyo-de-los-districtos-y-barrios-de-madrid/> [last accessed: 06/01/2021].

4. Among the associations that form part of the Museo Situado are the food bank BAB Colectivo, the squatted site Esta es una Plaza or Valiente Bangla, an association in defence of the human and social rights of migrants. A complete list can be found here: <https://www.museoreinasofia.es/museo-situado/manifiesto-etica-catastrofe> [last accessed: 29/03/2021].

5. To know more about these campaigns and others promoted by MS please consult: <https://www.museoreinasofia.es/museo-situado/campanas-urgentes> [last accessed: 25/03/2021].

6. This was defended, for example, by the director of the MNCARS in a recent interview, which was published with the headline 'The museum will have to take care as a hospital without ceasing to be critical' (Expósito, 2020).

7. This is the case of 'Red Alert', a group in which professionals from the entertainment sector in Spain have organized to mobilize and demand measures to improve their situation; or the 'cultural blackout' in networks between 10th and 11th April, 2020, by creators and agents, protesting the inaction of the Minister of Culture. Many publications and meetings have been held, such as the one we review in this paper, but also the 'Fragile culture' meeting, organized by La Casa Encendida in Madrid on May 7th, 2020, or articles such as La Vorágine (2020).

8. Unmetroymedio included monitoring and institutional support for the artists to share their ideas and creative processes – registered with the available means–. The material that accounts for these practices still circulates through social networks and gives rise to a 'simple audiovisual archive' that can be consulted on the CA2M institutional website. For more information please consult: '#UNMETROYMEDIO, A Project by CA2M Centro de Arte Dos de Mayo Curated by Manuel Segade and Tania Pardo'. Available at: <http://ca2m.org/es/en-curso/unmetroymedio> [last accessed: 02/01/2021].

9. These projects were redesigned during the pandemic, as Segade described at the meeting. The Under-21 Team, made up of a group of young people between 16 and 21 years old, replaced their meetings for reflection on utopian, dissident, experimental artistic practices 'with a Saturday meal in which each teenager and our educators cooked at home and what happened was that there was a space for exchange, a space for dialogue'

(Segade in Carrillo et al., 2020). For its part, the amateur choir – a creative project in which all voices and sounds are welcome – continued to operate through telephone mediation. For more information about the U21 Team, please consult: 'Under-21 Call', available at: <http://ca2m.org/es/actividades-historico/item/1025-equipo-sub21> [last accessed: 30/03/2021]. About the amateur choir: 'An Amateur Choir. Creative Voice Workshop', available at: <http://ca2m.org/en/el-triangulo/un-coro-amateur>, [last accessed: 02/01/2021].

10. It was through the Voces Situadas meetings (held since 2018) that dialogues between writers, activists, militants and agents of social change were expanded. During 2020, the roundtable format was moved to virtual conference platforms, and six meetings were organised around the pandemic: Situated Voices #12, Who's Caring for the Caregiver? Capitalism, reproduction and quarantine; Situated Voices #13. Surviving amongst all; Situated Voices #14: The virus in Fortress Europe; Situated Voices #15: We are all old, we are all mortal; Resistance and community organisation in times of pandemic; Situated Voices #16. Questioning the 'new normality'; Situated Voices #17. Pleasure Surfaces; all of them available on the MNCARS YouTube Channel.

11. Available at: <https://radio.museoreinasofia.es/> [last accessed: 02/01/2021].

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# Local museums, global publics: How online programming during COVID-19 impacted the way museums define their audiences

Madeline Duffy

In the peri-pandemic ‘new normal,’ museums occupy physical and online spaces. One consequence of this change is that previously location-based museum programmes are suddenly more accessible to global publics: worldwide populations of cultural heritage stakeholders, defined more by common interest than geographic location. This paper demonstrates how three American museums, each with different relationships to their publics, have engaged new audiences through online programming during COVID-19. As museums continue to adapt to additional, unprecedented challenges, continual re-evaluation of how the field defines publics will help cultural institutions adapt to fulfil their mandates in an ever-more globalised world.

*Keywords: Museum publics, globalisation, digital museology, public programming*

The COVID-19 Pandemic constituted an ‘unanticipated upending of our relationships to time, space, technology—and each other’ (Lehrer & Butler, 2020: 4). When forced to close their galleries in early 2020, North American museums adapted their programs and practices (literally) overnight, hoping to retain the interest and support of their publics. Subsequent applications of innovative digital techniques to museum work not only revolutionised audience engagement but sparked institutional efforts to reassess how museums define their publics in a digital age. As museums adapt to unprecedented challenges via strengthened online presence, they also expand to serve global publics: worldwide populations of cultural heritage stakeholders defined more by shared interests than geographic location (as Hooper-Greenhill’s [1999] *interpretive communities*; see also Castells, 2001; Smith, 2012; Tawfeeq

Fattah, 2016). Engaging with communities worldwide is now more manageable and rewarding than ever before. Perhaps it’s also more necessary in the peri-pandemic era, as the isolated yearn for enrichment, connection, and comfort.

This article takes a closer look at the experiences of three American museums during 2020. Each institution maintains unique relationships with its remote and local publics and unique insights on how exposure to online audiences during COVID-19 impacted museum practice.

Digitised collections, online exhibitions, virtual tours, and social media campaigns aren’t new to museums (Bennett, J., 1995), but most considered them supplemental before COVID-19 made all museum real estate suddenly virtual (Lehrer and Butler, 2020: 4).



In a Winter 2020-21 survey conducted for this research, respondents from 55 American Museums compared the frequency with which they offered specific online programmes in 2020 versus 2019. The clear majority of museums surveyed offered online programmes at an increased rate in 2020 (see Figure 1). That change created circumstances

into more dispersed (Post)modern spaces. The boundaries of museum space soften as institutions with online programs reach 'ever-broader public[s] in ever-bolder ways' (Gaither, 1992: 58), regardless of physical location.

Museums have always been significant players in the production of community identity (Bennett, T., 1995). Concepts used in such constructions (Community, Public, Culture) traditionally refer to social groups in a particular geographic location (Zolberg, 1992: 109; Giddens, 1991; Shelton, 2007). But communities and culture are fluid, 'entangled,' and 'constantly mutating' (Shelton, 2013b: 18; Russell, 2010); they have always transcended geographic boundaries (Gaither, 1992: 58; Papastergiadis, 2005).

Modern telecommunications enacted a 'time-space compression' (Harvey, 1989) which further unsettled the relationship between identity and locality (Giddens, 1991; Russell, 2010). In our connected world, drawing sharp distinctions between our history and the history of an imagined remote *other* 'is no longer tenable' (Nederveen Pieterse, 1996: 7; Shelton, 2007:393). Especially after the events of 2020, museums with online programmes cannot imagine they *only* serve those publics in their immediate geographic vicinity (Kuo Wei Tchen, 1992: 295). Online museum programmes serve global publics.

I employ the phrase 'global publics' in this article because, now more than ever, publics include individuals drawn not only 'from one culture or nation-state, but many' (Shelton, 2001: 1). Throughout this research, I asked all contributors to share their thoughts on 'global publics' as the term of art for this concept. Artist Ho Tzu Nyen preferred to refer to the public-at-large as 'the planetary audience,' since global and globalisation are associated with a 'certain moment and a certain discourse' (2021). I understand and share Nyen's concerns. Nevertheless, I chose to proceed using 'global publics,' as all other

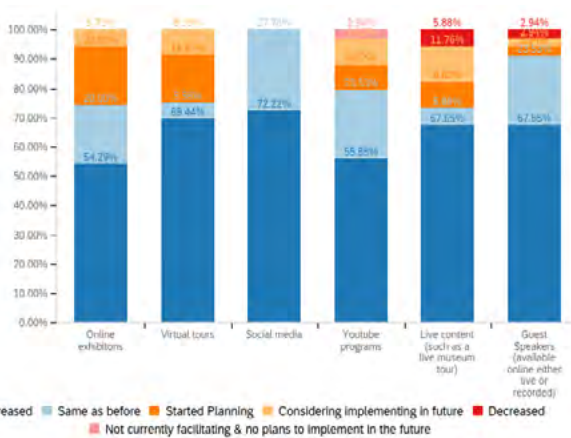


Figure 1. Frequency of online offerings in 2020 vs 2019

ripe for questioning widely held notions about the boundaries of museums as institutions and who those museums serve. The same survey shows the dramatic effect these changes had on audience makeup. 72.73% of respondents reported increased online engagement from publics located outside their museum's local vicinity (Figure 2).

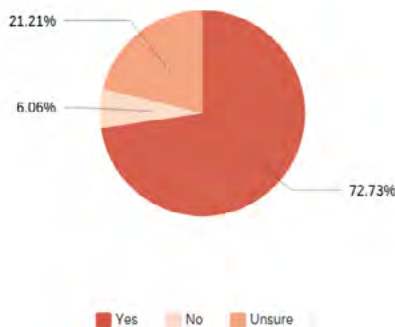


Figure 2: Percent of Museums That Reported an Increase in Online Engagement from Non-local Publics in 2020 vs 2019

### Global Publics

COVID-19 amplified the internet's effect of morphing place-based cultural institutions

respondents agreed that terminology is accessible, clear, intuitive, and easy to use.

The following case studies derive from semi-structured ethnographic interviews and survey results from staff at three American museums. The interviews were transcribed and coded for recurring themes and then assessed within a critical museological framework (Shelton 2013a) to determine whether online programming during COVID-19 impacted how museums define their publics. The first institution, the Washington State Historical Society, is a State historical society and museum. The second, the Tacoma Art Museum, is a local art museum with robust connections to its immediate community. The third, the Brigham Young University Museum of Art, is affiliated with a private, religious university; sponsored and patroned by students, alumni, and a global church membership.

### Washington State Historical Society

The Washington State Historical Society (WSHS), est. 1891, operates the State History Research Center and Washington State History Museum in Tacoma, Washington, as part of their mission to collect, preserve, and vividly teach the history of Washington. When the museum closed due to COVID-19, the society's primary concern was to continue serving those audiences they had before the pandemic. Molly Wilmoth, WSHS Lead Program Manager, recalled a pre-pandemic event targeted to local young professionals called 'After Hours' where guests gathered at the museum for drinks and discussed State history. Shortly after closing, WSHS an online 'After Hours' event, hoping past in-person attendees would come. What the WSHS didn't anticipate were several additional patrons from outside the Puget Sound area who attended. The interest of these non-local patrons inspired WSHS staff to 'start rethinking everything,' asking: 'How are we actually living out our mission?' As the State Historical Society, 'are we actually serving

the entire State?' (M Wilmoth 2020, personal communication, 23 December)

Wilmoth credits COVID-19 with providing the extra push WSHS needed to confront such questions. Pre-pandemic, WSHS was 'slowly migrating' toward online programming but had no immediate actions planned until the pandemic, per Wilmoth, 'forced us to reckon with the fact that we should've been doing a lot of these things a long time ago' (2020). One staff member had been resistant to online programming because they feared patrons who saw an artefact online would not bother coming to see it in person. Since the pandemic forced WSHS's hand, online outreach has not dissuaded in-person visitors, so far as Wilmoth can tell. Instead, several patrons have said online resources inspired them to plan an in-person visit to the museum. Other practitioners have reported similar effects (Perin, 1992; Kate, 2020).

The WSHS's new reach has been unexpectedly broad. After virtually attending an event commemorating the 40th anniversary of the Mount St. Helens eruption, produced by WSHS in partnership with the Washington State Parks, new members from as far afield as Tennessee joined to support the museum. In this case, the individual didn't have any apparent connection to Washington State—he was simply interested in the programme and supporting the museum. WSHS is working on finding the right balance between serving key publics and a global community: 'We are still creating programming that has a specific audience in mind,' but perhaps 'it can be a little bit more open-ended' (Wilmoth, 2020). A video about women's fashion throughout time, for example, 'is getting picked up all over the world because fashion and women's fashion is of interest to everyone. There is no geographic boundary there.' (ibid.)

The pandemic has also inspired conversations about accessibility at the WSHS. They're considering how accessibility to online materials enables patrons with disabilities to

access content from their own devices, in their own homes, instead of necessitating physical removal to a particular site. Programmes posted online can be accessed by different people at different times (even by the same person at different times) 'in perpetuity.' The same program can also be repackaged or repurposed by the museum for other uses or contexts, and museums can share content among themselves. Other innovations in accessibility at the WSHS are forthcoming. Wilmoth expressed feeling overwhelmed—that there is so much to improve at the museum and limited resources. For now, WSHS plans to focus on urgent priorities, making efforts to innovate and improve practices, allowing for hiccups and growing pains (Wilmoth, 2020).

However, while online programming during COVID-19 exposed new audiences to WSHS programming, other publics are more cut off than ever before. Wilmoth noted that the WSHS does not 'even know how to serve' school children right now, a primary audience pre-pandemic (Wilmoth, 2020). Still, the pandemic has simplified logistics for other programmes. Whereas videoconferencing technology was certainly available before the pandemic, 'people are more willing to do things virtually now' (ibid.). Partnerships WSHS has been trying to build for years are more feasible where online modalities have rendered barriers of distance less relevant.

In response to the racial turmoil in the United States, which catalysed amid the COVID-19 pandemic, the WSHS published a Statement of Commitment (Kilmer, 2020), outlining their plans to address systemic racism in their institution. One result of this reaffirmed commitment is an upcoming partnership with the University of Washington School of Public Health. This programme enlists Public Health students to collect oral histories and personal artefact of the pandemic. Wilmoth hopes engaging collegiate volunteers to collect community stories will move the WSHS away from traditional accession

practices, which relied heavily on donations from 'privileged white men,' and toward a more collaborative and equitable collection process (Wilmoth, 2020; see also Kilmer, 2020: 1). Because object-based museums cannot tell diverse stories if they don't have diverse collections, such purposeful actions to collect from more representative populations are essential to achieving WSHS's anti-racist goals.

The peri-pandemic challenges and conversations discussed in this section all contributed to WSHS's new organisational goals, set in 2020. Those goals include building new audiences locally and state-wide, creating meaningful impact 'in every region of the State,' and embracing 'inclusion, diversity, equity and accessibility in our operations, programs, and collections' (Kilmer, 2020).

### Tacoma Art Museum

Amelia Layton, Public Programs Manager at The Tacoma Art Museum (TAM), characterises the TAM as a centre for intercultural dialogue, reflective of its urban, Washington State community. Before the pandemic, TAM usually targeted public programmes to Tacoma and Pierce counties, occasionally expanding to the larger Seattle Metropolitan area for large events. As at the Washington State Historical Society, when TAM closed to the public, their immediate priority was maintaining relationships with local patrons, yet online programming expanded the museum's reach to non-local publics. Communities as far-afield as Vancouver, British Columbia, and Portland, Oregon are now regular publics, and international audiences are also engaging with TAM's content. 'That's a great thing,' Layton said, 'to be offering things to so many people in ways that so many people can access. We've opened this door of accessibility. We can't close it.' (A Layton, 2021, personal communication, 7 January).

Before the pandemic, the TAM did not

have a 'robust online landscape' (Layton, 2021). Whereas other museums had been developing online programmes for years, the TAM 'wasn't even facing that way' (ibid.). Pre-pandemic, TAM posted on Instagram about three times per week. The last video uploaded to their YouTube channel was from 2012. Staff considered social media something 'we in the education department didn't really have time to do' (ibid.). That mentality changed 'in COVID times' (ibid.). Social media is now a key engagement strategy at the TAM.

TAM also started using a more informal voice in their social media than before. Many museums espoused a more relaxed public image during 2020. As Layton quipped: 'We're all in our pajamas, it's fine' (2021). Layton credits this change to frontrunners in museum social media like the Getty and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. She also cites theoretical discussions happening in museums and the academy. 'Public programmes are a form of interpretation,' she said (2021). As museum professionals critically question industry practices, as they think about 'separating from the canon,' these theories manifest in programming (ibid.). Layton hopes that relaxing the image of museums on Social Media will help individuals feel welcome in the museum post-COVID as they are in online museum spaces.

Informal social media strategy has significantly impacted one of the TAM's publics: the TAM Teen Arts Council (TAC). TAM gave the TAC more independent control of their Instagram and events during the pandemic. TAC now organises a successful virtual iteration of their monthly program 'OPEN' (where teens used to meet in the galleries for an open mic night, open artmaking, and just 'hang out' in the museum) hosted on streaming platform Discord. 'Of course,' said Layton, 'teens will lead the way' (2021).

Since TAM started using Matterport to produce online exhibitions, Layton does not

see in-person-only exhibitions as an option moving forward. Patrons, local and remote, now expect online offerings from TAM. 'I can't personally go back to excluding those folks... We might not do it for every exhibition, but now that the door has been opened, we can't not do it ever again' (2021).

Online programming has 'blown open' accessibility at the TAM (Layton, 2021). 'It forced us to do things like caption everything,' which is something TAM could not afford for in-person events but that online platforms make relatively easy and inexpensive (2021). For sixteen years, TAM has hosted a *Día de Los Muertos* (Day of the Dead) festival. Since they couldn't hold the festival in person, some costs from 2019's budget did not apply. So, TAM diverted those funds to translation, enabling the publication of the entire Day of the Dead website in English and Spanish. Additionally, Layton worked with the marketing team to caption the videos on the festival website and create alternative text for digital images. She hopes to increase translation efforts across TAM's programmes in the future, but (at the TAM as at WSHS) that's a matter of funding and staffing.

Layton also noticed that guest speakers for online lectures bring their personal and professional networks to the audience—individuals from across the globe, who might not be able to fly to Tacoma to hear a speech, tune-in in significant numbers to online events. 'There's no borders anymore,' Layton said, echoing Alder (2017) and Gómez- Peña (1992). 'The only border is, really, do you speak the language that's being offered? Even then, if we're doing a musical or dance performance you don't even need to speak that language' (Layton, 2021). Another factor contributing to TAM's increased reach is that online materials aren't constrained by time: 'If you want to watch [a video] at midnight, you can watch it at midnight. If you have a time constraint, you can still participate. You could break up the offering into fifteen-minute sections. On many levels, that has been incredible' (ibid.).

Layton sees interactions with non-local patrons as 'hugely' valuable for TAM. 'We want to be relevant to Tacoma,' Layton says, but TAM is also a Northwestern Art museum and focuses on collecting from the entire Pacific Northwest region of the United States. Interest in art from the Pacific Northwest is not exclusive to local art lovers. TAM's 'weird but wonderful Western Art collection, the Haub Collection, attracts people from all over. There are just a handful of Western Art museums in the country, and Western Art fans are ferocious. So, when we're engaging with that collection, we do reach out farther and through those networks' (Layton, 2021).

### Brigham Young University Museum of Art

The Brigham Young University Museum of Art (BYU MOA) is a mid-sized university museum with many 'fans' among alumni, the local community, and a sizable, remotely-located public consisting of members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (which owns BYU). Dr Janalee Emmer, Associate Director of Exhibitions & Programming, stated in an interview that the MOA has always considered alumni and church members part of their broader audience (2021, 7 January). Nevertheless, Emmer has noticed remote publics engaging with the MOA more readily during the pandemic than they might have in the past.

When the MOA closed to the public in early March, the staff, though 'stunned' (Emmer, 2021), quickly applied themselves to the work of reaching their audiences online: converting their exhibitions and related programmes to virtual platforms and producing at least 75% more digital content than they had in 2019. According to Emmer, programming geared toward adult audiences 'has done quite well through our social media outlets' during the pandemic (2021). 'Take Five' lectures, for example, elicited positive responses among the usual university public as well as online audiences outside the university community when the MOA made them available online.

The MOA had been publishing content on Facebook and Instagram before the pandemic, which was 'already popular,' but the MOA produced and posted more frequently since COVID-19 (Emmer, 2021). Emmer predicts those social media programs will be a permanent part of museum programming in the future, adding that 'we are still in the process of figuring out what works best for our audiences' (ibid.).

The growth the MOA saw in non-local engagement during COVID-19 was organic. Remote publics were already interested in the MOA; there is just more online content available. Rather than deliberately targeting remote audiences, the MOA strategy has been to try 'almost any way we can to reach out to anyone interested in the museum and the programming we have right now. Maybe, as we go forward, we might be more strategic about those audiences,' but the MOA, like many museums, has primarily been in 'survival mode' (2021). Though the MOA didn't intentionally cater to remote publics during COVID-19, digital content nevertheless removed physical barriers to BYU MOA patronage (Gaither, 1992: 58). COVID-era changes made it not just possible—but easy—for patrons living outside of Utah to actively interact with MOA programmes.

Since the pandemic, many museums have been developing resources for educators, the MOA being no exception. Emmer reports that K-12 tours at the MOA have 'drastically declined,' citing similar issues to those reported by the Washington State Historical Society (2021). Emmer hypothesises that schools, districts, and teachers have also been in 'survival mode' and have been hesitant to seek out supplementary experiences during this time (ibid.).

While closed to the public, amid a 'larger, university-wide discussion' on social justice, MOA administration met with staff to re-write their mission statement and rethink their strategic planning (Emmer, 2021). While these

were not new conversations, when unrest and demands for social justice blazed across the United States, pandemic-era closures meant the MOA could take the time to consider them more fully. This work has been critical at Brigham Young University. Museums generally have historically operated as white institutional spaces (Bracey, 2016). However, the MOA is especially aware of how BYU and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints 'have been part of racism' and that the Church remains 'very much a white church' (Emmer, 2021). The past year stressed the urgency of efforts to disrupt these patterns.

As at the Washington State Historical Society, majority-white donors mean a 'very white collection' at BYU (Emmer, 2021). So, while the museum was closed, MOA staff took time to evaluate their acquisition and exhibition practices. As a museum of American Art, MOA staff hope to diversify their collections to more fully represent the complex cultural makeup of the United States. Like Wilmoth (2020), Emmer noted this goal is unachievable without representative collections. As such, the MOA has dramatically increased efforts to acquire works by Americans of colour. Of particular concern, the MOA has many pieces that *depict* Indigenous Americans but not nearly as many by Indigenous American artists. 'These are all discussions that most museums are engaging with right now, decolonising collections, expanding collections... Our staff has been thinking carefully about how we do this going into the future' (Emmer, 2021).

The themes addressed herein may apply interestingly to other educational institutions, as many also shifted to online modalities during COVID-19. Pre-pandemic, academia's approach to online programming mirrored museums': schools planned to develop more online programmes because of the appeal of lower overhead costs and the potential to reach students regardless of geographic location. However, as at museums, university administrations failed to prioritise

implementing those programmes— some taking years to execute the tiniest baby steps. Nonetheless, when COVID-19 closed campuses, even professors who'd avoided learning how to grade assignments online for decades suddenly learned to teach entire courses online. After over a year of online learning, universities, like museums, have built online infrastructure that isn't going anywhere now that it's in place.

Even after the pandemic is over, online learning of all kinds will become more relevant every day. Universities and museums alike will continue refining methods for online education in terms of pedagogy and accessibility. In turn, education will be more accessible to certain groups—though certainly not all. The internet (often considered the great equaliser) only amplifies some disparities between the connected and the disconnected (Domestic Data Streamers, 2020).

### **What Do Global Publics Mean for Museum Practice?**

Each individual interviewed for this research agreed that museums are past the point of no return for virtual programming: 'We have these new audiences that we've built up, and there's no going back' (Wilmoth, 2020). The effects of these changes will continue to manifest in yet unforeseen ways, but some recurring themes are evident.

As the pandemic forced museums online, other events of 2020 (e.g., racial unrest [Callihan, 2020], climate concerns [Nyen, 2021], political turmoil) also inspired staff to step back, consider their institutional goals, and develop new engagement strategies. COVID-induced closures at the WSHS, TAM, and BYU MOA inspired renewed efforts to engage some oft-excluded publics online: youth, people of colour, the disabled, the poor, or even those simply too busy to visit a museum during regular hours (Durgun, 2020).

Another positive result of this change is

that materials which before the pandemic were only available to local publics (or those with resources to travel) are increasingly accessible to global patrons and researchers (Barrett, 2016: 38; Durgun, 2021). This shift will undoubtedly enhance 'research value and impact,' particularly by facilitating collaboration with source communities and other researchers (Barrett, 2016; see also Nyen, 2021).

By facilitating direct communication with potentially nervous first-time visitors (as at the Tacoma Museum of Art), social media helps non-visitors see museums as more approachable, which will inspire in-person visits after restrictions lift (Layton, 2021; Walsh, 1991:1). Should he visit Tacoma, The Washington State History Museum will almost certainly see their new member from Tennessee because of the relationship he developed with the museum during the pandemic.

Global publics themselves are a benefit. Peter Tush (2021, personal correspondence, 3 March) of the Dalí Museum in Florida notes the positive financial impact a broader online audience can have on museums. Online programs allow patrons to stay invested in museums even after leaving an area, as at the BYU MOA. Museum professionals who harness digital programming also receive valuable feedback from audiences they perhaps wouldn't have engaged with otherwise (Tush, 2021). Access to that feedback is key to understanding how best to serve any public—local or remote (Douglas in Nyen et al., 2021). As online resources improve and these conversations continue, exciting opportunities for accessibility and intercultural dialogue will continue to emerge. The next challenge will be to balance online and in-person programming (Pykles, 2021; Tush, 2021).

No single museum can tell all stories or respond to all social needs with equal efficacy. Unquestionably, museums must curate

their programming to fit their mission and collections. A museum may rightly consider its local communities their primary public (Adler, 2017). Knowledge and accountability are now planetary affairs (Macdonald, 1992, p. 176; Nederveen Pieterse, 1996: 17).

Museums in the digital age will have the best outcomes if they apply sound theoretical understanding to negotiate 'a simultaneous particularity and universality' (Adler, 2017: 52; Lavine 1992:147) and tell stories relevant to their distinct disciplines in accessible ways (Kate, 2021). Museum professionals acknowledge that all museums are inextricable from their local context (Nyen et al., 2021; Shelton, 2013b). '[F]or this reason alone we must have a variety of museums and museum styles, serving different purposes or tackling challenges from different approaches' (Macdonald, 1992: 159). In such an ecosystem, each museum becomes a link in 'the chain of cultural reproduction' (Nederveen Pieterse, 1996: 12), producing new forms for museums to interact with and understand their audiences (and each other) on a planetary scale.

By situating museum practice in local contexts and keeping global publics in mind (Lowry in Nyen et al., 2021), museum professionals are better prepared to interface cross-culturally (Gómez- Peña, 1992: 72). This work requires a 'hybridity which can apply itself to what happens when objects and materials cross boundaries; that will enable us to trace the effects when the boundaries themselves are distorted, disappear, or are redrawn' as they have been during the COVID-19 pandemic (Shelton, 2001: 15). Practical work toward achieving that balance will require transparency, honesty, willingness to listen to communities, and awareness that museums 'operate locally and globally in different contexts, and that that is okay' (Nyen, 2021). As museums continue in that spirit to build upon work started in 2020, the upheavals COVID-19 brought to the museum community can lift museum practices to higher standards of excellence. Then, as

cultural heritage institutions are designed to do, those museums will raise their publics with them, both local and global.

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# From solid to liquid: a reflection on the inevitable fluidity of museum's communication

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If current society can be seen as a liquid element, that is, a collective that does not cease to be in continuous movement, abandoning its structure to surrender to the constant flow of current times (Bauman, 2000), is it worth thinking about the concept of a museum that is not stagnant in its own reality and whose communication seeks to keep up with the fast pace of current times and, consequently, of society? In order to provide some answers to this question, this article explores the idea of a liquid museum presented by Van Oost (2012), Cameron (2015) and Marras et al (2016) and the current and potential impact of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) on contemporary museological practices, viewing them as an instrument that promotes the institution's fluidity.

*Keywords: liquid modernity; liquid society; liquid museum; communication*

For the purpose of this article and its theoretical horizon, we will weave a phenomenological-hermeneutic approach to the concept of liquid modernity introduced by Zygmunt Bauman (1925-2017) and its correlation with the museological universe. Although the work developed by Bauman can be interpreted as a 'vast network of cartographies or liquid intersections' (Palese, 2013: 10), being 'eclectic and slippery and based on a variety of theoretical sources' (Jacobsen and Poder, 2008: 2), in the present investigation, we try to approach the texts that understand social fluidity and its consequent implications in the 21st century museum's. As such, first of all, we will present an understanding of the theoretical and practical dimension of liquid modernity advocated by Bauman (2000). Secondly, we will present an understanding of the concept of liquid museum, focusing on the articles developed by Van Oost (2012),

Cameron (2015) and Marras et al (2016). To finish, we will make an observation about the current and potential impact of ICT on contemporary museological practices, viewing them as an instrument that promotes the institution's fluidity. The central problem of this paper is, therefore, the analysis of how museums respond to social transformations under liquid modernity, a context that provides a multiplicity of possibilities for museum's adaptation, transformation and reinvention.

## **A brief reading about the concept of liquid modernity**

Bauman marked the solid modernity as a period shaped between the 14th and 15th centuries and whose peak occurred in the 19th and 20th centuries. However, it is by focusing on the establishment and fast progress of science and technology in the second half of the 20th century that Bauman draws

its concept of liquid modernity. The liquid modernity is a time period that corresponds to the contemporary world, considered not according to the usual historical nomenclature, which understands it as an era that began with the French Revolution, or as determined by some, with the Industrial Revolution, but seen as the postmodern world, spanning the last three decades of the 20th century and the present day.

In this sense, Bauman (2000) seeks to describe the concept of liquid modernity from four specific characteristics: the first, in which he argues that the forms of social organization no longer persist; the second, in which he tells us that there is a separation between power and politics; the third, in which it reveals that society is increasingly seen as a network and not as a structure; and the fourth, in which he argues that a collapse of long-term thinking and planning has occurred.

The solid society, which was, in a way, impregnated with a certain totalitarianism, a rigid collective unable to adapt to new forms, starts to melt the solids, that is, eliminates the irrelevant obligations of its existence (Bauman 2000). In this way, there was a deep crisis in society that begins to abandon the old failed plans of the modern era, occurring a total failure of the ideas that were considered certain and true in the past by modern thinkers (Pollock, 2007).

Consequently, society ends up transforming itself into a heterogeneous element that assumes several identities, within an environment that is totally provisional, variable and globalized, being subject to continuous formations and transformations. If the most relevant values of modernity (solid era) were associated with stability, union and tradition, in liquid modernity these same values, guides and structures dissolve, giving rise to times of constant volatility and fluidity. Thus, the term liquid reflects the effects of globalization, migration, nomadism, tourism, the Internet, among others (Jacobsen & Poder, 2008).

The concept of liquid modernity offers, therefore, an innovative approach that allows us to analyze the complexities of social change in the contemporary world. Liquid times present different challenges to today's society. As such, liquidity can be seen as a clear representation of our current reality since in contemporary times everything flows, shifts, overflows and filters, always for a certain period of time and without occupying a concrete and defined space (Pollock, 2007).

Far from being an arbitrary and metaphorical choice or situation, we understand that liquidity can be perceived as a strong theoretical and practical foundation that enables a comprehensive and adequate understanding of individuals and society in general. If the individual is constituted by the multiple impositions that result from the relationships to which he is attached, if he is composed in such a way that certain rules, certain ways of thinking, acting and feeling are inscribed in his most fundamental formation as a subject, then the relationships are liquid and people establish relationships with this liquidity, because they live in a society and are constituted in it. Thus, it becomes possible to observe that social change is not just 'an intrinsic part of any society; it also produces a tendency towards the acceptance of new values underlying our conception of existence' (Lee, 2015: 66).

But if society does not cease to be in continuous movement, abandoning its structure to surrender the constant flow of current times, in what situation are the museums, their own definition and their projects? Is it worth thinking about the concept of a fluid museum that is not stagnant in its own reality and that seeks to keep up with the fast pace of the times and society? If so, how can museums seek to become more fluid and, consequently, more sustainable?

## The liquid museum and the inevitable fluidity of museums today

It may be considered that the development and consolidation of a disciplinary field such as Museology depends, necessarily, on the continuous review of its foundations and premises, as well as on an always renewed critical perspective on its production (McCharty, 2019). This process allows to identify the constitutive contributions of the field and recognize the interpretative fluctuations that enrich its structures, facilitating the interfaces between what is said and the new approaches of those who focus on it (Janes, 2010).

The historical path of museums has been marked by different ways in which the conceptual elements that define them are usually revisited: their purposes, their strategies and expository modalities, their activities or, more frequently, the relation they try to establish with their audiences. These debates result from the very nature of museums as complex cultural institutions, with a certain historical, social and political framework, and which has implications for the negotiation, construction and reinvention of their cultural meanings nowadays (McCharty, 2019).

In 2019, the ICOM extraordinary general assembly held in Kyoto approved to postpone the vote on a new museum definition, deciding to enter into a process of consultation and improved cooperation between committees. However, according to the ideas included in ICOM's postponed museum definition, the museum can be understood as a 'not-for-profit institution' that is 'participatory and transparent, and work in active partnership with and for diverse communities to collect, preserve, research, interpret, exhibit, and enhance understandings of the world, aiming to contribute to human dignity and social justice, global equality and planetary wellbeing' (ICOM, 2019). Although this is a non-definitive definition, we can consider that this explanation aims to retain the unique

defining and essential unity of museums in terms of caring for cultural heritage while recognizing the need for them to adapt their values to the challenges of the 21st century, incorporate different world views, address deep societal inequalities and acknowledge the crisis in nature. In other words, museum seeks to maintain its status as a culture institution that seeks to provide a range of public services, whose transformation occurs largely by reference and correspondence to the characteristics of present-day society (ICOM France, 2020). This renewed perspective in the postponed definition of museum implies new focuses and directions on the social issue of the institution, leading, consequently, to the necessary existence of a new type of museum: a dynamic institution at the service of society and its own expectations, motivations and development.

As such, as it becomes necessary to (re) think about a new definition of museum, we must take a few steps back and recognize that if this institution was born within the scope of a solid modernity, today that modernity no longer exists (Bennett, 2005). Serving for a long time as symbols of modernity, museums have undergone profound changes in the context of postmodern society, occupying, currently, an ambivalent and contradictory position on issues such as knowledge and power, ideology and authority, identity and difference, permanence and transition (Knell, 2019). Based on this reality, Van Oost (2012), Cameron (2015) and Marras et al (2016) advocate the concept of liquid museum: a museological paradigm that, under the influence of the particularities and social complexities of liquid modernity, is not stagnant/isolated in their own reality, trying to keep up with the fast pace of current times, putting on the agenda all the issues, problems and complexities that this presently entails. Under this notion, the museum is seen as a complex process, a plural institution where different dimensions are included and interacted: spatial, time, social, political, educational, economic and even poetic.

However, it is necessary to show that there is no real opposition between the modern museum (solid) and the liquid museum, since, in essence, both categories are representations of the museum phenomenon, appropriate, in their entirety, to the time when they emerged as models of museological practice (Van Oost, 2012; Cameron, 2015).

According to Cameron (2015), the modern (solid) museum would be 'based on hierarchies, dualisms between culture / nature, truth perceptions, objectivity, certainty and modernity experience; linear forms of communication and production of scientific and social facts that resulted in an institution largely separated from society operating above it as a project focused on past values and practices' (ibidem: 345). Instead, the museum of the liquid era stands as a continuous project, which aims to keep up with the pace of the accelerated changes of society.

This liveliness provided by this liquid institution is conceptualized both as a means and as a result of the production and reproduction of social practices that are constantly updated and negotiated. As such, being influenced by the constant exchange of sources, practices and knowledge, the liquid museum is characterized by its dynamics, fluidity, friction and conflict. In this context, in what corresponds to its performance, the liquid museum can be interpreted as a structure who seeks to produce and manifest a constant liquidity. Under this understanding, more than a noun, the liquid museum can be seen as a verb, a process of transformation: a space that is made, practiced, experienced.

This process of liquefaction, which represents the institution's attempt to establish more horizontal and less hierarchical relations between the museum, its collections and heritage and society in general, corresponds to the constant updating of the practices, techniques, theoretical foundations and ideological aspects of the institution. Far

from being a simple 'causal, complementary, parallel or just reciprocal entity' (Cameron, 2015: 353), the museum of liquid modernity can be seen as a broadly relational institution. A liquid museum is, therefore, an institution with porous borders: a dynamic force that refuse any institutional rigidity and seeks to organize multiple capacities, opinions, values and experiences and different rationalities, technologies and techniques that enable their action.

### **The liquid communication: museums in the context of new ways of communicating**

The demands imposed by the social theory of liquid modernity end up demanding a new communicative positioning from museums, implying the emergence of (re)thinking about the capacity of these spaces to monitor and develop new ideas, trends and concepts. In this context, the need for the museum to assume an 'accessible communicative act for all' (Marras et al, 2016: 102) mobilizes the whole panoply of mass communication – largely provided by the digital age.

Thus, the concept of liquid museum emphasizes the growing and necessary fluidity of the boundaries of museum's communication and, more directly, the adoption and use of ITC- which can be defined as the set of activities, solutions and electronic means of processing, storing, communicating, accessing and using digital information that imply the use of computer hardware and software and the use of the Internet (Murphy, 2019). In this way, the impact that the dissemination of digital technology has in all fields of action and departments of the museum constantly changes the way in which collections are managed and made visible, increasing the capacity of museums to interconnect and share information.

The presence of museums in digital environments has been gaining increasing importance as a way of expanding the reach and accessibility of collections and captivating

and involving increasingly heterogeneous and global audiences. The contemporary museum therefore assumes itself as a hybrid space both in the functions it performs and in the range of technologies and exhibition techniques it employs, with few moments not constructed and mediated in the exhibition space (Murphy, 2019).

With the digitization of collections and the use of digital technologies in mediation and interaction with audiences, there is a decentralization of the museum, the objects and the knowledge it stores (Russo, 2012). To this extent, digitization can be considered as a way to promote the democratization of access to culture and knowledge and to turn cultural content (material or immaterial) into a lasting resource for the digital economy, also enabling new ways of interacting with these and create opportunities for innovation and creativity, benefiting new services in sectors such as education or tourism (Parry, 2013).

The information that is produced starts to be open / non-linear and is presented in different locations (often from very distant geographic points), allowing to instigate new connections between people and collections (Chun, Jenkins and Stein, 2007). These connections, fluid and changing according to the nature of the relationships, can include the surrounding community, the communities of origin of the objects, diaspora communities, groups with specialized interests or students. Furthermore, they are publics that can inform and be informed by the institution, creating an environment that allows different and complementary exchanges and interactions to occur. This reality mirrors the articulation of a reciprocal space in which all network partners are motivated to contribute and receive something in return in this process of involvement (Samis, 2007).

Technologies and computerized interpretive media are now disseminated and integrated in most exhibition spaces with the aim of providing more flexible and creative

experiences (Parry, 2013). This situation catapulted the need for museum to rethink their mission and values, in order to develop more relevant, inclusive and participatory services and curatorial programs, with particular emphasis on betting on digital communication strategies that would ensure the capture of audiences and its sustainability (Anderson, 2019). This bet reflects the growing concern of institutions with cultural policies to promote equal access, as well as awareness of the rapid changes in behavior and needs of audiences and their heterogeneity. Nevertheless, it also highlights the desire of museums to become relevant and expand the scope of their activities, expanding to new segments of society.

Access to networks and multiple channels of information, as well as interoperability between different platforms and media that allow complex multimedia applications and versatile and mobile connectivity, are resources that cultural institutions can no longer ignore. Thus, there is an increasing digitization and open-source sharing of content on the websites of the institutions, or on other platforms, and an active participation in the most diverse social networks, as well as a growing and diversified technological offer in the exhibition spaces ( kiosks and interactive digital surfaces, QR codes, Near-field Communication, multimedia guides, Virtual Reality (VR) and Augmented Reality (AR) applications for visitors' devices, among others) as a way for institutions to approach the new habits and expectations of hearings (McCharty, 2019).

By being properly integrated, ICT can benefit all museal procedures and practices, optimizing the internal and external workflow: they allow the practice of new forms of memory recovery - of the tangible and intangible heritage of Humanity - whether through the digitization of rich and differentiated content or the collection of testimonies and their valorization; and facilitate a more complex and free analysis of the information and content

made available, as well as its dissemination in a more accessible way and with greater reach through global communication networks and platforms (Kidd, 2014). The introduction of digital technologies also changed and expanded the concept of museum experience, which now takes place in two domains: the physical and the virtual. Each of these domains can complement the other, or provide an autonomous experience worthy of its own. The virtual experience - the visit to the websites, or to other digital platforms and social networks of the institutions - can anticipate or prolong the physical experience - the visit to the physical space of the institution - expanding the temporal context of the experience, through the offer of activities or digital resources, which will also provide new dialogical spaces of encounter between the institution and its audience that can be used to encourage exploration, debate and reflection around the collections or the themes of the exhibitions (Murphy, 2019).

The tendency to accept the museum, its exhibitions and narratives, as a space for communication shows the emergence of the liquid paradigm in the conceptualization of museum's audiences. Increasingly, we must consider that the liquid museum should be based on fragmented experiences and the stories that museums can tell - through their exhibitions, performances, workshops, websites, social networks, digital archives or games - should create networks of involvement and interaction, which dilute the boundaries between online and offline, between the audience and the producer, and between truth and fiction.

Thus, in a technological world, the visit to a museum no longer begins and ends when a person enters or leaves the building of the institution, the physical space of the museum is just a place - albeit a privileged one - within the continuum of the visitor's imaginative universe. Therefore, it is inferred that the communication held by the museum of this liquid era should be characterized by its truly

openness and vulnerability: a communication that allows the museum to be made up of oppositions, juxtapositions, overlaps and that reveals the institutions itself in plural planes and in variable geometries, with diverse and complementary points of view.

Furthermore, by allying itself with the use of ITC, the communicative process of the liquid museum should seek to incite, with greater emphasis, the participation and involvement of the society, serving as an intervention tool capable of mobilizing wills and efforts for resolution of common problems within the society, working issues such as social justice, climate change, immigration, power issues, gender equality, decolonization, the LGBTQ+ issues, among others. We can highlight, for example, the work that has been gradually developed by museums like the Rijksmuseum (Amsterdam) or the MoMa (New York), which, in order to break racist values and attitudes that build barriers to the creation of cultural spaces racially inclusive, have been dedicated on the implementation of anti-racist practices, such as sharing power with people of color, rethinking and reframe their collections and the way they present them, among other actions.

Although we may consider that many museums do not have the same capacity to adapt their communication to the fast and constant transformations of the current times, the reality is that such institutions must refuse the construction of physical and/or intellectual barriers that nullify or hinder their ability to reinvention and consequent adaptation to the complexities and attributions of the nowadays society. Hence the importance of a current reflection on the image that the museum tries to formulate of itself, but also an observation on the image that the museum tries to produce in the actual society and the relations that tries to establish with it. Nevertheless, we believe that the museum of liquid modernity can also enhance, multiply and expand a criticism about the complexities, anxieties and dissatisfactions of this fluid



stage, debating and exposing everything that is fragile durability and constant transience.

## Conclusions

The discussion around the solid-liquid, power-political, rigidity-flexibility dichotomies enabled the understanding and elaboration of the metaphor of the liquefaction of museological institutions in contemporary times. If museums can be seen as institutions that derived from solid modernity, the reality is that, when exposed to the pressures of constant updates and complexities of the current times, they must end up melting down their foundations. Therefore, in order to become socially relevant, museums and their communication must become increasingly liquefied, flexible, adaptable to adversity and elastic. However, the most critical point of the notion of liquid museum is also a preliminary perspective and, mainly, a theoretical discourse: in the daily practice of museums, this type of concept is far from taking place and, in general, there seems to be a desire to maintain that status quo.

If this paper was based on the theoretical and ideological foundations of museum's communication in liquid modernity, a theme that, in its genesis, could lead to multiple and captivating debates, it seems to us interesting to prolong this approach and recommend the development of research, analysis and many others contributions that, presenting another focus or deepening, aims to develop and understand the relationships between the theory and practice of this museological paradigm in its most diverse ways, interpretations and capacities. In this way, the concept of a liquid museum can be replaced in the light of other guidelines for the culture, heritage and development of individuals, communities and society.

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# Adapting to a changing world: How co-creation with communities informed organisational change in museums throughout 2020

Stella Toonen

Museums in 2020 have gone through severe change and uncertainty as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, which in some cases has prompted opportunities for drawing new relationships with communities. This study follows two contemporary art museums with a focused commitment to co-creating with communities – the Whitworth Art Gallery (Manchester, UK) and Queens Museum (New York, USA) – through that process of change. It gives an analysis of how co-creation has informed the organisations' responses to the pandemic and how the pandemic has influenced the staff's view on co-creation. Giving examples based on staff interviews and participant observations, it pays particular attention to how co-creating with communities has prompted organisational change and identifies areas where more change may be needed.

*Keywords: Co-creation, organisational change, community engagement, impact of Covid-19*

## Community-focused museums in a Covid-19 pandemic

Since March 2020 museums worldwide have gone through severe change. The Covid-19 pandemic did not only force an estimated 90% of museums and galleries worldwide to close their buildings for significant periods of time (UNESCO, 2020), but also created a challenging environment for them to function in, characterised by change and uncertainty.

Museums changed most visibly by pivoting physical programming to virtual and hyper-local formats, but the pandemic also prompted museums to reflect on their role and responsibilities towards their communities, and on how they might support those communities to have their voices heard and build greater resilience (Crooke, 2020). For

many museums this led to an increased focus on actively listening to what communities needed and to make informed choices about where the museum's resources were best put to use and how to build deeper community relationships (ICOM, 2020a). It reflects how, for many museums, the year 2020 pushed them to move towards more community-focused and collaborative practices, including forms of co-creation (Massi & Turrini, 2020).

As the pandemic unfolded, museums had to embrace uncertainty at every level of their work. With budgets frozen or decreased, staff on furlough or made redundant, and both health and cultural policy guidelines often unknown and changeable, museums needed to find a way to function in a very unstable environment (ICOM, 2020b; ICOM 2020c). Moreover, there is much uncertainty about how Covid-19 might continue to influence

relationships between audiences and communities and affect issues around equity, risk and privilege in the long-term (Honey-Rosés et al., 2020; Manderson & Levine, 2020), especially with a view to the economic crisis that is expected to follow suit and will likely be felt still long after the lockdowns end. While this uncertainty can feel paralysing, many believe that the disruptive moment may also provoke what Kuhn (1962) describes as a 'paradigm shift', and thereby contribute to structural and systemic change across the museum sector that can support equality and give increased importance to community engagement (Crooke, 2020; Heumann Gurian, 2020; Morris, 2020).

This study focuses on two museums that, already before the Covid-19 pandemic, built deep engagement with communities and set up collaborations to involve those groups in their change processes. This study analyses how those practices have informed the reflection, adaptation and change processes these museums have gone through prompted by the events of 2020. The two case study museums are the Whitworth Art Gallery (Manchester, UK) and Queens Museum (New York, USA), and were chosen pre-2020 on the basis of running major co-creation programmes.

This article will first introduce the theoretical framework around community collaboration, and co-creation in particular, and how these practices relate to organisational change processes. It will then outline the methodology of the research, and go on to analyse how co-creating with communities has informed change in the two case study museums as the crises of 2020 unfolded. It concludes by drawing links to how co-creation practices might offer museums approaches to managing change and uncertainty.

### **Community co-creation in relation to organisational change and uncertainty**

With roots in the audience-focused New Museology movement (Vergo, 1989),

discussions around cultural democracy (Evrard, 1997) and what Bishop (2006) described as a 'social turn' towards participation, collaboration with communities has increasingly become a priority for museums. Whereas communities are more broadly defined as groups who share certain characteristics (Delanty, 2003), the communities invited into these collaborations are often defined by not having professional experience of working in museums or the arts (Jubb, 2018) and are therefore placed in opposition to museum workers. Moreover, they are often communities who are underrepresented in museum narratives and workforces (Crooke, 2006), making community collaboration a democratisation exercise (Matarasso, 2019).

This dichotomy between museums and communities is especially important in understandings of a particular kind of community collaboration, called 'co-creation', even if the term's uses and definitions are rather wide-ranging (Walmsley, 2013). Simon (2010), Brown et al. (2011), the International Association of Public Participation (IAP2) (2014) and Torreggiani (2018) define co-creation by contrasting it to other types of collaboration along a participatory spectrum, which also includes community consultation, participation, and community-led work. The difference stated between these terms is that in consultation and participation processes communities contribute to projects that are essentially owned and led by museums, and in community-led processes the ownership flips to the community side of the equation, whereas co-creation stands out because it covers the part of the spectrum where museum and community have equal agency and ownership over the project (Simon, 2010; Brown et al., 2011; IAP2, 2014; Torreggiani, 2018). Co-creation is seen as representing a more genuine collaboration in which all parties contribute and benefit equitably, built on radical trust and a sharing of power (Lynch & Alberti, 2010).

It could be argued that there is a second element that defines co-creation: its relation to organisational change. Inherent to any co-creation project are active processes of negotiating power and agency (Jubb, 2018), challenging prejudices and assumptions (Lynch & Alberti, 2010) and redefining relationships (Byrne et al., 2018), which all contribute to shaping new perceptions and practices across museum work, even if each change in itself may only be small. These changes may have physical effects, for instance on exhibitions where co-curation can lead to the inclusion of new stories (Davies, 2010; Mohr et al., 2018), but might also reach more deeply into the structures of the organisation, by prompting reflection on internal processes, systems and practices. Changes to such internal frameworks can affect the organisational culture and values (Davies et al., 2013), from the museum's mission to the responsibility it feels towards its audiences and communities.

In some cases change stemming from co-creation makes an impact beyond the boundaries of the museum, for instance when giving a platform to community voices results in increased social inclusion (Barnes & McPherson, 2019). However, whether this is the case is often difficult to evaluate. Hence, the Whitworth Art Gallery's 'art for social change' (Hudson, 2020) and Battersea Arts Centre's 'co-creating change' (Co-Creating Change, n.d.) rhetoric, which connects co-creation to social change, is generally used as an action-instilling vision, rather than substantiated with much evidence. Heumann Gurian (2020), in a publication specifically concerned with social change since Covid-19, argues that such change is very much needed, but that current change originating from museums is barely scratching the surface of what would constitute systemic social change, and is often still tokenistic.

A third element that characterises co-creation is the embracing of uncertainty. To allow all participants in a co-creation

process to have agency over a project and its outcomes, it is fundamental to co-creation that the process is open-ended and has the flexibility to adapt to changing needs (Simon, 2010; SHARE Museums East, 2013). Co-creation favours process over outcome (Brown et al., 2011; Jubb, 2017) and thereby challenges traditional notions of fixed outcomes, progress and success in favour of experimentation. Moreover, the active pursuit of unknown project outcomes generally goes against traditional museum and funding practices (Simon, 2010; Bienkowski, 2016), where the expected return on investment is an important tool for justifying the existence of a project at its inception. As a result, the open-endedness and flexibility that is at the core of co-creation work often challenges traditional project structures, and may provoke systemic change in how the impact of co-creation work is regarded by funders, evaluators or policy-makers.

Change and uncertainty are not only themes within co-creation work, but also characterise the year 2020. This article will look at its two case study organisations to see how the acknowledgement of organisational change and uncertainty as essential forces in co-creation work has manifested itself in their responses to the Covid-19 pandemic and the impact that has had on the case study organisations. This article will thereby not only fill a gap in literature on the effects of the Covid-19 crisis on the museum sector, which is still sparse at the time of writing in spring 2021, but will also analyse the situation from an organisational change viewpoint, which is generally under-researched in museum studies. Most existing research focuses on the benefits of co-creation projects on community groups (Simon, 2010; Boiling & Thurman, 2018; Matarasso, 2019), but the impact of co-creation on the ways of working of the staff members involved, whose practices and power positions are constantly challenged throughout such projects, are often overlooked.

## Methodology

This study uses a comparative case study approach (Simons, 2009) to analyse the impact of co-creation work happening at two contemporary art museums: the Constituent Museum project at the Whitworth Art Gallery (Manchester, UK) and a body of projects leading up to the *Year of Uncertainty* programme at Queens Museum (New York, USA). These two organisations represent different sizes and remits, and the co-creators they engage with also denote different ecologies: both focus on local neighbours, but the groups they engage with, among others, respectively include South-East Asian communities and faith leaders in South Manchester and Latinx communities and local makers in the New York borough of Queens. What the two museums have in common is an institutional commitment to community co-creation and a change of directorship within the last three years, which has actively redirected their path towards becoming more community-focused.

The fieldwork period ran from February 2020 until December 2020. Data was gathered at the two institutions through semi-structured interviews with museum staff members from many different departments and through observations of staff meetings, co-creation meetings, and public co-creation events, using elements of organisational ethnography (McDonald, 2002; Morse, 2018). A total of eight interviews and thirteen observations were completed for the Whitworth, and nine interviews and sixteen observations for Queens Museum. Interviewees were chosen based on their involvement in co-creation work and often through snowball recommendations from other staff members. Meetings and events were chosen based on their focus on co-creation, their engagement with decision-making processes, and on practical availability.

Due to the escalation of the pandemic three months into the fieldwork period, many of the interviews and observations were conducted

remotely through video interviews and attending staff meetings and events online. At the Whitworth this was combined with physical attendance, but the research at Queens Museum was completed fully remote. This may have affected the observational data slightly, as some elements around body language, organisational culture, and spatial interaction were harder to read from a screen (Deakin & Wakefield, 2014; Sah et al., 2020). However, this was made up for by the data from the interviews, which were very rich, with staff having been prompted to reflect on their work more during 2020 than they were used to. Besides, interviewing subjects while they were in their home seemed to make for open, honest and generous conversations (Bertrand & Bourdeau, 2010). Finally, the lack of physical constraints due to the online format increased the duration of access to each case study from 10 weeks to 4-6 months per organisation.

### **Whitworth Art Gallery: Accelerating the transformation to constituent-led organisation**

Since new Director Alistair Hudson's arrival at the Whitworth Art Gallery in Manchester in 2018, the museum has been shifting to work according to a 'constituent museum' model. This model redraws relationships with those who use the museum – including audiences, communities, local neighbours, partner organisations and also museum staff – and creates agency for them to inform and shape the organisation's practices (Byrne et al., 2018; Arte Útil, 2019). It is built on a notion of 'usership' (Wright, 2013), which considers how museums can be of use to its constituents. Upon winning a Transformative Grant from Outset Partners in March 2019 the Whitworth has been able to set up a Constituent Museum project to accelerate the envisioned organisational change process to make the museum more constituent-led (Manchester University, 2019).

Halfway throughout the yearlong funded Constituent Museum project, the Covid-19

pandemic closed the museum for most of 2020. While up until that point an interviewee describes the transformation towards constituent-led working as largely consisting of 'thinking through [and] reframing work we were already doing', the acuteness of the crisis pushed projects to change more radically, both in terms of their form as well as the uses they fulfilled for constituents. Based on project observations, some staff struggled to not make assumptions about what their communities might need. However, the organisation was committed to actively listening to its constituencies and as a result it created a community co-creation panel in April 2020.

The panel took an equal-agency approach and its agenda and mission were being left open for the local community participants to negotiate, an important criterion for equitable power sharing in co-creation (Simon, 2010). However, at every meeting the focus of the group shifted, and finally the group asked the museum staff facilitator to set the agenda for them and use the group as a consultation body, rather than for open-ended co-creation. This did not necessarily mean the group did not want any agency, but rather that it had not been given the support it needed to develop the confidence to shape a clear vision and objectives by itself.

The example indicates how Whitworth staff are still grappling with ways of facilitating co-creation effectively, and in an evaluation meeting the co-creation panel facilitator noted the project was part of an organisational learning process. Rather than taking away the group's agency by turning it into a consultation process, they reflected on what happened and reconsidered the approach for achieving co-creation and avoiding what Arnstein (1969) called 'tokenistic' collaboration. Moreover, it showed the contradictions museums encounter when wanting to help community partners to build the confidence to express their voice, but to do so without steering the community's

decisions and without reinforcing traditional power structures. Many of these questions, as the facilitator stated, came back to the issue of managing expectations and being open and transparent about the contradictions and the mutual learning process.

A similar negotiation happened not between staff and communities, but internally within the museum, and related to contradictions between the museum's vision and its present systems. Due to the newness of the constituent museum model for many of the Whitworth's staff, the will to change to this new model sometimes overtook the speed of change, leading to superficial constructions. One staff member articulated the discrepancy between the museum's objective and the tools it has available as: 'How does Alistair [Hudson]'s organic model work if we're not an organic farm?' Indeed, an observation of the Whitworth's projects run with constituents in 2020 shows that co-creation is not embedded deeply across the organisation yet. It is largely happening within projects that lead to temporary content programmes (e.g. exhibitions, learning programmes), but is much less present across practices that shape the structure and systems of the museum more profoundly or long-term (e.g. collections, fundraising, governance). This became clearer when, due to the pandemic, all exhibitions and physical content programmes were temporarily closed, and staff were prompted to reflect on how co-creation might manifest itself in different forms and spaces.

One way of embedding co-creation into more permanent museum structures was by setting up a formal Constituent Board. The learning from running the community co-creation panel during the first lockdown closure period included experimenting with virtual co-creation methods, understanding constituent group needs, shaping missions and agendas, and building relationships with constituents who might consecutively move on to a position on the Constituent Board.

The relatively spontaneous community co-creation panel initiative thus provided a strong basis of experience to draw from for the more structurally embedded Constituent Board.

The development of the Constituent Museum transformation project, which always aimed to be a learning process (Manchester University, 2019), shows how the Whitworth is working to turn its theoretical vision for co-creation with constituents into effective practices that make a difference to the organisation and the communities it serves. Its theoretical vision is highly developed (Bruguera, n.d.; Byrne et al., 2018), and the interviews show that staff are feeling increasingly confident about its aims, but a focus on theoretical underpinning should not take away from practical efficacy. Interviewees for instance warn that the term 'constituent' might work in professional circles, but that to community members it might feel exclusionary. One interviewee suggests, 'using institutional, intellectual language that can be alienating, reinforces centuries-long held ways of who owns knowledge and power', and this could undermine the democratisation of the museum that the project hopes to achieve. To manage the challenge, museum staff change their language depending on whether they talk *about* communities in the museum or *with* communities outside the museum. Inconsistencies like these might be addressed as the museum's experience with co-creation work grows.

The Covid-19 pandemic might have helped to create a new environment in which change can happen more easily. The chaos of the unfolding crisis and the clumsiness of video calls early on during the pandemic created an open and forgiving atmosphere among museum and community co-creators. Moreover, the collective uncertainty and inexperience with new ways of (virtual) working put all participants on an even keel, and provided a space in which experimentation and failure could happen without the loss of trust. The

additional pressure that the pandemic put on making quick decisions also accelerated the speed of change, which could in normal times be expected to be relatively low in institutionalised organisations like the case study museums (Aldrich & Ruef, 2006).

The extent of the Whitworth's organisational transformation to a more constituent-led model in 2020 partly represents changes that would ultimately have happened anyway, but partly also shows acceleration caused by the Covid-19 pandemic. These transformations occurred in the form of practical changes to existing programmes and the creation of new projects, but also showed that at a more structural level, staff noticed inconsistencies between envisioned change and actual progress made. Their reflections showed that the Whitworth wrestles with internal and organisational contradictions that inhibit the effectiveness of their co-creation work, and that these have possibly become more pronounced by the pressures of the pandemic. Considering co-creation practices as a prompt for active reflection on power structures and for challenging traditional ways of working, the Whitworth has been engaging with such issues across 2020 indeed. To continue its transformation, continuous evaluation of its co-creation work is needed to keep developing and improving it, and to ensure it follows the changing needs and demands of its constituent communities.

### **Queens Museum: From reactive co-creation to actively embracing uncertainty**

Queens Museum in New York has a long history of being what many of its current staff describe as a 'community museum', meaning a museum that is run by, with and for its local community (Crooke, 2007; Pantzou, 2015). It combines a local history remit with major international work that attracts global attention and is known for working with socially-engaged artists on social justice issues, as well as for taking a multicultural approach to its programmes, representative of its diverse local community in Queens



(Wallis, 2018).

Interviews with nine staff members about how they collaborated with communities, however, indicated that co-creation was not always as deeply embedded as the museum's reputation for community work suggests. Most of the projects they highlighted would be classed as either participation projects (in which the museum provides activities that community members can 'join' (Jubb, 2017) rather than help shape), or hosting projects (in which the museum mainly provides the space in which community activities happen (Simon, 2010) rather than be an equal partner). While both approaches have strong points, they rarely challenge power structures between museums and communities, which is often a source of change in other co-creation projects (Jubb, 2017). Giving communities more agency in the museum's practices was therefore a central aim to Sally Tallant's strategy as the museum's incoming director in 2019.

The outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic a year after Tallant's arrival offered the opportunity to adjust the museum's community engagement approach, including its Community Organiser role. This position had usually been filled by a local artist, whose responsibility was to connect with the community in Queens and be a sounding board for what they required from the museum. Instead, one month into the pandemic, Queens Museum hired their first Community Organiser with a public service background, whose extensive local network instead offered the chance to set up a collaboration with a local food bank. Soon Queens Museum ran a regular food bank service from its building, bringing in hundreds of families every week who would otherwise rarely visit the museum grounds.

While the food bank project was emblematic of the Arte Útil-inspired 'usership' notion (Bruguera, n.d.; Wright, 2013) that characterises a museum led by its constituents' needs (Byrne et al., 2018), findings from the fieldwork

also highlighted two contradictions within the co-creation process of the project. The first is the seeming paradox of bringing a Community Organiser – who represents the community *outside* – *inside* the museum. Co-creation theory generally distinguishes a dichotomy between the established museum on the one hand and the independent community constituents on the other (Jubb, 2018), but hiring a community member onto the museum workforce to represent communities collapses the two opposites. None of the existing spectrums in the literature mention this possibility (Simon, 2010; Brown et al., 2011; IAP2, 2014; Jubb, 2018; Torreggiani, 2018), which arguably shows the limitations of these models, but also begs the question of whether a community co-creator who depends on the museum for their income is in a position to fully represent their community within the museum. It could create a power dynamic that could interfere with the Community Organiser's agency to challenge and change ways of working across the museum, as they become more institutionalised. While the interviewees were conscious of these questions, many felt unsure about their answers, and also in the literature on co-creation discussions on the ethics of conflating the museum and community oppositions are glaringly absent.

A second contradiction is apparent between the non-arts nature of the food bank and the artistic scope of Queens Museum as a contemporary art museum. The project evoked reflection among interviewees about fitting it into the curatorial framework. After deciding that there should be an artistic connection, the museum designed a creative activity programme alongside the food bank service halfway throughout the project (Queens Museum, n.d.), to make it fit with their organisational mission retrospectively. Interviewees describe this as a 'reactive' approach, which they indicate as being characteristic to most community engagement work they do at the museum. While one states that it allowed them

to quickly respond to increased levels of uncertainty during the pandemic, the interviewee also suggests having a more strategic vision to their co-creation strategy could in fact forge much deeper relationships with co-creators. The interviewee says: 'Our work is very touch-and-go around needs and urgencies. Questions about what kinds of relationships we have, we want to have, and who we want to be in those relationships, are not currently being discussed.' It suggests Queens Museum's approach favours taking action over refining its co-creation vision, and stands in contrast to the Whitworth Art Gallery example, where the institutional vision sometimes seemed more defined than the practical plan for action.

Based on the interviews, knowledge about co-creation practices does not seem equally distributed across the museum's workforce. On the one hand, some of the staff interviewees with much co-creation experience find they sometimes lack opportunities to apply it. One staff member for instance says that 'there are parameters around what experience is invited and what is not' and argues that many experienced staff are not given the agency, time or resource to build a more strategic approach to co-creation, quoting professional hierarchies as the main restrictive element. On the other hand, other staff members indicate that they do not feel very confident in their knowledge of co-creation at all. Indeed, the definitions that these interviewees give of 'co-creation' include types of collaboration that omit any community involvement or shifting of power structures, which is entirely at odds with how co-creation is defined in the literature (Simon, 2010; Jubb, 2018). The irregular co-creation expertise levels may result in some staff taking a superficial approach to co-creation that could put the relationships with communities at risk. Taking a more structural approach to embedding co-creation across the entire organisation, rather than only incidentally, might grow the collective level of co-creation expertise across the staff body.

This issue might be addressed through a new museum-wide co-creation programme for 2021, called the *Year of Uncertainty* (Queens Museum, 2021). It involves a funded invitation to community partners and local artists to develop projects with the museum and includes setting up a network of 'co-thinkers', to help shape it. The expected shape and outcomes of the project are left open to make space for input from the external co-creators. Their only brief is a set of broad themes: care, repair, play, justice and the future. A staff interviewee states: 'I don't know yet what it will prove, but by the end of the project, we should better understand how we can function [as a museum]'. It embraces the concept of uncertainty by accepting working with the unknown and celebrating alternative voices. However, when structurally embedding the co-creators into the museum for the duration of the year, the museum might have to take the interviewees' suggestions of putting the organisational and systemic structures in place to support genuine co-creation, or the project might risk becoming tokenistic. Moreover, a more structurally embedded approach could extend the impact of the one-year project beyond its duration, by both increasing the organisational levels of co-creation expertise and by supporting more systemic institutional change.

On the surface Queens Museum seemed to have put communities at the centre of their work in 2020, even going beyond their curatorial remit as a museum to fulfil an urgent food equality need among its local communities. However, looking more carefully at how co-creation is embedded within the organisation, the approach seems reactive and the Covid-19 response almost opportunistic. Thinking more strategically about developing relationships with co-creators and building a stronger theoretical framework to position the role of the Community Organiser would give staff more confidence in their co-creation work and strengthen the impact and legacy of their projects. The 2021 *Year of Uncertainty*

programme offers an opportunity to turn the uncertainty of the pandemic into more structural organisational change for the museum.

## Conclusion

This study analysed how in two contemporary art museums in the UK and US co-creating with communities has challenged and informed organisational change throughout the eventful year 2020, as well as where greater change needs to occur. When comparing the two case studies, three general observations can be made.

Firstly, the examples showed how both organisations chose to deal with the uncertainty of the situation by committing to listening more actively to the needs and demands of the communities they serve, through Community Board structures and a Community Organiser position. They thereby offer a voice to these communities, but also likely guarantee their own relevance as a museum within their local ecologies (Simon, 2016). The examples also suggested that pandemic-induced uncertainty is not dissimilar from the risks that come with the open-endedness and experimental nature of co-creation work, and that this notion of not knowing the outcome at the beginning of a project might be capitalised upon as a strength for a new programme and practice, such as through the Year of Uncertainty programme.

Secondly, the case studies show that community co-creation work, and the reflection on power structures that it invites, can be a powerful tool for changing organisations from within. The acuteness of the Covid-19 crisis and the acceleration it caused in some co-creation projects highlighted the shortcomings of these projects even more clearly and inspired changes and adjustments to be made. For the Whitworth this included a stronger board structure, and for Queens Museum it involved a new programme that engages with

community co-creation more structurally.

Thirdly, the unprecedented nature of the Covid-19 pandemic and the speed of change that it demanded created an environment that to most co-creators was clearly experimental, and where failure was not condemned, but learning could happen together instead. This sense of collective development might explain why interviewees at both museums described a perceived acceleration of their progress with co-creation work. The pandemic has brought forward new ways of thinking about collaboration and the change prompted by them provided an efficient opportunity to incorporate larger and more fundamental organisational change (Morris, 2020). This change does not just extend to community relationships, but also to museums' reflection on their own practices, power distributions and assumptions, and the necessary adjustments for building a more equitable ecology for its communities.

One of the interviewees suggests the uncertainty produced by the Covid-19 crisis might also provide for a more agreeable and less risk-averse environment for decision-making in the future. They argue that the collective experience of the pandemic will help people to reflect favourably on the relevance and necessity of change. Simon (2020) makes a similar argument by proposing that this shared understanding could increase support for what would in any other time have been seen as high-risk decisions, because 'the difference in stakes in 2020 is significant': in a crisis situation there is more to win than to lose. Arguably, the pandemic might therefore not only be regarded as an accelerator for change in museums, but also as a catalyst for a new way of managing change and risk, and as a positive force that can bring new opportunities.

The experience with managing co-creation projects both case studies already had before the pandemic, including their flexible approach to negotiating change and their embracing of uncertainty, might have laid

the groundwork for how they managed the pandemic. Future research might make comparisons between these museums – who embraced the changeability of co-creation work well before 2020 – and museums who had no such experience to build on, to see how their strategies differed and if the co-creation expertise in these museums offered a stronger foundation for dealing with crises.

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# Weaving as a tool to advance Human Rights Museology at Museo Casa de la Memoria in Medellín, Colombia

Isabel Dapena

The arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic has forced museums to rethink their roles as agents of social change in society. A human-centred human rights museology might offer a more equitable and fair type of museums: attuned and responsive to their communities, committed to fulfill their missions but guide its visions by being aware of the present reality that impacts our societies, especially sectors where inequality and oppression exist. By focusing on the Museo Casa de la Memoria in Medellín, Colombia, which has modified its work during the pandemic to continue its processes and exhibits, this chapter demonstrates that the definition of human rights museology can be more productively informed through the analyses of alternative practices developed by the marginalized groups which have been historically excluded from such conversations and decision-making processes, in this case scenario through the interests on the textile creations, memories and narratives of weaving groups and victims.

*Keywords: human rights museology, community work, resilience, textile narrative, weaving groups.*

## A House-Museum is built on trust

A little less than a decade ago, the Museo Casa de la Memoria (MCM) was built at the center of the city of Medellín, the second largest city in Colombia, with over 2.5 million inhabitants and more than 450,000 direct and indirect victims of the armed conflict (Martin, 2019). It is the only public memory museum that has been physically built in Colombia. As a young institution belonging to Mayor's Office, it bears the responsibility of building local memory processes interrelated with the complex reality of a country and a city surviving in the midst of an armed and socio-political conflict – even after the Colombian Government and the Colombian Revolutionary Armed Forces: FARC guerrilla, signed the peace agreement. New or pre-existing forms of violence from different outlawed groups - paramilitaries included - exercise power and influence over

the territories while certain economic, political and social interests impose changes in the daily life of various vulnerable communities still affected by multiple modes of victimization; being forcibly displaced; suffering exclusion, discrimination, detentions, and enforced disappearances; dealing with *invisible borders* impeding safe mobility through the territory; attacked through selective assassinations, sexual and gender violence, and even through State crimes, among many other atrocious acts that constitute the dispute for power related to illegality, drug trafficking and the Colombian armed conflict.

The MCM encompasses plural memories of violence and resistance related to the damage inflicted in Medellín, its methodology stands out internationally it is recognized for its work in the construction of memory and for generating ways to heal the relationship of a country with its violent past, as well as by





Figure 1. Long term exhibit at the MCM; Medellín: Memories of Violence and Resistance  
Photo credit: Isabel Dapena

its way of telling the transformation of the conflicts in Medellín and Colombia through art, images, and stories. For the MCM, creating trust bonds between communities and the Museum as part of the State has been and is a fundamental pillar. This purpose, as an organic relationship, has been both strengthened and weakened, since it implies costs, time, perseverance, and commitment, becoming every time a more complex situation for the future of public entities depending on terms of office. The trust supporting the coherence of the Museum has been achieved through processes that enliven new forms of relationship with past history, present realities and future possibilities, demands and challenges; through the generation of narratives based on Participatory Construction of Memories (PCM), allowing inclusive and representative, critical and reflective memory exercises to address fear, pain, horror, survival, resistance, resilience; through symbolic and metaphorical representations generating new meanings, contributing to understand and overcome the armed conflict and violence that have impact Medellín, Antioquia and Colombia in different ways.

In this scenario, MCM has managed to create and maintain constant bonds with weaving communities. One methodological pillar of the MCM to develop research, exhibition and cultural projects conceived from individual



Figure 2. Facade of the MCM, loom created by a Union of Seamstresses in Bogotá in 2020.  
Photo credit: Isabel Dapena

and collective living memories, which are transformed to the extent that they are fed by different voices and imaginaries that, nourishing on memories, have the possibility to reaffirm or reassess the references of the past and present. (Dapena, 2018).<sup>1</sup> For instance, with the weaver women community from La Loma settlement - that was twice forcibly displaced - It began collaborating through a participatory process in the realization of the exhibition of the *House-Museum* in 2013. This relationship originated when the photo documentalist Luigi Baquero created an exhibition project with the Museum in which he intended to provide new spaces for families and neighbors to meet after having been forcibly displaced for the first time in 2011, and for the second time in 2013. The centerpiece of the exhibition was a colorful textile work created by the community. Men and women were taught to weave, and while knitting each knot, and sometimes they spoke about moments of supreme pain and intense tension. *En el cielo Cabemos Todos* (We all Fit In Heaven) was a relief and, beyond that, it sowed hope. Today the actions of *Tejiendo Vida* (Weaving Life) and *Tejedoras del Cañón* (Weavers from El Cañón) weaving groups are stronger in La Loma, sharing culture and territory between generations, being a benchmark for other territories.



Figure 3. Processes before the exhibition: *The life being woven*. 2015.  
Photo credit: Adriana Roca.

Since 2016, a weaving group called *Costurero Abierto. Tejedores de memoria - CA-TM* (Open Weaving Group -Memory Weavers) formed mostly by women from various neighborhoods of Medellín started at the MCM. They persisted in creating a group of *weavers for memory*, after their participation in the meeting on textile narrative experiences from Latin America, in conjunction with other regional-local, national processes related to the exhibition *La vida que se teje* (The life that is woven, a project of University of Antioquia, Museum of Antioquia, Peasants Association of Antioquia), *Conflict Textiles* physical and digital collection, and the MCM, in which communities shared the polyphony of woven memories that narrate their stories, pain and experiences around social, political or armed conflicts, building collective memories and social ties.

Since then the CA-TM inhabits the MCM welcoming newcomers, growing and expanding their networks, ways of exchange and learnings. They participate in the creation of narratives in various organizational, social, pedagogical and exhibition processes, even during the Covid-19 pandemic. Likewise, the community of La Loma still participates in the creation of exhibitions with the Museum, being the most recent: *Rupturas y Arraigos, sin/sentidos de ciudad* (Ruptures and Roots, city non|sense) involving generational integration in a creation-reflection processes

and integration of languages between the bets of weavers and the cultural youth groups.



Figure 4. Graffiti workshop session carried out by young graffiti artists and weavers, from La Loma village. November 2020.  
Photo credit: Fabián Orozco, visual artist.

### On the Approach Museology and Human Rights Museology

The affected communities and groups of victims, from urban and rural territories, as well as several citizens of Medellín were consulted through an extensive process of citizen consultations in various territories of Medellín -with different actors and population groups-, carried out by *Corporación Región* for the Program of Attention and Reparation to Victims of the Armed Conflict by the Medellín Mayor's Office, to conceive this space based on the notion of *House* as a permanent space for meeting and conversation, and in the notion of *Museum* as a space to not forget, to preserve what is said. Thus, this is the basis of a pedagogical space that promotes social change, connects sensitive reflection and understanding, individually and collectively,

inviting to link the individual experience and the position as a society within the conflict.

The transformations, actions and tensions of museums based on the *new museology*, *social museology* and even the *ecomuseum*,<sup>2</sup> reveals that memory appeared involved in relational action, so the questions addressed in *critical museology*, where the place of enunciation of the discourse generate meanings from the encounter with the visitor in a more autonomous and self-understanding process based on open tools and messages are fundamental for a museum of memory. The curatorial bet of the MCM is positioned in the *approach museology*, it has tried to give visitors / communities their own place and space and has managed to promote scenarios of reciprocal and open interaction, fundamental in its museological and pedagogical, creative and reflective commitment, where people are actively involved (Hernandez, 2007).<sup>3</sup> Six years after the opening of the long-term exhibition *Medellín: Memorias de violencia y Resistencia* (Medellín: Memories of Violence and Resistance)<sup>4</sup> followed by forty temporary exhibitions conceived and staged - all which was made under my curatorial leadership from 2011 to 2020 -, related to various problems, victimizing events and types of affectations and social, cultural and community responses of coexistence, resilience and peace building, the Museum currently reconnects with the vision that was planned to be achieved in 2020 through its main exhibition (2011-2013), its first conceptual framework (2014) and the vision set forth in the statutes of its public establishment (2015).<sup>5</sup> These notions essentially show that the challenges and vision of the Museum for the next years - and decade - must be thought, once more, in response to the realities of today's society, communities and institutions, regarding to the complexities they face in times of crisis, where citizens participate and are taken into account; especially the most vulnerable, excluded and oppressed, who do carry out the practices that influence human rights

museology and, as it, fulfills the museum role as agent of social change.

The methodology used by the *House-Museum* is based on the PCM. Through the analysis of context and what the communities live and enunciate; the exchange of experiences and life stories; the possibility of creating and sharing in close proximity with them and with the public, it later presents the meanings, voices, expressions and speeches of the people and their territories. It leads to analyze and identify findings and clues that allow the elaboration of relevant, simple, or complex thoughts and of research approaches around the problems, not only seen through sufferings<sup>6</sup> but also through the manifestation of life in its multiple forms of existence and re-existence. These issues contribute to constitute the collection<sup>7</sup>, which a few years ago began to be organized in a digital repository that demands important commitments to attend the strategic development of the Museum in order to comply with its founding manifest and fulfill the trust that communities place in it as executor.

Understanding the context above, many reflections have been collected based on personal conversations and semi-structured interviews with women who have been part of PCM processes, through the textile narrative exposed during the last five years, as well as on the numerous conversations and moments shared during the curatorial and museographic orientation within some temporary exhibitions created along with allies, communities and victim organizations, such as: *Archivo Vivo Memorias de Madres, Medellín | es 70, 80, 90 – La ciudad habla, En el Cielo Cabemos Todos, Gramáticas de la Paz y el Conflicto, Narrativas del Desplazamiento, and Rupturas y Arraigos, sin | sentidos de ciudad* (Live Archive of Mothers' Memories; Medellín | es 70, 80, 90 – The city speaks; We all Fit In Heaven; Grammars of Peace and Conflict, Narratives of Displacement; and Ruptures and Roots, city non/sense; respectively). In those exhibitions, weaving, embroidery and

sewing actions, and many other techniques in exercise of resilience practices, gave rise to empowerment and citizen agency to promote a *human rights museology*.



Figure 5. Detail of the exhibit: *Weaving with the Thread of Memory*, 2020. Photo credit: Isabel Dapena

Isabel González, researcher and curator of the exhibition *La vida que se teje* (The Life Being Woven), manager of the traveling exhibition *Tejer con el Hilo de la Memoria, puntadas de dignidad en medio de la Guerra* (Weaving with the Thread of Memory: Stitches of Dignity in the Midst of War, work of a collective of Colombian weavers, made up of women survivors of the armed conflict);<sup>8</sup> Roberta Bacic, founder and curator of the *Conflict Textiles collection*<sup>9</sup> and curator of the exhibition *La vida que se teje*; Luna Acosta, visual artist, performer, researcher and feminist, co-author of *El Peso de la Nación* (Nation's Weight), durational performance where two artists weaved during one year a huge flag with various groups and the general public, with clothes donated by migrants in various public spaces both in Chile and Colombia);<sup>10</sup> Doralina Carvajal, victim of the forced disappearance of her son Fabio Alexander Agudelo, her mother and one brother, member of *Red de Tejedoras por la Memoria y la Vida* (Weavers network for memory and life) and member of the *Corporación Madres de la Candelaria - Founding Line* - and CA-TM; Orlinda Mesa,

victim of forced disappearance of her son Andrés Felipe Mesa Ramírez, MCM mediator and CA-TM counselor; Yecci Bell Posada, MCM mediator and CA-TM counselor, internship student of *Tejiendo los Hilos de la Memoria* (Weaving the Threads of Memory, project about local history carried out by University of Antioquia and supported by the MCM); Magaly Alzate, Colombian singer and CA-TM participant; Rosa, and Emma Mora, victims of forced intra-urban displacement and members of the *Grupo de Tejedoras del Cañón* (Weavers from El Cañón Group) from La Loma village. These women brought reflections around the following issues.



Figure 6. Members from La Loma village, victims of forced intra-urban displacement. November 2020. Photo credit: Isabel Dapena

### Textiles as a human rights tool in the MCM

#### *Recognition of self-identity and healing*

In Medellín, all sectors of society have been affected by violence regarding drug trafficking and the Colombian internal armed conflict, and all inhabitants have been directly or indirectly victimized by violence. Direct victims have suffered in body and soul the horrors of a war lasting for decades and that has engulfed and affected the entire country due to disputes between guerrillas, paramilitaries, outlawed organized groups, and the State forces. However, Medellín has also seen the birth of people, movements

and organizations that defend and continue to protect life, leaving an important legacy of reconciliation and resilience for the city.



Figure 6. Orlinda Mesa, victim of forced disappearance of her son Andrés Felipe Mesa Ramírez. MCM mediator and Open Weaving Group -Memory Weavers counselor. Photo credit: Sandra Ramirez

Many women of the CA-TM that have suffered from the conflict, also belong to other organizations, such as: Madres de *la Candelaria* which meets every Wednesday in a sit-in to publicly denounce and to make visible the forced disappearance of their relatives, performed next to the atrium of Nuestra Señora de *la Candelaria* cathedral in the center of Medellín since many years; others are mothers, wives, daughters and sisters of murdered or disappeared persons in Comuna 13 of Medellín, during the military *Orión* and *Mariscal Operations* raised by the Public Force in conjunction with members of the Cacique Nutibara Paramilitary bloc. These women come to the Museum to dialogue and this space becomes a kind of conversation where, in the words of mediator Yecci Bell Posada, 'I open my heart, I share personal stories, it helps individual and

collective healing in the midst of an unjust and inequitable system'.

However, while many members of the CA-TM did not recognize themselves as victims of the armed conflict and started by saying 'I am not a victim', when they began to narrate personal experiences and tragic situations, and after listening to their stories it turns out that they are. That shows that a reflection on the construction of identities in a violent city and on the identity of the victims' families is needed to formulate the questions from their own voice and experiences and to contribute to that acknowledgment (Posada, 2021).

In recent decades, Medellín has become a benchmark for social, urban and resilience transformation in the world: even so reparation and non-repetition can be two of the most controversial issues when reviewing the reality of the country, since the victims demand truth and justice to achieve that.<sup>11</sup> On a personal level, the possibilities of mourning vary. There is a great advantage towards reparation when it connects with ways of handling it, like moving from one place to another so people can value and reconnect with their own life and the lives of others. Cultural and creative processes as well as reflective and narrative processes are fundamental in this stage for individual and social healing. During one of the creation-reflection sessions of the MCM exhibitions along with some weaver communities, it was possible to show how mourning can change the conception of self-identity, both in individuals and communities, as evidenced in the following testimonies:

*At least we are no longer victims, I do not consider myself a victim. All these workshops have taught us to see it differently. The conflict, the pain, have changed, it helped us a lot to understand them (Weaver, 2021).*

*What happen within the group is magical, wonders happen here, we become more united, we get to know*

*each other better, so this growth is also conversation, sharing, growing, crying, laughing, singing (Mora, 2020).*

*I managed to improve personally, to get ahead. The group has helped us too much, having focused my life in a different way, having focused my life in another way... having formed this group... having been distracted radically changed my life and redirected it and gave it another meaning. (Alvarez, 2020)*

Thus, healing, overcoming trauma, bonds of trust, solidarity, and empowerment are some of the benefits of encounters around embroidery, weaving and creation with textiles in the MCM.

### **What to do at the local or global level to reaffirm weaving as a tool for the human rights museology?**

*Strengthen weaving groups, textile narratives and networks*

At the local level, there is a need to generate methodological strengthening of community initiatives for textile creation; to collect the memories arising regularly; to understand what happens through weaving exercises, with participants who generate affective bonds sharing experiences with others; and to acquire deeper knowledge around this practice, which can be fundamental for the way of narrating a story of life or a violent event, and makes possible the connection with other exercises at the national level. (Posada, 2021).

*Preserve, make visible and circulate textile narratives as a museum and community matters.*

Many weaving processes are not very visible, as it is a highly feminized and little valued activity where those who enunciate it have, in many cases, limited aesthetic resources and do not enter the appreciation circuit. The

role of museums as the MCM has to do with legitimizing narratives that strengthen social processes. Thus, it is fundamental to make visible voices that might not be the most recognized, in some cases due to de lack of politicized or strong discourses, even if their representations are not of specific memories or stories. The political value in the action of weaving must be recognized as an act of resistance used to stand up in the face of tragedy (Gonzalez, 2020).

The work within the CA-TM seeks to denounce, raise awareness and acknowledge, as a valuable exercise done with the hands and thoughts of people, where there is a story being told; so if it is hidden, who are they going to tell it to? How are the generations that didn't live it going to know it? It is possible to find ways to spin and tell those stories through their own voices, to tell the tragedy, but also their own path of resilience and grief where pain has begun to heal (Alzate, 2021). By knowing the *Arpilleras Collection*<sup>12</sup> of the Museum of Human Rights of Chile it is possible to understand the power of the textile narrative. There is still a long way to go in Colombia with regard to the methods to evaluate these weaving techniques. Although it is an object of memory that must be preserved, the function of a textile piece -which is alive- is the action of documenting and situating a narrative beyond the purpose of presenting it within an exhibition (González, 2020).

Textile pieces and practices must have a space within museums because they are equivalent to a type of language. If a museum has photos, posters, memoriabilia and maps, and record materials that may remain for posterity, the weave itself has, so to speak, layers of history. This content cannot be replaced with photography, the latter is a replica, the woven piece is the original material; many textiles have a smell and the stories told while weaving or embroidering can almost be perceived. Museums have the ability to preserve these pieces in better conditions

than an association or social organization. In Colombia, it is important to use all possible narrative resources to capture the history of the conflict, and to have memory institutions with adequate places to store its archive properly; digital collections are useful, but in no way replace the exhibitions of original works (Bacic, 2021).

In the case of *Peso de la Nación* (Nation's Weight), when asking how to guarantee the conservation of a flag woven between communities from Colombia and Chile, no place was found to host it due to the lack of infrastructure within memory museums (Museum of Memory and Human Rights of Chile and MCM), and finally, an art museum assumed it. In that sense, memory museums must move forward to handle, activate and preserve the textiles that represent these memory records (Acosta, 2021).

*Promote contact with the experience of textile narrative between territories in-situ and ex-situ*

An institutional space is needed so fabrics are not affected; even so, conservation is a discussion to be carried out by each process. Defining whether or not to conserve a textile has a great impact on their relationship with those who live it. (Acosta, 2021)

Many people live nearby MCM, at Caicedo and Boston neighborhoods. In the past, the lot where the Museum is located used to be a large hamlet that afterwards was evacuated and demolished within the framework of the development of the Comprehensive Urban Project of the Northeast Commune of Medellin. Today the Museum invites to the weaving sessions not only the groups of victims but also the general public, especially people living in this area (Carvajal, 2021).

The material produced in textile narrative processes must be both in the museum as in the territory, being essential that the communities have access to their creations in

an appropriate way, since their preservation is not necessarily a matter of centralization or regionalization of the material. Material coming from a place can also coexist in other territories and it is necessary to promote networks that manage to unite -through the transit of fabrics to other places- instead of separating; so that the different experiences can be shared in each place and textiles from other places or countries can be exhibited, gathering the different conflicts and the different typologies, techniques and creations. Each museum could have small repositories of real, touchable textiles, where the pieces would be cared for, and at the same time could be lived (Bacic, 2021).

*Embroidering community, embroidering peace, embroidering memory, weaving networks in Latin America for justice, for truth, for memory, for the peace of each people, here we are together and we continue to grow for the peace of this world. (Andrade, 2017)*

### Some conclusions

The MCM is committed to go further, generating continuity in the processes and bonds with communities and people as political and rights subjects. Opening new doors, wondering about the real impact of citizens and their communities in making strategic and structural decisions regarding the daily and future course of the *House-Museum*, integrating methodologies of citizen consultations on a regular basis. Practicing a truly inclusive and *human rights museology* is fundamental to its processes and towards trust, especially in the case of textile narratives, since people, citizens and related communities express that the MCM has the responsibility to maintain, strengthen, welcome, make visible, preserve and circulate them with greater attention and forcefulness.

Ten years after the inauguration of the MCM, and five years after the foundation of the CA-

TM, it is appropriate to spin a narrative around the textile creation processes developed (Alzate, 2021) and build an exhibition using the collection and allowing commemoration (Carvajal, 2021). The need to have a fixed space requires a solution to achieve the generational exchange and the appropriation of this inherited knowledge, which is useful to all; where to build narratives, to string them together (Posada, 2021).

It is time to formulate a new vision for the MCM in which the historically excluded and oppressed communities, diverse and heterogeneous populations, can contribute by raising their own gaze, defining their own interests and needs, and jointly analyzing the viability towards their solution. This involves reopening the ways of deciding along with the community about the use and enjoyment of space and the management of collections, research, and their own memories.

This vision can be idealistic and uncomfortable, but the associative character between social organizations and the State based on joint efforts allows generating unimagined transcendental impulses.<sup>13</sup> Thus, the needs and demands for the future projection of the MCM are driven by the proposals and questions raised by the communities from their experiences, as has happened in this case when talking with them about weaving as a tool towards a human rights museology.

## Notes

1. More information in the article Un Museo Casa para la Memoria Viva (A house museum for living memory) <http://revistas.urp.edu.pe/index.php/illapa/article/view/1843/1753>

2. The center of the discourse is no longer the object in the building, but it focuses on communities, inhabitants, visitors and curators - turning towards relations with the territory, heritage and sustainability from the bond (René Rivard, cit. in Corsane et al. 2009: 52),

3. Francisca Hernández Hernández states that 'the emergence of the museology of the approach or point of view It is about integrating the visitor into the exhibitions and ensuring that their relationship with them is meaningful, assigning it a role and spaces of its own. The visitor becomes the social actor par excellence and, consequently, they will not be the objects or knowledge that constitute the basis of the relationship between the visitor and the exhibition, but it will be the visitor himself who tries to be actively involved.'

4. Conceived and produced in its museography, exhibition design and curatorship led by Isabel Dapena (2011-2014), through joint work between three museums: Museo de Antioquia, Museo Casa de la Memoria and Parque Explora, and a research initially led by Corporación Región, later by Gerard Martin; as a project of the Program of Attention to Victims of the Armed Conflict, the Secretariat of Citizen Culture and the Medellín Mayor's Office. Various professional teams were specially selected for such purposes, among which stands out the work developed with the museographers Yesenia Rodríguez, Carolina Giraldo and the curators Alejandra Estrada and Verónica Mejía.

5. Vision set forth in the Main Exhibition manifesto of intention (2013): In 2020, the long-term exhibition of Museo Casa de la Memoria is a reference as a museum experience, based on the recognition and dissemination of historical memory of violence, develops pedagogical processes based on the visitor's experience as an opportunity to generate reflections on the role of each one in society in the face of violence, as well as the recognition of victims. / Vision set forth in the former Conceptual Framework (2014): Museo Casa de la Memoria will be an open place in permanent dialogue with the city, through which a significant contribution is made -from educational, cultural, investigative, outreach, mobilization, reflection and debate scenarios, and from symbolic, moral and subjective dimensions- to non-repetition,



and to respect and appreciation of life, as fundamental principles that help setting a horizon of peace and reconciliation. Vision set forth in the statutes of its public establishment (2015): Museo Casa de la Memoria will be recognized as a HOUSE for dialogue and the amplification of the voices of victims around their memories; a MUSEUM that enhances memory as political action, claiming the needs of collective mourning, the defense of human rights and symbolic reparation actions; and an inclusive and representative citizen REFERENCE, oriented to the understanding of the past and the cultural transformation of the logic of war as bases for the collective construction of peace, at the local, regional and national levels.

6. The museums discussed on envisage a genuine human rights culture and the extension of its protection for everyone. The museum's exhibit historical and contemporary situations involving gross violations of rights. It encourages that there is an emerging group of museums of human rights as custodians of what one could call a 'human rights culture'. (Duffy 2001: 16).

7. The recently published book, *Las Colecciones del Museo Casa de La Memoria de Medellín*, makes a critical look at the interior of the museum's processes towards the development of its collection and promotion, based on documentary information system based on digital humanities. <http://coleccion.museocasadelamemoria.gov.co/>

8. Shown and shared for three months with different weaver groups in Mexico (Mexico City, Guerrero and Chiapas). <https://vimeo.com/151735928>

9. Conflict Textiles is home to a large collection of international textiles, exhibitions and associated events, all of which focus on elements of conflict and human right abuses. Conflict Textiles is an 'Associated Site' of CAIN (Conflict Archive on the Internet) at Ulster University, Northern Ireland. <https://cain.ulster.ac.uk/conflicttextiles/>

10. July 23, 2016, the artists Luna Acosta and

Paula Baeza Pailamilla began the durational performance *El Peso de la Nación* at the Museum of Memory and Human Rights, which also took action in the MCM and in representative places of Medellín in 2017, weaving with passers-by. Art action that links, through weaving, the concept of nation, migration and labor exploitation. <https://www3.museodelamemoria.cl/exposiciones/el-peso-de-la-nacion/>

11. (2013) It joined the Global Network of Resilient Cities, which today operates under the Global Coalition initiative: 'Cities for a resilient recovery' and sought to be declared as subject to collective reparation. Later, it derived its actions towards a Strategy of Guarantees of Non-repetition and Culture of Peace for Medellín.

12. More information in <https://web.museodelamemoria.cl/publicaciones/arpilleras/>

13. For example, *Núcleos de Vida Ciudadana* (NCV), an Urban Development strategy of the Presidential Council for Medellín established in 1991, to confront the problem of violence generated by drug trafficking in a national and international dimension with a participatory methodology with the communities. With their knowledge and know-how, they were protagonists in the establishment of feasible and viable diagnoses and solutions to priority issues identified. The results were materialized through projects in which the process led to training, and community organization around their operational management (Dapena, 2020).

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# Doing the work: Exploring black history in Bristol Museums

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In 2020 museums faced increasing calls to decolonise, both from internal as well as external groups. While decolonisation refers to the questions of objects, the history of collections and the restitution of looted artefacts (see for example Hicks, 2020), it can also embody the question of authority, representation, and power in the museum. This paper discusses a collaborative digital project between community partners and Bristol Museums that started in 2017 and was designed to produce new online content on local Black history. It discusses the process of the engagement, as well as benefits and challenges and argues that decolonisation is also the reassessment of institutional structures and routines, as well as the recognition that the museum is a white space in which ethnic minorities can feel excluded. Decolonisation therefore, is also the introduction of multi-perspectivity and approaches of museums to enable and strengthen multiple participation and conversation.

*Keywords: Black History, Communities, Museums, Decolonisation*

*The museum is not the building  
The museum is not the display  
The museum is precisely the exchanges  
of knowledge between the people and  
the greatest enabler of participation.*

(Rassool, 2020)

During 2020, the museum sector faced the twin challenges of a global pandemic, and a new wave of global support for the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement that followed the killing of George Floyd. In Bristol, this reached a climax when the statue of the contested historical figure and slave trader Edward Colston was toppled on June the 7th 2020 during a BLM march. The incident sparked fresh conversations around the contested heritage of the former slave-trading city and galvanised a process of decolonisation in the UK and European museums. Although this was already present in museums, it became more salient in the wake of the

toppling of the statue and the growing recognition that institutionalised ways of seeing and structuring the (Western) world often discriminated against minority groups. Museum professionals began to articulate how their own institutions were complicit in discriminating against minorities, as they held on to structures and concepts of museums that were rooted in colonialism and informed by colonial pasts (e.g., National Trust, 2020; Carver and Gaschke, 2020). Critique surrounded the question of whose epistemology and authority shaped narratives in the museum, and, as a result, whose experiences were represented. Often these narratives were considered mono-directional and dominated by white middle- and upper-class experience, with the white curator talking about 'the Others' and never vice versa (see Boast, 2011). 2020 saw a growing commitment to decolonisation from a variety of institutions and increasing conceptualisations of the legacies of

colonialism and its effects on societies, people, and museums. These reflections are not completely new but build on an ongoing discussion of the museum as an important tool to narrate and perpetuate images of the nation, that include and exclude certain groups (Hall, 1999, Macdonald, 2003). Increasingly however, this aspect is discussed under the term 'decolonisation' and embodies not only a critical reflection of collections and provenance, but more so authority, narratives, epistemologies, and knowledge production of the museum (Jorek, 2020; Shoenberger, 2020).

According to Giblin et al.:

*Museum decolonisation is active, radical and potentially all-encompassing, having the scope to include almost any aspect of museum work, from recruitment to representation, audience engagement to repatriation, acquisitions to architecture, design to labelling, conservation to storage, and so on. Museum decolonisation is open to multiple interpretations, from the sharing of collections via long-term loans or repatriation to the challenging of curatorial, directorial, scientific, and other forms of established expertise to empower previously excluded voices and generate conversation and debate. However, in contrast to its potential reach, it is harder to define what decolonising should involve in museum praxis, and there is no consensus across the museum sector. (Giblin et al., 2019: 472).*

Recent calls for decolonisation underlined the perception that discrimination, bias, and barriers, particular against minority groups were embedded in the coloniality of the institution, a structural disposition that excluded historically discriminated individuals and groups by default. Recent academic discussions on the topic also pointed towards systemic and underlying power relations, and argue that the continuity of these structures,

reproduces the same benefits and beneficiaries of colonialism and enslavement today (e.g., Hicks 2020a, 2020b; Andrews, 2021). This exclusion is often subtle and not immediately visible to the people acting on it, because everyday practices in the museum can hide these mechanisms through practices and routines (see Macdonald 2003). Boast argued that these power and ethnic divides amongst others become salient through the praxis that community partners often are not monetarily compensated for their work in the museum, but rather are expected to for free. While community partners are welcome to share their knowledge, it is not always clear what the benefits are for these partners. Therefore, Boast concluded that besides the best efforts, museums remain asymmetric spaces of appropriation in which: 'the Others come to perform for us, not with us.' (Boast, 2011: 63). Handler and Gable describe a similar ethnic disparity between Black<sup>1</sup> and white museum guides in their famous study of Colonial Williamsburg. Comparing knowledge dissemination between Black and white museums guides, they argue that the latter were reluctant to address enslavement in the open-air museum on the colonial period and therefore did not include information on the 'other half' in their tours, the enslaved. Handler and Gable argue that this was because these guides felt uncomfortable and unsettled with the topic. But rather than admitting to this, they labelled their own practice as 'just telling the facts', implying that including the 'other half' in their tours, was not factual. Unaware of their own bias these guides perceived their praxis of writing the *others* off of the history of the Colonial Williamsburg, as neutral and factual rather than the continuation of the exclusion of enslaved people (Handler and Gable, 1997; Gable, 2014). Das and Lowe have discussed how natural science museums in general, and the British Museum in particular, often glorify the stories of their wealthy founders and early collectors, such as Hans Sloane, but overwrite the contribution of others. This practice not only champions and magnifies the contribution of upper class

collectors, explorers, and scientists, but hides achievements and knowledge of enslaved or indigenous people (Das and Lowe, 2018). Therefore, critique has suggested that museums are reproductive for middle and upper class values, but fail to attract members from other backgrounds who do not feel included or representative in these narratives or setting (e.g., Bourdieu and Darbel, 1997; Hall, 1999; Watson, 2007 and 2014; Graham, 2016; Dawson, 2014, 2018; English, 2015). Kehinde Andrews argues that museums still embody the same structures that champion the contribution of the white upper class to history, science and art, and not only hide the contributions of others, but alienate them from engaging with the institution. He gives the example of Philadelphia where although the Black community is the majority ethnic group, museums and art galleries look very similar to the UK, featuring mainly white artists and contributors of the past and the present, while Black artists serve as an add-on (Andrews, 2020).

This post- or decolonial perspective criticises museums not only for the possession of looted artefacts but for the embedded colonial structures that influence how societies understand themselves and their histories inside the museum, as well as the grand narrative of the nation (Hall, 1999). As a response, museums increasingly assign themselves to a role of social justice and undoing these structures (Kinsley and Wittman, 2013; Wintle, 2016), often through enabling multi-perspectivity as well as participation, however not always allowing a critical examination of museum practice, routines and authority (Robert 2014). There is a shift however as the '[c]ommon usage of 'engagement' and 'contact zone' in the museum and heritage sector has been a sign of the genuine desire to welcome all publics into their institutions' (Ashley, 2014: 262).

This paper discusses a collaborative digital project between community partners and Bristol Museums that started in 2017 and was

designed to produce new online content on local Black history. It looks at the engagement of members of these underrepresented groups and asks the question of how the institution negotiates access. The Participation Team of Bristol Museums felt that the museum's exclusivity was mainly because engagement and narratives were dominated by white and middle-class values that needed to be addressed and challenged in order to create a more inclusive space. Aware of the problematic history and connotations of Bristol Museums, the Team not only needed to show a certain sensitivity towards community partners and difficult topics, but also create a sense of reciprocity. While this was achieved through the payment of the community partners for their work, the text argues that the engagement prompted more benefits, such as the opportunity to gain qualifications, develop skills or express oneself in an institutional setting. Additionally, it raises the questions of what allows meaningful engagement, from following a passion or appetite for something related to the museum; experiencing joy, a sense of being valued or acknowledged; learning opportunities; spending leisure time. The engagement also created communal benefits in disclosing hidden stories, engaging in (and claiming) the prestigious space of the museum as well as creating positive stories and opportunities (and roadmaps) for future generations.

The paper argues that the museum also benefitted from the project, firstly because these projects and relationships with members of Black communities made it easier to react appropriately to the demands for Black history narratives following the toppling of the Edward Colston statue, and secondly because it helped provoke an internal process of decolonisation through the confrontation with alternative views and perspectives. After all, when the statue of Edward Colston was thrown into the river Avon and calls for museums to examine colonial histories grew, Bristol Museums was to some

extent prepared to provide a platform for this pressing debate.

The research on this project was conducted between 2018-2020 with Bristol Museums both on site and digitally. 'Bristol Museums' refers to the group of five museums run by Bristol City Council which include two large museums (Bristol Museum & Art Gallery and M Shed) and three historic houses (Blaise Museum, The Georgian House, and The Red Lodge). Bristol Museum & Art Gallery is an Edwardian building that holds a range of collections including natural history and local and international art, therefore we use museums and art galleries interchangeably, although we are aware of some differences. M Shed is the social history museum of the city and opened in 2011 after a transformation from the industrial to the social history museum. It now focusses on the social history and contemporary life of Bristol and will display the Edward Colston statue after reopening in May 2021. Significantly to this paper, M Shed seeks to create content in collaboration with Bristol's communities and contains, for example, a co-produced section on the trafficking of enslaved Africans and has a history of engaging with different forms of community centered approaches. They could all be described as experimental and explorative, starting with people responsible, seeing and trying to tackle underrepresentation.

### **Tackling underrepresentation: Data and experiences**

In late 2017, the participation team and digital team at Bristol Museums saw an increasing demand for narratives surrounding Bristol's Black history and sought to establish an experimental advisory steering group for a Black History Project (BHP). Their teams felt that there was a need for this project firstly because the museum's community and youth engagement work had highlighted the fact that many Black Bristolians did not feel represented by the service and did not feel their history was included. And secondly

because the Digital Team monitored an increasing online demand for content related to the transatlantic trafficking of enslaved Africans. Data patterns from Google Analytics suggested that there was a particular appetite for such content from teachers. Therefore, the two teams wanted to start a project to co-create new, representative, and easily accessible digital stories on Bristol's Black history. They also wanted to tackle the underrepresentation of Black and ethnic minorities in the museum's narratives, audiences, and workforce, as the 2011 census showed that although 16% of working age Bristolians were from a Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME)<sup>2</sup> background (Bristol City Council 2012), only 7% of the staff at the museum identified as being BAME. The number decreased further up the pay scale, with currently no BAME member of staff in positions of strategic authority, after one senior manager of BAME background left the museum for a CEO position in another museum in 2020 (see Jorek, 2020).

The project therefore sought to address two problems: the lack of Black representatives on the team and the lack of monetary compensation for external partners. In previous museum projects, the expertise of external communities was often expected to be given on a voluntary basis, which often diminished engagement and was perceived as a devaluation of this particular knowledge and expertise. The two teams argued that this also reinforced structural disadvantages because those who traditionally collaborated with museums and gave their time for free (or as part of their jobs) were often already part of the academic and cultural spheres within which the museum sits. In addition previous engagement work had highlighted the necessity of adhering to the credo: 'Nothing about us without us'.<sup>3</sup> Therefore the team decided to recruit largely Black partners on a paid basis to set up a Black history steering group.

As previous experience had demonstrated

to the teams that open calls would often not bring in members of underrepresented groups, they used existing networks and turned to partners that had previously worked on the museum's Black history projects, to guarantee relevant community partners. Amongst others, they invited a highly respected historian on Bristol's Black history; a history student at University of Bristol; a local activist and filmmaker who specialised in Black history and identity; and an artist who had staged work in Bristol's museums on the transatlantic trafficking of enslaved Africans. As a next step, the BHP group joined curators and other staff at the museum to create a public survey for a deeper understanding and conceptualisation of 'Black' history. The survey included questions on 'what should be included in Black history' and 'what was missing from the museum's narratives'. It produced a shortlist of key topics, which the BHP group prioritised and then appointed individuals to write a text on them, usually someone who they perceived to be an expert in this topic or field. The BHP group also suggested potential authors for each topic, who then, following input from museum staff, wrote easily accessible short pieces to be published on the museum's website. It was important for the group that the authors held final editorial rights, and texts were only published with the full consent from the author.

Some of the first stories that were published on the museum's website were a Black History timeline reaching back to the 16th century to show the long presence of Black people in the city, and '19 Black Bristol women who've made a difference' addressing and highlighting both, the underrepresentation of women and Black women in the museum's narratives.<sup>4</sup>

When the Colston statue was toppled in 2020 and demand on digital Black history content spiked, the BHP achieved great popularity. Its digital nature made it readily available for national and international audiences and

the stories had seen over 84,000 visits by December 2020. One story on the trafficking of enslaved Africans had over 15,000 views in June 2020 alone and could be described as the most popular content on the service's website. The next most popular content had just over 600 views during the same period (excluding holding pages or visitor information pages).

As the project developed and the remit of the group widened, members increasingly took up advisory/consulting roles such as advising on potential exhibitions, new acquisitions, or upcoming events often related to Black history and decolonisation. The group also grew in numbers particularly because the original members had mainly African-Caribbean ancestry and deemed it necessary to include more representatives from different Black communities in the city. Particularly communities with Somali and West African heritage have been growing during the last 30 years and the Somali population has become the biggest ethnic minority group in the city (Mills, 2014). The BHP group felt that to be representative of the different Black communities in the city, members of these communities needed to be included.

As with the original recruiting process, the museum invited partners from previous collaborations and members used their own connections to find participants in what could be described as a peer-to-peer approach. The latter was deemed more effective because, as mentioned above, previous engagement work had shown that individuals needed to be approached directly as public calls for engagement or open positions often failed to reach members of specific and excluded communities, and secondly, peer-to-peer approaches helped to build trust between individuals and the museum, particularly with those individuals who were disconnected from the sector.

Although the group reflected that this procedure may be slightly biased and only



rely on 'the usual suspects', they agreed that it would help to ensure the inclusion of those who they felt were underrepresented and indeed the approach led to some new members who had had little to no previous engagement with museums before the appointment.

Members of the group often discussed the overall whiteness of the museum, which made it difficult for Black and Brown people to access the institution. One member of the BHP group stated in a conference, where the project was presented, that: '[...] in a very white institution, there are only so many people that you can turn to like you who'll be represented in that space.' And that the museum '[...] always kind of served to see Blackness and Black people as subject, not an active participant within that history.'

Although she described herself as: 'a general history lover, [who] always volunteered at museums [and] love[s] being in that space', she stated that it needed special invitation for members of Black communities to participate in the museum because the history of structural barriers against these groups. She argued:

*The reality of the case is, people of colour, who still have a lot to say, are not going to feel comfortable in these spaces, unless they're invited in, they're not going to fight to be in these spaces, unless they know that there's something worth fighting for. And even if they are fighting to be in that space, it's still very much up to you [museum staff] whether or not you're willing to give up a little piece of that power to make that happen. [...] The only way that I would get into that room [the museum], even if I fought for it, is if they let me into that room, if they welcomed me into that room and said that we want to hear from you. And sometimes that's literally all that it takes [...]. (Reflection of participant at a conference).<sup>5</sup>*

The museum's Participation Team were aware of these barriers that discouraged people from engaging with the museum space and had established a certain sensitivity that was helpful for the understanding of people with different backgrounds and needs. One of these modes were a general acceptance that barriers were in place and feelings of alienation were a sign that the institution failed these groups rather than vice versa. Another one was the ability to listen to the members of the group, acknowledging their 'lived experience' in addition to the 'academic knowledge' that was salient in the museum space. The Participation Team increasingly tried to establish the BHP partners as experts in their own right and used their expertise as a critical perspective to advise on different projects, occasions and decision making in the museum. These decisions impacted the development of exhibitions and acquisition of new paintings and were increasingly used and relied upon by 2020.

### **Agency, reciprocity and passion: Creating meaningful engagement**

As the project not only aimed to diversify the museum's narratives, but also to provide opportunities and benefits for the participants, staff also addressed and tried to fulfill claims of reciprocity. There were several rewards for the participants, despite being paid, that will be discussed briefly. As Howard et al. argued for the case of museums and archives in Australia, museum professionals were not primarily motivated to work in the museum because of payment, but more so, because they could follow a passion (2016). The introduction of Black history and the exploration of stories related to Black experiences was a passion some of the participants held and could follow further in an institutional setting. It can be argued that besides getting paid, following a passion, and being valued created a sense of meaningful engagement that helped to establish confidence to engage with the museum space as well as outside of the museum.

Participants increasingly benefitted from the platform the museum provided and the increased public visibility. This was important because it helped creating new networks as well as providing employment opportunities outside the museum. One member of the BHP group recalled that participating in the project was, 'the best thing on my CV'. Another member, who had also worked on another project on decolonisation with the museum, secured a role in the diversity department of a national TV channel.

The project also created a wider visibility of Black communities and stories in the city and signaled that the museum recognised structural barriers and made efforts to deconstruct them, through the narration of Black history as well as the appreciation and recognition of knowledge and expertise of partners from these groups.

Generally, the project was perceived as successful because partners engaged regularly over a period of two years (and counting) and the museum continued to increase engagement with people of this background, both with members and non-members of the group. Only one member of the group raised concerns and wanted to leave the group because she felt the museum was not dedicated enough to interrogating its colonial past. However, she agreed to stay involved once it was explained that this was a longer process in which her involvement and conversation was important. Other members sometimes struggled to fit their engagement into their schedules and needed to skip meetings or could not meet deadlines. The payment of hourly rates allowed for some flexibility in attendance, and although this could be criticised as just 'project based' small scale work, it allowed participants to engage besides having or establishing their own careers outside of the museum.

### **Decolonising the museums: conflicting views and perspectives**

One of the main internal conflicts about the

project arose around the question of what is valued as 'expertise' and who was perceived as an expert. The teams responsible saw being Black itself as a vital element in a project to tackle the underrepresentation of Black communities and argued that the group added important perspectives and knowledge through their lived experience. Therefore, the Participation Team referred to the BHP group as partners and 'experts' rather than 'just' participants or volunteers. However, this valuation of Blackness as an expertise led to some resistance of some members of staff who could not see the need for such a group. They argued that besides the fact that most members of the BHP group did not have 'full academic' or postgraduate training, which could lead to 'dumbing down', the museum had already produced exhibitions in collaboration with members of Black communities, rendering this group redundant. They also argued that the project undermined academic tradition, by championing Black voices over others regardless of their academic background. However, as Handler and Gable (1995) and Das and Lowe (2018) discussed, traditional museums work can be read as 'championing' specific, traditionally rather upper-class voices and the invitation of the Black partners could be understood as an extension of voices and knowledge in the museum, rather than a diminishing of it.

The project therefore challenged the perspectives of some members of staff, especially some of those who have spent years, and sometimes decades, establishing their careers and consolidating their own expertise. While the Participation Team argued that lived experience also included years and decades of experience and commitment, and that it was important to contrast the dominant 'white, middle class' perspectives of the museum and its role, others felt that it refuted academic expertise. The BHP group also mirrored the white set-up of the institution and confronted some members of staff with their own whiteness.

Although the project was not established to scrutinise curatorial work by adding Black perspectives, it perhaps did so. And although it was not primarily set up to confront museum staff with their own whiteness, this was one side effect.

The payment of members of the group, in contrast to other museum volunteers who gave their time and expertise for free, was therefore criticised, even though the payment was not only set up to acknowledge the expertise of the group but also to respond to the fact that the sector very often still required exclusive qualifications from rather exclusive institutions. In addition, although the payment showed some valuation of the contributions and the narratives that the BHP group added, many of the group were self-employed and the hours they gave to the project would otherwise mean lost income. While this perspective on expertise and consultation was unsettling to some members of staff, others increasingly relied on the group and utilised the Black partners for decisions, such as planning exhibitions or outreach events. Rather than understanding the introduction of Black voices as a threat to academic expertise, some saw the group as an important resource for knowledge and perspectives, and a way of accessing and bringing in perspectives and experience of members of Black communities.

## **Conclusion**

As the discussion of the project has shown, from the engagement with the BHP and working with partners from Black communities, there were some gains and challenges for the museum as well as for the external partners. The project was an attempt to reassess the role of the museum and challenged museological practices in as much as it gave members of excluded communities a voice, recognition, and payment, and therefore a platform and opportunity to engage with the museum. For the continuation and success of the project, i.e., the continuing involvement of the external partners, it was

important to build lasting relationships, which involved creating an atmosphere of respect, trust, and acknowledgement, and an atmosphere in which participants felt valued. To avoid appropriating knowledge, partners were compensated monetarily, and authorship was clearly stated. The continuous work helped to build trust between the museum and members of excluded communities. Acknowledging difference and lived experience was important in this engagement, as well as a willingness to see, understand and minimise the barriers that are in place.

Due to this commitment, the museum was able to provide content on Black History in the city and was then well-placed when demand surged after the toppling of the Edward Colston statue and interest in Black history (particularly from members of the Black community) increased. Furthermore, some participants gained skills and experiences that were useful for their own personal development and enabled other employment opportunities, while others were provided with a platform for the expression of their passions and beliefs. Although it is not clear yet whether the younger members of the group may want to go into the heritage sector afterwards (and no one has raised this so far), the project is still ongoing and continues to provide space, engagement and representation that might inspire more Black people (and others) to visit and engage with museums and even consider pursuing a career in the museum sector. Both, the Participation Team and the Digital Team now have staff from this specific background and are increasingly diversifying the staff body.

It was therefore also a learning process for the museum as it helped show that engaging with partners from underrepresented groups provided learning opportunities for (mostly) white middle class museum professionals and gave insights to life and experiences that a white middle class academic did not have. Involvement of members of Black

communities became more common and was increasingly 'normalised' in the museum's work. However, as we have shown, the project also generated conflict and criticism: mostly because it challenged more traditional understandings of museum practice and academic expertise. The refutation of the project could also be described as a symptomatic reaction symptom of some white museum staff who were confronted with their whiteness, however more research and analysis would be necessary to substantiate this claim.

One criticism levelled at both this project and also the museum's recent Uncomfortable Truths project is that neither disrupted the physical space of the museum. The former exists only in digital form and the latter in the form of podcasts, though they are accompanied by physical labels signposting visitors to them. Both provide examples of participatory practice and create space for underrepresented voices, but neither forces fundamental change to the pre-existing museum exhibits. A casual visitor to one of Bristol's sites would likely not be aware of the results of either project. This does not necessarily diminish the benefits of either approach, but it is a reminder that these projects are blueprints for further work rather than ends unto themselves. If the projects simply continue in their current form, they run the risk of becoming a smokescreen that obscures the underlying structural and systemic mechanisms of exclusion. Although it was arguably successful, the Black History Project is also small scale and, as and as one member of staff reflected: 'the ambitions of such work need to be far larger. Ultimately, the aim must be to eradicate the need for such groups by creating museums that are representative, inclusive and participatory at their very core.'

## Notes

1. We capitalise Black throughout the text because the term refers to a collective expression of identity of people racialised as

Black. We capitalise Black in the same way as we capitalise Asian, Hispanics, Jewish, etc., and use the terms Black and Blackness as conceptual tools for the expression of and analytical lenses to describe this collective experience. We also use the term Black and Brown people or communities, because we noticed that this descriptor to categorize human experiences and construct a group identity, is often used by this community when self-referencing. We do not capitalise white, because there is not the same collective experience of being read as white or group identity.

2. We are aware of the criticism raised at the category BAME and only use it in this context as this was used by the Council and internal surveys. Otherwise, we refrain from the use of the term BAME.

3. The credo 'Nothing About Us Without Us' stems from the disability movement and describes that no policy should be decided without the participation and involvement of people affected by the policy (Charlton, 1998). It has amplified from the disability movement and is used for projects and policies related to other minority groups.

4. See <https://www.bristolmuseums.org.uk/stories/bristols-black-history/> and <https://www.bristolmuseums.org.uk/stories/19-black-bristol-women-who-have-made-a-difference/>.

5. For anonymisation purposes we cannot name the conference.

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## Piercing the museum: Situated practices from Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid

### Lucrezia Gigante in conversation with Jesús Carrillo

Jesús Carrillo (BA, MA, PhD) is Professor of Contemporary Art History at the Universidad Autónoma de Madrid. Previous to this role, he has been Head of the Cultural Programmes Department of the Reina Sofía Museum from 2008 to 2015 and General Director of Cultural Programs of Madrid City Council from 2015 to 2016.

*LG: Following the years spent as Head of the Cultural Programmes Department of the Reina Sofía Museum from 2008 to 2015, you have maintained an active collaboration with the Museum in the capacity of museum professional and member of the community. Can you briefly introduce the project Museo Situado that took place during the pandemic?*

*JC: Museo Situado is an assembly in which neighbours and members of the institution sit and do activities together. Its idea was prompted by/its formation followed the death of Mame Mbaye in March 2018, a Senegalese street vendor who collapsed at the door of his home in Lavapiés, not far from the museum, after being chased by the police. The death of Mame, described by the authorities as provoked by 'natural causes', instigated massive protests and a night of riots in Lavapiés. As Ana Longoni, Director of public activities of Reina Sofía says, the museum could not be blind to the struggle for life taking place out of its gates.<sup>1</sup>*

During the quarantine, meetings (now online) became more frequent, two or three a month, and dynamics more agile and effective, as if the participants had intuitively learnt how to operate the hybrid machinery of *Museo Situado* in an emergency. The assembly rapidly took part in the tide of solidarity that was rising in the neighbourhood. This could only happen because some of its most active members were the key elements in the existing support networks of Lavapiés. Some others, involved with the museum either as staff or interns, worked hand in hand with them in setting up campaigns, seminars, workshops, which used the museum as a (virtual) place and platform. Since March 2020, *Museo Situado* has collectively curated 10 (online) seminars in the series Voces Situadas addressing relevant issues related to COVID-19 and its effects (caring, community organisation, migrations, ageing, new normality...). It has also participated in communications campaigns about the suspension of evictions, the legalisation of migrants, the employment of translators in health services, or the labour rights for domestic workers.

*LG: How does this project relate to the other public activities of Reina Sofía Museum? Or to the exhibition programme, for example?*

*JC: Museo Situado started as a part of the public activities program without any*

structural connection to the exhibitions or to any museum departments. Its activity increased exponentially during lockdown, precisely when most of the standard functions of the museum were suspended, acquiring an unexpected relevance and visibility. One of *Museo Situado*'s projects, Language or death, was chosen to represent the institution during Museums' Day in May 2020. The project was developed by Argentinian artist Dani Zelko, and dealt with a fatal incident reported in the neighbourhood during the pandemic: Mohammed Hossein, a neighbour of Bangladesh origins living in Lavapiés, died of Covid 19 without any medical aid after constant calls to the health service, because he could not be understood. Individual members of the exhibitions department eventually collaborated with *Museo Situado* to design a mobile device for campaigning and participating in demonstrations. Unfortunately, this action had to be finally cancelled due to the COVID-related restrictions. It is hard to predict if *Museo Situado* will pierce the institution beyond its public and educational activities. This would involve a structural transformation of the production dynamic of other departments to open space for participation and dialogue. The current state of exception may help to erode the rigid walls dividing the museum (both vertically and horizontally).

*LG: In reaching out to communities that do not usually engage with the institution – and the Lavapiés neighbourhood is a case in point – there is often the risk that the museum and its representatives will be perceived as outsiders. How do you think this insider/outsider dynamic applies to Museo Situado? How did the museum, for example, approach the communities it sought to engage?*

JC: The public activities department of Reina Sofía Museum opened in 2008 as a laboratory of institutional experimentation, following the hypothesis of the 'crisis of the institution' which the by then new Director,

Manuel Borja Villel, announced as one of the ruling principles of his mandate. For years, the department bore the tensions of having to negotiate simultaneously with social agents and with the increasingly rigid bureaucracy of museum administration. After six years of wrestling with the institution, I quit as Head of Cultural Programs in 2015. The arrival in 2017 of a new public-activities Director, Ana Longoni, founding member of *Red Conceptualismos del Sur* with a long experience in negotiation processes, refreshed the energies of the department. Those members who were trained in the practice of knitting networks with external agents were prompt to join Longoni's plans, as I was myself. The number of Museum staff participating in the *Museo Situado* assembly increased rapidly. The precariousness of some of the workers involved and their pre-existing engagement with different forms of activism became suddenly visible. This provided a new perception of the social fabric of the institution: people with whom to share needs and demands, but also knowledge and projects.

By 2018, the department had the necessary connections with activists and associations of Lavapiés. Some of its members had participated as individuals in many demonstrations and campaigns. Bringing those connections to a Museum program born with the aim of being more than that happened rather smoothly.

*LG: And how do you think the museum – or any cultural institution in a broader sense – can build relationships with their publics and, more importantly, sustain them over time?*

JC: My institutional practice in the last decade approached the museum as the laboratory for a radical democratisation of the institution at large. Strategically, this meant suspending the divide between in and out and starting a negotiation with social agents, collectives, activists who were claiming for a new institutionality, instead of



addressing singular individuals as audience, consumers or users. I am aware of the rather 'utopian' or 'Sisyphic' nature of this enterprise, as well as of the changing terms in which these negotiations may take place in these confusing times. The transformation of the museum structure as a device of mediation, negotiation, public debate, knowledge and care will not take place (beyond theoretical and artistic discourse) from within or without the active participation of agents from civil society. We cannot do it alone. We need to become conspirators (I wrote about it a few years ago) to engage with others beyond the walls of the institution.<sup>2</sup> The future of the museum depends on the future of society, and I believe that museums should be useful in the preservation and development of society.

*LG: What aspects of Museo Situado should be applied more broadly to museum practices to inform the work of the 'caring institutions'?*

JC: I can list a few features in this regard: horizontality, recognition and real respect for difference, debate, negotiation, mutual care, and a sense of purpose that is easily lost in institutional practice. Caring, for me, means to do what we think/feel that "must" be done, even if existing institutional procedures may not help, and being aware that the terms of this mandate are political and must be discussed collectively, through public open debate.

*LG: As Head of the Cultural Programmes in previous years and collaborator of the Reina Sofía to date, you have had a front-row seat to the changes that were brought to bear on outreach practice during the pandemic. If the challenges are somewhat patent, what have been the opportunities for museum participation? Has the pandemic questioned existing practices, exposed tensions or accelerated dynamics along which we can (or should) rethink participation in museums?*

JC: The time de exception opened by COVID-19

intensified the pathologies already diagnosed for more than a decade by museum critics and advocates of a new institutionality. And at the same time, it showed the direction we should necessarily take towards the future. The immediate effect of the quarantine was complete devastation: the closure of museums and art centres and the sine die interruption of programs left many artists and cultural workers unemployed. The current situation is still anything but promising: on the one hand, there is the sinking of tourism and of the leisure industry upon which the economy of most institutions and art projects depend; on the other, the ban on gathering big audiences due to the current social distancing measures, which has been so far the way to gauge the social impact of art institutions. Finally, the diversion of public and private resources towards areas essential for the sustainment of life, among which art and culture are not counted. The crisis has not only shown the extreme fragility of the foundations of the cultural system. It has made clear that it needs urgently to reconnect with the social energies sustaining life as a whole.

In this context, many voices are advocating that cultural institutions should assume a caring role. In a time when we feel vulnerable and threatened, self-care, the care of others and the care of our environment surely become a priority. The museum, linked as it was to the industries of the 'superfluous': tourism and entertainment, should find a place, so we hear, alongside the institutions providing the 'necessary': hospitals and schools. A few museum directors have rushed to announce their intention to move towards what they call 'caring institutions', probably aware of the shift of social priorities and the danger of becoming irrelevant in the announced 'new normality'. But, as Manuel Borja-Villel already warned us, caring should not involve leaving criticality aside, quite the opposite. Caring is political, as feminism insist. It is 'conflictual', as Maddalena Fragnito reminded us, and it requires a radical reconfiguration of the art institution. In Autumn 2020, the *Bureau of*

Care, a group of artists, social workers and activists in collaboration with a heterogeneous cluster of European institutions, started an open process of discussion to move from narcissistic institutional critique to a real institutional transformation now that the demand for new forms of collective care feels urgent.<sup>3</sup>

In order to do that, the institution should revert its hermeticism, its fortress structure, and, as Ana Longoni says, open itself to the vitality and experience of fighting for justice of social movements. If citizens do not take a critical stand and participate in the dramatic reinvention of the institution that is to come, as Pantxo Ramas has recently remarked, they will become just 'patients', and institutions increasingly efficient vehicles of control.<sup>4</sup>

*LG: Over the last months, with COVID-19 bringing global tourism to a standstill, museums have had to redirect their efforts towards their local audiences, trying to be resources for their communities. Do you think this will have a long-term impact on how museums play a role in their urban, immediate contexts?*

JC: The Italian activists Marco Baravalle and Emanuelle Braga, from the Institute of Radical Imagination, advocate for an urgent paradigm shift that should address not only the cultural institution but the city model as a whole.<sup>5</sup> According to them, we should move from the 'creative city', attractive for capitalist investments, but extractive of social energy and lethal for the life of its citizens, towards an ecofeminist 'caring city', which places the sustainment of life at its core. Museums and biennales should stop being an extension of airport terminals for the transfer of international artists, curators and tourists and have a new role within the city and towards its inhabitants. The current paradigm of the city is collapsing, and the museum should stimulate and participate in an open debate among citizens about the way we live and the way we want to live.

*LG: Language shapes our realities, and the words we choose reveal a great deal about the ideas and values informing our thinking. In participation work, language is even more important as we need to be aware of its exclusionary implications. For example, the participants of Museo Situado (literally 'situated museum') refer internally to the project as 'Piercing the Reina'. This is a tangible example of how participants preferred an expression that made them active agents. Why do you propose the term 'constituencies' instead of visitors, publics etc?*

JC: We do not have a direct translation of the word 'constituency' in Spanish. This term came about during discussions within L'Internationale Museums Network, as a way to move away from the circular question about who our public/customer/user might be.<sup>6</sup> By using constituencies instead, we explicitly inverted the terms, recognising that, as democratic institutions, museums are merely the temporary crystallisation of ongoing processes. Rather than providing cultural services to anonymous users, demanding clients or world-class customers, museums should be places where people perform, expand and recharge their role as constituent members of society. Art, being understood as a commonality and not as the exclusive good of a privileged few, can be an effective antidote against our anxious and depressive libidinal regime – the antidote capable of shaking our conscience, activating our energies, unlocking our prejudices, assembling our wills and triggering our imagination to transcend material barriers. Participation, recognition of difference, listening and care should have a central role in this 'constituent museum'. A reflection on the material basis of cultural production, on the labour structure and the distribution of resources, should be the priority in this direction.

*LG: Would this role be more easily fulfilled if museums catered primarily for their local*

audiences, therefore building sustainable and direct relationships with them? What would be the implications for museums targeting global audiences?

JC: I believe that museums always speak from a position, there is an 'hic et nunc' component to their practices. With this being said, they speak from a place but not necessarily to locals. *Voce Situadas*, for example, managed to connect the museum with audiences from Latin America during the pandemic.

LG: Could you tell us about the *Glossary of Common Knowledge*?

JC: The *Glossary of Common Knowledge* (GCK) was conceived by the members of Moderna Galerija Ljubljana, as a reaction against the hegemony of the Anglo-American art world with regards to the terms we use, who is using them and how they relate to reality and action. When we started in 2013, it became apparent that any relevant transformation of the art system should have started from language. The imagination of a pluralistic constellation of voices replacing the tyranny of the Western-centred system, probably echoed the non-alignment movement which the former Yugoslavia had been leading during the Cold World. The GCK has promoted a situated use of language versus an abstract, de-territorialised and disembodied one. Participants speak from their specific contexts and experiences, with an emphasis on the struggles and conflicts involved in their situations. Speaking and listening are central to the GCK. Common knowledge is a political horizon to move to, not a pre-given instance, and it involves a radical transformation of the art world and its institutions.

LG: *Laboratory* is another buzzword in the museum studies field, often used to describe institutions as platforms where we can push the boundaries of established traditions. Sometimes, though, experimental practices are met with a certain degree of institutional

resistance. This links to your idea of the 'Conspiring Institutions' as places where we work collaboratively as agents of change to overturn structures that no longer serve the purpose of a truly democratic institution. Can change really begin within institutional practices then, within the museum walls?

JC: Institutions tend to repeat themselves, and this is not necessarily a bad thing in our unstable and uncertain times. But museums today are under enormous pressure. The existing neoliberal regime makes them behave like zombies which strive to survive and grow by connecting with financial powers and speculative real-estate operations. They are becoming part of a production chain where art and culture are resources to be transformed into economic wealth. COVID-19 has shown how fragile and futile this situation is. As I said above, our awareness of this institutional crisis should lead us to devise new mechanisms and to rehearse actions that challenge the existing inside/outside divide in order to reinforce the constituent foundations of the Museum. Conspiracy (literally 'blowing together') is a working concept which recognises the failure or the limits of the system to transform itself and involves the intervention of non-identified agents and some degree of risk. Art is traditionally performed by the usual suspects, and its operations do not have any 'real' consequence (one 'radical art' exhibition replacing another). Conspiracy changes that by connecting unexpected agents and cracking the normal functioning of the system. Conspiracy also means not to leave the institution altogether, but to pierce it, occupy it, use it, work with it, dance in it.

## Notes

1. Museo Situado Manifiesto can be found here: <https://www.museoreinasofia.es/museo-situado/manifiesto-etica-catastrofe>.
2. Carrillo, J. (2017). 'Conspiratorial institutions? Museums and social transformation in the

post-crisis period'. WrongWrong 19. [Accessed on 29.06.2021 <https://wrongwrong.net/artigo/conspiratorial-institutions-museums-and-social-transformation-in-the-post-crisis-period>].

3. *The bureau of Care* is an interdisciplinary research program about the ethics and politics of care [<http://thebureauofcare.org/>].

4. Pantxo Ramas, activist and researcher, is a member of L'Internationale [[https://www.internationaleonline.org/people/pantxo\\_ramas/](https://www.internationaleonline.org/people/pantxo_ramas/)].

5. The Institute of Radical Imagination is a think-tank inviting experts – political scientists, economists, lawyers, architects, hackers, activists, artists and cultural producers to share knowledge on a continuous base with the aim of defining and implementing zones of post-capitalism in Europe's South and the Mediterranean [<https://instituteofradicalimagination.org/>].

6. L'InternationaleOnlineLibrary is a continually expanding selection of publications of critical theory, postcolonial studies, geopolitics, museum studies and other cultural fields [<https://www.internationaleonline.org/library/>].

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# Engaging with the public in the age of pandemic: An interview with the curatorial team of the 2020 Special Public Project series “What begins and What Ends” at OCT Art and Design Gallery and OCAT Shenzhen, China.

Xueer Zou

Since the spring of 2020, museums and art institutions worldwide have been experiencing temporary closures due to Covid-19. Looking back at various responses made by art institutions through the year, there is a type of project that particularly draws my attention; those events that are designed within the internet and can only be delivered on an online platform. The 2020 Special Public Project series titled ‘What begins and What Ends’<sup>1</sup> jointly curated by the OCT Art and Design Gallery and OCAT Shenzhen is such an example.<sup>2</sup> I was impressed by the public engagement part in the series, showcased by ‘O2 Online Chat’.

At the beginning of 2021, I virtually met with three members from the curatorial team.<sup>3</sup> Interestingly, although they were still working in field of museums public programming, they were currently separated, as a part of three different institutions in two cities. It may had been a long time that they had not seen each other. They started to share their recent projects, most of which are offline. It reminded me that museums have remained closed where I live, while their life and work seemed to have returned to normal. It made me even more curious: How was the series going on? Why did they choose such an

approach? What does the ‘What Begins and What Ends’ series mean to them? With these questions, I bring them back to the end of March 2020.<sup>4</sup>

*ZXE: How would you describe the context when ‘What begins and What Ends’ was curated?*

WYQ: I remember that it was at the end of March, we were just back to work. Both OCAT and OCT Art and Design Gallery had established exhibitions, but we still didn’t know when to welcome the audiences back. Considering engagement with the public, our department could be the most flexible one in the whole institution. Most of our activities can easily to be moved online. So, talking about the motivation of curating the special series, it was partially because we had to.

LY: Yes, exactly. We had started two exhibitions in January, and then we had the Spring Festival break. Originally, we were supposed to come back in February, but with Covid-19 the whole world got turned around. When we came back at the end of March, the museums were also about to open again. However, we felt it was not right to simply reopen with the

previous exhibitions, which did not connect to the context. Because the current situation affected everyone, physically and mentally, we could not pretend that nothing had happened. It was hard to convince myself to get back to the museum without reflecting on it, and I believe that there was a consensus among the whole team that we have to do something. So, it was not that we placed ourselves in the audiences' position and tried to work out what they wanted, but in fact, we were trying to find out our position again though the whole series.

*ZXE: I know the 'What begins and What Ends' is a broad series including many types of projects; some face towards the art system; while some are more productive. But in terms of public engagement, why did you choose the methods you chose for 'O2 Online Chat'?*

LY: During the lockdown, there were many different rapid responses from other museums and galleries. For public engagement, some organisations even launched podcasts with article readings. There was already a batch of activities curated when we were ready to respond.

I had a strong feeling, so many voices came up together in a short time. The outbreak of Covid-19 was an unprecedented situation for the whole world, and everyone was trying to respond in their own way. We all have heard many debates about various facts, seen many analysis and predictions by scholars, and read theories of philosophers about the current situation, intensively. However, for ordinary people like me, a sudden influx of highly concentrated information is indigestible. We need time and space to process what we have experienced and need a space to express our thoughts. So, we found our museum might provide such a platform. That was the starting point of the project. Look at the name, 'O2 Online Chat', we were really trying to produce some oxygen.

What she just described was fascinating. I wondered how these approaches are applied in practice, so our conversation jumped into details. First, let me give you a whole picture of 'O2 Online Chat'. There were four sessions in total, whose themes were, 'When internet is the only access to life', 'Public Sphere and Independent Thinking', 'Another Eye' and 'Conflicts and the Cement of Society'. Three themes can be understood literally, but the 'Another Eye' uses poetic language to refer to the key workers during the lockdown. These four topics together are a portrayal of life during the first few months of the Pandemic.

*ZXE: How were these four themes decided?*

CH: It was very quick, honestly. When we brainstormed, we listed some topics. In fact, they were also what we cared about. It was a shared concern, not only for the period, but also for now. So, this part was not difficult for us; the rest of the work was to summarise and tidy the ideas into themes.

We also considered the order of the four topics. The first one 'When internet is the only access to life' served as an outline of the whole context, and also as one of the reasons why we were paying extra attention to the second theme, 'Public Sphere and Independent Thinking'. In that period, 'Another Eye' opened up another perspective, while the last one provided a kind of summary for all the sessions.

*ZXE: Did all the sessions have the same participants ?*

LY: We were expecting a different group of people in each session. However, after the first session, some participants showed their willingness to continue to join the rest of the three sessions.<sup>5</sup> So, there were a couple of people who stayed with us from the beginning, some of them even took part in the 'Collaborative Writing' event, later.

WYQ: Interestingly, these participants were

people who had never been to our museum before. Some of them did not live in Shenzhen; some were even in different time zones. That is the most beautiful part of having a project online, isn't it?

Yes, that was amazing. Although the museum doors were closed, we still witnessed a new connection that was established, it even engaged a wider group of audiences.<sup>6</sup> It also reminds me of my own experience. I saw the post about Online Chat in April, on the official WeChat public account of the museum, which is the most popular way of promoting events in China, when the place I live in had just entered the first lockdown. I wished I could be a part of it, and scanned the QR code to sign up, but couldn't complete the registration form. I could not tell what exactly stopped me, but the form was special. Unlike most other public events which just ask for basic information, this form was more like a survey, requiring more details, includes motivation for joining and ideas on the topic.

*ZXE: How many people participated in each chat session? I know there was a special registration form, what did that design help achieve?*

LY: We tried to limit the number of people for each session around ten, because the aim of whole project was to get more people to talk, and we believed that a smaller group would make it easier. And yes, the registration form was designed to help us target people who wanted to express their thoughts on specific topics and intentions of joining the sessions.

CH: We also contacted everyone who filled in the form to further explain the purpose of the event and listen to their thoughts on the topic. This process also helped us in preparing each section.

WYQ: In addition, we also considered that as this chat was initiated by us, as an art institution, we hoped it could have some connection with art and design. So, we also

invited designers and artists to take part in as one of the participants for each session. Like in the session about key workers, we invited a delivery man, a parcel courier, and a security guard. Their own experience is irreplaceable, and this group of people rarely ever had access to the museum's activities.

LY: Another reason to limit the scale is the consideration of self-censorship. We encourage everyone to communicate, but we were also worried about the conflicts that could be caused by different arguments, like what we saw on social media. Learning more about our participants in advance might help us prevent such a situation from happening.

*ZXE: So, did anyone use the camera during the chat?*

WYQ: No, we used only audio. It was for privacy reasons, and people could choose if they wanted to be kept anonymous or not. We found that most people used a nickname, while some used their real name. And we also noticed that people were more likely to talk without the camera.

*ZXE: That makes sense. And thinking about privacy and self-censorship, when organising a public engagement project, you would have to think about how to deal with sensitive issues, especially when some topics are very likely to contain many different opinions. How did you consider this at that time?*

LY: Basically, there was a host for each session, and we all had an outline. So that it would be hard to lose control of the direction of the whole chat. When hosting, we had also been vigilant not to let the conversation fall into any kind of emotional reaction. We tried to let everyone know that the purpose of the chat was not to distinguish between the right and wrong, so not to waste energy on convincing others. Besides, we also reminded everyone that if they encountered anything that makes them uncomfortable during the session, to please come to us first and any

radical approaches were not recommended. This was to protect the participants as well as ourselves. Fortunately, the four-sessions, all went well.

ZXE: So, the host was an essential role, right? Can you tell me more?

WYQ: We took turns to be the host for each session. We were all aware that the host was just a guide, who throws some phenomena and questions to encourage everyone to discuss. Unlike hosting conventional talks or seminars, the host was not trying to present any personal opinions. Then, we all did some research on each topic. We collected some related information to share with participants. CH: For example, for the session I hosted, 'Public Sphere and Independent Thinking', I deliberately added more theoretical ingredients while introducing the topic. On the one hand, as the topic could be related to everyone's personal experience, which might lead to emotional expression, I tried to balance it with some rational voice. On the other hand, by introducing some academic dimension, it helped to deepen the discussion.

Let me pause here and show you what CH means by 'adding theoretical ingredients'. In the screenshot of the WeChat post about the session (Figure 1), we can see her introducing German philosopher Jürgen Habermas (1992) and his theory about the public sphere; Political theorist Hannah Arendt and her *The Human Condition* (1958). I admire her approach of theoretical intervention, but unlike the discussions in a reading group at school, the conversation did not go deep on these theoretical points. Instead, people began to share their own experiences and thoughts. But these introductions did stain their discussions with a layer of rationality.

You have already seen the WeChat post as a presentation of 'O2 Online Chat'. You might notice that it published the transcript of the conversation with a visual of phone messages. I understand that having such a

kind of presentation is always a pressure for an art institution, even for a public project.<sup>7</sup> However, O2 Online Chat is the type of activity that is difficult to present, so I guess you may be as curious about how did they dealt with the final presentation.

ZXE: Are there any special considerations for the visual design of the WeChat post?

LY: So, in our institution, every public project will be presented as a WeChat post. For most of it, we write short articles, but this time we wanted to present the transcribes of chat. But the full text was very long, and we were trying to find a way to let more people read it. At the same time, we also wanted to restore a chatting scene for the readers. And our communications team helped us to realise the design.

ZXE: Did you edit the transcribes before



Figure 1 Screenshots of the WeChat post of O2 Online Chat. (OCT and Design Gallery official account, 2020).

Translation of key sentences of host: "the term 'Public Sphere' was first used by Hannah Arendt in 1950[...]." "[...]Jürgen Habermas described the reasons of 'refeudalization'[...]"

presenting it in the WeChat posts?



CH: We kept most of it, just deleted some parts which were out of the topic and adjusted some text from the spoken language to written text.

I also learned that considering the presentation, the team invited five designers to create digital posters with keywords picked up by participants from every session. They told me that they advised the museum to collect these posters, but it was not accepted. As a result, the posters were released via WeChat.

The team still had a lot to say, about the pressures of production in art institutions and why the museums did not collect these posters. And all of these relate to the reflection on the position and function of public programming in an art museum.

*ZXE: Would you like to curate more projects like this in the future? Especially when you are free to have events in person.*

LY: That is a good question to think about. It is always important to discuss how to use online space as a method of production. My recent work is about community. One of the issues I deal with is, 'Where is the community?'. The Internet is actually already a community regardless of where we are. So, when we think about community, it's not just about physical geographical space, it is also about the connections between us which has already been internalised into our life. All of these changes started a long time ago, but the Pandemic pushed it closer to us.

WYQ: Although we can organise offline activities now, online events are still irreplaceable. And through the special series, I realised that online activities are not just a substitute for offline events. This is also related to the temperament of the institution where I work. In the past few years, most of the public projects of OCAT were exhibition based academic lectures and talks related to exhibitions. A main part of the

participating audiences were professionals. However, through this series, especially the O2 Online Chat, more general audiences learned about us and came to us virtually. I found that a new connection was established between the public and the institution. So, it is not necessarily about online or offline; it is more about how we keep and deepen this connection through our public projects.

I mentioned at the beginning of this article that my motivation for having this conversation was simple. I wondered how an institution maintained, strengthened, and even developed its connection with its audiences in the Pandemic. Although we focused on details planning, implementing and presenting the project, and the main purpose of this article is to present those backstage secrets to you, our discussion can be summed up with related academic discourse.

Scholars believe that the values of art museums have shifted due to enormous changes in social structures in the past few decades (Bourdieu & Darbel, 1990; Duncan, 1998; Hooper-Greenhill, 1994, 2000, 2020). Covid-19 will undoubtedly intensify this change again. As Eilean Hooper-Greenhill conceptualized through her many publications, an effective way for art museums to prepare themselves in the new context is to create dialogues with their audiences. In the case of 'What begins and What Ends' series, even though a rustic idea motivated the series - we have to do something; it provided the first rapid response to the crisis in the whole institution. Compared with exhibitions, public projects are more convenient and reflective in nature when communicating with audiences. However, without the help of technical blessing, it would not become the longest and most flexible tentacles for such an endeavour. Museum scholars also draw their attention to digital applications. They believe that digital technology is a trend that the museum sector can never avoid; instead, the sector should benefit from it in many

aspects: widening of creative horizons and broadening of participation (Parry 2007, 2013; Drotner, K, Dziekan, V, Parry, R, & Schröder, KC 2018).<sup>8</sup> Technically, the approach of *O2 Online Chat* was simple, but the hidden potential is not. It shows how a public project uses the Internet in the underlying logic. And the Internet has indeed helped those two institutions expand their connection with audiences. As we discussed at the end, the new connection is meaningful for the current situation and the future development of art galleries museums.

I did not walk into any museum for over a year. Even in crisis, I wondered if it could become a better place when I (re)visited the museum. With these tiny but powerful approaches, I think the answer will be yes.

## Notes

1. 'What begins and what ends' is a Special Public Project series jointly curated by the OCT Art and Design Gallery and OCAT Shenzhen. It started with four sessions of 'O2 Online Chat' in April 2020; followed by another engaging project 'Collative Writing' which united more than seventy participants to write two solitary texts in three months. Besides that, there were interviews with artists and curators, and poster designing projects in collaboration with local designers.

2. OCT Art and Design Gallery and OCAT Shenzhen are part of the OCT Contemporary Art Terminal in Shenzhen, China. Geographical and kinship closeness makes such cooperation common between these two institutions.

3. When the series was curated, team member Hang CHEN (CH) worked in OCT Art and Design Gallery, Yueqin WU (WYQ) worked in OCAT Shenzhen and, Yang LIU (LY) was worked in both of two institutions.

4. This interview took place on 3rd January 2020 via Microsoft Teams. It was carried out in Chinese and translated by the author Xueer

Zou (ZXE).

5. I noticed the transformation of terms here; in the conversation, we describe the audience in different ways. A closer look at the terminology here can uncover some key ideas (Lang, Reeve & Woollard 2012). We used 'audience' rather than 'visitor', which indicate that an individual is actively engaged. The term 'public' used to describe people who not necessarily visiting or engaging with the museums but are recognised as significant, while 'participants' referred to people who did take part in the event.

6. Audience development has been an issue, both scholars and museum professionals care about. For example, some suggest by examining the needs and interests of different audiences and groups, can help the institutions to shape its response (Hooper-Greenhill 2000; Reeve 2021), while others believe that digital technologies can be the game changer (Parry 2007). Although we did not mention it in the conversation, these consciousnesses are the basis of this project. Furthermore, there is a new approach shown in this project, that continually self-reflecting might also help with developing an audience.

7. Especially in the context of contemporary art in China, as curator Nikita Cai (2020) mentioned in one of her latest article: 'After the Beijing Olympic Games in 2008, galleries, museums and art media in China have all contributed to creating a demand for contemporary art narrowly defined by market value.' Even though there are many criticisms of this phenomenon, this pressure of 'having to present something' still spreads to public engagement projects which don't even have to be presented.

8. Museum studies schooler Ross Parry address that contemporary museums find themselves within a society where everyday life is conducted in a 'data-full and technology-rich context'(2018). More and more research started to look upon how curatorship and museum provision has been informed, shaped and challenged by digital

technology.

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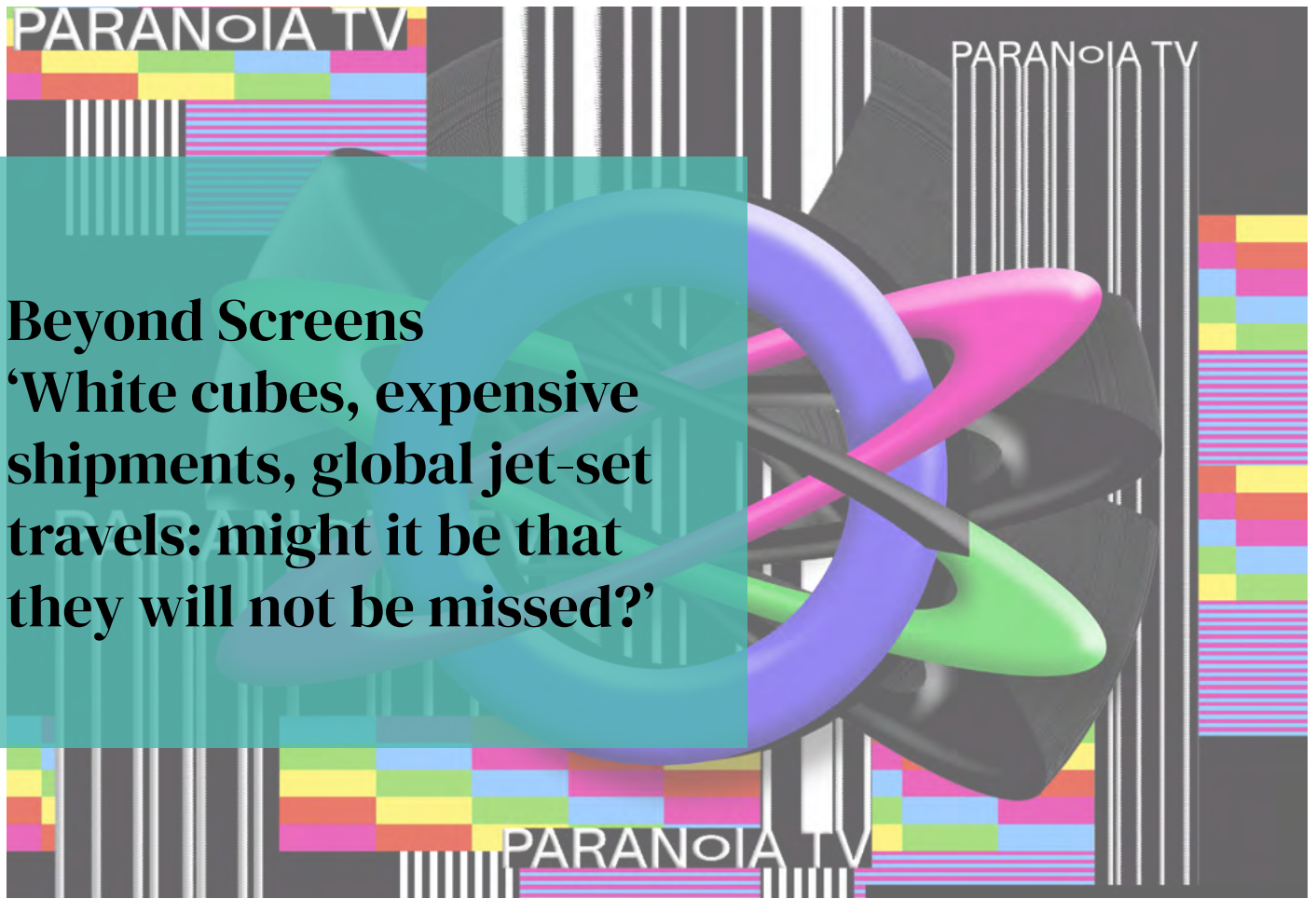
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## Beyond Screens 'White cubes, expensive shipments, global jet-set travels: might it be that they will not be missed?'

### Maxie Fischer

Steirischer herbst has been held annually in Graz, Austria since 1968 and is one of the oldest festivals for contemporary art in Europe. Like numerous other biennials and festivals, the 2020 edition faced serious programming challenges due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Unlike many other exhibitions and events that were cancelled, postponed or streamed online, artistic director Ekaterina Degot and her team created a format in spite of lockdown measures and restrictions.

The latest edition, taking place from 24 September to 18 October, centres on an experimental programme entitled *Paranoia TV*. Developed as a TV-compatible format, it featured newly commissioned works by more than 52 artists and collectives including films and TV series, online games or news and talk shows, which could be viewed on [paranoia-tv.com](http://paranoia-tv.com)

or via an app. *Paranoia TV* focuses thematically on the feelings of fear and uncertainty triggered by the pandemic. At a time when news programming provides the window to the world and streaming services the distraction from that very world, *Paranoia TV* explores these popular media and their discourses. In line with the etymological meaning of paranoia, the curatorial-artistic dimension casts doubt on the desire for normality, necessarily confronting its audience with the question: what is the normal state we actually want to return to?

The opening speech is symptomatic of this stance: while Degot speaks to a group of people who have gathered socially distanced in front of the Orpheum theatre in Graz, her speech appears on 99 screens in shop windows and displays throughout the city centre and

is also viewable online. Throughout the crisis, Degot says, we are all synchronised. The speech itself reveals just how synchronous and equally asynchronous the pandemic is for each of us: the transmission is not a livestream but a modified version claiming to be the authentic one.



Figure 1. *Paranoia TV*, Sujet: Grupa Ee

Clemens von Wedemeyer also examines the relationship between normality and crisis in his film *Emergency Drill Revisited*. Depicted is a meticulously planned rescue operation simulating the capsizing of a ferry. During the disaster control exercise, the emergency is rehearsed according to plan until it is devoid of any human emotion. But what parameters can be used to reliably predict the state of emergency? And to what extent have we already run through the current crisis in our minds?

The ten episodes of the series *Second Look* sketch out a completely different understanding of reality. Lina Majdalanie and Rabih Mroué carefully reflect on photos of strangers they have collected at flea markets. In examining the collection more deeply, arrangements of people and eras emerge, allowing the images to take on a secondary existence as fact and fiction are seamlessly merged. How valid is reality when its montage is so much more poetic?

While it would be easy to imagine the works of Majdalanie and Mroué and Von Wedemeyer



Figure 2. Opening speech by director Ekaterina Degot, displayed on screens throughout the city center, Graz, Photo: Johanna Lamprecht

in an exhibition space, *Paranoia TV* offers the best possible setting for daring formats like Ingo Niermann's *Deutsch Süd-Ost*. The novel, broadcast in 25 episodes and narrated by Mavie Hörbiger, recounts the 'last bastion of white men' and their bizarre life trajectories, which bear obvious resemblances to real-life personalities of the New Right, Reichsbürger, controversial artists and intellectuals. What kind of reality are we actually living in?

Unlike previous editions, *Paranoia TV* does not take place in the exhibition space or on stage, but on our screens. This seemingly simple fact results in a completely different experience given that personal screens, in contrast to exhibition formats, are somewhat limited as aesthetic configurations and are much more anchored to the logic of the

medium and how it is used. Steirischer herbst responds to this with a strong curatorial framework that itself appears performative and situates the artistic contributions within a fictitious media consortium that also provides a meaningful context for the discursive and educational programme as well as the editorial contributions. This can be viewed critically, but it also allows the programme to be perceived not simply as a transmission in virtual space but as contemporary art in an independent format.



Figure 3. Clemens von Wedemeyer, *Emergency Drill Revisited* (2020), Video, Film still: Courtesy of the artist

In addition to the digital programme, which can be accessed anywhere and at any time, a second part of the programme unfolds in Graz. While it can be assumed that *Paranoia TV* has been watched intentionally, the works on site are also directed at people who encounter them by chance. Anchored in everyday life and public space, or produced in large editions, specific connections have been created here to facilitate their reception. The adult colouring book *Lucy is Sick* by Roe Rosen is an account of its protagonist's experience with bone cancer, his welfare and vulnerability, the slow and rapid passage of time, and is distributed in a hospital ward. Joanna Piotrowska's staged photographs of self-made shelters and gestures of self-defence suggest violence and resistance within the four walls of one's own home. Printed as a newspaper, they are inserted into pizza adverts and find their way into living rooms with the delivery service. *Photo Booth*, an installation at the Iron Gates of the


former city wall, connects the person inside the passport photo machine to the world at large. The photo strip shows not only the expected portrait, but also street views from Berlin and Lagos taken by Akinbode Akinbiyi.



Figure 4. Akinbode Akinbiyi, *Photo Booth* (2020), Installation, Am Eisernen Tor, Graz, Photo: Mathias Völzke

Whether online or offline, all works have one thing in common: no exhibition space is required. What they do need, however, are institutions that promote their unfolding. This is precisely where Steirischer herbst comes in, initiating an artistic production and perception that ensures continuity in what is in many ways a precarious and uncertain time. In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, the 2020 edition uncoupled itself from the idea of a common location and instead found a variety of ways to grant the works their presence amidst the intrusions of everyday life. Behind this is probably the most basic definition of exhibitions: presenting artworks in a place suitable for public viewing.

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## **Lockdown in Lockdown. In Prison: Detained and Deprived of Liberty Temporary exhibition at the German Hygiene Museum**

Lisa Gordon

The German Hygiene Museum in Dresden was established in order to host the International Hygiene Exhibition of 1912. Visitors were able to see installations which sought to communicate critical new developments concerning the human anatomy, medicine, health and well-being. Today, the museum's permanent collection showcases many of the models and objects used in the exhibition, whilst tackling contemporary issues spanning science and society to art and culture. *In Prison: Detained and Deprived of Liberty* sought to illuminate aspects of the criminal justice system and the ways in which incarceration has impacted offenders and their loved-ones.

Despite its sanitary name, even the Hygiene Museum would soon be forced to close its doors to the public due to the

Coronavirus pandemic. The new landscape of social restrictions offered a unique basis of comparison with which to view the current temporary exhibition. I was able to visit in October 2020 during a window when most museums in Germany were permitted to open.

This transnational exhibition is partnered with the Musée des Confluences, Lyon, the Red Crescent Museum, Geneva and the International Committee of the Red Cross. The ICRC has been visiting prisoners around the world since the 19th Century with the aim of ensuring that conditions of detention are in line with international standards. Over the years, inmates have gifted numerous hand-made items to delegates as a display of gratitude for their assistance and many of these items can be seen in the exhibition.

Curatorial research and testimony were derived from a variety of sources and perspectives: those of former or current detainees, prison employees and experts on incarceration and the justice system mainly from Germany, Switzerland and France (Sunier, Rigaud-Roy, Dzierson, 2019).

Upon entering the space, we see a large wall text reading, 'It is we who punish.' The message is direct, and asks visitors to consider their role as citizens within the definition and application of criminal justice. The prison reform movement is believed to have arisen as jurors were no longer willing to condemn offenders to public displays of corporeal punishment. Combined with this, enlightenment ideas of rationalism strove to make penal processes more efficient whilst creating a deterrent. Other theorists believe that the root cause of the prison concept was influenced by Christian ideas which associated crime with sin and incarceration with penance. The now commonly accepted method of 'compensation' is represented by an oil painting from 1884 by Alexandre Bonnin de Fraysseix. It depicts the protagonists of a crime scene: the victim, lying on the ground; his family; the suspected perpetrator surrounded by gendarmes, the judges and a crowd of spectators. In the same display area we see aerial views of various panopticon prisons which were conceived by Jeremy Bentham in 1791. Surrounded by scenic countryside, the stark, fortress-like structure serves as a powerful reminder that the prison acts accordingly to protect its environs from the people inside it. This contrast appears to reflect the recognisable modernist trait that seeks to separate and order culture and society. This 'process of purification' (Latour, 2010) is mirrored again by the constant inside-outside relationship we see echoed throughout the exhibition architecture. Running along the centre of the gallery space are a series of orange cages with 'traditional' prison bars which the visitor can move in and out of freely; the green walls of the room symbolizing



Figure 1. Installation view, Genf, 2019 Photo: Radek Brunecky Design: Holzer / Kobler Architekturen (Zürich, Berlin)

the natural landscape of the outside world (Figure 1). Here is where the majority of the contemporary art intervention pieces can be found. An irritating but effective feature; the artwork is always partially obscured by the bars - an allusion to the gaze of the prisoner. Particularly well highlighted were the problematic, 'in-between' spaces which commonly encroach upon the boundaries of order. Mathieu Pernot's photo series *The Screamers* (Figure 2), captures relatives of prisoners shouting messages over the walls of various prisons, appearing suspected in a moment of impassioned exertion. Other novel methods of communication; *Les Pelotes* (Figure 3), are a collection of sock balls concealing contraband and secret messages that were intended for inmates, but ended up instead caught on the roof of a footbridge outside. Salvaged by Jean-Michel Pancin in 2010, the relics bear witness to the social relations of the last 30 years in this liminal, forbidden space. Although coated in resin and displayed behind glass, their decayed and dirty appearance made a strong impact in the sterile atmosphere of the pandemic. We are perhaps not used to seeing museum objects that are so demonstrative of their environment - instead they are cleaned-up and made ready for display. Social isolation can cause a loss of independence and in the long term a potential loss of identity. When faced with the





Figure 2. 'Les Hurlleurs', 2001–2004, France Photo: © Mathieu Pernot

of Saint George has been surrounded by a carefully engraved frame made from silver paper and a flattened tin from tomato purée (Figure 4). The display of the objects; many



Figure 4. 'Saint George', 2011 JVA (Prison) Bochum



Figure 3. Jean-Michel Pancin, 'Les Pelotes', 2010 Mixed media: Socks, acrylic resin, barbed wire Sainte-Anne d'Avignon prison, France

constant mirroring of one's self in unvarying surroundings, many people choose to organise their domestic environments in a way which helps to exert control over their lives. Artworks created in prisons made from the most minimal of resources are testament to the power of creativity under constraint. As a way of transcending the immediate environment many of the examples seek to reify a memory or belief linked to either the outside world or a spiritual space. An image

in elegant, well-lit vitrines positioned at waist height, allow for intimate examination. Exhibited and conserved in the customary way, we must consider the value judgements we place on all sorts of museum objects and recognise the powerful, if not sometimes disquieting effect that their provenance has. The exhibition makers have, through the introduction of a potent selection of objects, artworks and testimony, brought the veiled space of the prison to the public. Similar to the way that we are now the subjects of a health crisis which will undoubtedly be the theme of a future exhibition at the German Hygiene Museum, we are asked to put ourselves in the position of those hidden from the public gaze and to question some of the socio-cultural frameworks which have led to the formation and perpetuation of the prison idea.

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## American Democracy re-imagined: an intersection of senses and civil rights in 2020



### Viviana Guajardo

During the Spring of 2020, History Colorado showcased the Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Service (SITES), *American Democracy* (Smithsonian, 2020). This exhibition, aptly timed, has been present during ongoing racial justice movements in the US and the pandemic. History Colorado is presented with a civil rights call to action within our society along with the challenge of re-imagining the exhibition for a publicly safe showcase. History Colorado negotiates relevance by balancing the community needs of both civil rights acknowledgments and community safety.

#### Civil Rights

History Colorado (HC) is located at 12th and Broadway, a short 7-minute walk from the Capitol State Building. The Capitol

State Building and the surrounding area of Capitol Hill was the site of the Summer 2020 Civil Rights protests. HC staff attended these protests in support of the justice movement and took photos which were then incorporated into the atrium slideshow of *American Democracy*. "... [There is] the recent practice of sending museum researchers to protests to collect artifacts, including a Black Lives Matter banner, protest signs, and spent gas canisters" (Campbell, 2020). The intention was to show more than just protesting but emphasise political change over time (Bock, 2020). This slide presentation is one of the first elements immediately visible to visitors along with the 'We the People', a public art display created by Rian Kerrane for the very purpose of this exhibition. This art display is decorated with the plaster cast hand models of museum guests and volunteers in colors of

red, white, and blue. This piece was not part of SITES but was an addition by HC staff to foster a sense of local community art as the first piece which greets visitors.

'We the People' symbolizes the idea, proclaimed at the outset of the US Constitution, that our power is greater when we join together. ... They remind us that We, the People, create Democracy" (Kerrane, 2020).



Figure 1: "We the People" by Rian Kerrane. History Colorado Center. Photo by the Author

Just beyond *American Democracy* in the atrium is a Civil War monument titled *On Guard* which was installed in the Fall of 2020. It was originally erected in 1909 at the Colorado State Capitol building to commemorate the role of Colorado's volunteer soldiers in the Civil War against the Confederacy, however, it is also viewed as a problematic landmark that is representative of the Sand Creek Massacre of 1854 against the Cheyenne and Arapahoe Indigenous peoples. The protests of 2020 occurred before the monument at the State Capitol. 'ACAB' was spray-painted on the bodice of *On Guard* and toppled down by protestors. *On Guard* is portrayed with different interpretations featured on the labels surrounding the statue including those from Indigenous groups, artists, military veterans, and historians. Presenting *On Guard* to the public was not intended as a point of erasure nor reinstallation from its original location on the podium in front of the State

Capitol (Simpson, 2020). In this scenario, HC serves as a broker to demonstrate the varying perspectives in the Colorado community. *On Guard* will be on display until October 2021.

## Spatiality and Senses

The following exhibition description is from both first-hand experiences of this exhibition and conversations with various members of the curatorial team which consists of Public Historian Samuel Bock, Curator of Archives Shaun Boyd, and Chief Creative Officer Jason Hanson. When re-imagining the sensory and structural elements of *American Democracy*, exhibition staff as well as guest services associates aimed to create a space where people did not feel like they had to say no to exhibit features out of safety concerns (Bock, 2020).

Notably, *American Democracy* is divided into two sections onto separate floor levels: Unity Square, the interaction and public art aspect of this exhibit are in the atrium whereas the text and media-driven aspects are featured on the 4th floor. The atrium level exhibit space is an open concept with interaction-based elements. Guests can use the stylus pens with any touch screen or button, a safety precaution for the few touchable surfaces within the museum. There are writing activities available with distinguished 'clean' and 'used' markers. One such activity asks, 'What makes a good citizen?' followed with a fill-in prompt, 'A good citizen should...'. In the space, guests can interact and share what they feel. This offers an interaction-based option but is also engaging to the spectator who wants to read over the answers written in. Natural light floods the atrium along with a large-scale projector against the wall featuring images relating to democracy in the US. The first floor incorporates more interactive elements to the guest and is, therefore, more stimulating. The open concept atrium is a contrast to the contained and light-controlled environment of the 4th floor exhibit experience.

The 4th floor which features text, media, and visually driven content is a contemplative



Figure Set 2: American Democracy Atrium Interactive Displays. History Colorado Center. Photos by the Author.

environment where wandering, staring, and stillness are encouraged. It is dimly lit with intentional items spotlighted; this gives the feeling of a more intimate environment. Most pertinent was the segment dedicated to voting. The presence of this exhibition during the time of Civil Rights Justice movements and the drawn-out November 2020 elections resonates differently with the viewer. The timing of this exhibit and the timing of the 2020 US elections evokes a different feeling because the viewer is in synchronicity with a present set of events that will one day be considered historical. History Colorado's primary motivation is that it speaks to the People's History. HC has been at the forefront of documenting living history, as we are now. While BLM protest posters are incorporated in the 4th floor exhibit, further documentation is observed in the time capsule project in which items, photos, and memorabilia are being collected from the Colorado community to



Figure Set 3: American Democracy Upper Level Poster Display. History Colorado Center. Photos by the Author

show lived experiences throughout the 2020 pandemic.

*American Democracy*, although temporary and de-installed in January of 2021, is a significant exhibition. History Colorado negotiates relevance by balancing the community needs of Civil Rights acknowledgments, community safety by creating an involved and non-avoidant experience, and actively documenting the quintessential events of 2020 in the US.

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## Raffaello. 1520-1483. An Italian example on revisited ways of engagement in times of crisis.



### Chiara Marabelli

2020 marked an important date in Western art as the 500th anniversary of the death of Italian master Raffaello Sanzio (1483-1520). One of the major artists of the Renaissance, Raphael was dedicated to the study of architecture, urban planning and antiquities. When he died at the age of 37 on 6th April 1520, he had been living in Rome for eleven years, and had collaborated on projects with some of the most influential personalities of the time. In accordance with his will, he was buried in the Pantheon, an iconic Roman building, in which his tomb can still be visited today.

The process of imaginative and aesthetic 'deification' started shortly after his passing and has never actually stopped. In order to commemorate his genius, several initiatives were organised in various cities across Italy

last year. The most anticipated of these was the blockbuster show *Raffaello 1520-1483* at the Scuderie del Quirinale in Rome. The result of a three-year research project, it presented itself as "the greatest exhibition ever realised on Raphael" (De Simoni, 2020: 13).

Conceived by the Italian Ministry of Culture in partnership with the Uffizi Gallery, and in collaboration with the Borghese Gallery, the Colosseum Archaeological Park, and the Vatican Museums, this major event welcomed loans from 29 countries across Europe and the USA. On display were more than 200 objects (120 by Raphael himself), from letters to drawings, paintings, cartoons, tapestries, ancient sculptures and contemporary works.

The idea behind the exhibition is suggested by the title. Aiming to celebrate the anniversary

of his death, 'Raphael 1520-1483' unfolded in reverse chronological order. The route through the exhibition, in fact, starts with Raphael's obsequies and, by narrating events in a series of flashbacks, it ends at the dawn of his artistic apprenticeship (fig. 1).



Figure 1: View of the exhibition hall, with the painting 'Raphael's Funerals' by Pietro Vanni, 1896-1900 (Vatican Museums, Vatican City). Picture taken by the author.

Arranged over two floors, themes included his relationship with and interpretation of the classical past, Papal commissions and other private engagements, architectural plans, the canonisation of feminine beauty, and the early stages of his career spent at workshops in central Italy. The introductory showpiece to the exhibition was the almost life-size recreation of Raphael's tomb by Factum Arte, a company that specialises in digital mediation and the production of facsimiles (fig. 2).



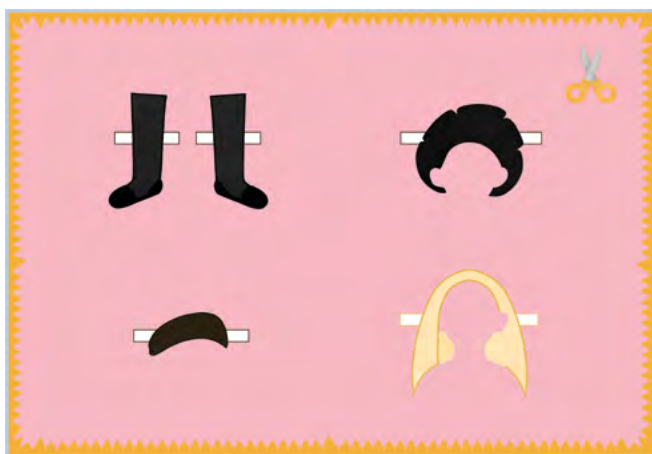
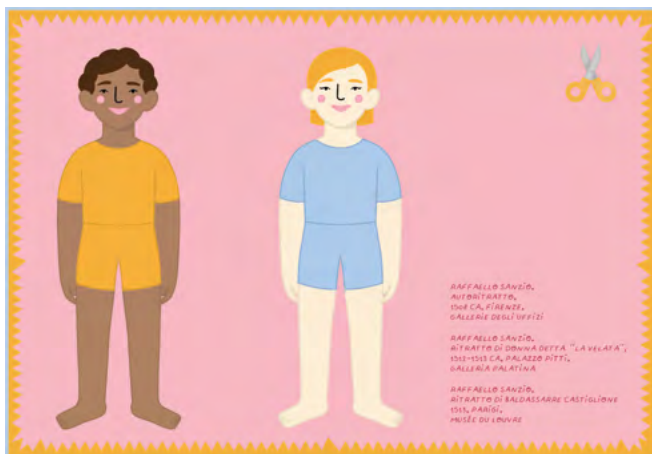
Figure 2: The recreation of the tomb of Raphael in the first exhibition room. Courtesy of Factum Arte. Copyright: Alberto Novelli © 2020 Scuderie del Quirinale - Ales.

Supposed to run from 5th March to 2nd June, the show closed after only three days due to the outbreak of Covid-19. It then re-opened on the same day it was meant to close and ran until 30th August, one month less than initially intended. The forced period of closure was an opportunity to think about outreach in more digitally-friendly and inclusive terms.

Although physically inaccessible, the exhibition was very alive digitally. Guided tours, live-streamed talks with curators and experts, and clips from behind the scenes, were hosted on social media platforms. Users were invited to interact with specific hashtags, such as #RaffaelloOltreLaMostra ['Raphael Beyond the Exhibition']. Moreover, additional content, including the audio guide originally intended for the visit, was made available remotely through a free mobile app. In parallel with specialist discussions shared as short and accessible videos, addressed to a general audience, there were other fields of investigation, such as fashion and botany. Educational activities were also offered: families and children could download and print colouring pictures and games for free (figs. 3.1-3.3).

New forms of on-site engagement had to be implemented. In order to maximise the number of visits, opening hours were extended at night and during the last three days the building did not close at all. Such measures allowed 162,000 people to see the show, 6,500 of which visited during the 11pm-9am slots on the final weekend (AgCult, 2020). The format of the visitor experience followed stringent regulations. After booking online, a group of a maximum of eight participants were accompanied through the exhibition by an invigilator. Lasting 80 minutes in total, visitors spent five minutes in each room, with the ring of a bell indicating when time was up. The experience turned out to be overwhelming, as the time provided was





Figures 3.1-3.3: Children's activity: dressing-up as characters with the clothes portrayed in Raphael's paintings. On the website there is also a b/w version available. Scuderie del Quirinale, 2021. Raffaello oltre la mostra KIDS, Rome, Scuderie del Quirinale. Available from: <https://www.scuderiequirinale.it/pagine/raffaello-oltre-la-mostra-kids> [Accessed 30/03/2021].

insufficient to read text panels or explore the exhibits in any detail, both of which included extensive in-depth information (fig. 4). The anticipation of the clamour of the bell was also rather distracting. On the other hand, the chance to closely engage with artworks in an uncrowded space was precious – impossible under 'ordinary' circumstances.



Figure 4: Detail of the accompanying text for the painting 'Self-Portrait with a Friend', Raffaello Sanzio, 1518-1519 (Louvre Museum, Paris). Picture taken by the author.

*Raffaello 1520-1483* demonstrates that positive outcomes can be achieved even in the most challenging of situations – the extra thought that was invested into revisited outreach strategies is an excellent example of this. With regards to the digital dimension of the show, the exhibition team demonstrated resourcefulness and determination to promote an online presence for a varied public. This attention to accessibility and the use of different formats and on different platforms deserve to be praised, considering the predominance of on-site engagement activities that had characterised the Italian cultural sector before 2020. On the Scuderie del Quirinale's website, the *Raffaello Reloaded* page still makes available all the

aforementioned videos and written materials, both in Italian and English, months after the exhibition closed.

With regards to display, the dense arrangements and rather technical textual interpretation that were used, together with the restricted time parameters of the visit, did not show enough consideration for the diversity of learning preferences that make up a typical museum audience. However, these changes did not undermine the overall quality of the visit. Tickets for the re-arranged event sold out quickly in fact, and night tours were particularly popular because they provided an alternative experience of the museum space – both offer clear signs of support for the cultural sector, which has been badly affected after months of lockdown.

To conclude, the effects of the pandemic have inevitably transformed the ways we engage with museum collections, demonstrating that extreme situations can bring about changes for the better. Digital tools have proved essential in keeping institutions alive. The *Raffaello 1520-1483* show offers a remarkable example of how digital and physical worlds can be complementary and sustain one another. As a vehicle for opening up interpretive possibilities, the further integration of the two is something to aspire to.

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# The 'Tweetside' Hoard: A Virtual Exhibition for a Challenging Age

Megan Schlanker

In recent months many of us have become more familiar with the virtual, and with activities that were previously firmly within the 'in-person' sphere appearing more and more in digital spaces. From March, virtual movie nights, family quizzes, dates and office meetings became the norm for many people in the UK, but what about virtual exhibitions? In the first wave of Covid-19, museums around the world opened their doors virtually, with tours available at the Louvre, the British Museum, the Van Gogh Museum and many other sites worldwide, part of an attempt to keep the public engaged with museums and to offer education and entertainment in a difficult time.

As England entered a second lockdown early in November 2020, causing museums across the country to close their doors after only a brief reopening, the Museum of London offered their contribution to the world of virtual exhibitions. On the 5th of November 2020, the museum 'opened' the virtual exhibition titled 'The Tweetside Hoard' on the social media platform Twitter. The museum showed a sense of humour not only in the title, but also in their opening remarks, reminding

their virtual visitors 'and please, no touching the display cases'. This review will explore the Tweetside Hoard exhibition, currently accessible via the @MuseumOfLondon Twitter account for anyone with access to the internet.

This exhibition focuses on the Cheapside Hoard, described by the Museum of London as 'the greatest single collection of Elizabethan and Stuart jewellery in the world'. The hoard was discovered by workmen in June 1912, and is intended to take pride of place in its own gallery at the museum's new site in West Smithfield. The jewellery itself is striking, and the first few 'display cases' of still images appear to be curated to give the impression of a treasure trove, with scattered collections of gold and jewels. Each virtual display case is contained in its own Tweet within the greater thread, which links the exhibition together. The exhibition highlights the international gem trade during the Elizabethan and Stuart eras, with gems and jewels from across Europe, Asia, Africa and South America appearing within the hoard.

The nature of the online exhibition allows

visitors to zoom in on exhibition pieces, encouraging them to do so in the case of a gold pin decorated with a miniature ship at its head. This allows visitors to take in any small details they may otherwise have missed, for example, the enamelwork on a richly decorated scent bottle, or the watch face set into a substantial Colombian emerald.

The virtual exhibition mirrors physical exhibitions with a tongue-in-cheek exit through the gift shop, with the final Tweet linking visitors to the Museum of London online gift shop. This innovative use of social media leaves us to question - what do virtual exhibitions mean for museums? There is some concern that virtual exhibitions will discourage in-person visits and engagement, but the Tweets replying to the thread seem to suggest a very different case, with several commenters expressing a desire to visit the Cheapside Hoard exhibition at the new Museum of London site when it opens. Other commenters thanked the museum for this opportunity to engage with a collection during this time of heightened isolation. It is important to remember, going forward, that for some people, this isolation will not end when the pandemic is under control. In future, virtual exhibitions may be the secret to making museums accessible to housebound individuals, as well as other people who may not have access to museums for whatever reason. This is obviously not a cure all, as digital poverty is still a very present concern, something that the Museums Association has discussed in depth over the past few months, but it is a step in the right direction. Social media exhibitions on Twitter and other platforms such as Instagram, may also appeal to younger demographics, specifically the 18-25 age range, which museums have notably struggled to engage with in recent years. Exhibitions like *The Tweetside Hoard* offer opportunities for youth engagement, and enhanced visibility within the demographic. Smaller museums may also particularly benefit from the creation of social media exhibitions, as such displays do not require

a huge web design budget or an enhanced virtual tour.

The Tweetside Hoard online exhibition was certainly a different experience to visiting a museum in person. It lacked the immediacy of an in-person visit, and I found that some of the 'display cases', particularly early on, could have done with some better labeling. However, in the current climate, the exhibition provided a welcome respite from world news and everyday concerns, if only for a few minutes. At the time of writing, the virtual exhibition is still available via the Museum of London Twitter account (@MuseumofLondon), and can also be found by typing 'Museum of London Tweetside Hoard' into a search engine. A book has also been published for those interested in learning more about the Cheapside Hoard, *The Cheapside Hoard: London's Lost Jewels*, written by Hazel Forsyth and available at [museumoflondonshop.co.uk](http://museumoflondonshop.co.uk).

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# Museums and galleries as art therapy spaces

**Coles, A. and Jury, H (Eds.) (2020). *Art Therapy in Museums and Galleries: Reframing Practice*. London and Philadelphia: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2020, 320 pp., GBP£26.99, ISBN 978-1785924118**

## Yanrong Jiang

*Art Therapy in Museums and Galleries: Reframing Practice* is a vital addition to the flourishing scholarship exploring the growing partnership between museums, galleries and art therapists. This is the first book to delve into the huge potential of art therapy outside of the traditional settings, such as clinics, hospitals and community studios, and to recognise the value of 'museum and gallery collections and environments for therapeutic work, enabling self-exploration, empowerment and social inclusion' (p.17). This book encompasses a remarkable collection of projects with wide-ranging groups, which include people with mental illness, older adults diagnosed with dementia, people recovering from substance abuse, as well as the community groups and staff working with them, etc. Contributors from the UK, Russia, Canada, Spain and Colombia provide readers with an international scope for these collaborations in different social and policy contexts.

The book is divided into three parts. Part one establishes the comprehensive context for art therapy work in museums and galleries by reviewing key published literature and identifying the need for effective evaluation system on art therapy

programmes in museums (Holttum); exploring how commonly held perceptions about museums and galleries might affect the clients' experience of museum-based art therapy (Coles); and discussing the reason why museums and galleries can be seen as 'safe spaces' for people in need (Chamberlain). The first three chapters set the tone for the book, providing considerable evidence and theoretical basis to explore how and why museum settings have great contributions to make to the therapeutic efficacy of the art therapy programmes. Some main contributions are: (1) clients can make emotional connections with museum collections and have chance to learn about themselves and people around them; (2) making artworks can empower clients, and enable them to reflect their experience, express their emotions, discover their agency and be in control of their lives; (3) museum can play the part of group, informing visitors about the commonalities among human situations, and as group members disclose experiences that other members relate to; (4) museums offer a non-clinical and non-stigmatising environment for clients, helping participants to feel like 'a person, not a patient' (p. 32); (5) museums' role in safeguarding heritage allows

participants to feel secure and to experience a sense of being valued and cared for.

After establishing a comprehensive context for the partnership between museums, galleries and art therapies, part two presents the main practical contribution of the volume. It discusses various projects around the world that exploring which key factors of the partnership and institutional framework determine the efficacy of museum-based art therapy in different social and policy contexts. For instance, Zhvitiashvili's chapter provides an important introductory text on developing 'museum therapy' in Russia after the collapse of the Communist regime, a process that was influenced by political, cultural and social transformations. Chapters in part two also introduce some projects within clinical settings, orphanages, day-care centres, drug and alcohol recovery centres, NHS, ect. These collaboration models might not be fully transferrable, but some essential factors could be applicable to the different social contexts, as follows: (1) establishing long-term trusting relationships through multi-agency partnerships, employing the specialist knowledge of different professionals; (2) interpreting museum collections for the art therapy programmes from multiple perspectives, curators and art therapists should work together to identify the artworks for different client groups, additionally, involving the clients' voice in this process through the evaluation of service users' feedback; (3) identifying effective evaluation systems and keeping records; (4) scaling up art therapy training models and sharing experiences with different institutional teams, it could create more opportunities for the multi-agency partnerships in different venues and work towards sustaining long-term relationships.

Part three provides wider perspectives for readers to understand the potential of museums and galleries as optimal places for delivering art therapy services. Jury's chapter starts from exploring the therapeutic efficacy

of artworks and artists in art therapy projects within the museum settings. She illustrates in detail of how viewing the two self-portraits by Rembrandt in the context of space, place and time could influence the therapeutic encounter in the art psychotherapy process. Jury elaborates on the role of the portrait for clients, the importance of reviewing artwork and self-reflection. Chapter twelve and thirteen focus on different population groups' experiences, exploring several ways in which museums, galleries and art therapy can meet clients' needs and support them. Chapter twelve explores how for refugees living in the transit at a country's border, the temporary gallery becomes a multipurpose and multifunctional venue, and responds to the necessary humanitarian needs of the homeless and highly vulnerable groups. Since Covid 19, the project sponsor Art Refuge UK has begun to work online, such as using Zoom and Instagram, with border frontline to reach out to refugees and provide art therapy programmes which are adaptive and appropriate to context, safe and accessible (Usiskin and Lloyd, 2020). Salom's chapter not only focuses on the specific groups, but also on the individual visitors, and how the collaboration between museums and art therapy is helping in the turbulent political context of post-conflict Colombia.

Although many contributors in the book recognise the importance of meaningful evaluation methods, few chapters provide the detailed and meaningful account of what these methods would entail, this can be seen as the future direction for this field. Nowadays, the global Coronavirus pandemic has had and will have an unprecedented impact on every population, museum and gallery as the important cultural sectors should actively take on social responsibilities in efficient ways. The book is a well-timed contribution for museum professionals, art therapists and all those interested in this ever-evolving field to realise the value of this multi-agency collaboration and to reinvent museums' functions and social roles for people after the pandemic.

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# Police museums' silence on brutality opens questions of state power in the sector

Holly Bee

However we define community, we define museums as for it; concerned with the creativity and memory of humanity, rather than its government. But our funding and governance frequently pushes us to validate state power, even when the state harms communities. This is perhaps nowhere more explicit than the police museum.

Police museums, often housed and managed within police departments, commonly “deflect culpability and blame for police violence and abuses.”<sup>1</sup> The Crime Museum, London’s exploration of “complex ethics” stayed confined to portraying victims of crime. The causes of crime, humanity of offenders, how we define crime, and police operations – issues that leave the state responsible – were erased.<sup>2</sup> As state bias and violence is increasingly exposed and museums are called to “consider anti-racism in everything we do”,<sup>3</sup> among other struggles for justice, can the police museum ethically exist?

In February 2020, the Green Anti-Capitalist Front occupied an abandoned London police station in a powerful reclaiming of space.<sup>4</sup> In March this year a protest group demanding justice for Sarah Everard did the same.<sup>5</sup> Can museums reclaim former sites of state violence for community representation? Can independent police museums unmask brutality and corruption through contemporary collecting, help heal traumatised communities, and campaign for fairer laws? Can they become places for communities to critically examine and resist the state?

When the state commits violence, state bodies, including museums, are bound up in its legitimising, self-absolving processes. Our conversations need to start there. We do not tackle a difficult, shared history with

an unfortunate legacy; we are complicit in a purposefully maintained present of targeted abuse. Our position as state bodies infects our community relations. As we grapple with the painful truth that for many museums are sites of state-sanctioned or induced trauma, we need to ask: can we be truly pro-community if we are not, when called, anti-establishment?

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## Revisiting and Reimagining Visitor Services in Museums

### C. Andrew Coulomb

It is time for museums to revisit and reimagine how Visitor Services departments function. It is often a high turnover, mistreated and underutilized department that is seen by many as an opportunity to break into the museum field when that is a rare occurrence. But what if it wasn't? One concept is something I began at a previous institution called The Museum Associate Programme. Visitor Services Associates, now called Museum Associates, still had a primary focus on Visitor Services, customer service and retail operations, but I added an extra layer to their role. Museum Associates spent one day a week, for six months working in various departments within the museum gaining experience, learning as much as they could and providing extra man power to each department. At the end of their six months, they would rotate departments. The primary goal was to give the Museum Associates a sampling of museum work while providing

applicable, quality experience that they could put on their resume through a pseudo entry-level position, with the added benefit of an extra person in each department. They were to be integrated as part of the team by attending meetings and given a project of substance they could complete in their six months within the department. One key piece to this programme is that there was no degree or experience requirement for the position. The aim was to attract individuals that were interested in the museum field, but didn't know how to get in. Ultimately, the goal was for the programme to be a full-time role with an even split in hours between the welcome desk and their Museum Associate duties, career placement assistance and salaried pay. My hope was that this programme would normalize investment in Visitor Services and change how emerging professionals enter the field.

## Discovering a New World

### Laura Dudley

Now more than ever, museums need to be responsive and open-minded spaces for communities to feel connected, whether we are together or apart. Due to the pandemic museums have the potential to reach out to new audiences through digital platforms, and should be doing this imaginatively, acting as both a tool for support and discussion, as well as an escape from the everyday through the lens of history. Even though museums across the world have been closed for extended

periods of time during the pandemic their work has never stopped happening. The sense of place which museums provide through their use of storytelling has only grown stronger and more innovative and accessible, and hopefully the last year has shown us the possibilities of experimentation and taking risks across all aspects of programming. I only hope that this continues to grow, and this moment has opened our eyes to a new world.

# A Call for Consensus-Oriented Museums

Isabell Fiedler and Olivia Harrer

COVID-19 showed us, that we need to (re-) position museums as consensus-oriented institutions, that serve as relevant discourse spaces in the analogue and digital world, where people can engage with different theories to understand the world and their relation to it, interact with museum staff and other community members, and share their personal views and opinions. To reach this, museums have to consider their visitors in all their actions and aim at achieving mutual consensus on the world of facts, norms and emotions.

If museums fail to do so, they will be foremost storage facilities for collections and scientific research institutions, but without contributions of their audiences, incorporation of contemporary social and political developments, and relevance for the people they serve.

COVID-19 just pointed out several missed opportunities in our path to consensus-orientation, especially in the digital realm. First, museums need to acknowledge that the museum space of the 21st century is an

integrated one, where analogue and digital go hand in hand. The digital space needs to be curated and cared for as the analogue one. The long dominating concept of the aura has to share the spotlight with the concept of interaction and consensus.

Second, the digital museum may never be a marketing tool but must be a place to interact with people in a consensus-oriented way. Access, transparency, dialogue, inclusion and participation are the prerequisites. Unfortunately, most digital museum formats only allow one of these, especially analogue formats transferred into the digital realm.

Third, museums oriented towards tourists and one-time visitors are now lonely and quiet. Instead, institutions who reached out to their communities in a consensus-orientated way, are now supported by their community members.

Hopefully museums see the crisis as a chance to reinvent themselves as strong, resilient and relevant consensus-oriented institutions.

# Meaningful Change and Visionary Reconciliation

## Amber Foster

Museums can be catalysts of change or the keepers of comfort. As a steward of wellbeing, they can provide solace during uncertain times by just being familiar. Guests can travel back in time, see the distant future, or just sit back and reflect on the present. Exhibitions and programs can also provide a voice to those that sometimes can't be heard. While neutrality can be subjective, museums have a responsibility to fan the flames of diversity with inclusive content reflecting the communities that they serve during challenging time

Institutions have a unique opportunity to educate about where we are, were, and are going. Museums can help visitors step in someone else's shoes when misinformation clouds the ability to see things clearly. During challenging time, it is important to provide a safe space that promotes the opportunity to

unify in spite of our differences. Adaptability is the key to maintaining those teachable moments Finding mediums that speak to your audience and provides the stability needed to ride the waves can help make an impact.

As the tide shifts, so should expectations. In this moment, we are in a place where we have seen history repeat itself in many forms. In certain instances, we need to ask why we have not learned from the past in a meaningful way. Through research and thought-provoking exhibits, we can sift through why we continue to get to these results and how we can work towards solutions. We have to take what we know from the past and educate for the future. In doing so, institutions can instill a collective sense of responsibility and respect for their community's diverse tapestries.

## At Home in a House Museum?

Jessica Horne

Moving forward, we need to rethink what it means to be 'at home' in house museums. House museums should not feel dusty or static. They should be dynamic places where museum staff, volunteers and visitors feel accurately represented and able to express their identities. What it means to be 'at home' has taken on new meanings as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. We have spent much of this year being told that we should stay at home to protect ourselves and the NHS from the virus. Whilst 'home' has been conceptualised as a place of physical safety by the state, many people still feel unsafe at home. For me, home is less about bricks and mortar and is more about people, ideas and an appreciation of intersectionality. Arguably, patriarchy is a virus which starts at home. We need more than a mere roof over our heads to feel 'at home'. House museums often feel like a snapshot of the past. Does the experience of

visiting offer a complete picture that satisfies all of our needs in the present? Provocatively termed the 'sleepiest corner of the museum world', house museums have the potential to systematically reproduce heteronormative order and racial inequalities (Sullivan Sorin, 2016: 11). Now more than ever we need to draw on the feminist tradition of co-production to better understand house museums as imagined spaces. We must interrogate collections away from the four walls of house museums with the help of diverse online audiences. A visit to a house museum need not only entail a visit to the house itself. I call for a discussion on the role of house museum websites to make the material spaces behind them more inclusive. During challenging times, we must work collaboratively to contest problematic notions of home and reimagine house museums for the future.

## A letter

Krista Lepik

My Dear!

How are you doing? I hope you are fine... I haven't heard so long from you, since we had to close our doors. It was just yesterday when we were wondering with colleagues about how's your life going. We miss you. Your laughter, your wows and awws, your comments, and questions. At least it was nice to see your artwork on our 'Stay-At-Home Art Contest' and read your answers in that online-quiz we organized in spring! By the way, did you also visit our virtual tour last week, when I was talking about cats in ancient Egypt? I think I saw someone with your name.

It's been a hectic time for us here. Do you remember those crates with photos you handed in last winter? I got them described already months ago, but now, I'm doing quite a detective work to find out about some of the persons and places in photos. So, soon you

can also see the results in our database. And, we are organising the exhibition about Pinball Machines for the next summer – I hope you can then come and play (everybody can have fun there, I promise)! Well, maybe I'm not supposed to tell about it, but I know you can keep a secret... Don't tell anyone, OK? The Eurovision Song Contest that will be held next year – they will send us the recordings and we'll take care of the files. How cool is that?

Oh, and aren't you tired of restrictions and lockdowns? When you feel blue, give me a call, and I will tell you stories from our museum. Tell that to the older man from the ground floor apartment, too! He's feeling probably very lonely right now. We have to keep together!

Take care,

Your Museum Fairy

## Museum Democracy

Eric W. Ross

During challenging times, I think it is imperative that museums, and especially history museums serve as spaces for democracy or dissensus. Dissensus is the struggle of subjects to present themselves as visible, speaking-beings by demonstrating the existence of a world inside another, thus creating a rupture in the everyday activities of life. For example, the existence of museums like the National Museum of African American History and Culture and the National Museum of the American Indian create such a rupture in Washington, DC. Their very presence near the Capitol dome and the White House disrupts the otherwise triumphant, patriotic narrative of American history on display throughout much of the capital city. Dissensus is critical to democracy because it recognizes that democracy is not simply the process of voting, but rather it is contested and won only

over the course of a constant struggle. Thus, the role of museums in a democracy is as spaces of visibility. Museums are both places for people to go and see and be seen, but they also serve as battlegrounds for politics because of their role in preserving and displaying history. By making decisions on what to collect or what not to collect as well as what to include and what to exclude within exhibitions, museums maintain control over what Jacques Rancière calls the “distribution of the sensible” or the process of making something, in this case the past, visible or invisible. Museums, therefore, are crucial sites for the struggle over politics in the present. By providing opportunities to see how the past is shaped within and without the museum it can give visitors a sense of agency in the present to shape the future.

# The future of museums

## Sandra Samolik

What is the future of museums? The pandemic will have a long-term impact on museums and their visitors, having us reconsidering the curatorial design and asking the question:

How can we engage all senses of the visitor and touch him without anything being touched?

Interactive collections are popular, stimulating not just visually but making the museum a physical experience. But what if this physicality awakes now fear?

Visitors might think twice about if they want to get in contact with knobs or buttons that have been handled by hundreds before. But there are alternatives:

We might reconsider the materials applied using antimicrobial surfaces from copper to its alloys (brasses, bronzes, cupronickel, copper brasses, copper-nickel-zinc). These are natural antimicrobial materials whose intrinsic properties destroy a wide range of microorganisms, preventing bacteria, fungi,

and viruses.

Digital touchscreens and kiosks are other sources that can create discomfort to its user. However, thanks to the development of applications and cameras that can sense the user's hand and create a cursor at the screen, the visitor can engage with the devices without touching them. QR codes, thereby, are an even more affordable option letting the visitors engage from their mobile device at the museum or even home while boosting the museum website's click rate simultaneously.

Finally, visitors can also be captured by giving the impression of being touched with the help of light. Modern exhibitions such as the Digital Art Museum in Tokyo let the visitor immerse in a light and sound spectacle.

So there is no reason for fear. Through creativity, awareness, a multi-disciplinary approach, and the application of new technological developments, curators can continue to engage and captivate all visitors' senses.

# A New Communication Frontier for the Museum Profession

Adam Matthew Shery

Just as the early twentieth century witnessed the radio medium revolutionize communication due to radio's reach into listeners' homes from throughout the world, and just as television added a visual element to this reach during the middle of the twentieth century, 2020's abrupt proliferation of online museum programming has transformed individuals' homes into virtual museum annexes. The pervasiveness of museum closures stemming from the COVID-19 pandemic has been a hub of innovation and discovery, rendering this pervasiveness a veritable frontier. Museum professionals, whom the pandemic has forced to convert their programming to predominantly or completely

internet-based formats, have adapted by inviting speakers from throughout the world to give lectures via the internet and by allowing museum enthusiasts internationally, with or without financial means to travel, to participate in these programs. Simultaneously, museum enthusiasts whose interests in museums formerly were exclusive to inperson visitation have discovered technological features and applications that they may not have originally planned to utilize. In summation, 2020 has accentuated the fundamental human ability for humans, and therefore museums, to adapt and evolve.



# New challenges for museum interactive installation design

Joseph Stich

Interactive experiences in museums are nowadays digitalised in the form of mobile applications and websites but also shared tactile surfaces in the form of tablets, kiosks, audio systems and custom setups. Due to the pandemic, museums are removing those surfaces to prevent any contagion among visitors. Interactive experiences therefore need to be designed, and redesigned, with a new major constraint: No tactile.

Having to design interactive systems without shared tactile surfaces implies an overhaul of the existing. Designers could, for example, more deeply explore interaction using motions, spatiality, disposable items, or they could push mobile applications and virtual tours even further with the potential risk of decreasing in situ visits.

There is a need to compose with technology already in place to avoid funding new material in time where the cultural sector has shrunk budget, but also to avoid additional stress on staff that would have to handle new systems alongside sanitary measures. There is a need to rethink how groups of visitors would interact with systems and between each other as gatherings are not recommended. There is a need to design with future in mind to prevent another overhaul if a similar situation happens again. On top of that, museums have to cooperate to find solutions together; the pandemic has shown that mutual aid can be beneficial now more than ever. As museums already are reinventing themselves through digitalisation and social media, the new challenging times are an opportunity to design affordable, accessible, customisable, innovative, and cooperative solutions.

## **Museums: A new partner in wellbeing**

Kristy Van Hoven

My work allows me a unique peek into how museums can support and evolve with the needs of their community, in good times and in challenging times. Over the past year as our world has been consumed by a pandemic, community unrest, and tests of fortitude and resiliency, museums have worked over time to be relevant, supportive and engaging through digital platforms and socially distanced measures. By creating a space (virtually or physically) where a community can ground and center itself, museums offer a unique and necessary place for people to engage and process the emotions engulfing them. During

2020 the role of museums in their community was solidified, not by the media or politicians and civic leaders, but by their communities asking for help in supporting learning, providing entertainment or being a place of rest bit while communities endured lockdowns and changing community dynamics. The role of museums is changing as communities turn to their local museums to support their community wellbeing, the question is are museums up for answering the call to become a more active, dynamic, and responsive member of their communities in the new era of history?

# If your home was a museum, what object would be on display?

## Mental Health and Mindfulness: Escape to Middle Earth

Ashleigh Black

PhD Candidate, Film and Visual Culture, University of Aberdeen



*All we have to decide is what to do with  
the time that is given us.*

J.R.R Tolkien

As the world is coming to terms with the impact of the coronavirus pandemic, the effects of past and current restrictions are still being felt. Throughout the lockdown of March until the summer, people sought different ways to cope with being isolation and to ease the strain on their mental health. For me, my escape has been through the fusion of art and literature; creating a world of colour to diffuse those feelings of uncertainty. The desire for a 'new normal' is one that is universally shared and, as individuals, taking time for oneself should not be underestimated.

# If your home was a museum, what object would be on display?

## The Clothesline

Blanca Jové Alcalde

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The clothesline represents the course of the time. As days go by, the clothes changes. The laundry on Monday morning may have nice t-shirts from the weekend, but on Wednesday it is full of home and sports wear. Or maybe now, in the midst of the Covid-19, every laundry looks just the same.

It displays your everydayness reality. It shows your interests and type of sociability. It reveals your work agenda and more personal pleasures. It portrays your routine, and that of the household. It is ultimately the public manifestation of the house maintenance works.

It is also window onto the outside world and a cafe or a bar in Covid-19 times. The shared space you have to engage with your neighbours.

The clothesline is the intersection between my world and yours.

# If your home was a museum, what object would be on display?

## A lively museum

Eloisa E. Rodrigues

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My museum-at-home is very high maintenance. It is composed by living beings: there is one that loudly requires constant attention: in the morning, it demands food; shouting and screaming – meow! meow! meow! A ritual that is repeated in the evenings – everyday! My museum-at-home is also vivid with green characters: the spider-plant called Shelly, Dr. Jacoby the Boston fern, the pink quill named Lucy, the snake-plant called Andy. They bring life to the house. My display at home is political as well because museums are about people, their stories, their objects, and their intangible material culture; and people are political. My museum-at-home is also about objects that have now a different life, such as this old guitar, originally from Mexico, which strings remain silent given my lack of musical skills. A guitar that is now only for decoration, left alone in a corner, accumulating dust and other meanings, such as many objects displayed in museums.

# If your home was a museum, what object would be on display?

## Renoir's The Skiff Cross Stitch

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I would display my cross stitch of the French Impressionist Renoir's The Skiff. This DMC kit from the National Gallery collection took me 17 months to complete. Stitching this was such a pleasurable and soothing hobby outside my PhD research. It at the same time helped me to reflect on the roles of artwork reproductions, one of the key issues examined in my thesis.

It is possibly unlikely for this work to be exhibited in a museum, as it is an image reproduction. It was completed based on the pattern given, so creativity would probably be questioned too. However, my The Skiff is unique in the sense that there were a few places where I accidentally used the wrong thread colours. (The white floss actually ran out beforehand!) This embroidery is therefore a form of engagement with a masterpiece. It also became a memento of my PhD life in Leicester.

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