EXHIBITIONS

EXHIBITION REVIEW ESSAY

Online Exhibitions during the COVID-19 Pandemic

In the mid-1990s, when many museums were beginning to take their first hesitant steps toward building online *personae*, the worry still holding many back was that if a collection or experience were available online, in-person visitation would invariably decline (Anderson 1996; Cody 1997; Wallace 1995). In the 25 years since, that fear has largely been dispelled even as our technical ability to digitally capture and disseminate cultural collections has improved exponentially, even to the point that the online experience in some ways exceeds the in-person experience. Indeed, museums have moved far beyond the ability to show a few images of the major works in a collection, adding opportunities that mirror almost all the offerings of the in-person experience. But even this “Mona Lisa” effect has not driven in-person visitation down. Rather the opposite. Anyone who has elbowed through the crowds at many of the world’s best-known museums can attest to that. Indeed, having been among this ubiquitous press of people, I could not help but think on such occasions that it would take an act of God to reduce the numbers and improve the quality of viewing.

Enter COVID-19. *Mea culpa*.

The global pandemic and ensuing quarantines grew just after the previous edition of *Museum Worlds* was published. It quickly became clear that the Reviews Section, usually ripe with a selection of exhibition and book reviews from around the globe, would be unusually challenged. But likewise, it seemed like an opportunity to move the exhibition reviews into a new area—reviewing the online offerings of museums. I was eager to see what shape this would take.

Traditional museum exhibitions are all the same, and yet each is unique. They all generally take on the same characteristics around the globe, their key components being the arrangements of artifact, specimen, or cultural object in a physical space with interpretation designed to give new insight or knowledge—an essay or treatise written in three dimensions. Yet, each of us knows intrinsically when an exhibition somehow transcends these parameters, whether through visual spectacle, engaging narrative, or innovative museological approach. The reviews put forth in *Museum Worlds* seek to highlight these moments of transcendence, perhaps especially the latter type for the benefit of global museum professionals.

Though we have not approached reviews of online exhibitions before, the global pandemic gives us the opportunity to consider it not as an ancillary element of an exhibition, but as a replacement of the original. The thing we feared in the mid-1990s has come to pass, even if temporarily—the virtual has replaced the actual.

In 2017, I defended my dissertation on this topic (Hoffman 2017), engaging the question of the post-object nature of digital culture or, rather, if the cultural object no longer exists, will the digital dimensions we have created for it be sufficient? In 2017, the answer was quite resoundingly “no.” In 2020, the pandemic corollary to this question—online exhibitions replacing in-person exhibitions—also comes up short.

My intent at the outset of this review was to find the top five or ten online exhibitions with the same objective that guides our other reviews—to find and underscore innovative or contributive examples that allow for further discussion or improvement in the global museum community. What quickly became clear is that the same truism for in-person exhibitions holds for their online counterparts: they are essentially all the same, with their own unique spin. Unfortunately, in the online space the ability to afford the technology or design to make an online exhibition stand out correlates strongly to distinctive or transcendent elements—not unlike in our physical museum spaces. However, the online realm further distills this aspect. The infinite blank canvas of the digital realm blurs the uniqueness of physical spaces, curatorial voices, and eclectic collections. Not only do online exhibitions become frustratingly entangled with everything else on a museum’s website, but much of the distinction lent by interpretation or object is obscured by predetermined image, text, and video formats. On website after website, online exhibition components vary only a little.

360° Tours Are All Essentially the Same

Popular for visitors because they approximate the visual museum experience better than a static presentation of single objects in a series, virtual tours or “360° tours” are very on trend. However, some museums can afford them; some cannot. For those that can, the virtual walkthrough is the same as you can find on any realtor’s website, but in a more beautiful and dramatic space. Much as in any digital medium, it is usually painfully evident when they are not professionally produced. Ultimately, though, 360° tours are dependent on how visually splendid the physical museum space is. Google Art Project (now Google Arts and Culture) has partnered with many museums to bring a professional level of this technology to museums around the world, simultaneously highlighting works in the collection. What might seem at first democratizing is frustratingly applied to well-funded and popular museums. For example: The National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art (NMMCA), Seoul, South Korea;¹ The Pergamon Museum, Berlin, Germany;² The Museum of Art of São Paulo Assis (MASP), Chateaubriand, Brazil;³ and the National Museum of Anthropology, Mexico City.⁴ If you have never visited or have and are looking for the comfort of old favorites in this time of uncertainty, log on. Apart from Google Arts and Culture, consider the Tomb of Pharaoh Ramses VI⁵ or any of the Vatican Museum tours,⁶ which set high standards. Likewise, there are several online sites, separate from the museum world, that have included the world’s great museums in their 360° tours of global metropolises.⁷ In general, museums could learn from the popularity of 360° tours with virtual reality (VR), augmented reality (AR), and 3D technology. Nevertheless, virtual museum tours are frustratingly hard to find from a museum’s own website, even when you are searching for them. Using a universal search engine is your best bet. Ironically, and in opposition, searching for specific works in the collection often still requires going directly to a museum’s own website.⁸

We Are All Working with the Same Tools

Every online museum exhibition is dependent on image, text, and video.⁹ Audio, often in the form of a podcast, is another popular inclusion. This is no big revelation. Each of these is

relatively cheap and easy to produce and manage through off-the-shelf content management systems as well as more bespoke products. In a way, this should be comforting. YouTube is free, and almost all the museums examined in the course of this review were creating videos for their own YouTube channels. Sometimes, they were imbedded into the website, sometimes there was a hypertext list of them, sometimes visitors were pushed to the YouTube channel itself. But they are still videos. Like the 360° tours, they vary in quality, and financial resources often define that quality via professional production, but in the time of COVID-19 the more homemade videos are charmingly comfortable and familiar. In fact, being less produced is perhaps an asset and contributes to removing some of the stuffiness sometimes associated with museums. I, personally, love the videos of interns, security guards, or assistants talking about which objects they love. #Rijksmuseumfromhome¹⁰ is an especially good series of seemingly homemade videos made during the pandemic. Clearly, there has been some level of postproduction, but they are still accessible and unstuffy, and, moreover, show the breadth of knowledge and passion among their employees as well as the awesome scope of the collection in an intimate way.

Podcasts can be (perhaps surprisingly) a bit trickier than videos. Even though professional sound quality and editing is not always required, the removal of the visual, and therefore enhanced focus on the aural, can amplify imperfections. Museums seem to be wise to this already, and podcasts are not as readily available as videos. There are a few museums who produce their own podcast content. The Natural History Museum in Los Angeles hosts a regular series,¹¹ while The British Museum produced a brief series on its World War II art relocation program.¹² However, most of the best museum podcasts with regular episodes are produced outside museums by passionate professionals. Some museums upload in-gallery or specialist lectures as just an audio track. As much as this sounds as exciting as a static recording of a lecture without the video component, it is and should be avoided. The National Gallery of Art (Washington, DC), however, has produced an interesting version of this format.¹³ In general though, the much more interesting, engaging (and therefore successful) audio productions are more conversational in tone and inquisitive in spirit.

Of course, images and texts are a lot easier to manage and produce than videos or podcasts, but museums should not kid themselves that they have mastered these either. It has only been in the past decade that *some* museums have *begun* relenting on their protective stance over images. After all, it long seemed that sharing images online was tacit consent to reproduce them (Jones-Garmil 1996). The Rijksmuseum has been at the forefront of online expansion from the early days, particularly as it relates to images. They were one of the first to make publicly available high-resolution images of their collection (Wim 2015) at a time when many museums were still restricting and charging for use (Chaumier et al. 2013).¹⁴ While many are still hesitant to provide really high-resolution images freely online, the Rijksmuseum remains a constant leader in the online museum field.¹⁵ The British Museum has one of the coolest virtual “tours” made in collaboration with the Google Cultural Institute. It is not a 360° tour of the galleries, but rather a dynamic, interactive infographic platform for the massive collection. Color-coded into five geographic regions, objects are represented by dots on a timeline that resembles a musical staff. Moving backward through time, the objects emanate a little tone, playing a random tune.¹⁶

Text in online exhibitions is ubiquitous—perhaps unsurprisingly—with not enough forethought given to how much and what in the context of where. Often, it is clear that the same text from an object’s gallery label accompanies the online image. Sometimes, it appears to be text from an exhibition catalogue or *catalogue raisonné*. But there seems to be little strategic thought put into what text might be more appropriate for a strictly online viewing of this image—more so where high-resolution images are provided and viewers can really have a guided tour of the intricacies of a work in a way that cannot occur in the galleries. Any marketing professional can

tell you that posting the exact same thing on every online platform—be it Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, or other—lacks strategy and reduces impact. The medium is the message (McLuhan and Fiore 1967); the platform and its demographic should dictate the scope and nature of the content. Thoughtfully catering—some might say “curating”—a museum’s exhibition specifically for an online venue improves accessibility and impact. This leads inexorably to the following.

We Are Still in the Clutches of a Replacement Mentality

This is to say that our perception of physical space, with all its limitations, is still governing our creation of online spaces. Some authors refer to this as the “Print Paradigm” (Doueihi 2011), where the engrained nature of print publication culture is still the inherent model for online formats and the means by which we often try to comprehend them. More recent authors note this continued reliance on this paradigm in the similar formats and components of both “online exhibitions” and “online publications” (Hidalgo Urbaneja 2020), which blur together in their use of all the various elements enumerated above.

Museums are stuck in the idea of the picture of an object simply replacing that object in an online environment.¹⁷ Certainly, the nature of 360° tours reinforces the “dominant framing metaphor” of our physical world. This is why museums are equally comfortable with the same gallery label text accompanying the online image of an object wherever or however it might appear. But this thinking anchors the online realm to the limitations of our physical world, when in reality the digital and physical realms can enhance one another while compensating for the other’s weaknesses. Online exhibitions offer the opportunity to do more—offer deeper, different, or competing interpretations; avenues to explore further; chances to look and think in ways not conducive to a linear gallery setting. Few museums are taking advantage of this.

Interface Is Everything

If we all have the same toolbox, then it is the interface (read: design) that distinguishes the better online exhibitions. This is not any different from exhibitions in physical gallery space—we know intrinsically when an online space transcends its basic components and “feels” comfortable and inviting. For museum exhibitions in the online realm, it seems that the strong visuals of images of the collection are often mistaken for the visual feel of the interface. When the interpretation is not necessarily designed for the digital space either, the online space is already at risk of failing. When the other tools for online presentation get added to an already poorly designed space, we either get jumbled, confounding websites, or buried components. The 360° tours that are only discoverable by backing out of a museum website and using a commercial search engine are not worth the financial resources to produce. One museum even used one of its blogs to create a list of all the ways the museum was presenting its collection online. It was indeed an impressive list, but the blog itself was a chance find, buried deep in the online recesses of this massive museum. Clarity is the guiding rule of online interface design, and it is frequently broken by museums’ online presentation of exhibitions.

Of course, “more” and “better” often require financial resources that are severely lacking in the best of times, let alone in the face of an unprecedented loss of employment and financial support for institutions. But I am also keenly aware of how much of what is above cannot be argued to be a result of rapid response to pandemic conditions, but rather is a product of museums’ long history of poorly articulating what “digitization” means and viewing online potentiality through the lens of our physical world. While the casual viewer will chance upon enjoyment of the various online exhibitions and tours during the pandemic, it seems clear that for the most part

online museum exhibitions betray an outmoded understanding of the digital with only a few transcendent examples.

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NOTES

1. The NMMCA (<https://www.mmca.go.kr/eng/>) has an “online museum” native to its website, but it is a compilation of video lectures on various arts and artists. Google Arts and Culture gives a virtual tour of the facility as well as a presentation of a few of their exhibitions and artworks. See: <https://artsandculture.google.com/partner/national-museum-of-modern-and-contemporary-art-korea?hl=en>.
2. The Pergamon Museum directs online viewers directly to Google Arts and Culture for online fare. See: <https://artsandculture.google.com/entity/pergamon/m05tcm?hl=en>.
3. The MASP (masp.org.br) does not overtly reference their Google Arts and Culture virtual tour (<https://artsandculture.google.com/partner/masp?hl=en>), but has a strong presentation of exhibitions and objects there.
4. The Museo Nacional d’ Antropología (<https://www.mna.inah.gob.mx/>) has been aggressively pursuing a collections digitization program, which is evident in its beautiful online collections photography. Google Arts and Culture hosts its only virtual tour, though. See <https://artsandculture.google.com/asset/the-national-museum-of-anthropology-mexico-city-ziko-van-dijk-wikimedia-commons/bAGSHRdlzSRcdQ?hl=en>.
5. <https://my.matterport.com/show/?m=NeiMEZa9d93&mils=1>.
6. <http://www.museivaticani.va/content/museivaticani/en/collezioni/musei/tour-virtuali-elenco.html>.
7. 360cities.net is one to check out.
8. Twenty years ago, Heather Dunn warned of the negative results of this for collections information, while eight years ago Koven Smith preached that “findability is authority in the Age of Google.” Museums have only partially taken heed (Dunn 2000; Smith 2012).
9. A topic the author Maribel Hidalgo Urbaneja (2020) discusses at more length in her recent article.
10. <https://www.rijksmuseum.nl/en/from-home>.
11. <https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/first-fridays-science-discussion/id350217062?mt=2>.
12. <https://britishmuseum.libsyn.com/>.
13. <https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/national-gallery-of-art-audio/id262840395>.
14. See also Allan (2007); Crews and Brown (2011a, 2011b); Green (2001); and McCauley (2008).
15. Every image at <https://www.rijksmuseum.nl/> can be viewed in detail, explored through various tours or associated media, or even downloaded. You can search by color, view the object data, order a poster, print a detail, download the work, and turn it into a new artistic creation. The whole website is a joy to explore online and RijksStudio (<https://www.rijksmuseum.nl/en/rijksstudio>) helped pioneer a favorites “playlist,” so you can have your own gallery, much like a playlist in Spotify.
16. Clicking on a single, colored point will bring up a brief on the object with the option of clicking to find out more. Doing so will bring up more images, audio clips, maps, related objects, text descriptions, and explanations. And, of course, you can share your find via the usual platforms. Viewers can also choose to see objects that have been related through more abstract concepts than chronology or geography by clicking on groups like “living and dying,” “trade and conflict,” “religion and belief,” etc. See <https://britishmuseum.withgoogle.com/>.
17. Certainly, when it comes to artworks, replacement and simple reproduction would have been anathema. See, for example, Benjamin (1982); Clair (2007); Heidegger (1971); and Malraux (1947).

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