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COVID -19: The Impact On Malaysian Visual Arts Scene

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: This paper discusses the impact of COVID-19 on the Visual Arts industry in Malaysia. In general, this pandemic has affected various forms of artistic activities and the income of visual arts artists and galleries. The cancellation of art projects and exhibitions has greatly affected the artist's source of income as well as disrupted the sale of works and forms of art appreciation. The crisis has also opened up a new form to the visual arts industry by looking at alternative approaches to the continuity of the arts field by switching to virtual or online methods. This emerging crisis of COVID-19 might be the starting point for all art practitioners including artists, art critics, galleries/museums, collectors, and curators in using the online space to continue to capitalize on and expand the Visual Arts industry.

Design/methodology/approach: Review approach.

Findings: The COVID-19 pandemic has made a huge impact on the country's Visual Arts industry where a wide range of art activities cannot be implemented and opened up opportunities for online activities

Practical implications: Exhibition and sale of works through online approach has become one of the main methods that support the Visual Arts industry with the application of a combination of the latest technologies such as VR and AI that enable the representation of real experiences in the context of art appreciation.

Originality/value: This paper is original.

Paper type: This paper can be categorized as a viewpoint

Keyword: Covid-19, Exhibition, Visual Arts, Online.

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I. INTRODUCTION

The creative industry especially the Visual Arts is one of the most affected industry of the COVID-19 pandemic. This creative sector has been suffering heavy damage as a result of the COVID-19 crisis which all public gatherings, performances, and exhibitions are cancelled in the interest of public health and safety due to the Movement Control Order (MCO). The closure of all museums and galleries as directed by the Government of Malaysia has a huge impact on visual art enthusiasts who rely on exhibition-gallery activities as a key step in the appreciation and sale process of artworks. As a result, this has severely disrupted and affected the income source of the art activists and visual artists and impacted the entire visual arts industry.

II. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A. Cancellation of art exhibitions and activities

The closure of the galleries and the ban on the assemblies have resulted in the entire network of Visual Arts related activities being cancelled such as exhibitions, residency programs, and community activities. Rimbun Dahan arts manager Xeem Noor in Maganathan & Toh (2020) said the restricted movement

announcement had affected its programming, particularly when it came to international guests, and all planned exhibits are cancelled and postponed. The residency program is part of an annual event that connects artists from the Asia Pacific region as a form of aesthetic experience sharing initiative to promote and develop local arts activities. The cancellation of this activity has affected the gallery management of the program that is in need to be rearranged (in the current state of crisis) as the arts activities and exhibitions were confirmed a year earlier. According to Bilqis Hijjas, president of MyDance Alliance in Maganathan & Toh (2020) many art projects are planned up to a year in advance which so many projects that have been in the progress for the past twelfth months now cannot go on, and many future ones are uncertain.



Figure 1 Malaysian museums and galleries closed amid coronavirus fear

Source: The Star, Monday, 16 March 2020

Art exhibitions play an important role in connecting artists and society as a reflection of thought and culture. Cline (2012) mentioned,

Exhibitions act as the catalyst of art and ideas to the public; they represent a way of displaying and contextualizing art that makes it relevant and accessible to contemporary

audiences. The art exhibition, by its nature, holds a mirror up to society, reflecting its interests and concerns while at the same time challenging its ideologies and preconceptions. Keeping art relevant to society and to a diverse audience at any given

point in history is one of the main goals of the art exhibition and one of the reasons it is so important to the history of art.

Meanwhile, Kenny Tang, Director of G13 Gallery in Lin (2020) said “many international □ and national □ art events have been cancelled or postponed. As curators, we wanted to break the silence and encourage artists to react, through their art, during this isolation period. After all, a picture tells a thousand words”. However, artists need to continue to work and creative activities need to continue for the development of the country's art industry. All parties need to work together to continue their creative vision through alternative methods such as exploration of technology and digital communication media because according to Resch (2011) art galleries contribute substantially to the cultural life of a city.

B. Effect on the sale of the artworks



Figure 2 Effect Covid-19 on the sale of the artworks

Source: Google.com

The exhibition plays an important role in connecting artists, art collectors, and art critics. The cancellation of various forms of the exhibition nationally and internationally made it difficult to sell the artwork and affect the income of the artist and gallery (as well as to get any additional revenue through public arts and community projects). Exhibitions are strategically located at the nexus where artists, their work, the art institution, and many different publics intersect Marincola (2006) and the art gallery supports artists which helping them to develop and arrange exhibitions that attract collectors. Art galleries form the most relevant intermediary in the art market Resch (2011). The exhibition is a stage in which artists and artworks are recognized by the community through unique styles and representations that shape their own identities and profiles. For this reason, ongoing exhibition activities are able to raise the reputation of an artist and assist in the sale of artworks. Ferguson (2005) argued exhibitions have become the medium through which most art becomes known. The various elements are intertwined and make the exhibition an important media-based economy on the sale of artworks or art market. Graw (2009) mentioned,

It is the expression of an elusive charge derived from a range of factors: singularity, art historical verdict, artist's reputation, the promise of originality, the prospect of duration, claim to autonomy, intellectual acumen.

According to Resch (2011) in Manners, Borstlap, & Saayman (2016) art galleries support and promote young artists by helping them develop and arrange exhibitions that attract collectors and buyers; art galleries are thus the intermediary or link to the art market. The presence of artists, art collectors, and art critics during the exhibition greatly influenced the sale of works. The works on display in the gallery space allow the appreciation to be done directly without the misunderstanding of perception and impression (if only viewing pictures or digital images) as their effects are completely different.

C. Lack of social interaction and aesthetic appreciation

Social interaction between artists is very important in the development and uplifting field of Visual Arts. In this context, exhibition activities (or public arts and community projects) are spaces where discussions and sharing of experiences and ideas with fellow artists (aesthetic appreciation) take place. In addition, art and cultural activists also make visits to the gallery to see the exhibitions or project sites as media for intellectual discussions either for learning (visual arts students) or aesthetic expansion. According to Christidou (2016) visitors negotiate and reconstruct these spatial dimensions by socially interacting with each other. Visiting a museum or gallery has an important duality as a cultural activity, as well as a leisure activity, often shared with others, friends, and family members. Meanwhile, Sandvik (2011) argued it is a process of sharing of memories and stories which transforming the object [or artwork] into socially networked experiences.



Figure 3 Lack of social interaction and aesthetic appreciation during Covid-19

Source: The Star, 25 March 2020

Talking about the artwork especially during the exhibition is a form of education and reflection to the visitors' re-examination of their outlooks on life. The role and function of art in our modern-day society have become increasingly valued, seen as the symbol of democracy (Mali, 2014).

D. Going online

The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and the enforcement of the MCO provided the gallery with an alternative opportunity to explore online marketing opportunities and social media to stimulate creative processes and appreciation and revenue. Art galleries and artists that have relied on conventional methods or physical exhibitions have to change the way they disseminate information about their works to be appreciated by society in such critical situations. Wendy Chang G13 gallery partner in Lin (2020) explained,

As we find ourselves having to find ways to cope with this new situation, it is our responsibility as a gallery to play our part in helping the industry. We will continue promoting art and art appreciation – that is not going to stop, but we have to think of other options to reach out to the audience now, such as through more extensive use of social media.

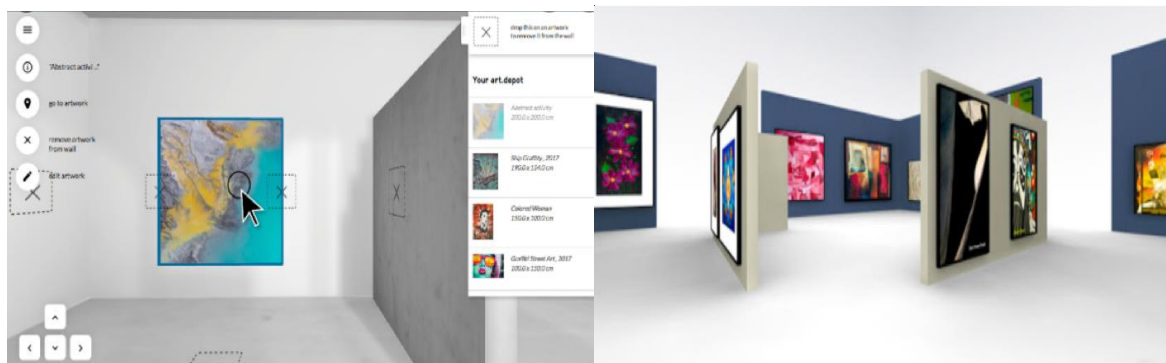


Figure 4 Visual Arts Scene is going online

Source: Google.com

In this context, the promotion method through virtual/digital engagement is a major stage that galleries need to explore specially to increase sales and encourage artists to continue to produce creative works for public viewing and appreciation. Meanwhile, Joshua Lim founder of A+ Works of Art in Lin (2020) said the current situation will definitely spur the industry as a whole to developing their digital profiles, whether it is for viewing, or buying and selling art as well as recognizing the role that art plays in times of crisis. As a whole, the COVID-19 pandemic is likely to accelerate the process of moving to a virtual online space. The need for online platforms has been around for a long time, but the crisis has increased its need more than ever. S. Jamal Al-Idrus, the owner of the Artemis Art Gallery in Lin (2020) argued that "not being able to travel right now makes being online even more critical. We're already using Instagram quite a bit, but the next step is to have more content online, to generate revenue via online presence".

However, the use of online methods may not overcome the advantages and effectiveness of physical exhibits in the context of appreciation of Visual Arts. Dardzinska & Romaniuk (2015) argued that "virtual art galleries may be perceived as unsatisfactory which the artworks in the museum environment are found to be more arousing, positive, interesting and liked, and also better remembered, by viewers compared to the computer presentation". In other words, online tours are considered less fun and more passive than actual visits to physical gallery space. Therefore, the use of online and social media is the best method in times of crisis and is an alternative instrument to support for future gallery management to further develop and assist the growth of the Visual Arts industry.

E. Recovery Package

In the face of economic hardship and economic uncertainty, the Government of Malaysia through the Cultural Development Agency (Cendana) has released an economic stimulus package to assist artists and cultural workers in the areas of performing arts, visual arts, and independent music sectors. The goal of the program is to foster and support artistic development and presentation of ideas uniquely despite the lack of physical resources. It aims to create opportunities to customize art practices, explore new ways of working, and experiment with new forms and ideas. The Recovery Package includes:

1. the food aid to artists & cultural workers - household income of RM4,000 and below
2. RM10b stimulus package (including SME) – immediate response grants of up to RM1,500 per individual artist/cultural worker and RM3,500 per collective/arts organization

III. CONCLUSION

The COVID-19 pandemic has made a huge impact on the country's Visual Arts industry where a wide range of art activities cannot be implemented and opened up opportunities for online activities. However, in general, in Malaysia, web-based works and online exhibitions have not yet made an impact on the visual arts scene. More surprisingly, even younger artists and freelance artists do not have a large social media presence. This emerging crisis of COVID-19 might be the starting point for all art practitioners including artists, art critics, galleries/museums, collectors, and curators using the online space to continue to capitalize on and expand the Visual Arts industry. Therefore, virtual exhibitions will not completely replace existing art, nor will it replicate the experience of interacting with artists directly during the exhibition. Perhaps using more efficient technologies, such as VR and AI-driven may bring us closer to a 'real experience' in the future.

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