Museums of Scarcity and Art Deserts

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Abstract

We review the unwillingness of artistic institutions to engage with their audiences as mirrored in their incapacity to develop meaningful alternatives to art access during the time of the COVID-19 pandemic and its consequences. An analysis of the pandemic offerings of some of the biggest museums in the world will allow us to identify their perceived offerings and their understanding of their function in society in contrast with their own statements of purpose. As the cost of accessing any cultural manifestation decreases, we turn from an economy of scarcity to an economy of visual consumption where there is an abundance of resources and attention is scarce. Art institutions and their encircling dynamics of limitation become less interesting for the public, and this results in the exclusion of art from the semantic bubble of a great part of the population.

Keywords: museums, scarcity, art, COVID, visual economy, social distancing

The COVID pandemic has presented an unparalleled situation in the arts, after the end of the 20th century brought aesthetic reflections on liquid and gaseous art, and the beginning of the 21st century was marked by reflections on the objectual turn. We found ourselves in a situation where solid, physical objects were inaccessible for such a period of time that it allowed art practices to take decisions, build and execute strategies. Furthermore,

many institutions already had electronic presence and significant electronic audiences that kept digital contact for a number of reasons (Kravchyna & Hastings, 2002; Mansfield, 2014).

This conflagration of circumstances allows us to identify trends in the responses of institutions to social distancing needs. These responses are shaped by the resources available, the nature of the collections and by the objectives conformed by the institutions' perceived place in society. Since regular in person interactions are paused, we can observe the way the institutions interact with the audience beyond the placement of objects in physical space, revealing what kind of institutional priorities are privileged when pushed to restructure their function remotely. If "[e]very aspect of a museum, gallery, or heritage site communicates. From the architectural style of the building or layout of a site, to the attendants at the entrance, the arrangement of the exhibits or artefacts, the colour of walls, and the positioning and content of labels and text panels (...)" (Mason, 2005), then we can gain valuable insights of what is placed online instead of those purposefully designed spaces, given that all the efforts of these institutions were limited into electronic outlets for months.

For the purposes of this article, we have chosen as examples of the trends of international museums with statements of purpose available online, as their objectives are clear and allow for an informed analysis. We have picked museums and not other artistic institutions because their positioning contrasts with the for profit goals of galleries, as commercial intent would impose its own set of priorities and the balance between these financial ends and their social concerns is not always clear (Krich, 2020). Coronavirus pandemic prompts visual art to turn virtual. The museums studied also carry particular responsibilities as they receive public funds, grants and tax exemptions based on their purported social goals, or they

receive funds from fiscally privileged foundations (John, 2013; Plaza, 2007).

The institutions examined are big enough that they would have budgets and staff to respond, connections with professionals and technical infrastructure, in order to isolate management philosophy from resource constraint. We understand that any institution has constraints, but we will also contrast these examples with successful efforts of smaller, less connected and well funded institutions. Some of the trends we identify actually made efficient use of expensive resources that nevertheless perpetuate structural social problems.

1. The diminished experience

One of the strategies museums used to connect with remote audiences is to promote previously produced content, content that was designed for outreach efforts before the pandemic (Bogardus Cortez, 2016). The google Cultural Institute has a number of technologies and projects that promise to "...preserve and bring the world's art and culture online so it's accessible to anyone, anywhere." (About Arts and Culture., n.d.)

However, these technologies are seldom used to actually make accessible art and culture, but instead they are used to reproduce the physical space of museums without taking care to allow for an engaging relationship between the viewer and the work; distorted yellowed walls, tiny paintings in long carpeted hallways, darkened sculptures and unclickable far away planes are hallmarks of the "virtual tours" offered by the British Museum, Guggenheim Museum, National Gallery of Art, National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, Pergamon Museum, Rijksmuseum, The J. Paul Getty Museum, and the Uffizi Gallery.

Figure 1. Ufizzi Gallery. (n.d.). ©2020 Google. Retrieved October 1, 2020, from https://www.virtualuffizi.com/botticelli-room.html. Screenshot by author.

Figure 2. National Gallery. (n.d.). ©2020 Google. Retrieved October 1, 2020, from https://artsandculture.google.com/streetview/the-national-gallery/hgFGlzj1GiNxTg. Screenshot by author.

Figure 3. Pergamon Museum. (n.d.). ©2020 Google. Retrieved October 1, 2020, from

https://artsandculture.google.com/streetview/pergamonmuseum-staatliche-museen-zu-berlin/0QEALap3qf0s1g?sv_lng=13.3966447&sv_lat=52.5214685&sv_h=103.13056816785165&sv_p=-1.251949398793542&sv_pid=JuPTlwm1z9Yl-fLTp-p0qw&sv_z=1.

Screenshot by author.

Figure 4. Rijksmuseum Museum. (n.d.). ©2020 Google. Retrieved October 1, 2020, from

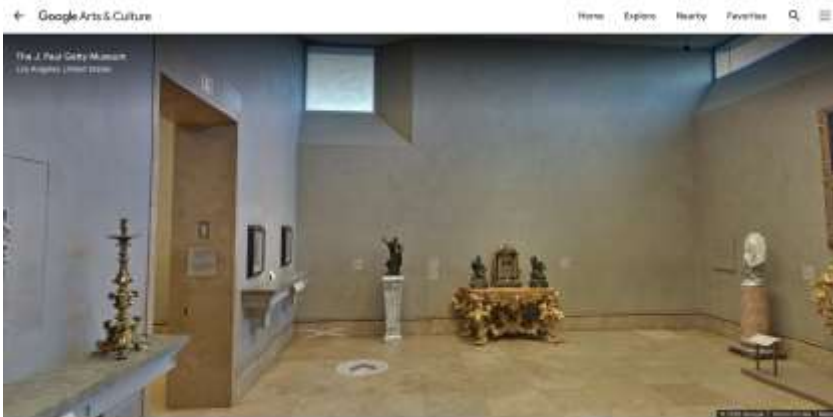https://www.rijksmuseum.nl/en/masterpieces-up-close.

Screenshot by author.

Figure 5. J Paul Getty Institute. (n.d.). ©2020 Google. Retrieved October 1, 2020, from
https://artsandculture.google.com/streetview/the-j-paul-getty-museum/cwFdGYSXlaOg6w?sv_lng=-118.4735542&sv_lat=34.0772014&sv_h=331.6280520085428&sv_p=2.928693879815512&sv_pid=UCJ08R3-O3sfXiTZjjSt2A&sv_z=1. Screenshot by author.

The Guggenheim is a great example of how lost an institution can become when offering online exhibits. When Frank Lloyd Wright (1959) wrote in his notes on the design of the physical space about the "...atmosphere of the unbroken wave – no meeting of the eye with angular or abrupt change of form," he was referring not to abstract whims, but to the architectural experience for the enjoyment of art. Yet when one visits the virtual tours the museum has on offer, one is faced with vast amounts of text and a clickable image that do not contribute at all to an experience connected with the philosophy set by the people who founded the museum. The difficult navigation, the distance with the works, the irreparable change in hues in a situation in which the human eye cannot adapt to the lighting conditions, everything adds up to a barrier that is erected between the art and the spectator.

The resulting experience, of clicking through a meaningless image, reinforces the idea in the viewer that it is the physical presence of the object that is worthwhile, and that visiting an online museum is a futile exercise, and that descentralization efforts on the part of the museums are laudable but misguided.

Figure 6. Guggenheim Museum. (n.d.). ©2020 Google. Retrieved October 1, 2020, from https://artsandculture.google.com/streetview/solomon-r-guggenheim-museum-interior-streetview/jAHfbv3JGM2KaQ?hl=en&sv_lng=-73.95885824579308&sv_lat=40.7829175413439&sv_h=261.59081717075435&sv_p=-4.629350871041012&sv_pid=_nQeVZZzZZrrmdxerxRQ6A&sv_z=0.9645743015259166. Screenshot by author.

These virtual tours are at best diminished experiences, where digital mediation has interposed its limitations, optical, navigational, temporal, between what is a complete experience in the original space, and a partial digital experience. At worst, this mediation strips the works of any aesthetic significance and turns them into low quality photo copies, in detriment of the

cause for art in general and of the digitalization and democratization of art in particular.

This does not mean that the tools developed by Google Arts and Culture are flawed in themselves, but that they are not designed to provide a meaningful aesthetic experience, the predominant "(...) focus of the system is to provide a compelling, engaging user experience through storytelling with cultural material" (Seales, Crossan, Yoshitake, Girgin, 2013). The developers of these tools understand culture in terms related to archive, conservation, and focused literary narratives rather than visual arts.

This bias towards literary, linear narratives is very clear when we look at the manner in which artworks are stripped of some of their essential characteristics by the process of integrating them into the system in a number of ways. Paintings in particular, when they are fragmented in sequential pieces on digital exhibits, and when navigated by "(...) moving pointing devices, the angles of the artwork are not always based on the artist's original intention. (...) [Imposing] a problematic view that provides misleading interpretations and understandings of artworks." (Zhang, 2020)

While it is still impossible to digitally recreate all of the sensory elements that make an object aesthetically relevant, disregarding key characteristics of the work when digitally displaying them greatly impairs their relevance as a public exhibit.

Figure 7. Painting close up in a Google arts and Culture painting display from the National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, Korea (n.d.). ©2020 Google. Retrieved October 1, 2020, from https://artsandculture.google.com/partner/national-museum-of-modern-and-contemporary-art-korea. Screenshot by author.

Figure 8. The national gallery with oculus (n.d.). ©2020 The National Gallery, retrieved 2020, from https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/visiting/virtual-tours/sainsbury-wing-vr-tour. Screenshot by author.

The referential absence

While these previously developed tools are implicitly exclusionary, we can see a confirmation of the biases behind their use in other strategies, where the generation of new content for the pandemic has centered on referencing the absence of the "real experience" of the museum that is inaccessible due to social distancing, MoMa for example designed a series of kids coloring books where you could remind yourself of the greatness of the works you are not available to actually enjoy. (Estiler, 2020)

Another of the actions taken by MoMa was the reactivation of online courses they had already produced (Vaughan, 2020) (Halliday, 2018), where you could gain a better understanding of how interesting and great the works hung on their inaccessible walls are. The experience always remained limited to referencing, not to create a worthwhile experience in itself for

everyone, but to augment the value of what can only be experienced in the physical, privileged space of the museum.

This is just a very visible example of a widespread attitude towards remote artistic initiatives. A number of public and private institutions concentrated on video studio visits (MOCA, 2020), interviews (Widewalls, 2020), documentaries and even yoga lessons (Graves, 2020), among other vehicles for underlining the importance of the works missed during the peak of social distancing measures. All of these second class experiences kept reminding visitors what they were lacking, as institutions poured themselves in producing empty references that only derive their worth from inaccessible experiences.

These problems are primarily epistemological, as the same or similar tools can be used to construct highly meaningful experiences, in contrast to the drab Google Culture virtual visits, we can find examples such as the Frida Kahlo Museum in Mexico City, that through a commercial contractor[1] built a clickable virtual visit that chose great angles, chose camera placements for their enjoyment, changed the height of the perspectives to fit the rooms, and above all, recognized the characteristics of what makes the museum enjoyable and made an honest attempt to create an enjoyable experience for the visitor online. The colors, lines and textures have been carefully captured in order to present them in an organized, easily accessible manner.

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[1] https://www.recorridosvirtuales.com/

Figure 9. Museo Frida Kahlo (n.d.). ©2020 Museo Frida Kahlo, retrieved 2020, from https://www.recorridosvirtuales.com/frida_kahlo/museo_frida_kahlo.html. Screenshot by author.

The age of the institutions is not a factor either in the approach to online exhibits, long standing institutions such as the Tate founded in 1897 and the New Museum founded in 1977 have created standalone, deeply aesthetic experiences for the viewers. The Tate's UNIQLO collaboration in the Tate Lates Nights, using poetry, performance and music created highly meaningful streams that didn't only concentrate on the work that couldn't be visited (Tate, 2020). The New Museum is another good example, having created Augmented Reality exhibits that could be visited without having to be inside enclosed spaces, by incorporating the cityscape in the digital exhibit. (Ciecko, 2020)

While museums claim to be "(...) in the service of society (...) exhibit[ing] the tangible and intangible heritage of humanity (...) for the purpos[e] of (...) enjoyment." (ICOM) And the micro-utopies of relational aesthetics have been integrated into the artistic practice of artists and to the programming of museums

(Blanes et al. 2016), COVID has led us to look beyond the words and recognize two different fundamental approaches in how cultural institutions faced social distancing needs.

One of the approaches we recognize is based on what we will call a Culture of Lack, distinguished by an Object Centered Inclination, where, as in Benjamin's Aura (1969), the value of the collection is tied to what cannot be really shared, the authenticity of the objects in the collection. Since this "(...) most sensitive nucleus (...)" (ibid.) would be jeopardized in making an authentic aesthetic experience available in absence of the physical object, works are only allowed to exist meaningfully inside the physical space of the museum. For an institution committed to a culture of lack, the limitations in access are inevitable, because what is valuable is something that should not be recreated or communicated without the presence of the object, it can only be pointed to, or expanded, but it cannot be offered as a real experience otherwise.

On the other hand, we have institutions that in their approach reflect a Culture of Plenty, in which the value is centered in the spectator's experience of artistic assets, and therefore all of the characteristics of the physical object that can be meaningful though any media should be used to construct a relevant experience. In a culture of plenty, it is the encounter between object and subject that is valuable, and therefore the greater the experience, and the more people can share it, makes the object more valuable. We identify some of the characteristics of these different approaches in the following table.

Culture of Lack	Culture of Plenty
Object centered	Experience centered
Public value is bigger as less people have access to the full aesthetic potential	Public value is bigger the more people have access to the full aesthetic potential
Barriers for user experience are fetishized	Barriers for user experience are examined for a solution
Experience is augmented by privilege, differentiation from other people	Experience is augmented by social connection, sharing an experience with many others
Finds convenience inside the limitations of technology in order to maintain focus on the restricted object	Uses the possibilities of technology to create meaningful experiences
Values context as data to be archived	Values context as part of an effort to generate knowledge through lived experience
Depends on scarcity	Depends on abundance

Table 1. Comparison between characteristics of a Culture of Lack and a Culture of Plenty

If after this fall of the curtain they do not reassess and radically change the way they structure access to aesthetic experience, then these are clearly not details to work out, but essential to how the institutions see themselves beyond the discourse, and they are misusing public resources to the detriment of social wellness.

Even since before the pandemic, "[a]ccess to the Internet is fast becoming seen as a basic utility not dissimilar to gas,

electricity or water (...)" (Walton, Kop, Spriggs and Fitzgerald, 2013) but as the technologies used to connect online are more pervasive in all social classes (ITU, 2020), it has become apparent that for electronic technologies to bring about a real positive social change you need more than having access to the material means of access to the internet (Recabarren, Nussbaum, Leiva 2007). Koss (2013) uses the term "Universal Digitisation" to describe a goal for policy making, where "individuals and organisations in every sphere can fully exploit the potential benefits of being online." (Koss, 2013)

The misalignment of digital strategies and announced goals from cultural institutions is not only a misuse of public resources, but it also results in a redefinition of audiences, digital demographics complicate the access of broad swaths of the population to cultural contents. The limited dedication of institutions to the user experience results in second grade offerings that further marginalize people already disconnected from the cultural centers. The reinforcement of the differences between first person physical experience and a secondary digital experience also reinforces the exclusionary relationship between a first rate public that can connect with the cultural institutions through an already established nexus, and a second rate public that is not really being communicated with.

While the privileged public can remember or imagine their past or eventual connection with the physically present objects, the marginalized public is further estranged by their perpetualized inaccessibility to 'real' worthwhile cultural experiences. Since the internet implies "(...) selective exposure because it provides such an abundance of information that selective exposure is not only possible, but also necessary." (Johnson, Bichard, Zhang, 2009) This means that there is little purpose for a member of these culturally marginalized

communities to engage and share digitally with artistic institutions.

If digital communication technologies were already breaking the location - community nexus (Barney, 2004), the substitution of "[a] space of flows [...] for [a] space of places" (Castells), whose new geographies are based on common interests (Balaguer, 2003), a "common world of things" (Barney, 2004), was accelerated by social distancing measures, which of course meant physical social distancing, to the detriment of offline social networks (Gauthier et al, 2020) while digital communities were strengthened. (Pérez-Escoda et al, 2020)

This also means that part of the population were increasingly isolated in already existing digital neighborhoods estranged from cultural institutions and the value they purpose to represent, contributing an artistic component to the formation of so called "cyberghettos" (Ebo, 1998), art deserts with very limited cultural capital where artistic expressions are very limited, while internet art exhibits are predominantly visited by people from communities defined by their cultural capital, indicated by characteristics such as having higher education degrees. (Enhuber, 2015)

As more people have access to the internet, being excluded from the possible benefits of electronic communications "(...) may become the major social justice challenge of our time" (Perlgut, 2011) because as the world in general becomes more digitally mediated, either because of temporal occurrences such as the COVID pandemic, or because of a general trend, an inadequacy of internet art exhibits could contribute, because of the reciprocity between online and offline worlds and digital acculturation (Dey, Yen, Samuel, 2019), to an alienation of sections of the public from organized artistic practices in general.

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