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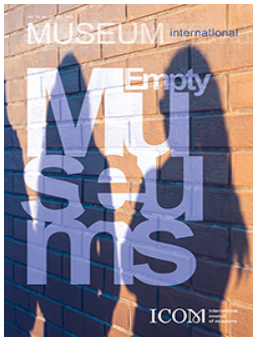
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Kaja Jurčišinová, Marline Lisette Wilders & Janneke Visser

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The Future of Blockbuster Exhibitions After the Covid-19 Crisis: The Case of the Dutch Museum Sector

by Kaja Jurčišínová,
Marline Lisette Wilders
and Janneke Visser

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Kaja Jurčišinová completed her undergraduate degree in Art History at the University of St Andrews in 2018 and graduated with a Master's in Arts and Culture from the University of Groningen in 2021. She was an intern at multiple cultural institutions across Europe, including the Dutch Museum Association, the Matter of Art biennale in Prague, the Slovak National Gallery and the European Cultural Centre in Venice.

Marline Lisette Wilders is Assistant Professor in Arts in Society at the University of Groningen. She teaches activism, cultural leadership and research methods for social sciences and humanities. She specialises in audience and reception research in performing arts, festivals and museums. For her postdoctoral research on the effects of adaptive reuse of industrial heritage sites for the functioning of the performing arts and built industrial heritage in society, she received a fellowship from the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research. She took part in the project 'Cultural Heritage and Improvised Music in European Festivals', funded by the European Union.

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During the Covid-19 crisis, when planned exhibitions remained unvisited or seen by only a limited number of people, identifying a blockbuster exhibition based on numbers alone became an even more questionable practice than before. If a blockbuster were only to be defined by number of visitors, there were no blockbuster exhibitions in the spring of 2020 nor will there be in the winter of 2021-2022.

In spring 2020, life as we knew it changed, and museums along with it. According to ICOM's current official definition (2021), a museum is 'a non-profit, permanent institution in the service of society and its development, open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits the tangible and intangible heritage of humanity and its environment for the purposes of education, study and enjoyment'. In light of this definition, the impact of the Covid-19 crisis on the museum sector raised a serious issue. In a situation in which almost all museums around the world were closed and visitors were absent or allowed in only in limited numbers, what is left of museums? What is left of their purpose if they are unable to fulfil one of their primary goals—being open to the public, serving, educating and providing enjoyment of our heritage?

During lockdown, some core activities of museums remained almost uninterrupted—for instance, research and curating of permanent collections continued as usual. In contrast, the organisation of temporary exhibitions was heavily hindered (King *et al.* 2021, p. 488). Financial investments for these types of exhibitions are made months or even years ahead, but if an exhibition happens to overlap with a strict lockdown of museums, various issues instantly become problematic—and the bigger the exhibition, the more unforeseeable the consequences. The risks are the most prominent for so-called blockbusters.

While there is no universally accepted definition of what a blockbuster exhibition is (Chi-Jung Chu 2015, p. 2), generally it signifies an exhibition that is large, expensive to organise and with a temporary, travelling character (Liu 2012, p. 24). The term itself originates from World War II, when the word blockbuster was used to talk about a large bomb that caused massive destruction. Later, this word penetrated the field of film studies where it indicated movies produced by American studios that had large commercial success in the post-war period (Hall 2011). The word 'blockbuster' has undoubtedly commercial connotations.

The blockbuster exhibition as emblematic of the contemporary museum sector

In museology, the phrase began to be used retrospectively in relation to the exhibition *Treasures of Tutankhamun* (1972), which first took place in the British Museum. This exhibition, often referred to as the first proper blockbuster exhibition, was visited by over one million people—an unprecedented commercial success. The exhibited archaeological objects travelled overseas and were presented with great success across America until 1981 (Hindley 2015). Based on this pioneer blockbuster, the main conditions that the blockbuster should meet are: first, it should attract a large number of visitors (Smithsonian Institution 2002). Secondly, a conventional blockbuster uses marketing tools, as well as an attractive exhibition title that refers to something familiar but with a sensational, 'masterpiece' quality (Barker 1999, p. 130). Blockbuster exhibitions became truly popularised in the 1990s, and the goal of attracting a high number of people was to make a financial profit for the museum, as well as to create a strong name for the institution (Zarobell 2017, p. 66; Desvallées and Mairesse 2010, p. 44). In other words, by 'combining the various scholarly sources, one could define a blockbuster exhibition as an exhibition that manages to attract a large audience' (Chi-Jung Chu 2015, p. 3).

However, we argue here that visitor numbers may not be the only reliable indicator of a successful blockbuster. Even before the crisis, using a precise number of visitors—for instance, according to Barker (1999, p. 127), a blockbuster should attract at least 250,000 visitors—as a tool to identify whether an exhibition is a blockbuster was not reliable. In the meantime, due to globalisation, a number of museums that used the blockbuster business model grew rapidly (Zarobell 2017, p. 65). Thus, more recently, the blockbuster model can be found not only in the most famous institutions in large tourist cities, but also in middle-sized museums located at urban peripheries. The number of visitors in a regional local museum may be smaller than in a museum located in the capital. Yet, compared to the usual number of visitors per exhibition, even 100,000 visitors may represent a huge blockbuster success for a smaller museum (Callens, pers. comm., 15 January 2021). During the Covid-19 crisis, when planned exhibitions remained unvisited or seen by only a limited number of people, identifying a blockbuster exhibition based on numbers alone became an even more questionable practice than before. If a blockbuster were only to be defined by number of visitors, there

were no blockbuster exhibitions in the spring of 2020 nor will there be in the winter of 2021-2022. Three recent exhibitions, *Yayoi Kusama* at Gropius Bau in Berlin (berlinerfestspiele.de 2021), *Epic Iran* at London's Victoria and Albert Museum and *Kandinsky* at the Bilbao Guggenheim (Chzhu 2021), all undeniably fulfil the conditions for a blockbuster—apart from masses of people.

It is important to note that the definition of 'blockbuster' varies, and no consistent definition exists. This article speculates that the reason for the ambiguity of this term can be linked to its expansion in recent years—more museums of more types and sizes are organising blockbusters, so the old definition from the 1970s, when blockbusters were limited to large institutions, no longer seems to be sufficient. The understanding of what a blockbuster is has shifted over time—in more than half a century of its existence—and today, blockbusters can be seen as a specific cultural phenomenon in the museum world in the late 20th and the early 21st centuries. A blockbuster is an exhibition that comes with a set of certain values and signs, and even if it fails to attract the desired size of the audience, that does not mean that the exhibition is no longer a blockbuster.

With the spread of blockbusters to many types and sizes of museums, the blockbuster exhibition has moved away from the original meaning of the word; it no longer exclusively means an exhibition that broke the record number of visitors. It has, rather, come to denote a type of exhibition.

This shift is related to a larger systemic change that took place in the museological field. While the initial motivation that lay behind blockbuster exhibitions in the second half of the 20th century was the lack of subsidies and an attempt to generate revenue via known capitalist tools, the purposes for a blockbuster have shifted; today, blockbusters also help improve the reputation of an institution and enforce its international relevance (Toepler 2006, p. 108; Desvallées and Mairesse 2010, p. 44). Blockbusters are now a common phenomenon across

museums in certain parts of the world, and they are ingrained in the manner in which museums think about their temporary display. Today, even middle-sized museums borrow expensive works from abroad and focus on their marketing methods when promoting exhibitions, so they can reach a broader audience by using attractive titles and loans for their exhibitions (Knol 2020). However, can this practice continue after the spread of Covid-19?

While blockbusters are often associated with their travelling nature or with loans from abroad, the Covid-19 crisis caused State borders to close and strictly limited international travel. The usual crowds were exchanged for social distancing and lockdowns. In the first half of 2020, many professionals in the field, including those in the Dutch Museum Association, assumed that

museums as we knew them would no longer exist after the pandemic (Choi and Kim 2021, p. 14); consequently, this would influence blockbuster practice too. Most museums were assumed to be financially depleted, and it would take a while for tourism to flourish again. In many cases, it is the high number of tourists that deliver the needed visitor numbers, which are essential for the financial viability of a blockbuster (Klinkert, Wieseman and Janiszewska 2020). Therefore, we hypothesise that the crisis, which has had a negative financial impact on the museum sector, may precipitate the end of financially challenging blockbusters, since they simply may no longer be profitable without visitors.

The Dutch case study: approach and methodology

To evaluate this hypothesis, an empirical research project was established on behalf of the Museumvereniging (Dutch Museum Association). The Museumvereniging was created in 2014 in Amsterdam, and over 450 Dutch museums are members. It serves as an umbrella organisation for its member museums: it interlinks them, helps guide them via codes of conduct that ensure the quality of the sector, and lobbies for their interest in the political and public spheres. The Museumvereniging played a crucial advocacy role for struggling Dutch museums during the Covid-19 crisis. The association immediately stepped in and researched the ensuing turmoil and lobbied for financial support from the government (Museumvereniging 2020b).

Once the initial preparation for the research was finalised, 19 out of 438 Dutch museums that are members of the Museumvereniging were selected to be invited to participate in the research based on their size, type of collection and identity within the regional, national or international context. The character of their collections was most important, because the collection lies at the heart of museum typology (Desvallées and Mairesse 2010, p. 26). On the other hand, because there is no clear universal international agreement on a precise typology of museums (UNESCO 2019, p. 22), the typology made by the Museumvereniging itself was used.

Based on their own collections, a Dutch museum can self-identify with one of the following categories: art, history, natural history, business, science and technology, ethnology or other (Cbs.nl 2020). Although we attempted to include all these types of museums, not all museums seemed relevant enough for the research focus. The most important criterion for choosing a museum was its experience with blockbusters, which is a practice common mostly for larger museums with art collections. Thus, most of the participating museums belong to this category.

To explore the assumption that the Covid-19 crisis may represent the final nail in the coffin of blockbuster exhibitions, a research design of a qualitative nature was developed, which would focus on the insider experience in a chosen sample of institutions. Qualitative research is suitable for the unstable, complex and multi-layered nature of the situation, and the focus on an unclear future. Consequently, structured interviews that could capture nuance and document key representatives' expectations for the future were used as the method. Online interviews were held between December 2020 and March 2021. All museum representatives agreed to be identified by name; in the discussion of results, we will refer to those interviews with the names of the interviewees between brackets. While interviews were

arranged, desk research on the participating institutions were simultaneously performed, gathering data from institutional web pages and in annual reports, to document the measurable impact of the crisis on the number of visitors. The following 14 Dutch museums (in alphabetical order) and their self-chosen representatives participated (Table 1 and Fig. 1):

1. Centraal Museum (Marije Verduijn, Head of Collections Management)
2. Drents Museum (Paul Klarenbeek, Marketing and Communications Coordinator)
3. Fries Museum (Kris Callens, General Director)
4. Groninger Museum (Andreas Blühm, General Director)
5. Hermitage Amsterdam (Paul Mosterd, Deputy Director)
6. Kröller-Müller Museum (Frits de Vogel, Business Director)
7. Kunsthal Rotterdam (Herman van Karnebeek, Business Director)
8. Kunstmuseum Den Haag (Anne de Haij, Executive Secretary and Programme Manager)
9. Museum De Lakenhal (Oskar Brandenburg, Head of Programme and Collections; at the time, Director)
10. Mauritshuis (Hedwig Wösten, Exhibitions Manager)
11. Natuurmuseum Fryslân (Peter Koomen, Head of Collections)

The Dutch Case Study: Overview of Museums Participating in the Research

	Institution	Size (in number of visitors per regular year)	Collection and significance	Type of Collection	Blockbuster approach and experience	Focus groups (before the crisis)	The main source of subsidies
1	Centraal Museum	360,000	regional	art and history	had one in the past, no future plans	mostly Dutch	municipality
2	Drents Museum	170,000	regional	art and history	positive	mostly Dutch	province
3	Fries Museum	100,000 – 350,000	regional	art and history	positive	mostly Dutch and German	province
4	Groninger Museum	200,000	regional	art	positive	mostly Dutch	province, city and state
5	Hermitage Amsterdam	400,000	world-renowned collection but located in St Petersburg	art and history	their model is based on it	Dutch and international	no state subsidies, own income and private donations
6	Kröller-Müller Museum	400,000 – 500,000	world-renowned	art	avoid using the term – negative	international and Dutch	rijksmuseum-state
7	Kunsthal Rotterdam	400,000	no collection	art	positive	mostly Dutch	municipality
8	Kunstmuseum Den Haag	400,000	world-renowned	art	Positive	mostly Dutch, wish to broaden it	municipality
9	Museum De Lakenhal	100,000	regional	art and history	attempts in the past, negative in the future	mostly Dutch, now focus on the local community	municipality
10	Mauritshuis	400,000 – 500,000	world-renowned	art	positive	international and Dutch	rijksmuseum-state
11	Natuurmuseum Fryslân	45,000 – 50,000	regional	nature and science	positive in the past, problematic in the future	mostly Dutch	province
12	Rijksmuseum	2,678 million	world-renowned	art	positive	international and Dutch	rijksmuseum-state
13	Stedelijk Museum	700,000	world-renowned	art	positive	Dutch and international	government
14	Van Gogh Museum	2.135 million	world-renowned	art	positive	international, now focus on Dutch	rijksmuseum-state

Table 1. The Dutch case study: overview of museums participating in the research.

12. Rijksmuseum (Eva Hermans, Head of Exhibitions)

13. Stedelijk Museum (Enrica Flores d'Arcais, Development Manager)

14. Van Gogh Museum (Edwin Becker, Head of Exhibitions)

Prior to the pandemic, blockbusters in the Netherlands were popular, especially in recent years. For instance, in cooperation with the National Gallery in London, the Rijksmuseum attracted over half a million people with its record blockbuster *Late Rembrandt* (2015)

(Hermans, pers. comm., 3 March 2021). The development of the sector went hand in hand with the growing number of blockbusters that can now be found also beyond the biggest museums in the Randstad.¹ While popular museums such as the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, the Rijksmuseum and the Van Gogh Museum—all located in the capital—have built their whole systems around attracting visitors to regular large temporary exhibitions and have operated in that manner for years, medium-sized museums in other regions of the country have recently attempted to do the same.

Museums such as the Fries Museum, Groninger Museum, Drents Museum, Centraal Museum and Museum De Lakenhal began to create exhibitions with captivating titles, invested significantly in their marketing methods and borrowed masterpieces from other institutions, often from abroad.

- Rijksmuseum
- Other sources of funding

1. Centraal Museum
2. Drents Museum
3. Fries Museum
4. Groninger Museum
5. Hermitage Amsterdam
6. Kröller-Müller Museum
7. Kunsthal Rotterdam
8. Kunstmuseum Den Haag
9. Museum De Lakenhal
10. Mauritshuis
11. Natuurmuseum Fryslân
12. Rijksmuseum
13. Stedelijk Museum
14. Van Gogh Museum



Fig 1. The Dutch case study: geographical location and the nature of research funding for participating museums, 2021.
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However, when Covid-19 hit the Netherlands, many planned blockbusters had to be postponed. This was the case for, for example, an ambitious *Frida Kahlo* exhibition that was meant to take place in the Drents Museum, the Groninger Museum's *Rolling Stones* exhibition, the Rijksmuseum's *Slavery* exhibition and the Kunstmuseum Den Haag's *Dior* exhibition (Klarenbeek, pers. comm., 7 December 2020; Blühm, pers. comm., 13 January 2021; Hermans, pers. comm., 3 March 2021; de Haij, pers. comm., 20 January 2021). While, in 2019, the Dutch museum sector had a record number of visitors (33 million), in March 2020, the situation in the Netherlands evolved in the same manner as elsewhere in Europe. When this research project began in September 2020, museums in the Netherlands were open, after having been shut from 13 March until 31 May. Even so, in the summer of that year, museums could welcome only a fraction of their original visitors because of the safety measures. Later in autumn, the situation markedly changed again. The second wave of the virus hit Europe hard, and with the rising number of infections, Dutch museums were forced to close their doors again for two weeks in November, and then again on 15 December, which lasted until 5 June 2021 (Museumvereniging 2020a). When museums finally opened and visitors were allowed back in measures were still in place, and the size of the audiences represented only a fraction of the original visitor capacity. This means that ticket revenues were not sufficient. For some museums, such as the Hermitage Amsterdam or the Van Gogh Museum, the income from visitors during a regular year represents more than 65 per cent of their overall earnings (Becker, pers. comm., 7 February 2021; Mosterd, pers. comm., 27 January 2021). As of 19 December 2021, a new lockdown was imposed and museums had to once again close.

To support museums in this troubling situation, the Dutch government offered various means of support. Over 450 registered museums comply with international criteria for museums. Of these, 29 are *rijksmuseums* (national museums). The State owns their collections and funds museums to take care of them and to be open to the public. There are also 12 museums (one in each province) that receive part of their funding from a national fund (which receives money

from the state). They need to reapply for this funding every four years and perform specific extra tasks to receive it. Municipalities are the main funders for 54 per cent of the museums. Around 20 per cent receive no funding from governmental bodies.

With regards to pandemic-related aid, museums had the option to apply for generic types of support. This type of support contributed to paying staff salaries (called NOW²) and to fixed costs, called TVL³ (business.gov.nl 2021). In addition, the Dutch government created special support for the Dutch cultural sector, which came in several packages. In 2020, it was 300 million euros; an additional 482 million euros was made available for the first half of 2021. An additional 15 million euros was added in the second half of December 2020, when there was a new lockdown (government.nl 2020). Furthermore, in early January 2021, an extra 20 million euros was offered to the cultural sector in the Netherlands as part of the Kickstart Cultural Fund scheme (cultuurfonds.nl 2021). In the third quarter of 2021, the government covered 45 million euros, which came from the 482 million for the *rijksmuseums* (cultuur.nl 2020). Another grant of 51.5 million euros was reserved for the third quarter of 2021. In December 2021, this money was allocated to all provinces and municipalities, which are requested to use it to support their local cultural organisations. They are not required to do so, as was the case with previous sums that the national government transferred to municipalities. The reality was that municipalities did not always grant the funds to institutions within their area, and the Kickstart Cultural Fund has extended its support and added 3.5 million euros (Museumvereniging 2021). Part of the money that the Kickstart Cultural Fund used came from the national packages.

The cultural policy system in the Netherlands is one of the world's most generous (Boekman Foundation 2020, p. 7). In contrast to the United States, for example, in Europe, culture is still greatly supported via governmental subsidies (Cowen 2004, p. v). However, there are major differences between various nations' cultural policy systems. There is an undeniable gap between States belonging to the previous Eastern and Western blocs. Their cultural policy systems are based on

different principles, and the societal value of arts and culture is perceived differently in post-communist countries (Rindzevičiūtė 2021, p. 150). In the former Eastern bloc, where the cultural policy system is underdeveloped compared to that of western Europe, the aid budget for culture was not sufficient during the Covid-19 pandemic, and the creative sector in these countries was hit the hardest (Ernst and Young 2021, p. 37).

Generally, countries in western Europe invest more in their cultural systems. This group of countries overlaps with those with a tradition of blockbuster exhibitions. There is a direct link between these two phenomena, because blockbusters need a large initial financial investment—as proven by the case study of the Fries Museum. Additionally, a strong indemnity scheme of a given State significantly helps: the lowered financial risk makes it easier for an institution to host blockbusters (Callens, pers. comm., 15 January 2021).

The reason why certain types of museums continue to organise blockbusters lies also in the initial motive for hosting them. Some museums are resistant to taking a break from blockbusters, as revealed by their responses as to why they organise them: there is a specific set of values and messages that they see behind the practice.

Blockbusters are here to stay

As will be shown in our discussion of certain research results, this strong financial backbone offered by the government in times of crisis matters the most, and it is the main reason why blockbusters will continue to take place in the Netherlands. However, there will be fewer of them, and they will be seen in fewer types of museums. The institutions that are confident in planning new large-scale displays for the upcoming years are major players in the field. While they suffered because of the lack of (foreign) visitors, they are not abandoning the blockbuster model any time soon – unlike the smaller institutions. The Rijksmuseum, the Van Gogh Museum, the Mauritshuis and the Kunstmuseum Den Haag are all in the process of arranging blockbusters for 2022. If we examine the permanent collections within different museum types, the results are clear: art museums are overwhelmingly willing to return to the organisation of blockbusters as soon as possible.

Moreover, major institutions are usually those that host a given country's most cherished collections and are thus important for its tourism and national image. Therefore, it is in the government's best interest to support them as much as possible, allowing major museums to feel a sense of security (Becker, pers. comm., 7 February 2021; de Vogel, pers. comm., 19 February 2021; Wösten, pers. comm., 3 December 2020). Among these institutions are the *rijksmuseums* (Rijksmuseum, Van Gogh Museum, Kröller-Müller Museum, Mauritshuis). The research data show that most of the interviewed *rijksmuseums* were doing well and had enough confidence and financial support to proceed with future blockbusters. The financial security was, in one case (Kröller-Müller Museum), so high that the institution returned the governmental support it had received, because it did not require the funds: 'You have the general measures from the government—and we are not using it, nor the other general governmental support. We only have support from the ministry and that's enough' (de Vogel, pers. comm., 19 February 2021). In summary, 50 per cent of the *rijksmuseums* were financially healthy and not struggling at all. The other half of the *rijksmuseums* were less confident about their financial state, but they were not struggling as badly as other museums, because they always felt a sense of security. In contrast, museums

funded by provinces or municipalities appeared to be less sure about their financial security, because the cultural policy and the consequent system of funding changes every four years, sometimes radically (Callens, pers. comm., 15 January 2021; Koomen, pers. comm., 1 February 2021; van Karnebeek, pers. comm., 14 January 2021). Thus, they have to be more careful with their resources, especially during times of crisis: 'we are aware that [blockbusters] may be more expensive, more difficult to get, and we will probably think twice and look at alternatives if possible' (Verduijn, pers. comm., 11 December 2020). This insecurity is reflected in the data in the sense that a significantly smaller number of medium-sized museums with provincial relevance is planning to organise another blockbuster in the near future.

The reason why certain types of museums continue to organise blockbusters lies also in the initial motive for hosting them. Some museums are resistant to taking a break from blockbusters, as revealed by their responses as to why they organise them: there is a specific set of values and messages that they see behind the practice. For instance, the Rijksmuseum's

mission [...] has always been to make art and history meaningful to a broad cross section of the contemporary national and international public. In our exhibitions, we often do this by placing Dutch art and history in an international context. And loans from foreign institutions are often necessary to tell these kinds of stories. I think that is the main reason for us, or the main drive for us, to continue with blockbusters. (Hermans, pers. comm., 3 March 2021)

The Kunstmuseum Den Haag has adopted a similar approach. Although this large museum with an extensive collection is not a *rijksmuseum*, and it is not as popular with foreign visitors as, for instance, the Van Gogh Museum or the Stedelijk Museum, staff there also feel a similar sentiment as the Rijksmuseum. Additionally, they believe that blockbusters—especially during Covid—do not necessarily have to be found in many museums:

We cannot work all at once, and organising international exhibitions,

attracting foreign visitors, having art shipped all over the world—obviously also from an ecological perspective—it is not a good thing. But we do think that every country deserves some strong museums who are able to do this. And you could say that is an arrogant way of looking at ourselves. But we think we have a really big collection of 166,000 objects and good international relationships. And with this strong core, in our collection represented by Mondrian or Escher, we will be able to keep our current policy of the combination of blockbusters and small collection presentations. (de Haij, pers. comm., 20 January 2021)

This sentiment is also shared by the Stedelijk Museum, as its manager of development suggests:

Sometimes you really want blockbusters [...] we still want to do that—I think we also owe that to the museum. We are a big museum of modern and contemporary art in the Netherlands. So people expect us to have big names or big exhibitions. (d'Arcais, pers. comm., 6 January 2021)

In other words, large institutions perceive securing monumental exhibitions with foreign loans as their duty, because they feel that they represent the best of art and culture that the Netherlands has to offer, and it is their responsibility to present their major works alongside other precious masterpieces in exciting, once-in-a-lifetime exhibitions. However, middle-sized regional museums turn to blockbusters for more existential reasons, such as a desirable number of visitors. Without blockbusters, the permanent collection would not be able to attract a big enough audience. We don't have 'The Night Watch' and we don't have a 'Girl with a Pearl Earring' (Callens, pers. comm., 15 January 2021).

What contributes to blockbusters still being organised, even if the pandemic is not over yet, is the fact that many of the exhibitions that were meant to open in 2020 were postponed until 2021. One of the defining signs of blockbusters is that, in many cases, the exhibition travels from institution to institution or from country to country (Zarobell 2017, p. 67). Thus, one of the biggest issues linked to blockbusters was

the worldwide disruption of the exhibition schedule (van Karnebeek, pers. comm., 14 January 2021). As blockbusters are often lent from one institution to another and travel from country to country, just one slight postponement disrupts the chain of following loans. Consequently, institutions had to figure out how to cancel existing agreements. Moreover, they also had to create a solution to fill the empty rooms where an exhibition was meant to be held, but never arrived, because of delays:

If we are going have to change the whole schedule, it's going to be really difficult, because this exhibition has dozens of lenders, so you have to go to all of them and say: Hey, is it ok if we keep your work for another two months? They will maybe say yes, or they say no. Or they say yes, but you have to pay me. So there's really a lot of work to do. (van Karnebeek, pers. comm., 14 January 2021)

Of course, this was the case when the museums were opened during the summer and autumn of 2020, and then reopened for summer 2021. In this situation, a strong collection represents a huge advantage—during the pandemic, they were often used as last-minute, curated fillers:

In the fall of 2020, we had planned an exhibition about fashion designer Dior and then the pandemic started. But we

have a commitment to make one large fashion exhibition each year—and we did not postpone the whole idea of a fashion exhibition. But we made one from our own collection. (de Haij, pers. comm., 20 January 2021)

Although the Covid-19 pandemic had a profound influence on blockbuster exhibitions planned for 2020 and 2021, most were not fully cancelled. Museums that participated in this research expressed that they wanted to show the planned display to visitors, and only 20 per cent of them fully cancelled an exhibition. Schedules were altered, exhibitions that were forced to shut early were prolonged and the ones that were meant to begin during lockdown were postponed to later dates in 2021, 2022 and 2023.

The Groninger Museum diverges from the majority of museums (85 per cent) that postponed their exhibitions. This institution took the risk and opened a blockbuster exhibition about the Rolling Stones. It opened as planned in November 2020, after long consideration of the risks (Blühm, pers. comm., 13 January 2021). However, in the end, this approach turned out to be too risky, and when the second wave arrived, the museum was forced to close again. Thus, the exhibition not only did not make any money, it led to a financial loss: 'We hoped to earn some money—that hope is gone. Now we hope to break

even—and that is probably not possible. We will have losses. It depends on how we limit the damage now' (Blühm, pers. comm., 13 January 2021).

The museums wanted to show planned exhibitions to their visitors as promised; they either felt that they 'owe it to them' (de Haij, pers. comm., 20 January 2021), or, simply, especially since they had adequate resources due to generous support, did not wish to radically change established ways of running their institutions (Hermans, pers. comm., 3 March 2021). In other words, there will be blockbusters, but fewer of them; especially in comparison to the successful period immediately preceding 2020. They will continue to be organised in those types of institutions that started the practice: art and art historical museums that are large and, under normal conditions, attract a significant number of foreign visitors. These types of museums will continue to organise blockbusters if they choose to, because they can—they have the support, the facilities and the staff. On the other hand, medium-sized museums that previously organise blockbusters before the crisis are more vulnerable than the large ones. A blockbuster is a bigger risk for them.

Blockbuster risks versus new opportunities: Sustainability and museums' online presence

Would a radical change in the organisation of blockbusters be so bad? Could the pandemic initiate a shift in the way we think about temporary exhibitions, display and interacting with visitors? Blockbusters have been receiving negative feedback for decades, and whether expensive blockbuster exhibitions have a sustainable future has been present in museum discourse since the beginning of their existence (Freedberg, Jackson-Stops and Spear 1987, p. 358). The critique can be linked directly to practical issues that are a part of organising a blockbuster, and for which loans from abroad are used. These loans carry with them risks such as 'accidents and losses during travel, injuries suffered during otherwise unnecessary conservation, thefts' (Daley and Savage 2007, p. 4). Another point of criticism

focuses on high insurance fees that are tied to loaned works. The precious objects that belong to other institutions or countries must be covered by insurance, and the fees tend to be astronomical (Barker 1999). Most importantly, the pressure to attract a large number of visitors because of the dependence on entrance fees makes the blockbuster exhibition model fragile (Barker 1999); as it was shown to be during the pandemic. The Hermitage Amsterdam is a perfect example of the fragility of the blockbuster model, which was only highlighted by the Covid-19 pandemic.

Before the crisis, the profile of Hermitage Amsterdam was clear—it was an independent entrepreneurial museum that did not depend on State subsidies. Its dynamic approach was

dependent on organising two blockbusters a year. Objects meant for the exhibition are shipped from St. Petersburg, where the collection of the State Hermitage Museum is located. These temporary exhibitions had to generate profit because up to 70 per cent of the museum's income was earned by ticket and related sales. The rest is usually provided by donors (Mosterd, pers. comm., 27 January 2021). During the crisis, it was impossible for this model to work, but the museum was not eligible to apply for culture-specific governmental subsidies, because it is a private museum: 'some museums get a lot of money from all different corners—from the province, from the city, from the national government—but we don't get anything' (Mosterd, pers. comm., 27 January 2021) Due to the Hermitage's financial model,

based on blockbusters and resultant ticket earnings, the museum openly asked the public for donations to survive in August of 2021 (hermitage.nl 2021).

Blockbuster exhibitions are also criticised for sustainability reasons. What comes hand in hand with blockbusters' positive qualities—such as, for instance, popularisation of art and culture (Lawrenson and O'Reilly 2019)—are the negatives: the CO₂ pollution caused by works travelling by plane, exploitation of museum staff who work long, unpaid overtime hours, and the vulnerability of the displayed precious works, which face crowds of people daily (Daley and Savage 2007, p. 4; Wösten, pers. comm., 3 December 2020; Brandenburg, pers. comm., 4 February 2021). Moreover, the large amount of building materials required to create a blockbuster is disposed of out soon after the exhibition closes, and it is not reused for the following one (Davies and Wilkinson 2008, p. 18).

Some hoped that the Covid-19 crisis could serve as a catalyst for change and initiate an address of some of the issues listed above (Choi and Kim 2021, p. 1). The forced break that blockbuster exhibitions took over the course of the pandemic led to an unexpected and more sustainable way of functioning for museums. International delivery of art was put on hold, flights were limited, and in March 2020, air travel experienced a drastic and unprecedented shift. In Europe alone, out of the 40 airlines and airline groups examined, 32 had completely suspended their operations [...] out of the eight that were operational were doing so at significantly reduced capacity' (Budd, Ison and Adrienne 2020). Many works that were on loan remained abroad and did not return on time. For instance, in March 2020, 14 Van Gogh paintings and drawings from the Kröller-Müller Museum collection were in Japan, and 'the works were stuck over there (...). It was back in the Netherlands by June' (de Vogel, pers. comm., 19 February 2021). Moreover, in 2021, the vaccine roll-out caused issues with the delivery of artworks. Vaccines were prioritised, and most delivery planes were filled with them (de Haij, pers. comm., 20 January 2021). This led to a significant decrease of CO₂ emissions during the early days of the crisis, by 17 per cent each day in comparison to 2019 (Le Quére *et al.* 2020).

Furthermore, the Covid-19 crisis put a larger emphasis on the online presence of museums, and online communication in general (Resta *et al.* 2021, p. 152). Because many works were being shipped without couriers and the exchange and the installation of works were being handled via online calls, the whole process was much more environmentally friendly and inexpensive for institutions. These are some of the positive developments that museums may wish to keep in place after the pandemic is over (Mosterd, pers. comm., 27 January 2021). The online presence of museums also helps institutions to have a sustainable future by reaching new target audiences. While museums (not only in the Netherlands) are known for their limited audience diversity – they are typically frequented by elderly individuals of a certain socio-economic background (de Haij, pers. comm., 20 January 2021)—the online domain and social media are dominated by younger generations. Therefore, by engaging with audiences online, a museum can diversify its range of visitors (d'Arcais, pers. comm., 6 January 2021). In fact, one of the interviewees stressed that younger people made up more of the audience of museums when they were partially opened in 2020 (d'Arcais, pers. comm., 6 January 2021). Older people were vulnerable and therefore more vigilant in public spaces, which is a behaviour that may continue:

we are obviously working on the diversity of our audience, but the largest part is still an older one—and we are afraid that even after vaccinations, they will be anxious to go out to spaces where there are a lot of people. (De Haij, pers. comm., 20 January 2021)

This, together with more active online activities, gave museums a chance to connect with the upcoming generation, create new loyal visitors and therefore ensure the continuation of their institutions in the future (de Haij, pers. comm., 20 January 2021). The research has shown that more than half of the participants believe that the museums' online activities are truly beneficial for the well-being of the institution. However, the remainder of the interviewed institutions perceived their online activities only as an addition to their physical display or as a means to keep audiences interested during forced closures. Thus, they do not

perceive it as important or crucial for the healthy operation of the museum.

Thanks to all the disruptions in travel and local social-distancing regulations, institutions temporarily depended more on their own collections and welcomed significantly fewer visitors, who could experience the display in a more satisfactory way, because they had the space to enjoy it:

At the moment, we have an exhibition where you get to be all by yourself with the 'View of Delft' when you're sitting in front of it, and you can almost touch the painting—and there's no guard, there's nothing; it's all you and the exhibition, which I think is really, really special. (Wösten, pers. comm., 3 December 2020)

Might these new conditions prevail after the pandemic is over, and will museums continue to operate in a more sustainable mode? Looking at the results from this research, it does not appear so. The question of sustainability was scarcely mentioned in the interviews, and if asked directly, it was mostly brushed off. With the exception of two institutions, none made any deeper or radical changes regarding the management of museums after the crisis had hit. Instead, they all rather await the return of things going back to pre-pandemic normal. Some even hope that, after the pandemic, people will crave travelling and culture even more, and we will witness the new roaring twenties in which culture, museums and blockbusters will flourish even more than before (Blühm, pers. comm., 13 January 2021).

The only institution where the theme of sustainability seemed to play a prominent role was the Museum De Lakenhal in Leiden. They had a negative experience with a blockbuster; *Young Rembrandt* (November 2019-February 2020) was visited by the masses, but it also completely exhausted the museum's wallet and employees. Consequently, they openly criticised the sector's emphasis on constant growth, blockbuster obsession and the focus on numbers (Knol 2020). Their current approach can be summarised as quality over quantity. They focus on community building, the local audience and more sustainable solutions (Brandenburg, pers. comm., 4 February 2021).

The Fries Museum's stance seems to stand in striking ideological contrast with the Museum De Lakenhal's opinion on quantity; the Fries Museum 'strongly believes that quality and quantity are connected. You cannot generate a large-scale public audience if your exhibition sucks' (Callens, pers. comm., 15 January 2021). The Fries Museum built its new identity on internationally known blockbusters that helped it to establish itself and grow from a regional institution to a museum

with a name known internationally. The Drents Museum has a similar story (Klarenbeek, pers. comm., 7 December 2020). However, do we really need 20 Dutch museums to organise a blockbuster at the same time? And what is wrong with a regional museum staying relevant to its region; does it necessarily have to keep growing and building a reputation outside of its original target group? Perhaps creating a strong exhibition is the role of a few chosen players—who

can carry the responsibility, consistently large workload, high financial investments and consequent risks. Their size, reputation and experience avoid the risk of exhaustion or closure. This reflects the stance taken by the Kunstmuseum Den Haag, the Museum De Lakenhal and the Rijksmuseum (de Haij, pers. comm., 20 January 2021; Brandenburg, pers. comm., 4 February 2021; Hermans, pers. comm., 3 March 2021).

Blockbusters have been a crucial part of the museum scene for decades. Although the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic may have appeared to mark their end, as was suggested in the initial research hypothesis, the results of the Dutch case study suggest otherwise: 11 of the 14 participating institutions will still host a large-scale exhibition with foreign loans in the upcoming two to four years. Of these 11 museums, seven are art and history museums of a significant size, located in the pre-Covid tourist hub. Large, travelling exhibitions with loans from abroad, sky-high insurance costs and aggressive marketing will continue to exist after the Covid-19 crisis. There will, however, be fewer of them, and fewer organisations will be able to afford their cost and risk. Institutions that continue to host blockbuster exhibitions enjoy continuous financial support from the government, with good reputations and their own permanent collections. These are, moreover, precisely the museums that participated in the start of the blockbuster tradition over 50 years ago. Today, blockbusters are deeply ingrained in the values and systems of the globalised and capitalised museum sector. This may account for why the majority of museums choose to resist the crisis and hope to return to their old ways—instead of choosing small-scale, community-based and potentially more sustainable ways of functioning—a direction in which only a limited number of organisations are headed.

NOTES

- 1 The Randstad is a large urban conglomerate consisting of the four largest Dutch cities (Amsterdam, Rotterdam, The Hague and Utrecht) in the western Netherlands.
- 2 Temporary Emergency Bridging Measure for Sustained Employment
- 3 Reimbursement Fixed Costs Scheme

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