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‘CULTURE SHOCK’: MUSEUMS’ ACTIVITY DURING THE PANDEMIC

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The coronavirus has had and will have an unprecedented impact on museums. To better understand the status quo and what might come next, we are collecting resources, such as NEMO's report and interactive map, on our page dedicated to museums during COVID-19.¹

*Empty UNESCO World Heritage sites, cultural events canceled, cultural institutions closed, community cultural practices suspended, heightened risk of looting of cultural sites... artists unable to make ends meet and the cultural tourism sector greatly affected... The impact of the COVID-19 on the cultural sector is being felt around the world. This impact is social, economic and political – it affects the fundamental right of access to culture, the social rights of artists and creative professionals, and the protection of adversity of cultural expressions. The unfolding crisis risks deepening inequalities and rendering communities vulnerable,² is how UNESCO describes the situation of culture in the world in 2020. Furthermore, in the report commissioned by the Council of Europe, it was emphatically stated that *the COVID-19 pandemic has wounded sociality and limited the possibility to stay together: the essence of many forms of art.*³*

‘Culture shock’ is how OECD described the reaction of the cultural sector to the sudden and global epidemic resulting in the institutional crisis caused by COVID-19, the report published on 7 September 2020.⁴ The description being to the point in the sense that no one had anticipated a similar course of events, or had been prepared for it. According to OECD, the venue-based sectors, together with concert halls, cinemas, and other institutions based in public buildings, are the hardest hit by social distancing measures. Although contrary to other organizations within this group, museums, at least

in Poland, are not threatened by the loss of financial stability caused by a drastic drop in admission income, they have not been spared a painful reduction in employment, implying mainly layoffs of the technical staff responsible for mounting exhibitions and their security.

However, organizational changes forced by the pandemic went far beyond the administrative and personnel level, since they affected to the same degree the very mission of museums, thus posing the question how to further implement museums’ statutory tasks, mainly making the collections available to the public. In response to this challenge a wide range of online projects were conceived: collections were made available online, social media came up with new initiatives, streaming was organized, so were curator’s tours, exhibitions in virtual space, and alike.⁵ Many were undertaken as an impromptu reaction.⁶ Within the multitude of initiatives a clear message could be identified: *art can be a remedy for forced quarantine.*⁷

Museums' operations in figures

According to the UNESCO Report *Museums Around the World in the Face of COVID-19*, 90% of all the museums worldwide have been affected by the pandemic and 10% are likely never to reopen.⁸ In 171 countries from among the 182 examined, almost all or some museum institutions were closed because

of the pandemic. Examining 95.000 institutions, the Report identified 800 types of varied initiatives undertaken in response to the pandemic-related crisis. The growing importance of digital technology in the museum sector has been emphasized; over the past year it was boosted, since many previously planned cultural events were digitized into their virtual versions. According to the Report, the greatest number of initiatives of online exhibitions held after the outbreak of the pandemic were mounted in European institutions. The Old Continent was an unquestionable leader in this respect, followed immediately by Asian museums.

The activity of museums throughout 2020 was affected by subsequent pandemic waves. A number of museums tried to resume their activity in the spring or summer. Such as Polish institutions, in which the turnout was reduced, and collections were made available conditionally only to those who followed the preventive sanitary regime. According to a Report by UNESCO prepared in early October 2020, only 37% of the world heritage sites were fully reopened.⁹ Regrettably, this having lasted merely for a month or two, the sites were closed again.

Along with the epidemic development, the world media witnessed a wave of information on the closure of exhibitions, festivals, biennials, fairs, and finally of the institutions that organized them.¹⁰ Some events were cancelled entirely, others were postponed. Optimists expected that the world would be back to normal in the autumn of 2020 (e.g., Art Basel initially moved its launch to September 2020¹¹), while pessimists proclaimed a long-term crisis (e.g. Triennial in Cleveland planned for 2021 was pushed to 2022¹²). Even the Venice Biennial had to give in to the pandemic.¹³ The latest to close down were British museums, Tate Modern including, which, as it may seem, tried to postpone the decision to close until the last minute.¹⁴ At that point the question was asked whether COVID-19 was to have such far-reaching repercussions as to postpone events by two years. Today we can see with much apprehension that this scenario is very likely. After the majority of art-dedicated institutions closed down until further notice in March and April 2020, including the Louvre,¹⁵ lay-offs of the staff followed. Many museums and galleries significantly reduced the number of their employees. Just to quote some examples: on 25 March, the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art and the Hammer Museum discharged 247 employees who did not have permanent contracts with them, while on 3 April the Whitney Museum in New York announced that in anticipation of a \$ 7-million shortfall it was breaching work contracts with 76 museum curators.¹⁶ According to the estimates of the American Alliance of Museums, AAM, all their members lose \$ 33 million daily, which in the horizon of a year may lead to the closure of 30% of their associated institutions.¹⁷

In mid-March 2020, all the locations of the two biggest auction houses worldwide: Christie's¹⁸ and Sotheby's,¹⁹ were closed. Since earlier almost all the art fairs had either been cancelled or postponed, art trade almost entirely stagnated,²⁰ with the only distribution channel operating online.²¹

Furthermore, COVID-19 also took its deadly toll among people of culture. On 24 March 2020, Maurice Berger, a 63-year-old critic and curator, passed away.²² In early April, a doyen of American architecture Michael McKinnell died

aged 84.²³ Just to quote the two, however many other examples could follow.²⁴

Time of the pandemic, time of change

Faced with the involuntary closure museums, were forced to find means and ways of sustaining the performance of their mission. Although, as shown by the above-quoted Reports, the majority of their actions consisted in swiftly making their collections available online, and also in organizing virtual touring of permanent exhibitions, testimony is also given to many unique and novel actions, previously unplanned.

The coronavirus provoked an overall debate over the sense of presenting art online. As much as the topic was not entirely novel, previously it had been tackled only incidentally. The prevailing majority of individuals professionally dealing with the organization of cultural events were sceptical about it, mainly owing to their conviction that virtual reality did not offer an equal range of sensual experience as a direct contact with art does. The internet was more often treated as a convenient repository of the earlier mounted exhibitions, where those as if gained their second life, rather than a venue for their actual launch.

The outbreak of the pandemic changed, however, conditions of the artistic life in this respect, too. This is well expressed in what the Chinese artist Pete Jiadong Qiang, whose exhibition was one of the first online events in China, says: *Online exhibitions will have their place in the future, and the epidemic accelerated the process. I would rather not have a specific boundary between online and offline, virtual and physical, especially for an emerging contemporary museum in Beijing.*²⁵ As much as sounding propagandistic, his statement is symptomatic of the pandemic reality in cultural institutions.

Also the most-widely known museums had to face the unprecedented situation of the world closed up by the pandemic. They were assisted in this by online services provided by platforms of high renown. And so, through Google Arts & Culture who had for many years worked on online tours of exhibitions, the public were given access to over 500 artistic institutions worldwide, such a New York's Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, London's National Gallery, the Musée d'Orsay in Paris, or the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam.

On Twitter, for example, cultural events connected with displays can be found on #MuseumFromHome. It has been circulating in social media since national quarantines were imposed in various countries, showing which exhibitions the public can view without leaving home.

The pandemic has imposed numerous innovations on the world of art. They were not always enthusiastically greeted, but it remains an undeniable fact that 2020 abounded in precursory cultural events transferred from the real world to virtual space. It is the Sydney Biennale that is considered to have been the first big event which instead of being moved to a different date was held online.²⁶ Initiated on 14 March 2020, its 22nd edition was titled NIRIN, which in the language of the Wiradjuri people, namely in the aboriginal dialect, means the 'edge'. Encompassing 700 works by over 101 individual artists and collectives, it included many artists representing Indigenous Australians. The works were presented on the Google Arts & Culture Platform and in other social media, such as YouTube or Spotify.

Another major event to have been held online was the subsequent edition of Art Basel. The art fair was, however, privileged, as they own their premises, and are not forced to incur any additional costs of renting, this allowing them to take the organizational risk. At the end of the day, there was much interest in the event on part of the exhibitors. In view of the lack of competition the decision to go ahead proved profitable to the organizers.

An interesting solution was adopted by the organizers of the exhibition at the Boijmans Ahoy Drive-Thru Museum in Rotterdam whose operation was launched on 1 August 2020 as a reaction to the pandemic. The idea is for the public to drive in their private cars into the area of the display of large-format works in different media: paintings, sculptures, or videos.²⁷

Museums came up with a multitude of initiatives which in many a case were unexpectedly surprising. Such was unquestionably the instance of the action proposed by the Nelson-Atkins Museum in Kansas City when three penguins from the local Zoo were taken to wander around the permanent exhibition.²⁸ *They seemed to react much better to Caravaggio than Monet,*²⁹ commented Julián Zugazagoitia, Museum's Executive Director. It was thanks to this project that a local museum made the headlines of the online art-related portals, where it had not been present too much before. The public were moved away from their cognitive schemes. Maybe on some faces a smile could be seen, contradicting the grim atmosphere of the pandemic. And although similar events will most likely remain in future history merely slightly bizarre news items, and *shall not survive*, to paraphrase the words of Alina Kurczewska, Director of the International Henryk Wieniawski Violin Competition in Poznan said about some impromptu musicians' projects meant to hearten the public, *they were the necessity of the moment.*³⁰

Old masters online

From among a wide range of offers of digital displays of art it is hard to select the ones that are the most meaningful. Quite a varied scope of those appeared online, however none proved to be innovatory enough to have been granted the top place in different ratings in view of their either formal or factual ingenuity or pioneering character. Therefore, it seems justified to differently emphasize the issue and ask not which of the 2020 events were the most prominent, but which proved the biggest challenge to their organizers. Quite a strong argumentation points to the exhibitions of old art, particularly those which had been mounted for quite some time, and whose planned premiere coincided with the forced lockdown of the institution that was preparing it. Firstly, such a choice seems obvious in view of the character of the works of Old Masters which seem exceptionally distanced from new technologies. Secondly, the outlays incurred to prepare the displays had been substantial, while the projects entailed complicated logistical challenges (e.g. insurance, transportation, security, assembly, etc.), which implied a prospect of huge losses in the case of the event's sudden cancellation. Thirdly, the exhibitions had been anticipated as major events not merely owing to the wide public interest and henceforth derived expectations, but due to their relation

with symbolic dates, e.g. the 500th anniversary of Raphael Sanzio's death in 2020. On that anniversary Rome's Scuderie del Quirinale mounted the exhibition 'Raffaello 1520–1483': the largest exhibition dedicated to the artist ever held in history.³¹ It resulted from many years of research into the artistic legacy of this Renaissance Master. Ghent's Museum Voor Schone Kunsten, in turn, had for months been announcing the big opening also of the largest in history monographic exhibition of Jan van Eyck titled 'Van Eyck. Een optische revolutie'. This display, too, was the result of a long-lasting research as well as of the conservation works on the Ghent Altarpiece conducted as of 2012.

The difficult situation connected with the forced closure of cultural institutions in 2020 forced the organizers of the two widely advertised exhibitions of the Old Masters to make a tough decision: whether to postpone their opening or to transfer it to the online realm; the latter of the options being potentially easier to organize, since not requiring the prolongation of the rental of expensive works. It implied, however, difficulties in another respect: the money for the tickets purchased well ahead of time had to be returned to the public. Furthermore, the 'maintenance' of the exhibition was connected with the need to work out an entirely new format of the presentation of historic art.

Despite both exhibitions having been prepared as traditional museum displays, their presentation was performed online. It was before our eyes that a technological revolution in museums collecting and presenting old art occurred. In both cases the deficit in the sensual contact with art was at least partially compensated for with 'revealing' much information from the so-called production backstage of the displays. In Raphael's case they were numerous videos documenting the preparation of the exhibition, as well as the tour of the display together with its curators, accompanied by the comments made by the Museum Director Matteo Lanfranconi. In the case of Van Eyck videos were used to present respective works with comments.

The efforts of both institutions undertaken in order to overcome the limitations caused by the pandemic need to be assessed positively. In a sense, thanks to the events having been presented online, they became more widely available. Out of box office blockbusters, they turned into visual spectacles available to everyone online. The achieved effect makes us wonder if in the future the exhibitions mounted with a similar work outlay as well as financial and logistical resources should not be obligatorily registered and made available online, regardless of whether simultaneously with their presentation at the venue, or already following the exhibition's closure. This will safeguard their permanence, while the mission consisting in securing the broadest possible access to culture shall be substantially extended.

The future of exhibitions

The above-mentioned difficulty with choosing the most essential cultural events of the past year which occurred in virtual reality is confirmed by the lack of unequivocal assessment of those by journalists, critics, and curators. As yet no rating list has been created which would be approved by representatives of the world of culture. The information available online is dispersed. And although one can find a number

of articles recommending e.g. top 10 virtual exhibitions of the past year, their authors in general do not coincide in their judgment, providing divergent proposals.

However, the positive aspect of the lockdown and of the freezing of the operations of cultural institutions can be glimpsed in the attempt to incite a media debate on the organizational model of exhibiting projects, particularly the question about the future of so-called blockbusters, i.e., commercial exhibitions being Hollywood-like box office hits meant to attract hosts of visitors. Such was the category that two exhibitions mentioned above: those dedicated to Raphael and Van Eyck respectively, would have been classified as in the past. The format applied in order to 'save' them was by many commentators interpreted as a harbinger of something new: of change happening before our eyes.

Frances Morris, Tate Modern Director, referred to the COVID pandemic as a turning point,³² shortly to be regarded with the concepts as 'before' and 'after'. In her view, the organization of big exhibiting events involving multi-million-dollar-worth rentals of art works from around the world is probably right now becoming the thing of the past. Although her diagnosis sounds less dramatic than the alarming title of the art critic Jarry Saltz's paper in 'The New York Magazine' *The Last Days of the Art World*,³³ it is, however, not less pessimistic.

Instead, the majority of commentators agree that quite a number of changes in cultural activity are in store for us. As much as we are aware they are inevitable, it is hard to fully predict them today. In the voices representing museum institutions, however, the hopeful undertone can be heard that although with a certain delay, we will be positively surprised by art.

*If you look at the great traumatising events of the past – world wars, global emergencies of different kinds – artists have always responded, argues Director Morris. After the first world war it was dada and surrealism; after the second, existentialism and gestural abstraction. Whatever the work looks like, it'll be interesting.*³⁴

Even Saltz suggests that in the place of the world of art that we know, a new one will emerge. And as much as it is hard to foresee its shape, the interest in art shall not cease, claims the author. This makes us realize that the actual impetus is given to art by the people who are passionate about art on both sides of making it public: those who present it and those who see it (producers of cultural events and their recipients). Therefore, *on the one hand nothing shall replace a direct contact with art*,³⁵ claim unanimously representatives of cultural institutions, however on the other the COVID-19 pandemic constitutes the time of search for new strategies and of implementing institutional reforms. Museum curators believe that the public are eagerly awaiting the reopening of exhibiting institutions, and that it is worth while to take advantage of the momentum to prepare for welcoming visitors anew. According to the information provided by Tomasz Łęcki,

Director of the National Museum in Poznan, in the course of the UNESCO debate *Art in the Face of the COVID Pandemic*, the temporary opening of the institution he runs on 6 May 2020 after some months of the lockdown demonstrated the huge need for a close contact with culture: *promptly the turnout exceeded 50% of that of the previous year, and in some weeks, e.g. at Rogalin, it even went beyond 100%. This was a kind of an individual family reaction leading to revisiting important places.*³⁶

This may serve as the best prospect for the time after the current crisis and the reopening of museums.

The 'culture shock' referred to at the beginning of the present paper, which resulted from the forced lockdown for sanitary safety of the whole creative sector, became visible in the cultural policy of states and international organizations of different levels. Among them e.g., the strategy for the recovery of culture and media following the COVID pandemic worked out by the European Council.³⁷ It enumerates the whole range of activities meant to animate artistic creativity. One of its basic assumptions is to make the cultural sector resilient to similar upheavals that might happen in the future. Apart from the possibility to benefit from the EU's and Member States' recovery funds, the strategy also foresees the development of the digital infrastructure as a social benefit from the situation that occurred.

Aid programmes are meant to alleviate organizational difficulties of cultural institutions, however as such they do herald essential changes. In all the documents issued recently by such institutions as e.g., ICOM, UNESCO, national organizations associating museums, as well as NGOs focused on monitoring cultural life, forecasts can be found of the transformations the museum sector will undergo. As much as they arouse anxiety, they fit in the chain of historical events which have been altering functions and importance of museum institutions, however maintaining their essential role in culture and social life of every civilization.³⁸

Online exhibitions will remain in place, yet not as the main goal of the public. The longing to resume the direct contact with art is clearly visible, while virtual presentations cannot become its competent substitute. Nonetheless, the change occurring before our eyes cannot be underestimated, since virtual reality has proven a true remedy for the crisis of traditional forms of contact with art. For many people it has been a real rescue, this actually testified to by the meme popular at the beginning of the pandemic: *If you think artists are useless, try to spend your quarantine without books, poems, movies, music, paintings, and games.*

In this context the concept of 'digital culture' and the inevitable shock that accompanies its introduction, particularly in the area of presenting old art, gained an entirely new, actually a much broader, and at least partially positive meaning.

Abstract: The questions related to museums' operations worldwide in 2020, namely during the so-called enforced quarantine resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic, are tackled. The actions of museums and other cultural institutions in reaction to the unexpected world pandemic and henceforth derived sanitary restrictions aborting the regular operations of museum as well as the fulfilment of their statutory mission are discussed. Statistical data and conditionings of museums' activities in different countries are analysed. Furthermore, the major documents issued by organizations such as UNESCO

or ICOM are presented and briefly characterized. Additionally, the focus is put on the analysis of cultural policies with museology in mind proposed domestically and internationally, and aiming at providing institutional and financial support to museums' operations. Moreover, questions are posed related to the possible direction of changes in museology caused by the pandemic. A subjective selection of the most interesting online events of the first pandemic wave has been presented. Also, an attempt has been made to diagnose the future of exhibiting in the digital era.

Keywords: culture versus pandemic, museology, COVID-19, culture-related law, online exhibitions.

Endnotes

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- ³⁸ Por. J. Skutnik, *Muzeum Sztuki jako miejsce mediacji kulturalnej i artystycznej* [Museum of Art As the Place of Cultural and Artistic Mediation], 'Kultura Współczesna' 2005, No. 2, p. 182.

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