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A Revolution in Exhibition-Making

Galleries and museums rush to meet new realities

Cassie McQuater’s *Black Room* (2018) is one of the works included in the Rhizome archive of digital art at the New Museum. Courtesy the artist

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Published 5 May 2020 in Other Insights

Imagine a revolution in exhibition-making, with curators and designers creating “mixed reality exhibitions” using a range of
digital elements such as virtual and augmented reality (VR and AR) 3D printing and the internet. “It could be extraordinary, allowing museums to engage with completely new publics, miles away, in other countries,” Geoffrey Marsh, the director of the V&A’s department of theatre and performance, told In Other Words in 2018.

He was talking as the record-breaking, multi-media exhibition “David Bowie Is”, that Marsh had co-curated, came to the end of its five-year, 12-museum run. Many considered it—and other exhibitions overseen by Marsh—to be ground-breaking examples of exhibition design, bringing notoriously difficult-to-display live performances to life with sound, video, objects and archival material. It would only be a few years before we would “see a generation of younger curators, who have grown up in the tech world, setting up consortia [to make similar these shows] around the world,”, because it is digital, Marsh predicted.

He could not have foreseen the present moment, when the only way to see art is digitally. Now that few of us can visit exhibitions, museums and galleries have been scrambling to find ways to let us see their shows. Unsurprisingly, the current situation favors those who have been working long-term on digital development and audience outreach, particularly the big international museums.

“Museums started investing in infrastructure, technology and capacity-building at the start of the internet age, but galleries—being mostly small businesses—are a bit behind,” says JiaJia Fei, founder of a new digital agency for art and
consulting director of digital at the Jewish Museum in New York. She advises museums, galleries, and arts organizations on digital strategy. “But galleries are now realizing that we have to fill that gap if we are eventually to cultivate a new audience of art buyers,” she says.

One of the most obvious trends since lockdown has been the slew of galleries adopting online viewing rooms that show works with price information for a limited time. But a small number of galleries have also been experimenting with VR and AR. They are looking for new ways to show art to collectors, with at least one eye on the cost and environmental impact of freighting artworks around the globe.

Heads up


Predictions that VR would be the next big thing were sparked by the excitement surrounding artist Jon Rafman’s Junior Suite at the 2014 Nada art fair in Miami. It was created for what was then a revolutionary gaming headset, the Oculus Rift, that went on general release in 2016.

Since then, museums and biennials have been keen to show such immersive works of art: Jordan Wolfson’s Real Violence at the 2017 Whitney Biennial and Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster’s Endodrome at the 2019 Venice Biennale among them. A small number of museums have experimented with VR as part of mainstream exhibitions: for example, Tate Modern’s recreation of Modigliani’s studio in 2017 and the Louvre’s virtual Mona Lisa tour for last year’s blockbuster Leonardo show.

But VR presents challenges for museums. When the privately funded, free-admission Zabludowicz Collection in London showed Rafman’s Sculpture Garden (Hedge Maze), (2015), huge queues developed, forcing the gallery to introduce priority booking. As a domestic experience it is even more problematic: in the US, the latest Oculus Quest costs about $500, and it is unlikely that many regular museum visitors own one.
This presents less of a problem for commercial galleries, according to Oliver Miro, son of gallerist Victoria, who has developed an “extended reality” (XR) platform, Vortic, that lets galleries create their own virtual exhibitions. Using high-resolution 3D scanning technology, the content management system, Vortic Curate, can replicate the gallery’s existing space, or create an entirely different one, and the works of art hanging in it. A downloadable app, Vortic Collect, allows collectors to view the works on smartphone or tablet. The app also offers an AR function, which allows collectors to see how works look in their homes. Vortic VR creates a more immersive experience of the gallery space using an Oculus headset. It is scheduled to launch this month, in a joint presentation by Victoria Miro and David Zwirner.

The company Acute Art released an app to promote and sell AR sculptures and drawings by street artist KAWS, whose AR work COMPANION (EXPANDED) (2020) is pictured above. Courtesy: KAWS and Acute Art

Miro says he initially imagined the headsets would only be available in galleries, but now he plans to send them to key collectors as well, allowing them to view works at home.

Meanwhile, the launch of an app by the Lisson Gallery, developed by the 3D visualization and AR company Augment, has
been fast-tracked and made available by subscription to all galleries in light of their closure during the pandemic, says Lisson Gallery’s executive director Alex Logsdail. Lisson has been working with Augment since 2018 to produce the app, that launched two weeks ago and which allows galleries to scan works of art, including complicated sculptures, and lets clients “place” them in their home, gallery or outdoors using a simple interface.

The technology was adapted from Augment software that clients such as Coca-Cola, Logitech and Unilever use for designing work and factory spaces. But the visuals were “fairly rudimentary, and not the level of technology or aesthetic finish that the art world needs”, says Logsdail. Now, collectors can view the space they are in on their phone or tablet and “drop” 3D objects into it.

Another company, Acute Art, which was set up in 2017 to produce VR and AR works of art as well as 360-degree videos, received a lot of media attention last year when the-then director of Stockholm’s Moderna Museet, Daniel Birnbaum, joined the firm as its director. Last month the company released an app, Acute Art, to promote and sell AR sculptures and drawings by street artist KAWS. You can also view VR works by other artists—such as Marina Abramović, Nathalie Djurberg and Hans Berg—for free on the Acute Art X app, ideally viewed through a Google Cardboard headset.

**Online challenge**

![Rembrandt's Night Watch (1642) is featured in the Rijksmuseum's digital version of the institution's Gallery of Honour. Image courtesy of the Rijksmuseum](image)

As museums and galleries work to attract remote audiences they face the choice of either attempting to recreate their physical spaces or developing new kinds of experiences made for digital consumption. Many museums have 360-degree filmed walkthroughs—of variable quality—or tours using Google Streetview on Google Arts & Culture, while V21 Artspace, using a 3D system made by Matterport, has made numerous virtual exhibitions for museums and galleries, including Ben Brown and Hauser & Wirth.

The Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam has released digital version of its Gallery of Honour, launched as the Netherlands shut down in March. It follows the layout of the real-world space, a grand corridor whosealcoves contain masterpieces from the 17th-century, which leads to the gallery containing Rembrandt’s *The Night Watch* (1642).
Nine of the paintings have audio guides and texts in English and Dutch, and while walking virtually through the space is not particularly easy (a common problem with 360-degree simulations) there is a fairly straightforward map to help. Minor irritations: if you like the look of any other pictures in the gallery, it is near impossible to “walk” up to them and read the labels, which are out of focus.

**Collective effort**

The quantity of specialist information about digitizing collections and archives would easily fill an archive of its own. It has been almost 20 years since museums began focusing on the subject—when many were still using typed-up filing cards. But, as a 2018 report by the UK culture ministry noted, digitization is expensive, needs considerable specialist and technical expertise and, once the collection is online individual works can be difficult to find.

Nevertheless, museums continue to experiment and some of the best “are now coming in to their own”, as a British Museum spokesman put it—visitors to the museum’s website have more than doubled to 1.5m in the first four weeks of lockdown. In 2015 it launched an often-cited example, “The Museum of the World”. This features a graphic navigation system—which does not attempt to mirror the real-world galleries—accompanied by text, audio and films about 4,500 key objects.

At the beginning of April, the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, announced that its research center, the International Center for the Arts of the Americas, was relaunching its website devoted to the study of Latin American and Latinx art. Commercial and curatorial interest in the field has grown rapidly in the past decade or so, with major shows of Tarsila do Amaral and Lygia Clark in New York, and Hélio Oiticica and Mira Schendel in London. Gary Tinterow, the museum’s director, stresses how important research has been in that process.
Charles L. Turner, 6th Avenue–Subway–Post (1942-44) is one of the home movies from “Private Lives Public Spaces” available online. Courtesy The Museum of Modern Art.

He credits his predecessor Peter Marzio and curator Mari Carmen Ramirez with recognizing more than 20 years ago that “the lack of access to primary sources” was a “fundamental barrier to understanding entire generations of artists who made important contributions to 20th-century and 21st-century art”. The dual-language (English and Spanish) website includes 8,000 documents, under easy-to-use search and topic groupings.

Earlier this month In Other Words highlighted the Rhizome archive of digital art partly because the best art to view on screens is work that was made for them. Helsinki’s leading contemporary art museum, Kiasma, has followed suit. Its growing collection of digital artworks on its online platform includes early pieces such as Juha van Ingen’s Web-Safe (1999-2000), and Jon Rafman’s Oh the Humanity (2015).

Meanwhile, the Museum of Modern Art in New York has made nine of the home movies from the exhibition “Private Lives Public Spaces”, which opened last October, available online. The New Yorker magazine critic Richard Brody called them “a crucial reminder of [home movies’] historical—and even historic—power”.

Keep it simple
All this may seem a bit daunting, especially for museums and galleries with furloughed staff and cashflow issues. But some of the best solutions are technically much less elaborate.
Good, old-fashioned films of exhibitions—some made with quite basic technology—are drawing large audiences during lockdown. The curator Till-Holger Borchert proves an engaging presenter in “Visit Van Eyck as a VIP”, a 26-minute Facebook guided tour of the masterpieces in the temporarily closed exhibition “Van Eyck: An Optical Revolution” at MSK in Ghent. It has been so successful—with more than 160,000 views so far—that tourism organization Visit Flanders has extended the idea to other Old Master museums, with new videos launching at 7pm CET (6pm BST, 2pm EST) every Wednesday.

An even cheaper, and easily copiable, option has been launched by the team behind the Biennale of Sydney, which was forced to close after just ten days. Short curators’ tours—less than two minutes long and shot on phones—of key works from the show are being steadily released on Instagram.

Meanwhile, “Andy Warhol at Tate Modern—Exhibition Tour” is a punchily-scripted seven-minute walk-through of an exhibition that only opened a week before London locked down. Curators Gregor Muir and Fiontán Moran cover the major works, rooms and themes of the exhibition, which focused on the relationship between Warhol’s personal life and his work. The tour notched up more than 100,000 views in its first ten days.

In something of a first, Bitforms Gallery founder Steve Sacks launched a new show in New York on 22 April. He is showing works by Daniel Canogar, who makes LED sculptures that track Google trends. Sacks says he and technician Scott Neal had to “use extreme caution”, taking “a lot of virtual advice” while they installed the show, wearing protective clothing and maintaining social distancing rules. As a result, the exhibition took three weeks to mount. It had a virtual private view on Instagram Live and is now viewable on the platform.

Museums and galleries can still think creatively, says JiaJia Fei—the fact we are so overwhelmed by screen-based media at the moment means most of us have little to lose by trying. Mistakes are more likely to be treated kindly if they are noticed at all. “Now is definitely the time for experimentation,” she says.