

GENERAL ARTICLES

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What's in a Name? Museums in the Post-Digital Age

Abstract: This article examines the recently proposed ICOM museum definition and its detractors in order to trace the history of museums and their social purpose as they move from a traditional past into a tumultuous present and uncertain future. As countries begin to reframe the role of arts and culture in shaping a world affected by a global pandemic, museums will need to address not only practical measures – such as social distancing guidelines and limited visitor numbers – but also how these institutions are situated within the greater social context. Technology is particularly useful for museums to share their collections with audiences and transcend geographical boundaries, and it also allows these institutions to reposition themselves as relevant within the ongoing cultural heritage dialogue and context. However, it is debatable whether online and digital offerings classify as museums. Even if there is no consensus on the textbook definition of *museum*, pinpointing common traits will help establish their evolution and role for current and future generations. Embracing digitization, virtual museums, and other non-traditional frameworks allows for a more expansive

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and inclusive conception of museums, taking into account their dual role: as custodians of public knowledge and spaces for education and development.

Keywords: museum, technology, cultural property, cultural heritage, digital

Introduction

“May You Live in Interesting Times”: This tagline for the 2019 Venice Biennale,¹ based on a supposed Chinese proverb, proved eerily prophetic during the early months of 2020. A new strain of coronavirus – dubbed COVID-19 – swept across China and then the world. The global economy ground to a halt as businesses closed their doors and millions of people were forced to stay home and practice social distancing in an effort to curb the illness. Among those shuttered businesses were museums, cultural foundations, and other art market participants. Faced with an unprecedented loss of income, many high-profile museums – such as the Louvre in Paris and the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York (“The Met”) – chose to make their collections available online, in addition to implementing other digital initiatives. This has provided a fascinating glimpse into how museums can not only make themselves accessible in times of crisis, but also the ways in which technology has already changed, and will continue to influence how society views and appreciates art and culture. This includes conceptions of cultural heritage and cultural property, since museums are crucial for their preservation and display. While the issues discussed in this article can apply to museums in general, unless otherwise noted my discussion focuses on art and culture museums in particular.

It is true that “[h]eritage has always been important, but in an increasingly globalized world, our understanding and attitude towards cultural heritage is shaping our sense of place and context more than ever before”.² Furthermore, “cultural property is an evolving category used to describe ways of talking about collective entitlement, shared inheritance, the material nature of identity, and in more recent years, to debate the ethics of the commoditization of culture”.³ These issues are all concretized in museums. Nonetheless, the legal aspect of cul-

¹ R. Rugoff, *May You Live in Interesting Times*, statement by Ralph Rugoff, Curator of the 58th International Art Exhibition, 58th Venice Biennale 2019, <https://universes.art/en/venice-biennale/2019/may-you-live-in-interesting-times> [accessed: 25.03.2020].

² M. Economou, *Heritage in the Digital Age*, in: W. Logan, M. Nic Craith, U. Kockel (eds.), *A Companion to Heritage Studies*, John Wiley & Sons, Chichester 2015, p. 215.

³ J. Anderson, H. Geismar, *Introduction*, in: J. Anderson, H. Geismar (eds.), *The Routledge Companion to Cultural Property*, Routledge, Oxon–New York 2017, p. 1.

tural property/cultural heritage cannot be separated from their moral and political aspects, meaning that museums must straddle this divide. This becomes even more complicated when considering the new types of museums that have recently become popular, including “virtual museums”, “experiential museums”, and “digital museums”. The Museum of Ice Cream, TeamLab, and the Meet Vincent Van Gogh Experience are all examples of the intersections between art and technology, aiming to meet the expectations of the selfie generation. But are any of these examples museums in the true sense of the word? What does it mean for a “museum” to be considered as such today? And who – or what – serves as a gatekeeper for this term? These questions all correspond to an underlying tension present in modern society, which has changed rapidly and on a global scale as a result of the digital revolution.

Given the ubiquitous use of smartphones and near-constant user demand for content, museums have shifted their focus towards the digital sphere. This has a positive aspect, as people are able to engage with distant cultures in a way that they would not have been able to previously. Nonetheless certain concerns remain, such as whether anything is gained or lost when replacing physical objects with digital surrogates. On the one hand, there is a sense that a digital reproduction can somehow cheapen an item's value, but on the other hand, digital tools can also help preserve heritage sites and transmit knowledge and understanding to a wider audience. Online platforms can also help cultural institutions implement cultural and educational policies, as well as transmit social and political messages to a wider audience.

Nowadays, it is uncommon to find a cultural institution that is not present online. However, the degree of participation in digital or online forums is not uniform and corresponds to a subjective analysis of what the institution considers important and how technology can aid in the furtherance of its mission. The following questions serve as a guide for the present article and provide contextual support for its analysis of museums, both physical and otherwise: What cultural role and significance can physical artifacts assume in the age of information technologies? In what ways do information and communication technologies enhance the nature and contemporary role of the museum? Can a virtual museum promote the social dimension of creativity, and connect it to the collection and preservation of novel cultural objects?⁴

The following section tackles the thorny question *What is a museum?* in order to examine what designated museums have in common and how these institutions have evolved over the past decades.

⁴ E. Giaccardi, *Collective Storytelling and Social Creativity in the Virtual Museum: A Case Study*, “Massachusetts Institute of Technology Design Issues” 2006, Vol. 22(3), p. 29.

What Is a Museum?

Museums have been present as social institutions for hundreds of years. Federico Borromeo, founder of the Ambrosiana Gallery in Milan, even published a seminal text in 1625 titled *Musaeum*, detailing the importance of safeguarding art for future generations.⁵ In this sense, museums not only have a practical function – collecting and cataloguing works – but also an ethical one. As private collections become open to the public, the motivations for displaying artworks change. Once this occurs, display is no longer for personal enjoyment but for general edification. Thus, from their inception museums have been inextricably linked to a moral duty vis-à-vis society at large. This is reflected in modern definitions of the term “museum”, which have recently come into question as a result of rapid societal change and an increased diversity of perspectives in the field of cultural studies.

The International Council of Museums (ICOM)'s current definition of “museum” (dating back to 1947) 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”.⁶ Compare this to ICOM's new proposed definition unveiled in 2019:

Museums are democratizing, inclusive and polyphonic spaces for critical dialogue about the pasts and futures. Acknowledging and addressing the conflicts and challenges of the present, they hold artefacts and specimens in trust for society, safeguard diverse memories for future generations and guarantee equal rights and equal access to heritage for all people. Museums are not for profit. They are participatory and transparent, and work in active partnership with and for diverse communities to collect, preserve, research, interpret, exhibit and enhance understandings of the world, aiming to contribute to human dignity and social justice, global equality and planetary wellbeing.⁷

This definition was meant to be put to a vote at ICOM's annual conference in September 2019, but a decision was ultimately postponed after the French delegation won majority support for its contention that there had been insufficient consultation with regional branches. Leading up to the vote, many institutions and national branches of the organization expressed concerns that the chosen text was too “ideological” and expansive, meaning well-known museums such as the

⁵ G. Mazzaferro, *Federico Borromeo, [Musaeum. The Ambrosiana Gallery in the Memoirs of its Founder]*. Edited by Piero Cigada. With a Commentary by Gianfranco Ravasi. Review by Giovanni Mazzaferro, “Letteratura artistica, Cross-cultural studies in Art History Sources”, 4 May 2017, <http://letteraturaartistica.blogspot.com/2017/05/federico-borromeo2323.html> [accessed: 02.09.2020].

⁶ <http://archives.icom.museum/definition.html>.

⁷ ICOM, *ICOM Announces the Alternative Museum Definition that Will Be Subject to a Vote*, 25 July 2019, <https://icom.museum/en/news/icom-announces-the-alternative-museum-definition-that-will-be-subject-to-a-vote/> [accessed: 23.03.2020].

Louvre in Paris would find it difficult to comply. François Mairesse, the chair of the International Committee of Museology, stated: "A definition is a simple and precise sentence characterizing an object, and this is not a definition but a statement of fashionable values, much too complicated and partly aberrant". The former director of ICOM, Hugues de Verine, also thought that the proposed definition was "over inflated verbiage". Furthermore, this clash appears to have touched a nerve; the vehemence of the opposition indicates that it is a sensitive matter.⁸

Nor was the controversy limited to industry professionals; a poll on Twitter by the Museums Association revealed that most participants (61.9%) felt the new definition failed to accurately portray what a museum is in the 21st century.⁹ A new date for the vote has not yet been set, although all parties do agree that an updated definition is necessary. ICOM's president at the time, Suay Aksoy, called on museums to "take the lead in these times of profound societal changes" and focus on sustainability, human rights, and empowering communities through arts and education.¹⁰ ICOM members from emerging economies also pointed out that the proposed definition allows for a greater flexibility that would validate their own efforts in community-building and advocacy. However, delegates from countries where legislation is tied to the ICOM definition expressed concerns that their governments would react poorly to attempts to incorporate such an expansive definition, either through a lack of understanding or by diverting much-needed funds to organizations outside ICOM's original scope. Many feel that the new definition is more akin to a mission statement or political manifesto rather than a practical and useful concept for the global museum sector.¹¹ Interestingly, ICOM gathered a list of proposed definitions from all over the world when deliberating over its new definition, but opted for a completely innovative one instead – with mixed results.¹² The list is available online and has 269 proposals from countries as varied as Mozambique, Lebanon, Malaysia, Brazil, and Canada, demonstrating that this is clearly an important subject. Common themes from the list include: diversity, interpretation, development, public welfare, cultural heritage, education, accessibility, transmission, communication, freedom from bias, value, and understanding.¹³

⁸ Z. Small, *A New Definition of "Museum" Sparks International Debate*, "Hyperallergic", 19 August 2019, <https://hyperallergic.com/513858/icom-museum-definition/> [accessed: 25.03.2020].

⁹ Ibidem.

¹⁰ V. Noce, *Vote on Icom's New Museum Definition Postponed*, "The Art Newspaper", 9 September 2019, <https://www.theartnewspaper.com/news/icom-kyoto> [accessed: 23.03.2020].

¹¹ T. Nelson, *Why ICOM Postponed the Vote on Its New Museum Definition*, "Museums Journal", 2 October 2019, <https://www.museumsassociation.org/museums-journal/opinion/2019/10/01102019-definition-just-start-of-conversation/#> [accessed: 23.03.2020].

¹² Z. Small, op. cit.

¹³ ICOM, *Creating the New Museum Definition: Over 250 Proposals to Check Out!*, 1 April 2019, <https://icom.museum/en/news/the-museum-definition-the-backbone-of-icom/> [accessed: 23.03.2020].

It is also worth noting that in 2015 UNESCO published a proposal on the role of museums and collections, defining “museum” as: “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 purpose of education, study and enjoyment”.¹⁴ The primary functions of museums are listed as preservation, research, communication, and education.¹⁵ So far, this seems in line with traditional conceptions. However, this proposal also directly addresses the issues of globalization, institutions’ relationships with the economy and quality of life, their social role, and information technologies. As “vital public spaces”, museums should promote and ensure respect for human rights and gender equality, facilitate dialogues between different cultures, and enhance the social inclusion of vulnerable populations.¹⁶

Thus, there is a sense that museums do have a function beyond merely caring for physical objects, which leads to a complicated discussion: Can arts and cultural institutions be separated from ideological and political concerns? Moreover, *should* they be separated? It is worth noting that the precursors to today’s museums developed according to bourgeois tastes and a Eurocentric agenda, separating “high” and “low” forms of art.¹⁷ Even in the 17th century, Borromeo encouraged the creation of as many replicas as possible of antiquities in order to preserve them as sources of information and aesthetic enjoyment in the event the originals were damaged or destroyed, but this stemmed from the belief that classical Greek and Roman art was the pinnacle of artistic achievement.¹⁸ Nowadays, the role of private stakeholders in determining what museums are is very much at the forefront, in addition to public actors.

For instance, Turkish writer and private museum founder Orhan Pamuk is “against these precious monumental institutions being used as blueprints for future museums. Museums should explore and uncover the universe and humanity of the new and modern man emerging from increasingly wealthy non-Western nations. The aim of big, state-sponsored museums, on the other hand, is to represent the state. This is neither a good nor innocent objective”. Pamuk bases his belief on the fact that most national museums developed as symbols of royal and imperial power and are now tourist destinations, presenting the role of the nation as more

¹⁴ UNESCO, *Proposal for a Non-Binding Standard-Setting Instrument on the Protection and Promotion of Various Aspects of the Role of Museums and Collections*, 38 C/25, 27 July 2015, Annex p. 2, para. 4, https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000233892_eng [accessed: 14.09.2020].

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, paras. 7-12.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, paras. 14-18.

¹⁷ E. Huhtamo, *On the Origins of the Virtual Museum*, Nobel Symposium (NS 120), “Virtual Museums and Public Understanding of Science and Culture,” 2002, p. 5, <http://www.golob-gm.si/4-three-standard-stop-pages-marcel-duchamp/o-virtual-museum-from-frederick-kiesler-to-marcel-duchamp.htm> [accessed: 23.03.2020].

¹⁸ G. Mazzaferro, *op. cit.*

important than that of the individual. This prevents visitors from experiencing humanity as an individual concept, particularly in the context of oppression under political regimes. Pamuk further argues that resources should be channeled into smaller museums, supporting people in converting their own homes into exhibition spaces.¹⁹ The use of digital technologies can certainly aid this objective, but it challenges the status quo in the cultural sphere.

The term “virtual museum” is also useful to understand the ongoing controversy. Britannica Online defined it in 1996 as: “a collection of digitally recorded images, sound files, text document, and other data of historical, scientific, or cultural interest that are accessed through electronic media. A virtual museum does not house actual objects and therefore lacks the permanence and unique qualities of a museum in the institutional definition of the term”. Therefore, a virtual museum serves as a repository for curated objects, but is still inferior to a traditional museum because it fails to add value to the data provided.²⁰ Clearly the times have changed since this concept originated, due to the internet’s increasingly ubiquitous and transformative nature. An updated definition of “virtual museum” is:

a logically related collection of digital objects composed in a variety of media, and, because of its capacity to provide connectedness and various points of access, it lends itself to transcending traditional methods of communicating and interacting with the visitors being flexible towards their needs and interests; it has no real place or space, its objects and the related information can be disseminated all over the world.²¹

Virtual museums possess the capacity to engage with visitors and allow for new ways of seeing objects and redefining their contextual relationships. The virtual museum is the spiritual successor to the imaginary museum (*musée imaginaire*) posited by André Malraux in 1947. An imaginary museum has no walls, location, or spatial boundaries and is accessible to everyone; these are all characteristics of the virtual museum.²² According to ICOM, there are three distinct categories of virtual museums that developed as extensions of physical museums: the brochure museum, the content museum, and the learning museum. A brochure museum provides visitors with information about the physical museum and is mainly used as a marketing tool; a content museum is created for the purpose of making

¹⁹ O. Pamuk, *A Modest Manifesto for Museums*, “American Craft Magazine”, 31 May 2013, <https://craft-council.org/magazine/article/modest-manifesto-museums> [accessed: 23.03.2020].

²⁰ W. Schweibenz, *The “Virtual Museum”: New Perspectives for Museums to Present Objects and Information Using the Internet as a Knowledge Base and Communication System*, in: H.H. Zimmermann, V. Schramm (eds.), *Knowledge Management und Kommunikationssysteme, Workflow Management, Multimedia, Knowledge Transfer. Proceedings des 6. Internationalen Symposiums für Informationswissenschaft*, Prag, 3.–7. November 1998, UVK Verlagsgesellschaft, Konstanz 1998, p. 190.

²¹ *Ibidem*, p. 191.

²² S. Styliani et al., *Virtual Museums, a Survey and Some Issues for Consideration*, “Journal of Cultural Heritage” 2009, Vol. 10, p. 521.

information about the museum collections available; and a learning museum is educationally-oriented and its goal is to establish a relationship between the virtual visitor and the online collection.²³ Museums can opt for any of these approaches, or a combination of all three. Currently, several high-ranking museums combine elements of the brochure, content, and learning museums to create a better visitor experience and engage a wider variety of audiences.

Like physical museums, virtual museums engage in acquisition, storage, documentation, research, exhibition, and communication. They can act in a complementary and auxiliary fashion to their physical counterparts, and use technological advances to safeguard cultural artifacts through digital representations and databases storing multimedia information. Furthermore, they allow curators to experiment with different designs to make virtual exhibitions more appealing and realistic, as well as interactive, overcoming the spatial limitations of a “real” museum. Websites can be powerful tools of communication and provide a variety of opportunities and accessibility options to those who are unable to physically visit the museum space or otherwise engage with the collection fully. Crucially, the virtual museum environment offers more opportunities for learning and engaging with arts and cultural heritage in an enjoyable way. However, virtual museums still possess limitations; they exclude the computer-illiterate and rely on access to the internet, which is not always available in certain parts of the world. But in other respects they appear to complete the same functions as physical museums, complying with ICOM’s current definition.²⁴

Giaccardi claims that all museums are virtual in the sense that they are an extension of reality, since they extract pieces from an environment which are then transferred to a new site, where the relationships with the original environment and time are recreated. This switch to “something else” and the ambiguity of museum pieces as both physically present and subject to changes in perspectives leads to a *meta-place*, as suggested by Malraux. The complex nature of cultural objects lends itself to a type of interconnectedness that presents “not only an opportunity but also a need” in light of our reliance on information and communication technologies. As a result, there is a need for museums, as places of “cultural negotiation”, to integrate both tangible and intangible resources. According to Giaccardi, the three forms of virtuality found in museums are: duplication and extension of reality; recombination and personalization; and interconnection. These forms contribute to knowledge transfer and construction, but are not sufficient to cope with the intricate and multifaceted reality of the museum. As a result, new models are needed.²⁵ This intriguing argument provides an additional facet to the debate and should be considered when examining the current functions of museums, particu-

²³ Ibidem.

²⁴ Ibidem, pp. 524-525.

²⁵ E. Giaccardi, op. cit., pp. 29-32.

larly in light of the pandemic and new forms of technology aiding these institutions in their struggle to maintain relevance and obtain funding.

Another significant term for the ongoing museum controversy is *digital heritage*. This refers to both born-digital content (created and disseminated digitally) and digitized content (content that was originally in analogue format and subsequently digitized).²⁶ As electronic information has become a mainstay of daily museum life in addition to cultural heritage preservation, particularly regarding intangible heritage, UNESCO adopted a Charter on the Preservation of Digital Heritage in 2003.²⁷ The Charter's Article 1 states that digital heritage is vital and has "lasting value and significance", meaning that it should be "protected and preserved for current and future generations". It allows for the improvement of access to historical and contemporary cultural and knowledge materials which would otherwise disappear, as well as bridging the gap between socioeconomic classes. This is echoed in Article 9, which states that "digital heritage is inherently unlimited by time, geography, culture or format. It is culture-specific, but potentially accessible to every person in the world. Minorities may speak to majorities, the individual to a global audience". The line between the physical and the virtual thus becomes even more blurred as cultural heritage moves into the digital realm, and cultural heritage institutions evolve from their role as information interpreters to that of information providers.²⁸

Therefore, despite a wealth of data on the subject and multiple applicable definitions, it is not so simple to pinpoint what exactly a museum is and what it is not. It then becomes necessary to understand the role technology plays in museums in order to situate them within a greater social context. Technological frameworks and their development are discussed below.

New Technological Frameworks

Strictly speaking, "new" frameworks and technologies in the museum context have been emerging and developing since the 19th century. The concept of a "virtual museum" has also undergone a transformation during this time, from CD-ROM products serving as virtual companions to existing art museums to award-winning blogs and Instagram accounts providing original content. Mass media especially has served as a catalyst for accessibility and the creation of a "museum without walls", allowing for "an all-encompassing, albeit chaotic, museum available to any-

²⁶ P.J. Lor, J.J. Britz, *An Ethical Perspective on Political-Economic Issues in the Long-Term Preservation of Digital Heritage*, "Journal of the American Society for Information Science and Technology" 2012, Vol. 63(11), p.2153.

²⁷ 15 October 2003, http://portal.unesco.org/en/ev.php-URL_ID=17721&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html [accessed: 23.03.2020].

²⁸ C. van den Akker et al., *Digital Hermeneutics: Agora and the Online Understanding of Cultural Heritage*, "Journal of Automated Reasoning" 2011, DOI: 10.1145/2527031.2527039, p. 1.

body. Theorists and critics often felt they were standing [...] ‘on the museum’s ruins’.²⁹ But a key component of modern museums is the participatory role of the viewer/visitor, who is given a greater degree of control than ever before. Social media revolves around the elusive algorithm dictated by tastemakers or “influencers”; to stay relevant, museums have been forced to embrace the potential of digital tools. These are used to simultaneously provide collective consumption and individual customized experiences, leading to the ultimate forms of user experience: “the domestic consumption of art at a distance”³⁰ or complete immersion in digital artwork that responds to physical manipulation.³¹

Interestingly, museums have been compared to mass media since they are “in the communication business” and offer a display of objects to educate, inform, and entertain by “translat[ing] the otherwise unfamiliar and inaccessible into the familiar and accessible”. Furthermore, sociologist Heiner Treinen described the state of mind of museum visitors as the same as those using mass media, called “active dozing”, in the form of “cultural window shopping”. Treinen’s research hails from the early 1990s, suggesting that museums’ struggle to balance information and entertainment through the use of new structures in communication and learning in order to create a dynamic interplay has been prevalent for decades. The paradigm shift introduced by information technology (IT) heralded the changes brought about by social media at the advent of the 21st century, where museums are considered “storehouses of knowledge as well as storehouses of objects”. Museum staff came to realize that presenting objects was not enough to hold visitors’ attention; they also had to create meaning and establish context. This connectedness between visitors and museums forms the basis of their relationship and is a core feature of the virtual museum, in the sense that it integrates an interdisciplinary presentation of museum information with the help of media and transcends the museum’s physical limitations. It is an audience-driven model that is not new per se, but which has evolved to keep pace with the increasingly important role of technology in daily life.³²

For instance, ICOM recently published social media guidelines for its committees as well as a blog post on reaching and engaging the public remotely.³³ Suggestions include putting collections online, organizing virtual tours, and using hashtags and social media contests. With over 3 billion active social media users worldwide,

²⁹ E. Huhtamo, op. cit., p. 3.

³⁰ Ibidem, pp. 9-10.

³¹ C. Coe, *World’s First Digital Museum Puts Patrons Inside the Artwork*, “New York Post”, 26 June 2018, <https://nypost.com/2018/06/26/worlds-first-digital-museum-puts-patrons-inside-the-artwork/> [accessed: 23.03.2020].

³² W. Schweibenz, op. cit., pp. 185-188.

³³ ICOM, *How to Reach – and Engage – Your Public Remotely*, 12 March 2020, https://icom.museum/en/news/how-to-reach-and-engage-your-public-remotely/?fbclid=IwAR0pnmPjHP1fr2Wq8s8Z_mZxCjXmqGv7M7UgFP0wmKzeX_IXKLRx1ulKk [accessed: 23.03.2020].

the influence of this type of technology cannot be overestimated. Visual content is the most popular, and museums are well-equipped to capitalize on public interest.³⁴ The Met is one premier institution that has found a way to successfully integrate digital initiatives into their cultural strategy. Since 2011 it has used apps, social media (particularly Instagram), and a blog to provide a behind-the-scenes look at its collections and drive visitor interest. Its Artist Project, where 100 of the world's most influential contemporary artists were asked to choose items from the museum that inspired them, as well as the online catalogue of objects and their digital curation, are recent examples of this ambitious goal. According to the Met's latest annual report, it received a record 7 million visitors for the third year in a row, while its website had over 30 million visits and its Instagram account had 3.2 million followers.³⁵ This demonstrates that online engagement and the savvy use of technology translates into real-world revenue, if done correctly. Museums must ascertain what kind of content people respond to, and what will stand out in crowded social feeds: "This stuff already belongs to the public. [...] The challenge that museums have is getting it out to the public. There's a lot of lessons to be learned about making museums more accessible".³⁶

The digitization of collections is a popular way for museums not only to preserve cultural heritage, but also to make collections more attractive and accessible to the public at large. Along with experiences in the digital realm, some institutions have invested in new technologies – such as virtual reality (VR) or augmented reality (AR) – to create immersive experiences and enhance museum visits. VR can also help reconstruct artworks and aid restoration efforts without affecting the original objects. These tools can greatly assist with communication and education, but are also viewed with a degree of mistrust, as they upset the balance of how museums have been traditionally perceived: "The insertion of technology in museum environments is sometime [sic] considered as a factor able to threaten, or even to undermine, with playful elements the authoritativeness of the institution".³⁷ Another concern is the potential of technology to distract from the collection instead of conveying information. Ultimately however, digital space offers museums the ability to transcend the physical limitations of collection display. It is common

³⁴ ICOM, *Social Media Guidelines for ICOM Committees*, 2019, <https://icom.museum/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/Social-media-guidelinesEN-1.pdf> [accessed: 23.03.3030], pp. 5, 22.

³⁵ The Metropolitan Museum of Art, *One Hundred Forty-Ninth Annual Report of the Trustees for the Fiscal Year July 1, 2018, through June 30, 2019*, 12 November 2019, p. 9, <https://www.metmuseum.org/-/media/files/about-the-met/annual-reports/2018-2019/title-page-annual-report-2018-19.pdf?la=en&hash=A-3BECE66C2AF7431C78479E36879CC91> [accessed: 05.04.2020].

³⁶ D. Baker, *Museums, the Next Media Companies: Why The Met Built a 70-person Media Team*, "Contently", 12 May 2015, <https://contently.com/2015/05/12/museums-the-next-media-companies/> [accessed: 23.03.2020] (emphasis added).

³⁷ M. Carrozzino, M. Bergamasco, *Beyond Virtual Museums: Experiencing Immersive Virtual Reality in Real Museums*, "Journal of Cultural Heritage" 2010, Vol. 11, p. 457.

knowledge that museums typically only show a portion of their assets; sometimes as little as 10%. Digital tools can surpass the storage-preservation-display cycle altogether and attract more attention to items that would otherwise languish in storage.³⁸ This attention can further be translated into greater knowledge and crowdsourcing.

But digital curation is one thing; it repurposes already-existing tools and architecture for a purpose – reimagining how a museum will operate in the digital world in tandem with its physical counterpart. Digital creation is quite another thing, and this is where the waters of the term “museum” become murky. The Museum of Illusions (MOI), with 23 locations around the globe, is an example of a new breed of cultural institution. MOI is a for-profit business intended as a permanent fixture, hosting immersive exhibits and created to capitalize on social media trends using digital technology. However, MOI also includes an educational facet. The Museum of Ice Cream is another popular installation centre called an “experium” by its founder (a portmanteau combining experience and museum). Using the term “museum” is a strategic business and branding decision, as museums are among the most trusted institutions in the public perception. However, when compared to ICOM’s definition, it becomes apparent that a new discourse and terminology are needed to bring such organizations into the fold. Elizabeth Merritt of the American Alliance of Museums (AAM) sees this interplay as ultimately beneficial for traditional museums, since they will be able to learn how to operate and create new revenue sources. Others, such as Peter Kim of the Museum of Food and Drink (MOFAD), are more skeptical. Kim believes that invoking the word “museum” carries certain expectations of educating, community-building, and public service, and if they are not met the meaning of the word is warped and changed.³⁹

A core issue is thus whether a museum’s digital adaptability undermines its mission. On the one hand, visitor engagement and education is part of a museum’s traditional role. However, there is an entertainment aspect inherent in digital content as well; otherwise a museum’s content will not stand out among the millions of accounts online. If the entertainment aspect of a museum’s offerings outweighs the educational aspect, is a museum still fulfilling its purpose? Another related issue is whether a visitor will be able to distinguish between what falls under the official definition of a museum and what responsibilities this entails. In traditional museums, the focus is placed on the collection, whereas new museums – such as the Museum of Selfies in Los Angeles – focus on the visitors themselves, making

³⁸ E. Ch’ng, *Digital Heritage Tourism: Reconfiguring the Visitor Experience in Heritage Sites, Museums and Architecture in the Era of Pervasive Computing*. Keynote paper, “Percorsi creativi di turismo urbano (Creative Paths of Urban Tourism) Conference”, Catania, 22-24 September 2011, p. 3.

³⁹ K. Loew, *Why Do Instagram Playgrounds Keep Calling Themselves Museums?*, “CityLab”, 16 October 2019, <https://www.citylab.com/life/2019/10/selfie-instagram-nyc-museum-ice-cream-immersive-experience/599875/> [accessed: 23.03.2020].

them the subjects of exhibits. Can one say that a museum's main function remains the same in both instances? Many would probably disagree. But given the seismic changes in the art world, this perspective should be reexamined.

The following section discusses the role of private parties in the art market and how this affects museums. It is necessary to understand the context in which museums' digital development takes place in order to properly situate these organizations within the global social consciousness.

A Global Art World Shift

In recent years, the prominence of private parties and interests in the art world has become a frequent topic of conversation. This phenomenon has both positive and negative aspects. Worldwide, art and collectible wealth in the hands of High Net Worth and Ultra High Net Worth Individuals (HNWIs and UHNWIs, respectively) accounted for an estimated \$1.74 trillion in 2018, projected to increase to \$2.125 trillion by 2023.⁴⁰ However, although collectors have no obligation to share their art with the public, art philanthropy and social impact investment are attracting wider attention. Private art museums and foundations allow collectors to display their collections and are attractive options for many reasons, including fiscal ones, but they can also have a lasting positive effect. Such organizations can implement educational and community-building initiatives, exposing a greater variety of people to the benefits of arts and culture.⁴¹

But private parties do not always restrict themselves to the private sphere. In addition to making gifts and donations, private parties have also infiltrated the governing boards of high-ranking public museums, such as the Whitney in New York. This has led to no small amount of controversy, as donors' financial interests are sometimes linked to questionable sources. In 2019, Warren Kanders was forced to resign from the Whitney's board after artists refused to participate in the Biennial due to Kanders' position as chairman and CEO of a company that manufactures tear gas. Later, both the Met and the Tate in London announced that they would no longer accept donations from the Sackler family, which is involved in the US opioid crisis; and the Louvre removed the Sackler name from their donations.⁴² This puts museums which depend on fundraising in an unenviable position, caught between moral outrage and financial need. It also highlights the role of public opinion in determining what a museum – and its governing bodies – can and should do. Furthermore, this calls attention to the role of artists in shaping cultural

⁴⁰ These estimates predate the incidence of the novel coronavirus.

⁴¹ Deloitte, *ArtTactic, Art & Finance Report 2019*, 6th ed., pp. 27-28, <https://www2.deloitte.com/content/dam/Deloitte/global/Documents/Finance/gx-fsi-art-and-finance-report-2019.pdf> [accessed: 25.10.2019].

⁴² J. Tarmy, *The American Museum Is in Crisis*, "Bloomberg News", 15 August 2019, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/features/2019-08-15/the-american-museum-is-in-crisis> [accessed: 05.05.2020].

institutions; despite their works being acquired and displayed, artists must often fight to have their voices heard in museums' decision-making processes.

Private stakeholders are increasingly encouraged to participate in cultural and arts projects, such as the European Year of Cultural Heritage (EYCH) in 2018. Private-public partnerships and technology are driving change and can promote new models for social investment. Deloitte calls this trend a paradigm shift "from shareholders' value to stakeholders' value".⁴³ This year (i.e. in 2020), the matter has become more pressing due to the worldwide closures and travel restrictions in the wake of COVID-19. Events such as International Museum Day have been moved online, with ICOM calling for participants "to both celebrate the diversity of perspectives that make up the communities and personnel of museums, and champion tools for identifying and overcoming bias in what they display and the stories they tell", tying into 2019's theme of "Museums as Hubs – The Future of Tradition" and the UN's Sustainable Development Goals.⁴⁴ Individual responses to art business closures have shown that creativity is not tied to physical interaction. For instance, Oliver Miro is launching a platform (Vortic) for galleries to create new exhibitions using VR and AR.⁴⁵ While Vortic was created with art galleries in mind, it is not impossible for museums to use this app, or a similar one, to create virtual exhibitions with a lower carbon footprint while the lockdown lasts, or even beyond the current situation.

As a result, this forced hiatus can be seen as an opportunity for museums to lead the charge in creating a more sustainable art market "after years of kicking and screaming against the technological tide", and in keeping with modern conceptions of cultural heritage.⁴⁶ The Faro Convention defines *cultural heritage* as "a group of resources inherited from the past which people identify, independently of ownership, as a reflection and expression of their constantly evolving values, beliefs, knowledge and traditions. It includes all aspects of the environment resulting from the interaction between people and places through time".⁴⁷ This could certainly encompass the digital environment, which has become a pervasive and inescapable part of daily life. Moreover, digitized information itself has become indispensable

⁴³ Deloitte, *ArtTactic*, op. cit., pp. 127, 156.

⁴⁴ D. Ziska, *International Museum Day 2020 Goes Digital and Spotlights "Museums for Equality: Diversity and Inclusion"*, "American Alliance of Museums Blog", 30 March 2020, <https://www.aam-us.org/2020/03/30/international-museum-day-2020-goes-digital-and-spotlights-museums-for-equality-diversity-and-inclusion/> [accessed: 23.03.2020].

⁴⁵ N. Rea, *A Famous Art Dealer's Son Is Launching a New Platform for Galleries to Create Virtual-Reality Exhibitions Using 3D-Scanning Technology*, "Artnet News", 24 March 2020, <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/new-extended-reality-app-1812807> [accessed: 25.03.2020].

⁴⁶ M. Gerlis, *The Fate of the Art Market in the Balance*, "Financial Times", 19 March 2020, <https://www.ft.com/content/85fc2062-6847-11ea-a6ac-9122541af204> [accessed: 23.03.2020].

⁴⁷ Council of Europe Framework Convention on the Value of Cultural Heritage for Society, 27 October 2005, CETS 199, Art. 2(a).

in the Web 3.0 era, which means that digital natives are accustomed to and will expect museums to cater to their preferences.⁴⁸ Therefore digital heritage, like tangible and intangible forms of cultural heritage, should be considered a living and complex organism.

A passage from Economou deserves special consideration for this analysis:

We are currently focusing less on the realistic representation of the natural and cultural environment in the digital domain, and are becoming more critical about issues regarding the ownership, value, authenticity, and identity of digital heritage. The availability of digital cultural content that is open for reinterpretation and reuse should make us rethink these issues in new ways. In an increasingly globalized world, there is greater emphasis on the use of digital media by local communities interpreting their own places and practices, within a context of greater mobility. The spread of the internet has brought to the fore stronger than ever before the potential for global connectivity and the need to cater for international audiences, while also serving and being adaptable to local or personal preferences. [...] In order for heritage organizations and custodians to maintain contact with diverse audiences and ensure that heritage remains relevant in a rapidly changing world, it is necessary to examine openly the questions that digital heritage brings up, and invite user communities to participate in this continuous process of reinterpretation and mutual exchange.⁴⁹

Since the digital revolution cannot be stopped, it behooves museums to seriously consider and renegotiate their relationships with technology. Moving forward, in order to guarantee visitor access and transparency museums will need to implement more types of technology into their daily operations. Many high-profile institutions have already taken advantage of the global coronavirus pandemic to make the leap. Google Arts & Culture has partnered with several museums, including the Hermitage Museum in Russia and Schönbrunn Palace in Austria, to provide virtual tours of their collections. Other museums have made lectures and videos available on YouTube, such as a recording of Tibetan chants in the New York Rubin Museum's Buddhist Shrine Room and a behind-the-scenes look at the newly remodeled Museum of Modern Art (MoMA). Even the Vatican Museums have opened their virtual doors to the world,⁵⁰ while the art community in Hong Kong created a platform (ART Power HK) to reenergize the local cultural sector.⁵¹

⁴⁸ E. Ch'ng, op. cit., pp. 5-6.

⁴⁹ M. Economou, op. cit., p. 225.

⁵⁰ S. Cascone, *Travel Plans on Hold? You Can Visit 500 International Museums From the Comfort of Your Own Home Thanks to Google*, "Artnet News", 17 March 2020, <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/visit-500-museums-virtually-google-arts-culture-1806657> [accessed: 23.03.2020]; K. White, *9 Dazzling Virtual Art Experiences You Can Have From the Comfort of Your Own Home, Including a Trip to the Sistine Chapel*, "Artnet News", 23 March 2020, <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/virtual-art-experiences-1809261> [accessed: 23.03.2020].

⁵¹ N. Rea, *In the Face of the Coronavirus Crisis, Hong Kong's Art World Has Banded Together to Launch a New Online Platform for Art*, "Artnet News", 5 March 2020, <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/coronavirus-hong-kong-online-gallery-platform-1794369> [accessed: 23.03.2020].

Furthermore, the lack of visitors has had significant financial implications. For instance the Met is reportedly expecting a \$100 million loss this year and artists fear that the UK will become a “cultural wasteland” in the wake of the pandemic. In the words of singer Rufus Wainwright: “Artists are creating so much content online that people can experience in their homes. They have not stopped producing and it would be a crime as a society to not support them through this crisis as they are nourishing us”. Despite government subsidies and emergency response packages for creative industries, many employees and smaller institutions are falling through the cracks.⁵² Harnessing technologies and digital content helps to compensate for these shortfalls and keep cultural institutions open and maintain their relevance in the current social landscape.⁵³ Online tours, classes, and challenges have all been used by museums to keep their digital doors open, as closures are expected to continue at least until the autumn.

Other institutions, known as “museopreneurs”, have experimented with techniques from the tech and start-up worlds to improve their agility and become more data-driven. This is reflected in design thinking, marketing strategies, exhibition designs, and multiple revenue streams, aimed at achieving harmony between museums’ role as caretakers of culture and the need to generate income. NEW INC, an offshoot of the New Museum in New York City, is the first “museum-led incubator” in the world whose multidisciplinary approach tackles the definition of what a museum can be in the 21st century. Cultural and civic partnerships, leading-edge art and technological initiatives are all part of this rebranding, opening institutions to new connections and cultivating mutually beneficial and long-lasting relationships.⁵⁴

Most importantly, museums now have an opportunity to address the deeper political and economic inequalities exposed by the virus, by critically engaging teachers, scholars, museum visitors, and community members. AAM encourages institutions to stimulate creative engagement with pressing issues such as global warming, as well as internal issues like object restitution. As a result of community activism, critical scholarship, and changing public culture, museums have become more democratic. But this process is not yet complete. Harnessing digital and virtual tools can allow museums to “spur quarantined public to contemplate museums’ entrenched biases, critically engage with their collections, and invent

⁵² L. Bakare, *UK Could Become ‘Cultural Wasteland’ Due to Coronavirus, Say Leading Artists*, “The Guardian”, 26 April 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/26/uk-could-become-cultural-wasteland-due-to-coronavirus-say-artists> [accessed: 26.04.2020].

⁵³ J. Halperin, *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Is Bracing for a \$100 Million Shortfall as Leadership Pivots to Highlight the Institution’s Digital Offerings*, “Artnet News”, 19 March 2020, <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/met-closed-digital-plan-coronavirus-1809888> [accessed: 23.03.2020].

⁵⁴ B. Ciecko, *Museopreneur: How Museums Are Leaping into New Business Models with Entrepreneurial Spirit*, “American Alliance of Museums Blog”, 3 May 2019, <https://www.aam-us.org/2019/05/03/museopreneur-how-museums-are-leaping-into-new-business-models-with-entrepreneurial-spirit/> [accessed: 23.03.2020]].

new ways to relate to them”.⁵⁵ By encouraging the public to re-think and re-imagine their responses to collections, museums will diversify their audiences and prompt a greater degree of enthusiasm and appreciation for the key role of the arts in daily life. Indeed, it is a “public duty”.⁵⁶ This is particularly significant as the debate rages on over looted and colonial artifacts, such as the Parthenon marbles and the Benin Bronzes in the British Museum.

The term “museum” should also be extended to born-digital institutions, such as Google Arts & Culture, to help reframe the role of museums in providing accessibility to a greater number of people. Furthermore, digital initiatives allow artists to partner with museums, experiment in new ways and methods, and engage with visitors directly. A recent example is KAWS’s use of AR to create sculptures sold through an app.⁵⁷ Some believe that VR and AR will be essential to navigate the post-pandemic art world, ushering in a new paradigm of international visual culture and exchange where virtual sculptures are embedded in the urban landscape while virtual exhibitions occur on several continents simultaneously.⁵⁸ Art has tremendous civic, social, and political value and museums are the guardians of this priceless heritage. Thus it is crucial for traditional museums to foster collaborative partnerships, use technology, and focus on inclusion rather than exclusion. Otherwise, they risk being left behind as the world continues to transform and embrace digital solutions.

Interestingly, Suay Aksoy resigned from her position as ICOM president on 19 June 2020. While the reason for this decision is not specified in the public announcement, it is likely that the controversy over the proposed definition of “museum” influenced this outcome. Newly appointed president Alberto Garlandini stated:

The COVID-19 emergency has been an unexpected threat. However, even in lockdown and quarantine, museum professionals have been working miracles to preserve and promote collections and heritage. [...] In these troubled times, ICOM has even more responsibilities than in the past. Museums are in the service of society and ICOM is in the service of museums and heritage.⁵⁹

⁵⁵ E. Lehrer, S.R. Butler, *Curatorial Dreaming in the Age of COVID-19*, “American Alliance of Museums Blog”, 4 May 2020, <https://www.aam-us.org/2020/05/04/curatorial-dreaming-in-the-age-of-covid-19/> [accessed: 04.05.2020].

⁵⁶ J. Pes, N. Rea, *A World-Famous Curator Is Working 18-Hour Days to Put One of Italy’s Top Museums Online So Italians Can Visit From Quarantine*, “Artnet News”, 10 March 2020, <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/coronavirus-italy-directors-1798908> [accessed: 23.03.2020].

⁵⁷ N. Rea, *KAWS Just Entered the Augmented Reality Game with Giant Virtual Sculptures that You Can See – and Buy – in 11 Major Cities*, “Artnet News”, 12 March 2020, <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/kaws-augmented-reality-1800375> [accessed: 23.03.2020].

⁵⁸ D. Birnbaum, *In the Changed World After Lockdown, We Will Need Smarter New Ways to Interact With Art. I Believe Virtual Reality Is the Answer*, “Artnet News”, 21 April 2020, <https://news.artnet.com/opinion/will-need-new-ways-interact-art-lockdown-believe-virtual-reality-answer-1839591> [accessed: 21.04.2020].

⁵⁹ ICOM, *Alberto Garlandini Appointed New ICOM President*, 21 June 2020, <https://icom.museum/en/news/alberto-garlandini-appointed-new-icom-president/> [accessed: 21.06.2020].

In order to effectively serve a post-pandemic society and account for developments in the field of cultural heritage and property, museums must expand their digital offerings and welcome non-traditional institutions into the fold.

Conclusion

Currently, we are indeed living in interesting times: “We move from one crisis to another. We suffer one disturbance and shock after another”.⁶⁰ ICOM’s proposed definition of “museum” adheres to what Venice Biennale curator Ralph Rugoff terms “the interconnectedness of diverse phenomena”.⁶¹ While it is true that a basic definition is needed in order to accommodate as many museums as possible in that vein, it is also necessary to consider the expanding role of museums in the overarching social consciousness. Globalization and the digital revolution have made it possible for any institution to exist online and be available to the public without the need for a physical counterpart. However, traditionalists have argued against the inclusion of several of these organizations in the roster of museums, as defined by common conceptions. Should the definition of museums exclude institutions that do not occupy a physical space, but rather solely a digital one? This seems narrow-minded in light of museums’ recent push towards online visitation and digital initiatives. It is clear that the art world must evolve in order to survive, and if embracing online and digital museums is the way forward, then it should be considered seriously. This has been demonstrated by the art market’s recent reliance on technological tools and social media to drive revenue despite social distancing; for instance, virtual and hybrid auctions held during the 2020 summer months managed to bring in millions of dollars through online bidding.⁶²

The success of initiatives like EYCH further demonstrate that private individuals and digital tools have much to offer the field of arts and cultural heritage. Rather than distrusting digital and virtual museums or cultural experiences, these should be seen as an extension of the traditional museum mandate: to cultivate relationships with the community and provide educational resources so that arts and culture are available to the public. If not, museums will end up alienating the very people that they wish to attract and who they rely on for survival. Even before the pandemic, audiences were spending greater amounts of time online and had certain expectations for cultural institutions in the digital sphere. In order to ensure that museums continue to play a vital part in society and promote democracy and transparency, gatekeepers such as ICOM must broaden the conception of “museum”.

⁶⁰ R. Rugoff, op. cit.

⁶¹ Ibidem.

⁶² B. Sutton, *Titus Kaphar and Amoako Bofo Works Star in Phillips's Sold-Out Virtual Evening Auction*, “Artsy”, 2 July 2020, <https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-titus-kaphar-amoko-bofo-works-star-philipss-sold-out-virtual-evening-auction> [accessed: 14.09.2020].

While finding a consensus on the definition of “museum” will take some time, it is important to note how technology has aided cultural institutions and provided them with an equal playing field as a result of COVID-19. Given that accessibility is one of the cornerstones of museums in their traditional iteration – they are meant for the public – an updated definition should consider how the digital revolution has permanently shifted audience and visitor expectations. In order to serve society, museums must understand what society expects of them. This goes beyond adapting to passing trends, and instead recognizing the fundamental nature of new frameworks and behavioral patterns. As custodians of cultural heritage, museums cannot be separated from society – they must work in tandem to ensure that relevant changes are incorporated into their own functions. This includes developing new digital offerings and using available technologies to expand the reach of their collections and interact with greater varieties of visitors. In doing so, museums will ensure that they continue to preserve cultural heritage for future generations in a way that present generations can respond to and appreciate.

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