



Zhang Hui's 2018 oil painting "Just Like in the Mirror 1," is part of the current show, "Meditations in an Emergency," at the recently reopened UCCA Beijing.

IT'S SAFE TO SAY THAT THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC IS the single greatest challenge to culture globally since World War II—possibly the greatest ever.

Yet in the wake of closings all over the world of major arts and culture facilities, what has emerged has been equally unprecedented. Museums are pivoting quickly and determinedly to remain open online to visitors, potentially expanding their reach in the process. Artists, suddenly finding their calendars empty, have become more prolific and perhaps more relevant, reacting to the crisis and sharing their work immediately wherever possible. Audiences themselves, faced with the isolation imposed by social distancing rules, have turned into artists, performers and producers, creating virtual art in front of their cell phone cameras, creative lawn sign messages and group musical events from balconies and porches.

All of this activity has been cathartic and gratifying, particularly to those who have long worked in cultural organizations and believe deeply in the power of art to transform the human experience. Yet even as they have turned the crisis into a new opportunity, the threat to museums remains profound and the future of some of humanity's greatest achievements and artifacts, uncertain.

"In the short term, the COVID pandemic has caused a collapse of art infrastructure with the cancellation of blockbusters, international exhibitions, art fairs and biennales," says Dr. Apinan

Poshyananda, Chief Executive and Artistic Director of the Bangkok Art Biennale and former Permanent Secretary and Acting Minister, Ministry of Culture of Thailand. "In the long term, the layoff and furlough of art employees, closures of art museums and bankruptcy of art institutions and galleries will completely transform the art community. The art market and consumer behavior will be turned upside down. Art as investment will face a very hard time."

Even New York's Armory Show, which was able to go ahead as planned in early March, faces similar concerns for the future, both for itself and for the network of galleries and artists that it serves.

"We were the last major international art fair to complete its run before things began to shut down," says Nicole Berry, Executive Director of New York's The Armory Show. "We had already made a determination to move our dates and venue with our next edition scheduled for September 2021. These changes have given us space to direct all of our attention to programming designed to support galleries, institutions, and artists negatively impacted by this crisis."

The Guggenheim on the other hand, was forced for a time to close not only its New York City facilities, but also its sister institutions in Venice, Italy and Bilbao, Spain.

"The entire Guggenheim community confronted the crisis," said Richard Armstrong, Director of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum and Foundation.

DARK MUSEUMS, Digital Halls

Besieged by the pandemic response, creative efforts abound in the world's great houses of culture. By Brunswick Arts' **PETER DILLON.**

“The pandemic has forced all of us to adapt very quickly to circumstances beyond our control. The closure necessitated new work patterns, but also instilled and strengthened the deep sense of community within our institution.”

ADAPT TO SURVIVE

Dr. Poshyananda expects little relief in the way of government funding, as entire national economies will be in need of the same stimulus funding. He adds that American and European institutions may be worst hit, because of what he calls a “demand-supply side” model easily impacted by market fluctuations. But the threat is ubiquitous and organizations everywhere “must adapt to survive on their own.”

“For Bangkok Art Biennale, we have used digital and online to keep our stakeholders, followers and artists connected,” he says. “The theme ‘Escape Routes’ for Bangkok Art Biennale 2020-21 is chosen to reflect the grave new world that we are living in.”

The Biennale’s series of “Artist Talks” online have received popular virtual engagement, and plans are in place to adapt the upcoming Bangkok Art Biennale, which opens in October, to accommodate new social distancing requirements, he said.

“In addition, we will start an art-as-sanctuary program, where artists will be invited to have long-term residency to think, create, contemplate and discuss artistic contributions to improve ecological degradation and continuous natural disasters on a planetary scale.”

This story of crisis and accommodation, risk and resiliency, despair and determination, is repeated in museums the world over. According to recent studies by UNESCO and the International Council of Museums, 90 percent of museums worldwide were forced to close their doors and stop in-person operations during the pandemic. The reports estimate that of those 85,000 facilities, 13 percent—more than 11,000 museums—may never be able to reopen.

In the US alone, shuttered institutions were estimated to be losing \$33 million a day at the height of the crisis, according to the American Alliance of Museums. That lost revenue, together with the threat of a resurgence in the virus, will require dramatic adjustments.

“As we look ahead to gradually reopening our doors, following the lead of our colleagues at the Peggy Guggenheim Collection and the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao, we envision a changed museum experience within a changed world, but remain committed to providing a meaningful experience for visitors,” the Guggenheim’s Mr. Armstrong says.

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Many of the works featured in the 2018 Bangkok Art Biennale. Exhibits occur at venues throughout the city. Left, Andrew Stahl’s painting “River Memories” was part at the show at the East Asiatic Building.

Below, David Litvin, the grower at © 80 Acres Farms, sits in an indoor garden on Fifth Avenue at the Guggenheim. 100 pounds of tomatoes are being given each week to the city’s food pantries.

Bettina Korek, Director of The Serpentine Gallery in London, says the space has had to make “sweeping changes” to daily operations with the closure of its galleries, mostly around remote work for staff and increases to its already well-established online offerings. One of the biggest challenges has involved reinventing the online audience experience.

“We took a ‘less is more’ approach,” Ms. Korek said. “We saw that we would have the biggest impact if we were able to present projects that encourage our audience to engage offline and away from their screens as well. We’ve put a lot of energy into projects like ‘do it,’ which presents recipes for anyone to create artworks on their own.”

The exhibit “do it” has been a feature of the Serpentine since 1993 and is billed as “an ever-expanding set of creative instructions by leading artists—simple enough for anyone to do,” according to the museum’s website.

CHANGED EXPERIENCE

In each city around the world, museums are working hard to maintain and even build anew communities united by the cultural experience. The tools they are using are often being developed in the midst of the

PHOTOGRAPHS: COURTESY OF UCCA, BANGKOK BIENNALE AND GUGGENHEIM NEW YORK CITY



crisis. And in each case, these approaches are to some degree permanently changing the way museums engage with the world.

“One of the indelible lessons learned during the pandemic has been the many ways in which innovation can outmaneuver physical distance,” Ms. Korek said. “As we look to the future, we are increasingly focused on collaborating with other organizations from different ‘worlds’—creative worlds like design, music and entertainment, but also worlds that are traditionally thought to be more utilitarian like technology and science.”

At the Guggenheim, Mr. Armstrong also noted the flexibility and innovation of his team’s response, successfully building out existing programming for its digital audience.

“We can report a rise of interest and visitation to our digital content through Guggenheim at Large—an online platform offering both free and paid education programming aimed at providing inspiration, solace, and community,” he said. “In the first 50 days of closure we saw growth on digital platforms, with a 60 percent increase on traffic to our website and over 30 percent increase with social media engagements.”

For its’ part, The Armory Show is also counting on further development of online resources.

“Our first digital initiative, which will continue post-crisis, is called Armory Access,” Ms. Berry said. The offering provides a platform for galleries involved with the show to generate engagement with exhibitions that either closed early or never opened. “We have also brought our Curatorial Leadership Summit (CLS), a daylong summit for 75 international curators that occurs during the run of the fair, online as a Virtual CLS and will be doing the same with our talks program, Armory Live, in order to tackle relevant topics that we are all facing.”

In addition, the Armory Show is looking ahead to its next physical fair in September 2021, she said. “We are in discussions now as to what that will look like. While we grieve for the lives this virus has taken, and the disruption it has caused to so many, we look forward to creating something useful and meaningful, not only for the fair, but for the industry.”

The Hong Kong Museum of Art was among the earliest hit by the crisis. It was forced to close for public safety in January—months before those in London and New York—and continues to wrestle with the uncertainty created by the pandemic.

“We were partially opened with special hours and limited admission for visits from 11 to 22 March,” says Director Maria Mok. “Then we were obliged to close again due to a surge of infected cases.”

Even now, in June, with the museum once again reopened, the threat still looms. In response, it has created a new online platform, “virtually@HKMoA,” where audiences can enjoy videos, animations, e-pamphlets, audio guides, documentaries, and other multimedia programs.

“We offer our entire collection of around 17,000 sets of artworks online,” Ms. Mok says.

The museum has four core collections: Chinese Antiquities, Chinese Painting and Calligraphy, China Trade Art, and Modern and Hong Kong Art. All are accessible through its Collection Databank and through Google Arts & Culture. In addition, the museum used the period while it was closed to actively connect with members through social media and participation in international events such as the March 24 #MuseumBouquet, where museums around the world sent each other historical images of flowers via Twitter—images now featured together on Twitter and on many museum-related websites.

THE OLD WITH THE NEW

Despite the upheaval, some things about the museum experience will not change, says Philip Tinari, Director and CEO of contemporary art galleries UCCA, located in the heart of Beijing’s 798 District.

“The role must remain the same—it’s how we inhabit the role that changes,” says Mr. Tinari. “Our role has always been to deepen lives and foster exchange through contemporary art and culture. We have continued to do that by adapting programming to distanced formats, but also by using the downtime created by the crisis to refine and adjust our offer.

“I’m not yet sure that it will fundamentally change things for us. It will certainly force us to recalibrate toward projects that are less resource intensive, and it has pushed us to think things through related to our online presence and engagement. It has intensified the interest calculus behind most sponsorships and collaborations. But I think in the end our viewers are still waiting to re-engage with us in physical space.”

Indeed, online growth for museums in general cannot completely replace live audiences. Further, the expected loss of revenue has weakened flexibility in long-term planning for many, so future accommodations as a result of the crisis are likely.

Meanwhile, in some parts of the world including countries in Africa and the Small Islands Developing States, online channels were never really a viable option. Quoted by the UN News, UNESCO Director-General Audrey Azoulay said the pandemic “reminds us that half of humanity does not have access to digital technologies.”

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**PHILIP TINARI,
Director and CEO
of UCCA**

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The point isn’t lost on institutions in the world’s developed capitals, who are increasingly building more community service into their programs.

“The pandemic has amplified inequities throughout the world,” says The Serpentine Gallery’s Ms. Korek. “One of many that pertains to museums is access to the arts. Over the past several decades, museums have gradually descended the ivory tower to experiment with pop culture, technology, and social impact. It felt we were already on the precipice of a paradigm shift—I think perhaps five years from now we’ll look back on this time and see how quickly museums broadened their goals, actions, and audiences, and by extension opened up the arts community to more people than ever.

“Now is a time for inclusivity and generosity in all domains of life, and this is certainly called for in the arts community.”

The Guggenheim in New York has seen the growing value in its programs that reach deeply into the local community.

“Over the years, I have witnessed how art can offer refuge to those impacted by crisis,” Mr. Armstrong says. “Within the museum, I am impressed and humbled by our staff—we have banded together in small acts of kindness, offering free virtual tours to NYC public school students and developing 5,000 free Creative Relief Art Kits for the children of essential workers at hospitals in the Bronx and local community centers.”

While the museum’s exhibition “Countryside: The Future” has been closed, its garden module in front of the museum has continued harvesting 100 pounds of organic tomatoes a week and donating them to food pantries across the boroughs.

“There is an enormous opportunity for art museums, and for the Guggenheim, to play a meaningful role in the hearts and minds of our public even in times of crisis or doubt,” Mr. Armstrong says.

Mr. Tinari, of Beijing’s UCCA, has spoken about the city’s large and growing appetite for culture, both from China and elsewhere. He notes that, for his facility, savings from not having to mount exhibits or to staff facilities coupled with support from the Chinese government will help offset some losses. And given both the current efforts at engagement online and the frustrations of isolation on the part of the city’s population, he expects to see a strong response now that UCCA has reopened.

“That’s not to say that we will not face further issues later on,” he said. “In the meantime, we will do what we can when we can, and be grateful for whatever we can get.” ♦