Cultural Connections

Volume V | 2020

Living In The New Normal—The Arts and Culture Respond

About Culture Academy Singapore

The Culture Academy (CA) champions the development of the next generation of Singapore's cultural leaders in the public and private sectors. CA's work focuses on three inter-related areas: Leadership and Capability Development, Research and Scholarship, and International Partnerships, which cut across all of CA's strategic priorities.

Cultural Connections is a journal published annually by Culture Academy Singapore to nurture thought leadership in cultural work in the public sector. This journal encourages scholarship and the exchange of ideas in the sector. It thus provides a platform for our professionals and administrators in the sector to publish alongside other thought leaders from the region and beyond.

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Foreword

The year 2020 will be remembered for the COVID-19 pandemic and its complex, lasting impact on lives, livelihoods, and the concept of a globalised and borderless world.

Whilst the pandemic has led to borders being closed, businesses and lives disrupted, there have also been positive developments. In many cities today, air quality is better, space constraints reduced, and working from home arrangements have strengthened family and community bonds. Across the spectrum of economy and society, digital transformation and technological innovation have progressed in compressed time and speed.

In the midst of this flux and uncertainty, we have also witnessed the power of the arts and culture in bringing isolated peoples and communities together to uplift spirits and provide relief in the face of daily challenges. Many of us have discovered or renewed our appreciation for the beauty, power and impact of the arts and culture on lives, livelihoods and mental wellbeing. The crisis has also revealed the resilience, creativity and the "never say die" attitude of the arts and culture community, whose members came together to support one another during this time of few or no gigs, and to even rally together to bring relief to the underserved and marginalised groups.

Here in Singapore, the impact of COVID-19 was cushioned by proactive relief measures funded by the government to ensure that lives and livelihood were saved and sustained during this period. The Arts and Culture Resilience Package (ACRP) of $55 million was given to protect livelihoods, defray costs, enhance capabilities, and encourage innovative digital presentations of artworks. It also helped artists to continue to inspire and uplift the people during the pandemic, and prepare themselves for recovery.

This edition offers a good collection of essays from both local experts and our international counterparts. The essays document the resilience, creativity, adaptability, and perseverance of the arts and culture community and the various governments as they work in tandem to ensure that the arts and culture are sustained and continue to provide succor and joy to their people.

As we prepare for the new normal, one thing is clear—the power of the arts and heritage cannot be underestimated. Here is looking forward to a more resilient, creative, and connected arts and culture community whom I am confident is prepared for the new normal.

Rosa Daniel (Mrs)
Dean, Culture Academy Singapore

Editor-in-Chief's Note

As I pen this note, I note that it is the last two months of 2020—a year that will go down in history as one that tested the entire world economically, socially, and politically.

This edition is testament to the arts and culture communities who have rallied together to bring solace, entertainment, and joy during these isolating times, despite how they are among the worst affected in the pandemic. Through the essays contributed by thought leaders from Australia, China, France, Germany, Indonesia and Singapore, we see that these communities the world over, like the mythical phoenix, is rising from the ashes to emerge stronger and more resilient.

The opening essay by Peter Ho, futurist and thinker from Singapore, reflects on the drivers and shapers of culture through examples from societies through history, focusing on how culture is resilient and adaptive despite cataclysmic events and disruptive trends.

COVID-19 has proved to be one of such cataclysmic events. Our essayists show how arts and culture communities in different parts of the world are adapting to the new normal, with digital technologies taking a lead in providing solutions. The contributions also offer a range of perspectives on how institutions, governments and communities are responding, as well as thoughts on the way forward.

From Australia, Dr Mathew Trinca shares how the National Museum of Australia is documenting the pandemic as it unfolds, with social media platforms playing a key role in connecting people and collecting stories. Our contributors from Europe, one of the worst-hit regions by the pandemic, detail the impact on the cultural sector. From France, prominent cultural leader Jack Lang makes the case for intensive government intervention in revitalising the arts and culture sector. Professor Dr Marion Ackermann of Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden, one of Germany's largest museums, writes about the institute's immediate response to the pandemic and how museums will adapt in the post-COVID-19 world.

The essays from Asia present a variety of perspectives on how the arts and culture is adapting in the pandemic. Ye Yipei from The Palace Museum, China, advocates for digital solutions as the way forward for museums to stay relevant while arguing that museums will need to find new methods to add value to the visiting experience.

Singapore's essayists explore the pandemic's impact from diverse viewpoints—Yvonne Tham from The Esplanade – Theatres on the Bay, Singapore's premier performing arts venue, talks about the role of an arts centre in bridging distances during these times of safe distancing; Michael Koh and Andy Tan, Centre for Liveable Cities, propose decentralising cultural spaces and detail strategies to implementing it; Alvin Tan

(Continued on next page)

from National Heritage Board provides an overview of the pandemic's impact on museums and recaps how the museum experience may adapt to the new normal; and Paul Tan, National Arts Council shares how the government agency supported the arts sector through various initiatives, such as grants and commissioned works.

Finally, we close with the contribution from artist Mella Jaarsma, Cemeti Institute for Art & Society based in Yogyakarta, Indonesia. Jaarsma provides precious insights into the ability of the local arts community to self-organise and rally together for the bigger good, from marshalling resources to help marginalised communities to launching creative initiatives that brought succour to many in these trying times.

It is in the darkest hour that the grit of the human spirit shines through. We have seen how the arts and culture have great value in bringing people together and lifting spirits during crises. Moving forward, I am confident that the resilience, resolve and relevance of arts and culture communities around the world will steer them through this unprecedented event.

Here is wishing all our readers a much happier, healthier and positive 2021.

Thangamma Karthigesu (Ms)
Director (Leadership and Capability Development) and Editor-in-Chief
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Ah Beng's[1] excursion into the past, present and future of culture

Peter Ho

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This opening essay takes a wide lens on the myriad drivers, from cultural imperialism and patronage to technological progress, that shape our understanding and practice of culture in the past, present and future, drawing on multiple examples from societies across various historical periods.

What is culture?

If you were to ask a Singaporean to explain his culture, he might identify Singlish[2] as a defining characteristic. Indeed, language is an important part of culture. But it is only one component. Culture covers all aspects of human life that are determined or conditioned by being part of a society. It includes not only language but also religion, food, dress, gestures, social habits, music and the arts. If you prefer a more formal definition, culture could be described as "shared patterns of behaviours and interactions, cognitive constructs and understanding that are learned by socialisation" (Center for Advanced Research on Language Acquisition 2020). Indeed, it is through socialisation that culture is learned and transmitted from generation to generation.

The fact that people eat or drink is not in itself cultural. It is a biological necessity for the sustenance of life. On the other hand, we eat particular foods and refrain from eating other types even though they may be perfectly edible and nourishing, like vegetarians or those who observe Hindu, Jewish, Muslim and other religiously-defined dietary practices. We drink coffee at certain times of the day; we go to the hawker centre in the evening after work. These are not just personal choices but also matters of culture. Reflecting this, last year Singapore nominated its hawker culture for inscription into UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.

Religion too is part of culture. The Tamil festival of Thaipusam sees Hindu devotees carrying *kavadis*[3] as a form of penance. For the uninitiated, it is a spectacular if not slightly unnerving sight of people skewered with needles and hooks. This practice, which originated in India, is not only preserved here, but has also been embraced by others outside the Tamil-Hindu community. When I was doing my military service, one of my national servicemen who was moonlighting as a Chinese temple medium, a *tangki*, decided that he too wished to carry a *kavadi*. I do not know whether he had undergone a Damascene conversion, or simply wanted to escape from some of his military duties. But he went through all the rituals and preparations and, by all accounts, manfully carried a *kavadi* like any other Hindu devotee. Thaipusam in Singapore is more than just a Hindu religious festival. It has become part of the larger cultural consciousness of all Singaporeans. Societies like Singapore's are no longer defined by one culture, but instead incorporate many cultures that co-exist with and even blend into each other.

Purpose of culture

In his brilliant and engaging book *Sapiens*, Yuval Noah Harari describes how language gave people the ability to create legends, myths, gods and religions, which are the underpinnings of culture. Culture was the social glue that kept people in groups, first in hunter-gatherer tribes, and when they became sedentary farmers, in small farming communities that evolved into villages, towns, and eventually into cities,

countries and nations. Anthropologist Joseph Tainter (Tainter 1988) and political scientist Thomas Homer-Dixon (Homer-Dixon 2010) have offered a different perspective. As the material basis of a society gets more complex, mechanisms emerge to manage that complexity. These include not just more complex forms of government and laws, but also of culture.

Another view from Benedict Anderson (Anderson 1983), the political scientist and historian, conceptualises nations as "imagined communities". Nations are too large for people within to meet face-to-face. Yet they are able to find sufficient shared interests to identify themselves with their country—an imagined community—against those outside. Mark Moffett, a biologist, quoting philosopher Ross Poole, neatly explained it this way, "What is important is not so much that everyone imagines the same nation, but that they imagine that they imagine the same nation" (Moffett 2018).

But it is also culture, not just nationalism, that binds people together, and with equal force. Culture creates shared imaginings that underpin community as much as nationalism. While Anderson was focused on imagined communities as a product of modernity and mass communications, the concept holds for the communities of our ancestors as well.

The role of empire

Because each community had its own culture, the early period of human history consisted of many small, fragmented cultures. Then empires rose which amalgamated these multifarious cultures into a few big cultures. They accommodated diversity, and "people expressed their identification with the empire with geographically local flourishes that reflected their ancestry"(Moffett 2018). Harari explains that "ideas, people, goods and technology spread more easily within the borders of an empire than in a politically fragmented region"(Harari 2015). The purpose, Harari goes on to explain, "was to make life easier for themselves. The cultural ideas spread by empire were seldom the exclusive creation of the ruling elite. Since the imperial vision tends to be universal and inclusive, it was relatively easy for the imperial elite to adopt ideas, norms and traditions from wherever they found them."

So, empires catalysed a process of cultural osmosis—the assimilation of customs and practices by one culture from another. The few dominant cultures today such as the European and the Chinese trace their roots to empires. Historians credit Genghis Khan, the ruthless founder of the Mongol empire, the largest contiguous empire in history, with bringing the Silk Road under one cohesive political environment. This increased communication and trade between Europe, the Middle East and Asia. As a result, cultural practices flowed and mixed within these regions. When Kublai Khan, grandson of Genghis Khan, completed the Mongol conquest of China, he decided to make China his base. He adopted the Chinese political system and supported its cultural model. As a result, Chinese customs and culture were preserved.

Cultural imperialism

A more recent but perhaps even less benign version of cultural osmosis is cultural imperialism, often attributed in the last few centuries to the imposition by the colonial powers like England, France, Portugal and Spain of various aspects of

their own culture—including religion, customs, traditions, language, social norms and values, even architecture—onto their colonies. This deliberate and sometimes forceful extension of the colonial powers' way of life over their subordinated populations either transformed or replaced aspects of indigenous cultures.

Because decolonisation is a recent phenomenon, echoes of cultural imperialism still reverberate strongly in many parts of Latin America, Africa and Asia. Certainly, Singapore as a colony of the British empire was profoundly affected by cultural imperialism. The neo-classical buildings around the Padang—the former City Hall and the Supreme Court—are genuflections to English architectural traditions. Our *lingua franca* is English. Our educational system, system of government and laws, even some of our street and building names, have British roots. The displacement of indigenous cultures by the colonial process has sometimes been justified as a modernising impulse. To quote Thomas Babington Macaulay, a British politician in the 1800s, English-language education in colonial India was intended to form "a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in tastes, in opinions, in morals and in intellect."[4] On the other hand, the loss of cultural identity is real, irreparable and irreplaceable.

Role of patronage

Throughout history, patronage has played a big role in fostering arts and culture. Leonardo da Vinci was able to produce great works of art because he had patrons like the Medici family[5] and Cesare Borgia[6]. Arts and culture flourished in China over millennia because of the patronage of emperors. Beethoven's greatest patron was Archduke Rudolph who, as brother of the Austrian emperor, was able to gain for Beethoven access to the highest salons in Vienna. In those days, the rich and powerful were expected to extend patronage to worthy individuals who were below their standing in society.

Today, in lieu of kings and princes, patronage flows from governments and philanthropists. In the United States, where public philanthropy has reached its apogee, great performing halls and museums are funded by contributions from patrons of the arts, and some by individual philanthropists like industrialist Andrew Carnegie, the famous and famously rich American steel magnate who built the equally famous Carnegie Hall in New York.

Here in Singapore, major cultural events like the Chingay Festival obtain much of their support from government. We have two magnificent venues for the performing arts: the Victoria Concert Hall and Esplanade - Theatres on the Bay, where plays, orchestral performances and opera are staged to a growing base of fans who have learnt to appreciate these as the finer things in life. Both were funded by the governments of the day. Indeed, given the cost of such cultural infrastructure, it is hard to see how in the Singapore context such undertakings could have proceeded without strong government backing, financial or otherwise.

But should culture and art depend exclusively on governments and philanthropy to flourish? The answer is 'no'. In a way, the culture that is centred on the concert hall where people have to pay to enter, and at any rate, where there are limited seats, is culture for the few. In contrast, culture for the many has to be much more accessible, affordable, and perhaps have a popular appeal to those who have not developed an ear for opera or symphonies. In Singapore, culture for the masses can be found in open air street

wayangs[7], and *getai*[8] performances during the Hungry Ghost Festival.[9]

The development and evolution of culture is not just the province of the elites. It is also an organic process, developing and evolving through the interactions of the people in society. In the late 1970s, many students in secondary schools, junior colleges and polytechnics in Singapore began to write songs in Mandarin to express their thoughts and feelings around themes like friendships or love stories, and often sung to the accompaniment of guitars. This genre of songs is called *xinyao*[10]. Like many cultural trends, it emerged spontaneously. Its appeal is perhaps because the lyrics of *xinyao* songs relate to the daily lives of Singaporean youths. It is now an integral part of the music scene in Singapore.

In recent years, radio, television and the internet have made culture more accessible. Indeed, one of the factors that made *xinyao* popular was its exposure on radio and television. During the recent COVID-19 circuit breaker, local plays and musicals like "Emily of Emerald Hill" and "Madam White Snake" were streamed by the Wild Rice theatre company on YouTube, free of charge. Other production companies acted similarly during comparable lockdowns. The world-famous New York Metropolitan Opera recently produced a whole gala performance—chorus and orchestra—miraculously achieved by assembling performers online from their homes, and then streamed it to a global audience.

Technology

Today, technology plays a pivotal role in the spread of the arts and culture. Television brought American culture into living rooms around the world. As a result, American cultural norms, such as popular music and dress styles, have been embraced in countries around the world. In the same way, Asian culture has spread, in particular Japanese and Korean culture. For example, K-pop, such as the hit Gangnam Style[11], became wildly popular global phenomena, spread by television and through the internet. I recall not a few recruits for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs telling me that they had learnt a third language, Korean, on their own. When I asked why, they explained that they wanted to watch undubbed Korean television serials. Whereas culture used to spread through conquest by empires or trade routes, today it is spread almost instantaneously around the world by technology. Carried to its logical extreme, will this lead to a single global culture, a cultural singularity? Maybe not. But it is clear that cultural formation today is increasingly the product of the combined forces of globalisation and technology.

But technology does not just spread culture. It also creates new cultural forms. Photography was for a long time not considered art, merely a technology that recorded images of the real world. It was argued that photographs could not replicate human creativity, unlike drawing or painting. Of course, this view has given way to a more enlightened view. Today, some of the best photographers can command millions for their works, no different from painters whose pieces adorn the walls of museums around the world.

But the medium does not just lend itself to fine art. Photography has evolved into a democratically accessible activity. With the introduction of the Brownie camera at the turn of the last century, Kodak ushered in an era of photography for the masses. This process accelerated in the 1990s with the introduction of fully digital cameras. Digital cameras were soon incorporated into the ubiquitous mobile phone, enabling almost every human being on the planet to aspire to be the next

Henri Cartier-Bresson, or a Sebastião Salgado, or a Noboyuki Arashi, or a Robert Mapplethorpe. Digital cameras became the 'killer app' for mobile telephones. When combined with social media platforms like Instagram and Pinterest, new cultural activities have emerged.

Indeed, technology is lowering the barriers to entry for creating, disseminating and monetising art. For example, music-creation software removes the need to purchase and master musical instruments. Artists are also able to crowdsource funding through new platforms enabled by technology, such as crowdfunding site Kickstarter and membership-based platform Patreon to help artists and creators monetise their works. Instead of just governments and philanthropists, technology giants are now assuming the role of providing funding and other opportunities to cultural workers and artists.

Acceleration

The pace of technological change is accelerating. The reason is Moore's Law, an empirical law that says computing power doubles every two years. This constitutes an acceleration. A large segment of technology that depends on semiconductors tracks Moore's Law. If technological change is accelerating, then the cultural change it fosters must also accelerate in tandem. While in the past, cultural norms took decades if not centuries to develop and evolve, today, cultural practices that are impacted by technology have a half-life of years. A few years ago, the Augmented Reality game, Pokémon Go, swept the world. It was arguably a cultural phenomenon because it changed social behaviour. Smartphone zombies, obsessed with tracking down Pokémon, wandered about town oblivious to other people and to the danger of traffic whizzing around them. Today, the Pokémon Go craze has subsided. New apps like Tik Tok, a video sharing social networking platform, are all the rage now. It is today a facet of culture around the world.

Such new forms of technology-driven culture are often ephemeral, like tweets. Limited to 140 characters, tweets are fleeting and perhaps a bit superficial. But they are a reflection of society today. So, the US Library of Congress has collected tweets at great cost ever since Twitter's beginnings in 2006. This is because it considers tweets part of culture, being records of societies' knowledge and creativity. Arguably, technology makes the transmission of culture broad and shallow, like tweets, rather than deep and narrow of tradition in the past, when cultural practices had time to evolve and become deeply embedded into social structures.

In his marvellous book *Scale*, Geoffrey West describes how the very environment that the city provides that enhances innovation, creativity and open-ended growth, also leads to another profound feature of modern life, namely that its pace seems to be continually speeding up.

The Peranakan[12] culture is a unique part of the Singapore and Malaysian heritage. In the heyday of the Peranakans, *nyonyas*[13] would gather each day to gossip and to prepare complex spices, and then cook the meals of the day. However, the pace of life in those days was more laid back and tranquil. Today, with the pressures of modern society in fast-moving Singapore, few have the time, or even the inclination, to prepare food in the traditional Peranakan way. Instead, the cuisine is sustained by ready-mixed spices, and ready-to-eat microwaveable packages. Is this real Peranakan culture? Or is it a poor imitation of the real thing? The argument will continue, but for

now at least the cuisine is preserved in speedy and convenient new forms.

Contestation

Recently, the well-known Singaporean chef and writer, Violet Oon, herself a Peranakan, concocted a fusion "Nyonya Nasi Ambeng"[14] dish for her restaurant. Some said that it did not properly acknowledge its Javanese roots, even accusing her of "cultural appropriation". She subsequently renamed the dish. This episode echoed an earlier dispute that arose a few years ago between Singaporeans and Malaysians over who invented chilli crab.

This reflects the ceaseless phenomenon of cultural contestation, except that today, this happens with greater speed, energy and potential for conflict because technological change is accelerating. And the contestation is not just over food. Young people often lead the way in challenging the norms. The hippie countercultural movement of the 1960s and 1970s originated in college campuses in America and then spread to other parts of the Western world. It was a phenomenon of youth who rejected the mores of middle-class American life, criticising middle-class values, repudiating established institutions, and opposing nuclear weapons and the Vietnam War. This contestation eventually influenced the mainstream, and its effects are seen today in more relaxed attitudes toward sex, in the new concern for the environment, and in a widespread lessening of formality.

Today, we see contestations arising from decolonisation—tearing down statues even in the West, re-visiting history and questioning the assumptions of established historical narratives. We have had our own version of this when the bicentennial celebrations ignited a debate over the role of Sir Stamford Raffles in modern Singapore's development. In a sense, it is out of such contestation that culture emerges. It may be disconcerting in the near term, because it challenges familiar structures that we are accustomed to and the similarities that comfort us. But it also provides the scrabble letters for new meanings to emerge, and from that, new cultural forms. If we take culture as the product of contestation, then the rules of engagement—which reflect societal values—become crucial. Are they inclusive? Do they embrace differences? Do they contribute to shared directions and aspirations? On the basis of this contestation and the rules of engagement, cultures evolve, helping society adapt to the changing environment.

The future

Today, globalisation and technology are forces that are transforming human societies around the world. But there are other forces at work that also alter societies. Climate change is one such force. Millennials are acutely aware that climate change will impact their lives and their children's much more than their parents'. Individuals like activist Greta Thunberg and movements like Extinction Rebellion are re-shaping attitudes towards climate change. It is in the nature of culture, being an intrinsic part of human society, that it will change in tandem. For example, food choices in future will very much be determined by their carbon footprint, and red meat will become less fashionable. Likewise, cultural events will be designed to be more environmentally-friendly.

That is the central point. Culture is alive and adaptive. Societies that try to maintain things the way they are, including culture, introduce rigidities into the system. They deem culture to be unchanging and eternal, rather than a human construct that is maintained at a cost. The Roman Empire is an example that springs to mind. The moment it was no longer able to fuel and feed its sprawling territories, especially the Western empire, it collapsed and its sophisticated and dominant culture went into decline.

Conclusion

In a sense, culture comprises agreed-upon societal heuristics or short-cuts—practices, norms, rituals, and so on—that grease the wheels of society. It saves people the trouble of having to negotiate their relationships from scratch with others in the community. That works as long as the world is unchanging. But the world will shift, as it must in this globalised and inter-connected world of accelerating change. If the culture does not change and evolve, then society will become dysfunctional. This is the point at which it collapses, as Joseph Tainter argues in his book *The Collapse of Complex Societies*. So, culture must change and evolve for society to survive and thrive. Traditions can be preserved, even celebrated, but they cannot hold back the larger societal changes that are a necessary part of human progress. But because human society is a complex adaptive system, these changes are always going to be emergent.

About the Author

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Peter Ho is Chairman of Urban Redevelopment Authority of Singapore (URA), Chairman of Social Science Research Council (SSRC), Chairman of the Singapore Centre on Environmental Life Sciences Engineering (SCELSE), Chairman of National Supercomputing Centre (NSCC) Steering Committee, Chairman of Campus for Research Excellence and Technological Enterprise (CREATE) Governing Council, Chairman of Office for Space Technology & Industry (OSTIn) Board, and Chairman of PRECIsion Health Research, SingaporE (PRECISE) Pro-Tem Board Oversight Committee. He is a member of the Board of Trustees of the National University of Singapore (NUS), and a board member of National Research Foundation (NRF), a member of the Board of Governors of S Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), and of Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy (LKYSPP).

When he retired from Singapore Administrative Service in 2010 after a career in the Public Service stretching more than 34 years, he was Head, Civil Service, concurrent with his other appointments of Permanent Secretary (Foreign Affairs), Permanent Secretary (National Security & Intelligence Coordination), and Permanent Secretary (Special Duties) in the Prime Minister's Office. Before that, he was Permanent Secretary (Defence). He was also the inaugural Chairman of Maritime and Port Authority of Singapore.

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Notes:

1. The term *Ah Beng*, used in the title, is Singaporean slang for a man who is rough round the edges and unsophisticated, that is, uncultured.
2. *Singlish* is an informal version of English that is used in Singapore. Linguists refer to it as Singapore Colloquial English or Singapore English (See National Library Board's entry on Singlish in *Infopedia* https://bit.ly/2ZOfuNA).
3. Devotees who carry the *kavadi* pierce silver pins through their cheeks and tongue and/or prick the body with hooks and spear-like needles. A *kavadi* carrier can have as many as 100 spears piercing his flesh, but apparently loses little blood, sustained by faith in a trancelike state.
4. In the discussions leading to the English Education Act 1835, Macaulay produced a Memorandum on Indian education in which he argued that Western learning was superior and could only be taught through the medium of English. Together with other measures promoting English as the language of administration and of the higher law courts, the Act eventually led to English becoming one of the languages of India, rather than simply the native tongue of its foreign rulers.
5. The House of Medici was a powerful Italian banking family and political dynasty that gained prominence in Florence during the 15th century.
6. Cesare Borgia (d. 1507) was a powerful Italian noble who held various offices and tried to establish his own principality in central Italy. His policies inspired Machiavelli's work *The Prince*.
7. *Wayang*, a Malay word meaning "a theatrical performance employing puppets or human dancers", commonly refers to Chinese street opera in Singapore.
8. *Getai*, which literally means "song stage" in Chinese, is a popular form of mass entertainment in the 1950s with *getai* established at various amusement parks. Today, *getai* is mainly staged during the Hungry Ghost Festival to entertain both the living and the dead.
9. The Hungry Ghost Festival, also known as the seventh month, is a significant event in Chinese culture. For the whole of the seventh lunar month in the Chinese calendar, believers worship their ancestors and make offerings to the departed.
10. *Xinyao* is a genre of music that typically refers to Mandarin ballads composed, written and performed by youths in Singapore (from National Library Board).
11. *Gangnam Style* by the South Korean recording artist Psy became the first music video to hit one billion views on YouTube on 21 December 2012. By June 2014, the video had surpassed two billion views.
12. *Peranakan* refers to people of mixed Chinese and Malay heritage. They were also known as Straits Chinese as they were usually born in the Straits Settlements of Singapore, Penang and Malacca.
13. A *nyonya* is a female Peranakan. A male Peranakan is known as a *baba*.
14. *Nasi ambeng* is an Indonesian rice dish that consists of—but is not limited to—steamed white rice, chicken curry or chicken stewed in soy sauce, beef or chicken *rendang*, *sambal goreng* and other ingredients. (from Wikipedia)

Collecting the pandemic crisis: The challenge for museums in the age of COVID-19

Dr Mathew Trinca

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Director, National Museum of Australia

Using the online medium as a platform, National Museum of Australia sets out to document the pandemic as it develops, and finds the digital approach to be invaluable in documenting an unfolding historic event, enabling people to connect and exchange stories and views on the crisis, collecting diverse stories, and assisting the museum's work in acquiring potential artefacts.

The response from the public was clear and immediate when National Museum of Australia launched an online project in April 2020 to record our nation's collective experiences of the novel coronavirus. Within minutes of the project going live, scores of people across the country joined a virtual conversation about how they were coping with the pandemic.

"I've been waiting for something like this to start," wrote one woman on our Facebook Group page that first day. More posts followed, with people sharing photographs, videos and stories through the "Bridging the Distance" project (Figure 1), either on social media or directly via the Museum's website. Many of the posts offered humour in the face of adversity. There was the couple pictured in face masks for their wedding photos, and another which showed how a family had amended the game of Twister to comply with social distancing rules. Or my favourite: a photo of a roll of toilet paper sprayed gold (Figure 2), satirising the ugly rush for supplies in supermarkets across Australia as the crisis unfolded.

History may be in the telling but you need to be able to recall what happened and what it felt like in order to really know the past. That's why the National Museum committed itself to collecting these posts and emails through its "Bridging the Distance" project and keeping them as "virtual objects" of our shared COVID-19 experience. It was an approach we trialled with a similar online project "Fridge Door Fire Stories" during that other crisis over the Australian summer of 2019-

Figure 1. Facebook page banner for "Bridging the distance" project, 2020.
Image courtesy of National Museum of Australia.

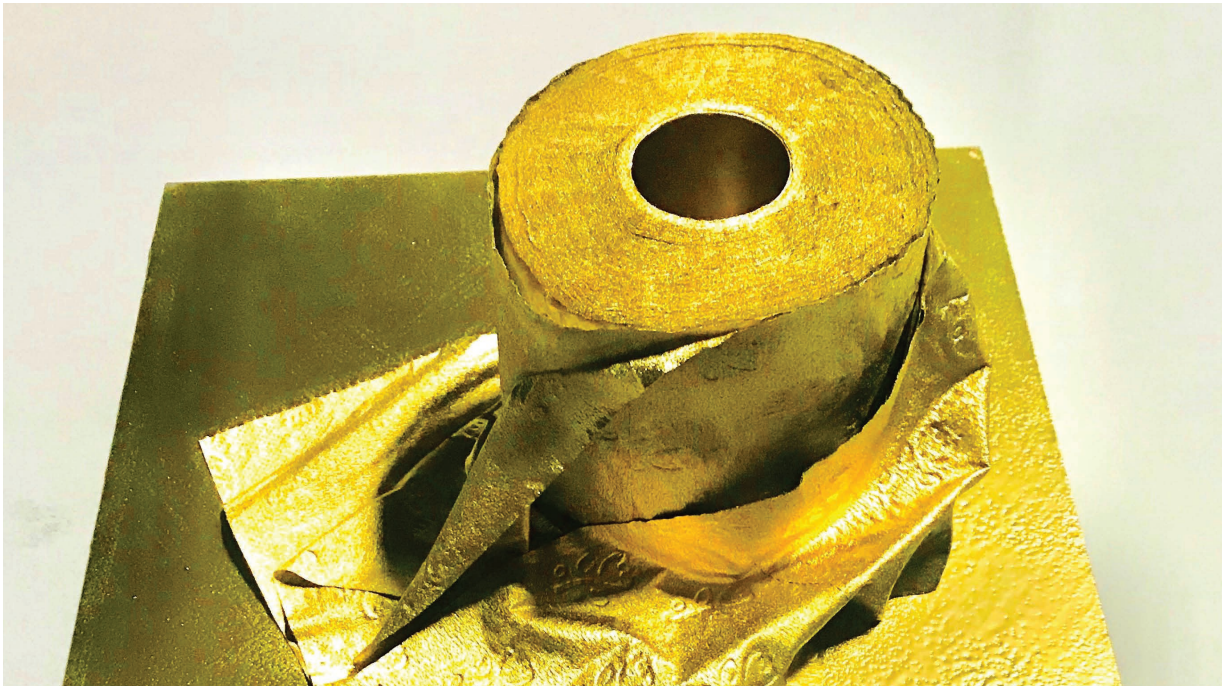

Figure 2. "An Australian Story—March 2020". A roll of toilet paper sprayed gold satirises the ugly rush for supplies during the pandemic, 2020. Image courtesy of the artist J.S. Gvozden.

20—the wide-scale bushfires that devastated a vast extent of the continent after a searing drought (Figure 3). The museum launched a Facebook page to document stories and imagery stemming from this defining event. The platform provided a national opportunity for grassroots storytelling and to honour frontline emergency workers, and assists in the museum's work in identifying any potential collection objects and contacting members of public about them.

Both projects have taught us much about how we can re-imagine the task of collecting and documenting contemporary events for posterity. After all, collecting online is just a new take on the long-established museum practice of making, keeping and presenting collections of objects that bring our stories of the past alive.

The responsibility to make and keep a material record of our lives and times is something National Museum and many other museums in Australia take very seriously. But there is a lot more to "Bridging the Distance" and other projects like them than making online archives. The real worth of online projects lies in enabling people to come together, to connect and to exchange views of what is happening to them as it is happening. In the case of the coronavirus pandemic, people needed to express how they were dealing with this new world—one that was challenging their sense of themselves and was wholly unexpected. Those who sent in posts, photos and videos to sites like "Bridging the Distance" have clearly wanted to express their own ideas, as much as consume those offered to them by museums and other like organisations online. This is a deeper truth embedded in the digital turn of museums, which once were all about the stories they told but now are increasingly confronted with communities and publics who want to tell us what they know.

Figure 3. The launch of the museum's "Fridge Door Fire Stories" project coincided with the incorporation into the museum's collection of an iconic fridge stocked with cold drinks for firefighters in the New South Wales town of Bungendore. Image courtesy of National Museum of Australia.

I am convinced that life for museums and galleries—and indeed for all in the arts—on the other side of this crisis will not be quite the same as it was before. The act of closing the front doors of National Museum to safeguard the community was both materially and psychologically challenging to me as director, to the staff, and indeed to our visitors. After all, the fundamental logic of museums is based on the idea of serving the public and giving people the opportunity to learn about the world in which they live, to make sense of their own lives by making sense of real things, artefacts, in their collections, and to participate in programmes. I have never imagined that I would be a museum director who had to close the doors, to turn people away, and effectively deny them these opportunities.

For all that, amid the crisis, and the consequent closure of museums and galleries around the world, there has also come a sense of new possibilities. There have been welcome developments of new practices and new ways of maintaining our sense of our public mission and service. In Australia, as in many parts of the world, much of this has involved pivoting our organisations to focus on digital delivery and online engagement. I have been impressed, for instance, by how quickly we have seen new communication technologies adopted across the sector and the emergence of new modes of online delivery of programmes and presentations for our publics.

This is not to say that we have somehow given up on the great collections of artefacts that underpin our work, or the virtues of the physical museum as a social and civic space which enables active, embodied learning. In fact, at National Museum, our curators have also been busy making collections of things that document the nation's experience of COVID-19, from test kits and personal protective gear used by medical staff, to works of arts created by people during lockdown. In many cases, the contacts we made

with people through online sites like "Bridging the Distance" and "Fridge Door Fire Stories"have led to us collecting physical objects that represent their stories. Refocusing the museum's work on virtual engagement online with people across the country, and indeed around the world, has been challenging. But it has also helped our work in more traditional areas and given us a different perspective on what we do. We have proof finally that the museum as a trusted, valued civic institution no longer needs to be defined by its location and geography. Instead, it can become a site for exchange and connection, attracting new audiences far from its doors by delivering what it does best—ideas, dialogue and debate—into their homes.

Almost 30 years ago, American writer and critic Howard Rheingold coined the term 'virtual community' to describe people of common interest who connected online (Rheingold 1993). Rheingold saw these new attachments, unlimited by the old geographical sense of community and unfettered by the elaborate economic, social and political superstructures organising pre-digital industrialised societies, as offering personal benefits as well as collective goods. Having had his own doubts about the impact of these communication technologies on society, he came to see the potential for these services to augment our lives, such as by distributing power more broadly among ordinary citizens rather than having it concentrated in the hands of economic and political elites. But just as we have hurried to use these new digital tools, we have also become more ambivalent about their effects on our social lives. Dystopic visions of technologised futures find full expression in our media and popular culture. We worry about our children online, even while we spend more and more time with our own devices.

Perhaps this is just the cultural conundrum at the heart of our digital age—the feeling of being impelled inexorably forward while looking back longingly to a simpler imagined past. Yet if the coronavirus crisis has done anything, it has given us more time to think. When I look at the public response to our "Bridging the Distance" project, and other online efforts to connect people, I am struck by the thought that the digital world is actually saving our sense of community. At a time when we have endured the unseemly sight of people fighting over toilet rolls as the crisis deepened, it is the grace and kindness shown by people expressing fears and anxieties about COVID-19 online that give me some cause for comfort.

It behoves us then to try and understand what this means for our great arts institutions, and more particularly for our museums and galleries around the world. While it is too early to tell how any of this will end, I do know that I am grateful for this online connection, both professionally and personally, which has lifted to a new level as we seek to protect our communities from the coronavirus. At a time when we have been forced into physical isolation, what a wonder it is to realise we seem to be drawing closer together online, though not in a way that necessarily suggests the digital will somehow supplant the physical. Courtesy of our biology, humans are altogether social animals that draw great support from being in the company of others. Those of us who work in museums know well the delight our audiences feel in the fellowship of others in our galleries and exhibitions. But I am sure we will take the great strides we have made in re-imagining the museum online in recent months into the post-COVID-19 world, whatever that may look like.

The digital turn is not one we will roll back, however much the material world remains at the heart of what we do. The trick for all of us may be in how we re-imagine and re-energise our idea of community, and indeed our institutions, by combining the best of our physical and virtual selves. In this respect, I think museums and galleries have much to offer their societies, at the same time as they have much to learn from them. Museums are after all theatres of the real, curating collections of physical things, and a range of real, live experiences which speak to us all of the wonder of our communities and humanity at large. At the same time, the necessities of responding to the COVID-19 crisis has shown us another key role for our institutions—as online facilitators of conversations and debate that help people negotiate the way through the minefields of the present and future. It is a combination that seems eminently suited for what Klaus Schwab has called the Fourth Industrial Revolution, an age that will be dominated by artificial intelligence, autonomous vehicles and the internet of things melding with our physical experiences as humans. Schwab's argument is that these forces are radically changing human societies, as individuals, businesses and governments learn to operate in wholly new ways. Museums are well-placed to help their societies negotiate and make sense of these wrenching changes, but only if they find a way to maintain their essential distinction as places devoted to things and make the pivot to this new way of living digitally.

I remain an optimist, even in the face of the mounting challenges we face in dealing with this global crisis, while not underestimating the cost of its impact upon peoples around the world. The redeeming feature of human societies is their astonishing capacity for adaptation and dealing productively with change. Ultimately that makes me very optimistic about the future of museums. I think we have the capacity to shed some of museums' outdated organisational baggage, inherited from an earlier age, as we evolve into the institutions we need for the 21st century and beyond. My hope is that as we do so, we preserve the very best of what we have been known for—great collections of our material world—while enabling dialogue, debate and ideas as we increasingly learn to live in this digital world. I look forward to museums helping to lead their communities as they renegotiate this essential relationship between the virtual and the real. ☐

About the Author

Dr Mathew Trinca is Director of National Museum of Australia, Chair of International Council of Museums Australia and Co-Chair of Australia Singapore Arts Group. Under his leadership, National Museum of Australia has developed strongly engaged national and international programmes focusing on bringing alive the stories of Australia for local and overseas audiences. Trinca's publications include contributions to debates on museum theory and practice, the history of Australian travel to the United Kingdom, on convictism in Western Australia, and on that state's constitutional history.

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The space(s) between us: Reflections amidst a pandemic on the role of an arts centre

Yvonne Tham
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In the words of the author, "an arts centre thrives on closing distances". What then, is the role of an arts centre in the time of pandemic and social distancing, and how can it continue to engage artists and audiences? CEO of Esplanade – Theatres on the Bay Yvonne Tham discusses the centre's experience and her thoughts on the way forward.

The world before the pandemic was one of closed distances. For instance, we were planning to present the Hamburg Ballet from Germany in April 2020 and the United Kingdom National Theatre's *War Horse* in May 2020. These transnational tours for arts productions were not so surprising then. And during the "A Date With Friends" festival for seniors in early March 2020, audiences clapped to the music of their youth in our concert hall and outdoor theatre, and if they had reached out, they could even have held the hands of a stranger.

An arts centre thrives on closing distances—between people, cultures, worlds. In a darkened auditorium, our differences dim. Regardless of our backgrounds, we take on the semblance of a community. We learn, ponder, laugh and cry together. Even after the performance, we continue to possess this shared knowledge and experience.

The COVID-19 pandemic and its various phases of physical distancing therefore pose what is almost an existential challenge to Esplanade, whose vision is to be an arts centre for everyone. *Why does an arts centre exist if it cannot bring people together in its spaces? When our stages are dark, how else can an arts centre bring about a sense of community and place, to represent the needs of society? If we do not do so, who will miss all of this? Indeed, what is the measure of a national performing arts centre amidst a global pandemic that threatens lives and livelihoods?*

These questions are not entirely new. Within the first six months of Esplanade's opening in 2002, Singapore experienced SARS. Throughout that period, Esplanade had stayed open with live performances. We implemented thermal scanning, health declaration and contact tracing measures. We knew that our work in presenting the arts allowed people a means to find comfort during those trying and uncertain months.

As a result of that experience, we have always maintained, as part of our business continuity plans, a reasonable stock of thermal scanners, thermometers, personal protective equipment and "I'm Cool" stickers. But COVID-19 is a different virus in a more unpredictable world. Esplanade had to close its doors from April to June this year during the "Circuit Breaker", a phase of elevated safe distancing measures. For the first time in our 18-year history, the centre was "dark". As I write this in July 2020, under Phase 2 of Safe Re-opening, our public spaces can welcome visitors again. Most of our mall tenants are serving walk-in or dine-in customers and artists are returning to our venues for rehearsals and recording sessions, albeit with many restrictions. However, performances with live audiences are still not allowed.

Thankfully, most of my colleagues are not prone to being morose. Having to confront these questions have helped us challenge, clarify and chart the role of an arts centre for futures that, we now acknowledge, have always been uncertain.

A space for community

Upon learning of a possible closure of cultural venues in late March 2020, we quickly started to devise new ways of recording the works already in progress. This process was not unilateral. It was, as I observed of my colleagues working with artists, one of a community deciding what was best for the well-being of its immediate members, for the integrity of the work, and for the benefit of its extended members, the audience.

Esplanade had actually started on a journey to imagine and create a digital performing arts centre in late 2017. Then, we were all bemoaning the amount of time people, especially the young, are spending on their mobile devices. But we decided it was more productive to work with, and not against, this tide.

One of the first things we did then was to digitise our archival recordings. We also systematically invested in quality recordings of selected performances, in particular our commissions and new works by Singapore and regional artists. We then relooked into our online and social media platforms, and started creating meaningful articles, behind-the-scenes videos, education kits for schools and families, and other companion content to better engage our communities. We had two aims. One was to reach someone who had yet to step into Esplanade or to experience the arts, by delivering interesting arts content to their mobile devices. The other was to provide information and tools for people to get the most out of their visit or performance experience. In October 2019, just months before COVID-19, we launched "Esplanade Offstage", a site where people can access a rich array of content about the performing arts in Singapore and Asia. We are currently looking to enhance the level of interactivity and engagement on "Esplanade Offstage".

The internet, however, is not short of content. So what do the arts and artists bring to the digital or virtual space that is unique, and vice versa? And how does it relate to our role as an arts centre? In answering these questions, we were guided by these three key aspects of the arts.

Figure 1. Recordings of previous Mother's Day concerts were released online, reaching more than 70,000 viewers in the first week. Image courtesy of The Esplanade - Theatres by the Bay.

Figure 2. Studio recordings from The Esplanade's archive such as the performance of *Dark Room* by Edith Podesta were made accessible on the Internet as part of "The Studios Online". Photo by Crispian Chan. Image courtesy of The Esplanade - Theatres by the Bay.

The first is *access*. In May 2020, we released two archival videos of Esplanade's free Mother's Day concerts featuring songs from the 1950s-70s (Figure 1). These concerts were held every year for the public and beneficiaries of senior activity centres and homes were invited. With seniors being at a higher risk of contracting the virus, we shared these videos with our social sector partners for those in senior care facilities to enjoy amidst Circuit Breaker. Each year, these concerts reach over 3,000 people. In comparison, the videos drew more than 70,000 unique views in the first week.

While we are now looking to continue sharing online music concerts with seniors beyond the situation of COVID-19, we are also aware that digital access is not universal. This experience has also challenged our ideas of how else we can bring the arts meaningfully to people who, post-COVID, may still not be able to leave their homes or care facilities. We are exploring the possibility of a music truck with artists going out to seniors in care facilities around Singapore.

The second aspect is *critical reflection*. I deeply appreciate the level of critical thinking artists bring to our relationship with technology, even as arts centres have had to quickly embrace it. In this period of a global healthcare and economic crisis, performing artists have used technology to make and share powerful statements expressing society's loss and fears. I do not doubt that performing artists, post-COVID, will continue to use technology in critical ways to develop their practice, reflect upon our human condition, or solve practical problems of production. I am reminded that the right use of technology can help the arts possibly reduce its carbon footprint, creating alternative approaches to sets, performance or even collaborations and tours.

The third is *community*. From April to July 2020, Esplanade curated an online season of Singapore theatre works, called "The Studios Online", that were previously presented in our blackbox space, or could not play to a live audience because of the Circuit Breaker (Figures 2 and 3). Some of these plays were selected because they related to our human experiences of loss, grief and memory.

Figure 3. The new multi-disciplinary production *Lost Cinema 20/20* was commissioned by The Esplanade and streamed in the online theatre season. Photo by Crispian Chan. Image courtesy of The Esplanade - Theatres by the Bay.

Each production was accompanied by articles, past interviews as well as live chat sessions with the artists. It gathered a community of theatre practitioners, theatre lovers, students and even those new to theatre. I believe these stories and conversations allowed both artists and audiences to process the loss of jobs, mobility, interaction with loved ones, or even lives to COVID-19, not alone, but as a community.

Whether as a physical space or online, these three aspects of the arts continue to frame how we think about our work. And while we have yet to fully understand how virtual communities differ, I know that we can never replace seeing, touching, smelling and simply being beside the body of another, or absorbing the sights, smells, sounds and electricity of a place.

A space for new norms

At "da:ns lab", an Esplanade programme produced by Singapore's Dance Nucleus, artist Alecia Neo shared that she had first encountered the phrase "New Normal" in a caregivers' support group. How apt. The pandemic is traumatic and leaves a legacy that requires long-term care and new forms of support.

Esplanade regularly supports the making of new artistic work. But beyond this, as a public space, we must also constantly look to setting new—and positive—norms of both social behaviour and industry practice.

Firstly, one example of a possible new norm in public facilities is the practice of staggered timings and booking ahead to avoid over-crowding. It requires us to respect our given time in a space. When performing venues re-open, it will call on individuals to be responsible, to abide by these new practices. Another example could be that to prevent queues from forming during intermission, audiences may be allowed to leave the auditorium at any point to use the restrooms. In many relaxed and family-friendly performances, this is already the practice. However, there will always be patrons who will be unhappy with the movement or noise

during a performance. If this is to be a new norm, perhaps we would become more accepting of this for a social good.

Secondly, the proliferation of digital content in this period has raised new questions about intellectual property and fair use or payment for an artist's creative output. In the same way, many observers have pointed out that it is not sustainable in the long term that artistic content is available for free. The music industry addressed this issue years ago with paid music downloads and, until COVID-19, had enjoyed renewed income via live shows.

In May 2020, Esplanade experimented with ticketing three online presentations of past productions featuring Singapore artists, with the option given to audiences whether they would pay and how much. Only 10 per cent of audiences opted to do so. Half of the audiences were new to the artist or even to Esplanade, and understandably, more reluctant to commit financially. While modest, the ticket proceeds were appreciated by all the artists involved. It was our first attempt. Two months later, Esplanade and the wider creative community were more aware of the need to create a paying culture for online experiences. Learning from the online broadcasts of sporting events, ticketing companies like SISTIC are also developing more interesting options for artists and presenters to create private online viewing rooms, simultaneous chat functions, and multiple camera views. When appropriately applied, these platforms could create new possibilities distinct from the live experience, and perhaps, better attract a paying online audience.

Thirdly, the pandemic has surfaced social inequalities around the world. In Singapore, how we relate to foreign workers in our midst has come to the fore. Issues of mental health, long swept under the carpet, have also taken on new urgency under the strain of the pandemic. While Esplanade has always considered accessibility and inclusion as our cornerstone, we must always do more and better to include diverse voices, talents and needs.

On the international front, with most borders remaining closed, many arts centres and artists have taken to the online platform to connect and collaborate. Again, while this can never replace the experience of a physical meeting, it does point to the fact that we can, and should, find more sustainable ways to share our work.

Last but certainly not least, digital and broadcasting knowledge and skillsets are now a new norm for organisations. These are no longer unique to the marketing or the technology teams, but fundamental to everyone working at an arts centre. This underlies the need to constantly learn and make connections between disciplines as we seek new solutions. During this period, my colleagues have also given online classes exposing people across the organisation to stage rigging, lighting design, sound systems and various technical aspects of production, as well as practices in programming for and welcoming people who are elderly, on the autism spectrum, or visually impaired. I am most encouraged by this new open-ness to learning across disciplines. It feeds our human curiosity and creativity. Both these qualities are necessary if individuals and organisations want to survive in a world where global emergencies can quickly escalate to shut down entire economies and public life. Even though financial sustainability has always been a challenge for arts organisations, COVID-19 will further test those who do not accept or actively shape their own New Normal realities.

A safe space

I want to conclude with the idea of space of safety. I started this reflection with the importance of closing distances. Paradoxically, in a COVID-19 environment, the words "safe" and "distancing" have become synonymous even so.

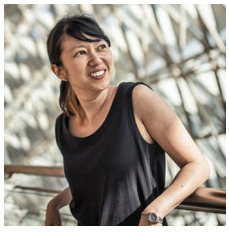
For Esplanade, the physical safety of our public, artists, crew, contractors and staff have always been foremost. Even before COVID-19, at the start of any workday in our venues, there is a compulsory toolbox briefing for everyone that underscores health and safety practices. Today, these toolbox briefings include reminders about hygiene, mask-wearing and keeping safe distances. Equipment as well as surfaces in our public spaces are constantly undergoing disinfection. The number of artists allowed in each of our dressing rooms is restricted. Around Esplanade today, you will find sanitiser dispensers, stickers on the floor about safe distancing, and one-metre distance markers. This is over and above the thermal scanning and safe-entry registration at entrances.

Beyond physical safety, the pandemic has also reminded us of the critical need for individuals to feel psychologically safe. This is the role of institutions, and cultural institutions provide a safe space for the values, traditions, conversations, and resources that are deemed critical for society to continue into the future. A performing arts centre like Esplanade is no different.

When we were allowed to have rehearsals and recordings in our venues in July 2020, we started to do so for this one reason: to create a sense of continuity for artists. With it comes the assurance of some income, however limited; the assurance that the arts matter to society, even or especially in a time of crisis; and the assurance that they can practise their art in a physically safe environment. In the same way, our responsibility is to ensure we are ready at any time with the safe environment for live audiences to return. With it comes the assurance to people of some relief, comfort and inspiration through the arts; the assurance that the arts matter to personal well-being; and the assurance that they can safely connect with the artist and feel that sense of community again in a public space.

The space between us speaks of safety. There are times it stands in for psychological safety, and with COVID-19, it is necessary for health or physical safety. The space between us also speaks of our differences. We can celebrate the rich diversity of individual viewpoints and cultures, even if they may at times give birth to divisive energies. I maintain that our desire and efforts as an arts centre are always to close these distances, if not entirely achievable now, then in the future. ☐

About the Author



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A strategic approach for museums to the post-COVID-19 world

Ye Yipei
Data Manager, The Palace Museum, China

Drawing from the experience of The Palace Museum and other museums in China during the lockdown, Ye Yipei explores the future of culture in the digital realm such as the possibility of and opportunities offered by a unified national portal for disparate digitised cultural collections, and potential income streams. Her essay also shares her thoughts on the need for physical museums to evolve and adapt to the post-COVID-19 future.

The moment came when cities were on lockdown and people were forced into self-isolation at home to avoid crowds. The epidemic caused by the coronavirus had brought about a significant deviation from the norms of everyday life. A variety of epidemic control measures such as self-quarantine, self-isolation and above all, social distancing, are currently in practice and will probably last for an unpredictable period. Given that this is probably "the worst global recession since Great Depression" (Gopinath 2020), it is hard to forecast precisely what negative consequences it may have on domestic politics, international relations, and the ideology and personal dispositions of everyone affected. Hence, the museum as a public space should take a strategic approach to address the potential deviation from established pre-pandemic norms.

Museums, galleries, and cultural heritage institutions provide an important cultural service as they preserve and interpret information grounded on material evidence including immovable and moveable cultural relics. The space and tangible collections are crucial in constructing an immersive experience for visitors, especially for museums of archaeological excavation sites. Dr John H. Falk, a leading researcher on museums and human-environment interaction, posited that museum-going is first and foremost a leisure experience (Falk and Dierking 2013, 39–41). When the pandemic disrupted leisure activities, we should consider what kind of cultural services museums can provide beyond in-person leisure experiences.

Just as the pandemic accelerated the race by businesses to adopt e-commerce, it catalysed an unprecedented expansion into digital space by museums in China after the shutdown. Social media and external-facing portions of museums' websites took centre place during the closure period. The Palace Museum's website saw a 114.9 per cent year-over-year growth on page views in the first season. The accumulation of digital assets by museums over the years finally came into use. The museums released more collection information online and hosted panoramic and virtual exhibitions on their websites and apps.

Take The Palace Museum as an example. We released panoramic virtual galleries and previous exhibitions on The Palace Museum Exhibition app (Figure 1), and 229 items in 3D models on our website (Figure 2). During the closure, The Palace Museum conducted its first live streaming on over 20 live streaming platforms on 5 and 6 April (Figure 3). Audiences enjoyed a quiet virtual Forbidden City bathed in spring light, accompanied by curators' talks. Cross-platform video views amounted to around 190 billion as of 6 April, 1730 hours.

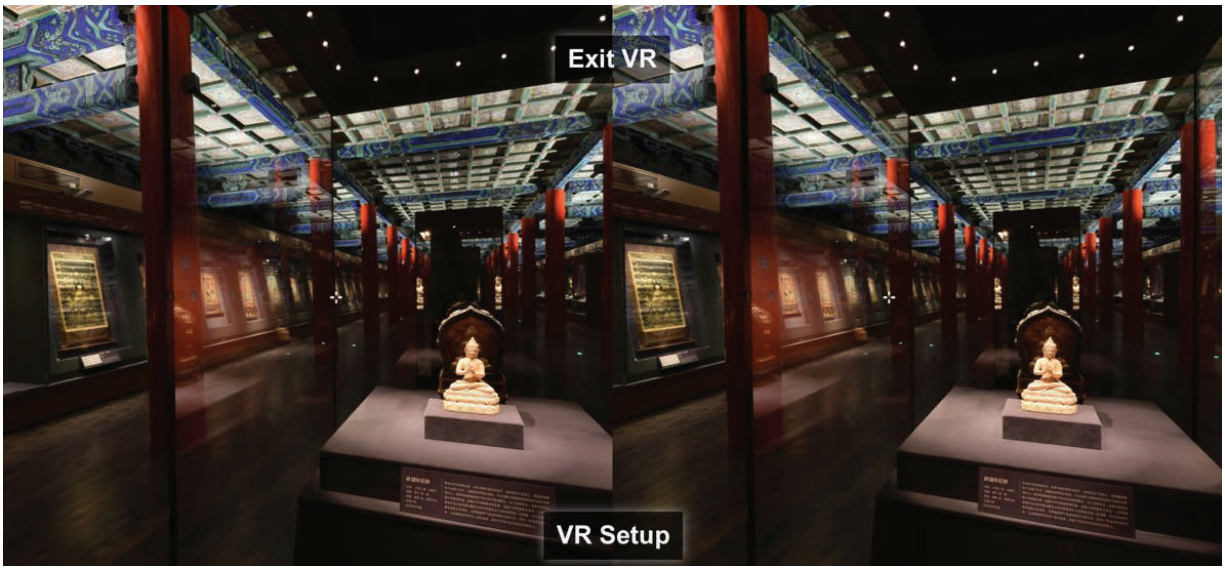

Figure 1. Panoramic virtual exhibition (VR mode) of the Fortune and Longevity of Sumeru on the museum's app. Image courtesy of The Palace Museum.

Figure 2. A 3D model of a painted enamel jar with longevity designs produced during the reign of Emperor Yongzheng (1723-1735), displayed on The Palace Museum's website. Image courtesy of The Palace Museum.

Figure 3. Poster for The Palace Museum's first live streaming. Image courtesy of The Palace Museum.

The content online became a vital means for museums to connect with audiences. Technological innovations made it possible for museums without concrete form to remain active online. In China, this gave rise to the collective term, "Museum in the Cloud" (云博物馆) , for the various efforts of museums to go online, the word "cloud" a reference to the technological infrastructure enabling the hosting and accessibility of such large sets of data. The term makes reference to both museums having their data stored offsite, backed up to public-cloud-based servers besides local backup; and museums making attempts to replicate online as close as possible the experience of visiting in person. For instance, many museums including The Palace Museum offer panoramic exhibitions and virtual-reality exhibitions. An iPhone (VR-capable) and a handmade cardboard VR headset are an audience's full gears to enjoy an immersive museum-visiting experience. During this period, museums also see the significance of the behind-the-scenes data that supports these initiatives mentioned above, because data can be repurposed and presented in ways to help the public see museums and their collections without having to visit in person. These efforts made it possible for the populace to enrich their inner and cultural lives in an unprecedented way during the pandemic.

Taking the idea of "Museum in the Cloud" further

Over decades, museums have been dedicated to collection digitalisation in various ways including digital scans, photographic identification, creating 3D models for historical and archaeological sites etc. mainly for academic research and data

preservation purposes. To make their collections available to everyone in the world, some museums have launched online collection catalogues with high-resolution images and metadata based on their internal collection management system. The collections then become accessible to any individuals or groups.

Considering digital infrastructure as one of the most significant capacities of a modern nation, China launched a plan for systematic construction of big data capabilities in the cultural sector in May 2020. The national project aims to propel China's deeper integration culturally and technologically. Data from museums plays an indispensable role in the plan. By reviewing existing data fields and considering the addition of more fields, the nation has plans to establish core data standards ready to link to any database. It is a practical approach to facilitate the integration, mediation and interchange of heterogeneous information from museums and cultural institutions, therefore transforming disparate, localised information sources into a coherent national and even global resource on the internet. Moreover, the approach will make it possible to massively describe iconographic elements depicted on works of art, create tags, enhance semantic richness of the collection, and facilitate collaborative knowledge creation and management with the power of crowdsourcing. It is an efficient way of advancing a culturally and socially sustainable development for museums.

The idea of "Museum in the Cloud" is so much more than presenting virtual reality exhibitions online. With the national project as described, the current state of multiple disparate websites and virtual efforts will eventually be replaced with a unified cultural portal. With data standards and structured data, this unified portal is ready to offer integrated access to various museums and institutions' databases in spite of physical segmentation, providing comprehensive information with the help of semantic search. Historians and digital humanity researchers are welcomed to conduct research based on museums' collection and put forward different views, integrate collections' metadata from different museums and construct databases for cross-discipline research and application. For instance, researchers are able to fetch data from various museums' online collection management systems via integrated application programming interfaces, exploring quantitative visual and statistical approaches to a specific hypothesis by data abstraction, manual and automatic modelling, exploratory analysis and finally representation (El-Assady et al. 2016). As for the amateur enthusiasts and audiences whose interest may extend beyond a single institution's collection or a specific category, a unified portal will allow them to access the cultural resources and databases of diverse museums.

Nonetheless, despite all the advantages, such extensive digitalisation efforts are considered controversial by some conservatives over concerns regarding the museums' income. If audiences can enjoy all cultural services that a museum can possibly provide online, why should they visit in person? Decline in visitorship will result in a drastic loss of income for museums, as was shown during the coronavirus outbreak. Furthermore, providing open access to museums' images will put an end to benefiting from licensing quality images. Yet, if an image is a rendering of an artefact accessible in the public domain, produced by scanning as faithfully as possible, it is questionable if a licensing fee should be charged since it is merely a visual reproduction.

It is time that museums explore other means to generate revenue seeing that the trend in open digital access to museum collections is inevitable. A trend that museums may study for precedence

is user willingness to pay for digital access. For example, digital extended play records (EPs) on online music platforms in mainland China are making a profit, and video website iQiyi posted 52 per cent revenue growth in 2018, reaching 10 billion yuan in membership income. More and more examples of profitable businesses based on digital content show that people are willing to pay for quality content and knowledge. This potentially harks well for museums.

The irreplaceability of physical museums

As for the physical museums, the question remains: what is a physical museum's core attractiveness? What is it that tempts visitors to walk through the gate of a museum repeatedly and be willing to pay for admission? What is that which is irreplaceable by online cultural services?

Firstly, an original piece of art or artefact will never lose its appeal. As Jennifer Hansen-Glucklich wrote in her book *Holocaust Memory Reframed Museums and the Challenges of Representation:*

> Artifacts possess an aura of authenticity as traces of a lost time and place. Because they appear to be unmediated remnants of an authentic past, they possess an almost mystical power to bridge time and space and to act as witnesses (Hansen-Glucklich 2014, 81).

For youngsters, the museum is the best complement to aesthetic education, as it fosters their sensorial abilities and provides an approach to art appreciation. A place like the museum with a combination of architecture, artefacts, and art, could not be a better place for this purpose. Considering that visiting museums is an inevitable educational investment, people will find museums' collections always appealing and they will be willing to pay for admission. Any digitised or animated works by the museum may enhance the experience but can never replace the in-person visit.

Secondly, facilities such as the museum café, shop, guided tours etc. are leisure attachments to the museum visiting experience. A distinct as well as sensory service in a culture-laden environment could amplify the pleasures, such as cafes designed to complementarily integrate with visitors' unified aesthetic desire in a museum or gallery experience (McIntyre 2011). According to Leaf Van Boven, Assistant Professor of Psychology at University of Colorado Boulder, experiences are shown to create more happiness than material goods because they provide positive personal reinterpretations over time (*Science Daily* 2004). People are also shown to be willing to spend money on experiences rather than material purchases, as "the memory of an experience persists over a long period of time, whereas the perceived value of a possession can weaken" (*Inquirer.Net* 2020).

Thirdly, museums can be actively engaged in addressing social concerns and be a central and visible player in civic life. The museum is an active community centre for discussing ideas and exchanging opinions. Nowadays, museums are playing an increasingly active role in holding activities for local citizens, such as art workshops, book signings, lectures on art and history, and courses for various groups of audiences. By being actively involved in urban culture, museums are viewed as a link between culture and local development. They can encourage local economic development by supporting creative activities and benefitting local enterprises and entrepreneurs.

For museums that are mainly funded by central or local government funds, it is essential that they show their importance to local economic and social development. During the pandemic, we have seen some museums in China closing down due to financial troubles. When there are so many businesses and companies appealing for government financial assistance, museums and the cultural sector appear to be ranked relatively lower. It is therefore critical that museums show their contribution to local development, such as in job creation, tourism and social inclusion, so as to earn their eligibility for financial support.

During the coronavirus outbreak, the world underwent many unprecedented changes. Some of these changes may revert to pre-pandemic status, while other changes will be irreversible, such as the trend in digitalisation. The pandemic is a painful reminder of the phrase "survival of the fittest". The question is, do museums have the courage and preparation to go forward with time? ☐

About the Author

Ye Yipei is Data Manager at The Palace Museum. Her experience includes building digital galleries, curating digital exhibitions, and creating online content and mini digital exhibitions for smartphone apps. She is in charge of the museum's project to build a semantic network for ancient Chinese artefacts, which potentially can facilitate the development of computer-based lexicons, particularly within the field of artificial intelligence.

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Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden in the time of COVID-19

Professor Dr Marion Ackermann
Director General, Dresden State Art Collections (SKD), Germany

During and after lockdown, the internationally renowned Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden found ways to turn the crisis into opportunities, such as experimenting with working models, driving digitalisation efforts, finding new means of audience engagement, rethinking exhibitions and events with significant tactile and participatory elements, and reflecting on the ways forward for cultural institutions.

This year has been an emotional roller-coaster for us at Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden (SKD): On 28 and 29 January 2020, after seven years of extensive refurbishment works on the Semperbau section of the Zwinger[1], we opened the world famous Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister (Old Masters Picture Gallery) and Skulpturensammlung (Sculpture Collection), with an impressive, re-imagined design. Following this prolonged period of restoration, the masterpieces had only been accessible to our visitors for two weeks when we were forced to close our 15 museums in mid-March due to the coronavirus pandemic. In the German federal system, this step had to be taken in accordance with the regulations issued by the Saxon State Ministry of Cultural Affairs and Tourism and the health authorities to slow the spread of the virus and protect our visitors. After many long weeks, we started to reopen gradually, museum by museum, on 4 May 2020. The challenge now is to re-evaluate the post-reopening situation in these volatile times. As Germany's second-largest network of museums after Berlin, what did we learn during this time, which measures did we take, and what is our outlook for the future?

Ensuring safety for all

Where the German language has just one word *Sicherheit*, English is more nuanced, distinguishing between "safety" and "security", both of which were foremost in our thoughts throughout this period: How do we protect our collections? How do we protect our visitors and staff? SKD were closed to visitors from 14 March until 4 May 2020. Our first step, as soon as lockdown was imposed, was to allow our staff of almost 420 to work from home, equipping them with the required technology where our capacities permitted. During these weeks, our priorities were immanent crisis management, realigning responsibilities with the new requirements and adapting safety and security protocols. We communicated with personnel via staff e-mail and updates. We introduced new software tools for collaboration (e.g., Microsoft Teams) and communication (e.g., DFNconf, Skype or Zoom). As a public-sector company in Germany, this represented a major paradigm shift, which we consider a great opportunity.

As it soon became clear that the lockdown orders would remain in place beyond 19 April 2020—the date initially predicted for the easing of restrictions—loans and returns were largely stopped, the durations of existing exhibitions were adapted, and business travel was put on hold until further notice. Even at the point of writing, we only approve business trips in exceptional circumstances.

Our main goal then was to develop a comprehensive hygiene concept for the period during and after lockdown. This focused in particular on our staff who worked on-site, in the

museums or offices, throughout these months. We are fully aware of our privileged position of not having to impose part-time work on any of our employees, or fire anyone.

We quickly learned what is involved in shutting down such an extensive complex of ongoing museum operations and starting it up again a short time later. The museums were reopened one-by-one in accordance with the development of the pandemic. This flexible reaction to the pandemic was also reflected in changing opening hours, in part due to the immense security costs for every institution opened. From these initial openings, we applied the lessons learned to our visitor management: we tried to estimate how many visitors would come the next day, and wondered whether they would follow the new rules. Security also played a role: How quickly would our external service provider be fully operational again? They had been forced into introducing part-time work for some of their employees and had to redeploy others elsewhere during the closures. We also had to pick up work where we had left off, resume planning and meet deadlines for exhibition preparations, projects and catalogue printing. Our exhibition planning for the following three years needed a complete overhaul.

The hygiene protocol comprises mandatory face masks, ensuring safe distancing between visitors and staff, enhanced hygiene measures like regular disinfection and plastic barriers, prescribed one-way routes in museums, online registration and limiting the number of visitors in a given museum at the same time—the figure prescribed by Free State of Saxony is one visitor per 20 m^2. The flyers and catalogues on display have been removed, audio guides are currently unavailable, guided tours have to be booked in advance, visitors are encouraged to buy tickets cash-free, and the only cloakroom facilities on offer are lockers.

Confronting new challenges

The SKD experience ranges from access restrictions with a security interlock, to rethinking exhibitions with significant tactile, haptic and participatory elements, like our successful 'Children's Biennale' which is held in cooperation with the National Gallery Singapore. What educational and didactic formats, or even exhibition formats, will we be able to use in the future? Will a local exhibition involve creating digital spaces? How can we educate groups of visitors without endangering them? This shows the precarious situation of this key aspect of museums—art education. Such work usually entails a high level of contact with our visitors and among staff, and it is desirable that art education should continue its work with the same value added in the future. This area must now reinvent itself for the digital age, which may also give it a positive impetus.

During the period, we were also in constant communication with our external partners and our main sponsors, cooperation partners, and lenders in particular, keeping them abreast of our security measures and changes. That was especially important for us, as we must continue to highlight the relevance of culture and our museums in the future to ensure that we do not lose public and private funding. In all of this, we needed to remain in especially close contact with local authorities and ministries to plan the reopening process. Our aim was to implement the complex, rapidly changing regulations in our internal organisational structure.

The direct consequences of the coronavirus pandemic on the cultural landscape are clear and obvious: the future of independent sponsors is full of uncertainty, which is why we are trying our best

to support artists and creatives. These concerns are evident, especially in the local environment; many artists earn their living by transporting artworks or installing exhibitions, activities that are now greatly reduced, while any long-planned stays abroad and scholarships cannot be undertaken, blocking their development. Of course, we are also doing everything we can to foster the creation of art, but our resources are limited—the SKD is a large museum network with collections ranging from ancient times to the present. We must try to meet the needs of all creatives equally. That said, we forwarded information on government emergency relief measures, reassigned education and didactics employees to other projects where possible, and began conceiving new online formats.

How will the way we exhibit and experience art change? We suffered seven-digit losses in revenue due to the protracted closures and gradual re-opening. Dresden is a city that thrives on tourism: visitors used to flock from Eastern Europe and Russia to see the Sistine Madonna in Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister and admire the restored "Florence on the River Elbe" with its royal palace that houses unique collections like the Grünes Gewölbe state treasury, the 500-year-old Münzkabinett, and the Royal State Apartments reconstructed in 2019. German and international tourists come in particular to see masterpieces from the Romanticism period and the former German Democratic Republic to artists such as Gerhard Richter and Rodin at the Albertinum. According to forecasts, these tourists will remain conspicuous by their absence for some more time. Due to the associated sharp decline in our visitor figures, we have had to draw up new business plans and fundamentally rethink our approach. Now, more than ever, we will have to appeal to our local public, including new visitor groups and expectations. The tighter budget also means fewer blockbuster exhibitions. The result will be a lower number of temporary exhibitions, which will have to be planned together with our local network and entail increased cooperation with regional institutions.

However, in spite of this focus on our local audience from Saxony and Germany, we will not be abandoning our international orientation. Museums must not become provincial; they must uphold the cosmopolitan spirit against any and all nationalist and racist tendencies. We have to consolidate joint projects and reinforce bridges to other nations. The closed borders and travel restrictions, reductions in international tourism as well as a potential decline in lending of artefacts, and business travel, which is incidentally in line with our desire for greater sustainability, inspire us to coordinate and communicate even more intensely. In this context, we are currently enjoying the generous spirit and empathy in the museum environment, as reflected in special consideration for plans and lending transactions.

Turning the crisis into opportunity

For all its darkness, this crisis has rays of hope too. During this time, we are increasingly looking inwards, without the hustle and bustle of international operations. We can turn the crisis into an opportunity by concentrating on the qualities available locally, in our own rich collections. While we have reduced our programmes, postponed or even cancelled exhibition openings and meticulously planned events, the present deceleration satisfies our yearning to break out from the rat race. Business as usual, with its countless long-distance trips and the overflowing programmes of art and culture came to an abrupt, enforced stop. This has given our researchers time to focus even more on their projects, something they have always wanted but

may have been denied for organisational and bureaucratic reasons. Meetings are now more efficient and, paradoxically, more intimate than ever, in spite of and perhaps due to the virtual format. We experienced this both at digital meetings and international virtual conferences, where we felt great solidarity in the museum environment. In this new era, fluid, fast and effective new forms of external and internal communication are required to overcome the lethargy of traditional, rigid structures and develop an atmosphere of creativity, trust and humour to be able to respond quickly.

At the same time, we reflected in-depth internally on our approach as an institution, honing our strategic aims, experimenting with new working models and taking a step towards greater sustainability. For a long time, working from home and instituting dynamic working hours were out of the question in German public-sector institutions, especially with taking into consideration factors such as the question of the right formats, work-life balance and employees who cannot work from home. Overall, we used the pandemic as a time to focus on the basics and view digitalisation as an opportunity to implement working from home. It is also giving a long sought-after boost to a new level of environmental sustainability.

Like so many museums worldwide, we have shifted our presence online and expanded our digital content. We will continue to do so in the future. Besides existing offers like the panorama tours and our website, we developed new online formats. Live "Art for Lunch" video walks with our curators, exhibition openings like our major anniversary exhibition "300 years of the Kupferstich-Kabinett" and interesting contents of our education and didactics departments (e.g. formats like *kunst@ home* for children during the lockdown) were made available on the internet. As a rapid response to the new masked encounters in everyday life, we created the multi-collection online exhibition #wemask based on a suggestion by the Kunstgewerbemuseum. Through an animated tutorial, we launched a campaign to make and donate face masks, and combined it with a brief cultural history of masks in our collections, like those in the Sculpture Collection or our Ethnographic Collections. In addition, professional protective equipment was donated to auxiliary facilities such as hospitals and care centres as part of our efforts to help alleviate the current situation. We also brought some light-hearted humour to the difficult situation with our Meme Creator software, which turns the works in our collections into memes.

The "Here and Now" exhibition, planned and implemented at short notice, was a special initiative. In cooperation with Dresden Academy of Fine Arts, it showcased works by up-and-coming artists in a digital outdoor exhibition on steles in Dresden's old town. During the lockdown, with its restrictions on going out and socialising, and museum and gallery closures, this offered a platform to young art students, whose very existence is under threat as a result of the pandemic.

Non-digital formats also offer a way to show solidarity. Our staff sent postcards with imagery from our collections to communities, in particular to those most affected by the crisis, (i.e. people isolated in nursing homes) as if to say: If you can't come to the art, the art will come to you.

However, we must also take a critical look at this extraordinary new situation. The director of the Kunstgewerbemuseum, Thomas Geisler, has dedicated an exhibition to the role of fake news and data visualisation in the current information crisis, how design and access to knowledge interact, and which new approaches are needed. We feel that people have new questions as a result

of these existential changes, and we are responding with new narratives. At the same time, we want museums to be a refuge where visitors can indulge in the immanent beauty of the artworks.

The fundamental tectonic shifts in digitalisation also raise new questions. We envision ourselves as an institution that is as transparent and accessible as possible, a hub of public life in the heart of society. But how can we bridge the gap between free online content, our aspiration to meet our audience's expectations and our financial resources? The future of museums is about people, not numbers, yet, financially it is also a question of our existence as an ongoing concern. How can we operate profitably as a museum, and also support artists cooperating with us? Hybrid solutions are one possible response, for example, using digital satellites as a teaser, with online mirrors of our exhibitions encouraging visitors to come to the museum. Monetising efforts such as exclusive paid content. e.g. podcasts or guided tours available for exclusive groups should be the last resort.

Conclusion

There is one final thought that I find extremely important. Even in this financially difficult situation, museums must not stop collecting. If we stop now, the gaps we leave cannot be filled by future generations. This applies not just to existing art, but also art that reacts to the here and now in 2020. Great art has always been born in hard times, which are often periods of intense artistic production, and this pandemic is one such event.

This crisis shows how important culture is to society and individuals. Conversely, artists need the public. Again and again, we see that culture is of systemic importance.

There are still many questions arising from the pandemic that we must confront. For example, if people cannot travel again to the same extent as before COVID-19, and if museums remain subject to restrictions, artworks can still build bridges. What will be the future of art loans, in terms of courier safety, sustainability or resource efficiency? Which new, smart, digital solutions will prevail?

Finally, much as virtual formats have made significant headway during the pandemic, the physical museum and its collection remain highly relevant in our society. Digitalisation may have made artworks and artefacts in closed museums accessible worldwide. Yet, as lockdowns ease, we are also experiencing the importance of materiality and direct presence of collections. Ultimately, the sensory experience and aura of the original artworks prove to be irreplaceable. ☐

About the Author

Professor Dr. Marion Ackermann has been Director General of Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden since November 2016. Prior to that, she held various positions in other cultural institutions, including Städtische Galerie im Lenbachhaus, Munich (1995-2003), Kunstmuseum Stuttgart (Director, 2003-2009) and Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen in Düsseldorf (Director, 2009-2016). Alongside curating iconic exhibitions such as *Joseph Beuys: Parallelprozesse, Kandinsky Malevich Mondrian – The Infinite White Abyss and Uecker*, she has also set up numerous projects with young and emerging artists. She is also the vice-chair of Bizot Group, a forum that brings together directors of the world's largest museums to exchange ideas and news.

Notes:

1. The renowned historical ensemble called Zwinger, once the forecourt of the new palace built by King of Poland Augustus II the Strong (1670-1733), is now home to three museums of the Dresden State Art Collections: the Porcelain Collection, the Mathematical-Physical Salon and the Old Masters Picture Gallery as well as the Sculpture Collections.

Cultural opportunities for liveable neighbourhoods

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In the wake of the pandemic, decentralised, accessible platforms for arts and culture located in suburban neighbourhoods continue to provide residents with opportunities to build shared memories, cultural experiences, a sense of place, as well as strengthen social resilience. The authors in this essay explore the various modes in which such localised spaces may be imagined and executed.

Cultural spaces in everyday life

Performing arts venues and museums have traditionally been concentrated in the downtowns of cities; take, for example, Museum Mile in London and Civic District in Singapore. Housed in iconic buildings or national monuments, these cultural spaces are usually open for public access. Visitors may enjoy a historical and cultural learning experience and locals may feel a sense of pride in their respective cultures. Such cultural spaces provide a safe platform for building shared memories and contribute towards a high quality of life.

The pandemic, however, has highlighted the shortcomings of cultural hotspots. During COVID-19 lockdowns in many cities around the world, access to downtowns was restricted and cultural venues were closed. In the meantime, engaging with culture via other means continued to uplift spirits and facilitate community connections. Even though people had to stay home, cultural activities such as museum tours, heritage site visits, and musicals were available online. Expressions of culture, such as community singing across apartment blocks, or choirs on virtual platforms formed by a diversity of individuals singing inspirational songs, encouraged people to stay resilient. In Singapore, a solitary cellist's ad-hoc performance from the balcony of the Shangri-La Rasa Sentosa Resort & Spa enthralled other guests who were also serving Stay-Home Notices[1]. Musician Dick Lee's live concert via virtual platforms allowed viewers to share in his life story and garnered some 22,000 views from around the world. Culture thus continued to manifest in our everyday lives.

More pertinently, localised cultural experiences continued despite lockdowns as residents worldwide were still able to access everyday spaces such as their immediate neighbourhoods for purposes such as obtaining everyday supplies. In some cities, these quick outings allowed for brushes with culture in public spaces; for example, the sculpture in the neighbourhood square, the painted mural on the side wall of the corner building or the plaque marking a heritage building. These small local touches remind communities of the cultural uniqueness of their neighbourhoods, making culture easily accessible, and instilling a sense of place and belonging.

Post COVID-19, there are new opportunities to re-imagine our neighbourhoods as vibrant places where we can engage even more with culture in our everyday lives. Developing easier access to cultural spaces improves liveability in neighbourhoods and helps communities to face any future crisis with greater solidarity and resilience. Drawing from examples both in other cities and within Singapore, as well as principles from the Singapore Liveability Framework, this article explores possibilities for expanding and enhancing cultural spaces in Singapore's post COVID-19 neighbourhoods.

Decentralising cultural facilities

Singapore's 1991 Culture Plan, a layer of the then Concept Plan[2], projected for the decentralisation of arts and cultural venues into the heartlands. This would allow for greater access to cultural facilities, alleviate crowding in the city centre and strengthen the cultural character of neighbourhoods.

On a regional level, public libraries in particular are well distributed to serve townships, and are found co-located in shopping centres and integrated with transit nodes. Community regional hubs such as Our Tampines Hub house performing facilities, practice studios, a public library and a community gallery. At a local level, there are smaller performing venues integrated with community centres, for example the Necessary Stage at Marine Parade Community Building located in a neighbourhood in eastern Singapore. National Arts Council's Arts Housing Scheme provides spaces outside the city area in places like Telok Kurau Artists Village and Wisma Geylang Serai for artists to practise or create.

Figure 1. The Whitechapel Gallery (top) and the Victoria and Albert Museum of Childhood in London (bottom) are cultural spaces located in the city's neighbourhoods. Images courtesy of Herry Lawford (top) and BasPhoto/shutterstock.com (bottom).

Locating cultural facilities in neighbourhood centres

Building on existing efforts, more can be done to locate cultural facilities within integrated developments at the neighbourhood level. Facilities such as private museums, artist studios, music schools and performing spaces can be located in community centres or in the commercial neighbourhood centres of our heartland towns.

In London, Whitechapel Gallery is a public art gallery that organises shows that are of interest to the local community in the borough of Tower Hamlets (Figure 1). The privately funded Saatchi Gallery in Sloane Square opens a private collection for public access. Victoria and Albert Museum of Childhood is a deliberate insertion into the less well-off Bethnal Green neighbourhood, and serves as an icon of community pride (Figure 1).

Sharing of cultural amenities by educational institutions

Educational institutions, many of which are located in suburban neighbourhoods, are another resource to enable access to culture in everyday spaces. Institutes of higher learning and schools can open their cultural facilities to community groups. For instance, Republic Cultural Centre of Republic Polytechnic in Woodlands town, located in the northern region of Singapore, is accessible to the public. It is a focal point for the artistic development of students as well as a cultural space that facilitates the integration of the community through the common appreciation of the arts. It is located at the entrance of the polytechnic and serves as an excellent interface between the community and the students.

Going forward, one possibility is for schools to be designed to locate selected facilities such as arts and music studios, laboratories and home economics kitchens at the external edge of their compounds. The community can be granted access to these facilities after schooling hours at night or during the weekend. There is much to learn from The School in Sydhavnen (*Skolen I Sydhavnen*) in Copenhagen, a primary school that is also a community and cultural gathering point where facilities are made available for public use during non-schooling hours. The design incorporates a natural hierarchy of public, semi-public and more private spaces within, with a fully accessible viewing deck and a school playground that is shared with the community.

Artist-in-residence schemes within schools can also be introduced to promote interactions between artists, students and members of the community. Such residency facilities can provide a home for the artist to create and make, allowing for real-world active teaching to the students in their school. This can provide students opportunities to interact with the artist on school days and allow community interaction through classes during non-schooling hours.

Local community museums

Museums housed in city centres tend to be sites for national narratives. In contrast, local museums are better placed to tell the unique stories of neighbourhoods and communities. For example, in Singapore, community heritage museums in the neighbourhoods of Queenstown and Taman Jurong are highly popular among residents. Clan associations, often housed in heritage buildings, offer compelling historical records. These museums and associations document and tell the stories of ordinary Singaporeans and local neighbourhood life, providing a very different offering from museums in the city centre. Museum@My Queenstown showcases objects of socio-cultural significance from the area, such as items from two long-time businesses serving residents for more than five decades—the signboard of Thin Huat, a provision shop, and items from Meng's Clinic (Figure 2). The museum is run by civic group, My Community, which co-curates exhibitions with residents, and sustained through funds from residents, businesses and religious institutions as well as government grants.

Figure 2. Top: Museum@My Queenstown run by civic group My Community; Bottom: The "Museum of Us" was set up in a vacant shop in Old Kent Road, London, as a community space for exchanging ideas for longer-term plans for the area. Images courtesy of My Community (top) and Fieldwork Facility (bottom).

In encouraging the setting up of local community museums, we can look at the example of the rejuvenation of Old Kent Road in Southwark, London, where the local city council invited New London Architect and Fieldwork Facility to work with the local community (residents, industry and local action groups) in refurbishing a vacant shop into the Museum of Us (Figure 2). The museum features portraits of confident local residents in its campaign to raise community awareness and pride, making it a space for workshops and for the community to exchange ideas and share their views on the long-term plans of the area (Howie 2019).

Community museums can also showcase prominent local personalities or national heroes who lived in the area and contributed to nation building. For example, we can imagine re-creating the home of Zubir Said, composer of Singapore's national anthem, complete with piano and original song sheets. Mackintosh House in Glasgow, Scotland, recreated the house of renowned artist and architect Charles Rennie Mackintosh, complete with its original interiors. Memories of older residents may also serve as a resource for community museums in building shared stories. In Singapore, members of the community, particularly the pioneering generation who

witnessed Singapore's fledging years as a republic, can be invited to share their stories in nation building and inspire the younger generation.

A recent initiative by National Heritage Board (NHB), Street Corner Heritage Galleries, involves partnering local shop owners with at least 30 years of history to co-create mini-museums showcasing the heritage of their shops, for example the Ji Xiang Ang Ku Kueh in Everton Park and Loong Fatt Tau Sar Piah in Balestier. In going further to recognise and promote our intangible cultural heritage, we can learn from Japan where "living national treasure" status is conferred upon craftsmen and artisans in recognition of their expertise. Workshops run by such individuals become iconic of their neighbourhoods, drawing admirers from near and far.

Connecting points of cultural interest in neighbourhoods

A growing number of city leaders in Milan, London and Paris are bent on improving the post COVID-19 environment of their cities. They are adopting new city-wide efforts to temporarily close streets to vehicles, forming a network of inter-connected city blocks. This facilitates safe distancing, creating additional public space for residents to remain active by walking and cycling, and in some cities, allowing the spillover of outdoor dining to boost local economic activities, and creating more opportunities for cultural activities to occur.

In Singapore, during the COVID-19 circuit breaker[3], parks and beaches were closed, thereby limiting access to nature. Exercise venues such as swimming pools, courts and gyms were also closed, restricting exercise options. Outdoor walking, jogging and running in one's immediate neighbourhood thus became a popular leisure activity.

During a walk or jog, one may encounter prosaic elements in the neighbourhood that might have gone unnoticed previously, providing a respite and improving physical and mental well-being (Brinson 2020). Delightful and identifiable points of interests along the way (such as works of art) can increase the attractiveness of taking walks around the neighbourhood. Curiosity in heritage can be generated through the marking of heritage buildings or heritage trees, with story boards featuring local points of interest. These can strengthen local neighbourhood identity and are opportunities for community-led efforts.

Cultural curation of walking trails

The experience of walking in the neighbourhood can be further enhanced by curating well-connected walking trails and park connectors[4]. In Singapore, community art projects in a neighbourhood can be linked up with existing heritage trails by NHB to create an intra-neighbourhood walking trail in a continuous loop. Such a trail can be marked out via coloured lines on pedestrian paths with directional signs. Landscaping with plants, markers and amenities such as benches and water dispensers can be included to enhance walkability. Points of interest and heritage buildings in the neighbourhood can have storyboards, similar to those created for national monuments and historic districts,

to encourage residents to pause and learn more about the neighbourhood. An inspiration for the design of the trails can be the Freedom Trail in Boston, where a a four-kilometre brick path connects 16 historically significant sites with clear story boards along the way (Figure 3).

There are plenty of opportunities to involve the community in such a process. Extending NHB's Heritage Trails Adoption Scheme[5] to include other local community groups is an opportunity for students to work with residents, particularly local pioneers (Figure 3). Participatory mapping of neighbourhood trails can be done to produce creative walking maps, which can be incorporated in an easy-to-access smartphone app. Non-governmental organisations such as Singapore Heritage Society, and members of the public can be invited to contribute memories of specific sites in the neighbourhood, which in turn enrich the narratives of the trails.

Figure 3. Top: Freedom Trail in Boston uses a brick path to connect historically-significant sites, encouraging visitors to explore downtown Boston on foot; Bottom: A student from Catholic Junior College guiding his peers on the Balestier Heritage Trail. Images courtesy of Patrick Rasenberg (top left), Wilson Loo Kok Wee (top right) and National Heritage Board (bottom).

Linking neighbourhood trails to the park connector network

Going further, these local neighbourhood trails can be linked up to Singapore's park connector network to create inter-neighbourhood routes. Currently, there are 350km of park connectors island-wide, which will be expanded to 500km by 2030 as part of National Parks Board (NParks)'s "City in Nature" efforts. However, some of our park connectors are not continuous as they are bisected by wide roads. Inter-neighbourhood connectivity can be further enhanced by using overhead bridges or underpasses to close gaps along the connectors to provide seamless walking and cycle trails. For instance, a cycling bridge across the Tampines Expressway to connect Tampines and Pasir Ris towns is currently being studied. At Bidadari and Punggol towns, Housing & Development Board has retained two heritage roads, Aljunied Road and Old Punggol Road, and re-planned them as green connectors within the town, linked to nearby open spaces and park connectors. Informal performance areas similar to those in Tokyo's Yoyogi Park can be set up, and community art installations can be placed along these roads to create a community and cultural walk.

The 606, or Bloomingdale Trail in Chicago, building on the defunct Bloomingdale rail line, is a 4.3km elevated park that connects four neighbourhoods (Figure 4). The 606 serves more than 80,000 residents who live within 10 minutes' walk to the trail, providing a space for leisure and safe commuting to downtown Chicago. Even though it was initially intended as a bicycle trail, the community found ways to use it creatively such as making the trail a "living work of art" with different plant species that change with the seasons, temporary art installations, performances, and regular community arts programmes (Centre for Liveable Cities 2017).

In contrast, the Major Taylor Trail in the same city has a lower usage, one of the main reasons being that pedestrians and cyclists have to cross busy streets along the trail, unlike The 606, which provides a seamless connection via overpasses for pedestrians and cyclists (Wisniewski 2016).

Figure 4. The 606 in Chicago provides a seamless connection through four neighbourhoods and offers spaces for artwork and cultural activities. Images courtesy of Thomas Barrat/shutterstock.com (top) and artistmac (bottom).

Creating broader car-lite cultural districts

In Singapore, we can also work towards creating more car-free zones and car-free days to provide more space for the public, while encouraging car-lite mobility. This can provide more space for safe distancing measures in a post COVID-19 world. For example, Haji Lane, which boasts of Singapore's most Instagrammable murals, can benefit from permanent street closure linking back to the overall pedestrian network at Oman Street and Bussorah Street (Figure 6). The combination of the various murals, Arabic motifs, heritage buildings, historic story boards, public and private museums and arts spaces can then be invariably linked to form a broader cultural district. The Ximending area in Taipei is a car-free zone daily from 10am to 10pm (Figure 5). When the streets are closed, the district becomes a vibrant cultural area for buskers and street vendors selling food and artistic crafts, along with retail shops, cinemas, hotels and restaurants.

The back lanes and side lanes of historic districts can also be transformed into new pedestrian links and secondary frontages for the conserved shophouses. Melbourne led the way with the transformation of its dark and dank service lanes into laneways lined with cosy coffee places and food and beverage outlets. Melbourne's laneways have created new economic value for the building frontages along them and infused the city with a culture of coffee and reading (Figure 6).

Figure 5. The streets of Ximending in Taipei are pedestrianised from 10am–10pm daily, turning the district into a vibrant cultural area popular with locals and tourists. Images courtesy of Various images (left) and Yi-Lin Tsai (right) from shutterstock.com.

Figure 6. Haji Lane in Singapore (top) and Melbourne's laneways (bottom). Images courtesy of Lezlie (top left), Fabio Achilli (top right), _TC Photography_ (bottom left) and Leigh Marriner (bottom right).

Activating public spaces through cultural place-making

Public spaces such as town squares or pedestrianised streets are key touch points for culture. Such public realms can allow people to engage in social and cultural activities even as social distancing measures remain in gradual recovery from COVID-19. In Singapore, there are plenty of public spaces for people to enjoy, be it in neighbourhoods such as the Toa Payoh town centre or the city centre like the promenade outside Marina Bay Sands. Public squares at Bedok Town Square, Paya Lebar Quarter and Kampung Admiralty offer spaces for pedestrians and community activities, alongside food and beverage outlets. Initiatives spearheaded by government agencies such as "Streets for People", "Friendly Faces, Lively Places" and "Arts in Your Neighbourhood Programme"[6] encourage community participation in enlivening public spaces. Going forward, place-making interventions can be made to enrich our public spaces with culture.

Co-creating public art through mural painting

Currently, the PAssionArts Community Art Gallery programme in Singapore by People's Association, a statutory board overseeing grassroots communities and social organisations, invites residents and community artists to display and share artworks in selected community spaces such as void-decks[7] and coffee shops. This initiative can be expanded by identifying additional spaces for community murals which reflect residents' ideals and tell the unique stories of the neighbourhood.

Murals are visually striking and have strong symbolic values. In the creation of such murals, residents can be invited to participate in the ideation and painting process. For example, in 2019, the Ang Mo Kio Constituency Merchant Association commissioned 10 murals as part of rejuvenation efforts for the town centre. A 3D mural featuring a waterfall and koi pond is dedicated to the merchants of the town centre as the koi fish is associated with good fortune.

In Philadelphia, the Mural Arts Philadelphia programme engages communities in 50-100 public art mural projects a year using participatory methods. Artists partner community members to envision and express stories from the community through murals in public spaces.

There is plenty of local expertise in facilitating such community-led placemaking projects. For example, with the support of Our Singapore Fund[8], community organisation, Participate in Design, has engaged residents in the planning and design of a community space, or Community Living Room, at a void deck in the Telok Blangah Crescent neighbourhood (Figure 7). This involves the painting of nature-inspired murals reflecting familiar landmarks in Telok Blangah. Along with other design interventions such as the installation of painted mobile seats, the void deck is transformed into an attractive place for residents, many of whom are seniors, to socialise.

Beyond the walls of void decks, other neighbourhood spaces such as utility boxes, street

Figure 7. Volunteers coming together in painting murals at the void deck of 7 Telok Blangah Crescent. Image courtesy of Participate in Design.

Figure 8. Over 1,200 painted traffic signal boxes by the community form an outdoor art gallery in the suburbs of Brisbane. Images courtesy of Brisbane City Council.

surfaces, underpasses of expressways, and even bin centres can be potential canvases for artists and the community. One example is the Artforce project by the Brisbane City Council and Urban Smart Projects, which invites residents of all ages and backgrounds to design and paint on traffic signal boxes in Brisbane suburbs (Figure 8).

Catalysing spontaneous interactions through small interventions

Inexpensive, light-touch interventions can act as catalysts for spontaneous interactions between members of the public in building social bonds and making the neighbourhood loveable. In the case of Singapore, Urban Redevelopment Authority's "Making Loveable Places" strategy includes the "Play It Forward programme", where pianos are placed in public spaces to create spontaneous performances and gatherings. In Hong Kong, the "Seating for Socialising" movement placed small one cubic metre cubes in under-utilised public spaces as an experiment to improve social bonds. These cubes generated playfulness and spontaneity in both adults and children as they stack and arrange them in different sculptural configurations for interactions.

Small interventions in the urban environment like the installation of mirrors in Taipei and New Taipei City's underground metro stations and linkways encourages dancers from all walks of life such as school groups, street performers and professionals to rehearse and perform (Figure 9). Members of the public stop and watch, sometimes even spontaneously joining the dancers to dance, creating a jovial atmosphere. In Singapore, we see examples of such spaces in the pedestrian underpass to Esplanade and at the underground connecting corridor at the Singapore Management University (SMU) campus. We can certainly observe more creative activities and spontaneous social interactions if mirrors like the ones in Taipei were installed in these areas and around our neighbourhoods!

Figure 9. Mirrors installed in some metro stations in Taipei provide practice spaces for dancers from all walks of life. Images courtesy of Taipei Metro.

Creative markets in public spaces

In many cities, neighbourhoods are known for their weekend markets selling creative goods or local produce. Apart from making the neighbourhood attractive for locals and visitors, such markets also support artists and creative producers in showcasing and selling their work. Our communities can work with local organisations that specialise in organising flea markets such as Fleawhere and Art Market, by The Local People, to host regular weekend markets in neighbourhood centres. In Ximending, Taipei, the public plaza outside the historic Red House hosts a weekend creative market (創意市集–in Traditional Chinese used in Taiwan, or 创意市集 in Simplified Chinese) where artists and creative producers all over Taiwan are invited to sell their work (Figure 10). This initiative is supported by the Taipei authorities and the Taipei Culture Foundation. Cultural performances can also be curated to showcase local talents. In Harvard Square, Cambridge, the business association curates cultural performances in designated areas, going beyond the selection of buskers to drawing up a detailed schedule of performances and rotations of buskers between designated areas.

Towards a community governance model

In realising the ideas presented in this article, integrated planning with stakeholders across government agencies and community institutions such as local grassroots, schools, businesses, residents and artists is key.

In the spirit of the Singapore Together movement[9], the cultural character of neighbourhoods can be shaped directly by local communities in taking on greater ownership of their neighbourhoods. A potential model in empowering local communities to take ownership in the ideation, creation and governance of local placemaking efforts is that of the Community Benefits District, a model adopted in San Francisco.

Unlike the Business Improvement District model that is largely made up of large commercial organisations in the city centre, the Community Benefits District model is usually found in mixed-use local neighbourhoods involving a partnership

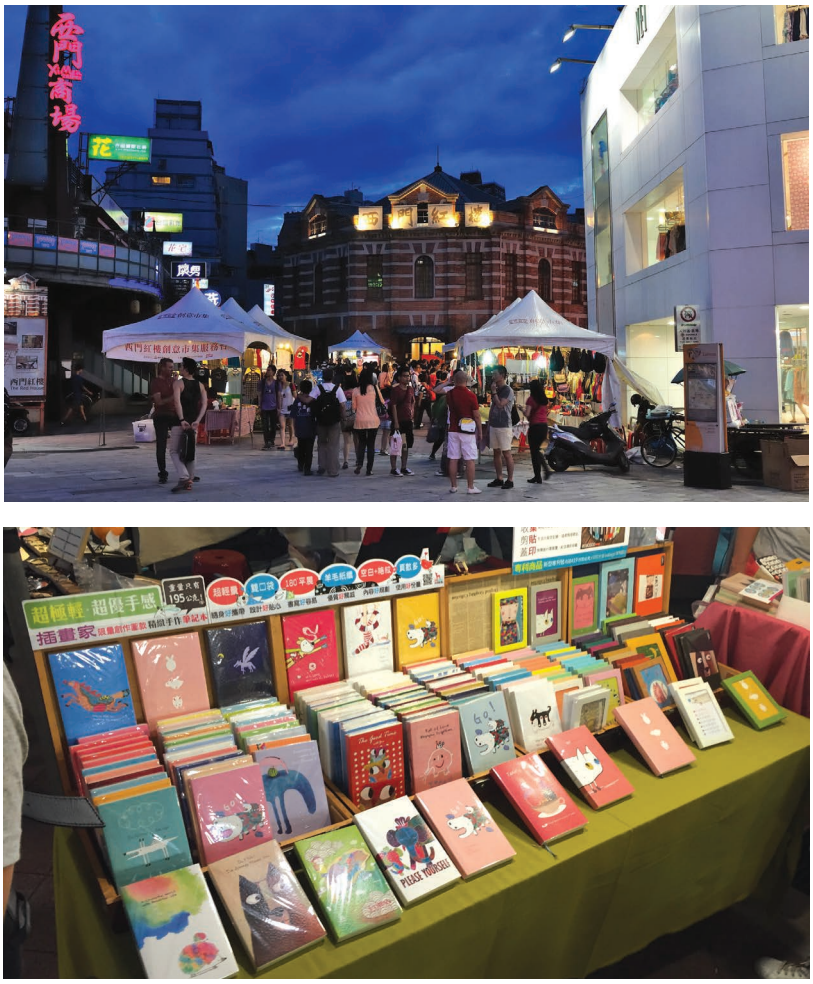

Figure 10. A weekend market selling creative and cultural products at the public plaza in front of the historic Red House in Taipei. Images courtesy of Alain (top) and Tan Xin Wei Andy (bottom).

between the local city council and diverse range of community stakeholders. Once an area has voted to establish a Community Benefits District, local property owners are levied a special assessment to fund improvements to their neighbourhood. For example, some neighbourhoods in San Francisco have adopted the Community Benefits District model where property owners pay a small assessment that goes toward maintaining and improving parks, plazas, gardens, sidewalks and other local improvement projects (Poole 2015).

While a monthly levy for residents may not be applicable in Singapore's context, the Community Benefits District model is useful for bringing community stakeholders together in working with stakeholder agencies on neighbourhood-specific placemaking projects such as mural painting, participatory mapping of neighbourhood trails, street closures, installation and maintenance of street furniture, management of school facilities for public use and setting up community museums. In this way, the community gets to decide what it wants and how much it wishes to contribute towards the projects in terms of financial or manpower resources.

Culture for liveability

Putting our ideas together, we can develop delightful and well-connected local walking loops around our neighbourhoods. These can be linked to the overall park connector system being implemented for Singapore. These trails feature community mural projects, painted infrastructure such as utility boxes, street lamps or park furniture along the way. Markers of heritage sites and information boards can reflect local stories and instil awareness and pride. Together with community museums and public spaces activated with cultural place-making initiatives, we can better tell the story of our neighbourhoods to reflect their unique cultural identity and create many attractive local places for residents to explore and enjoy.

Cultural institutions in Singapore such as museums and art galleries are reinventing and improvising to remain attractive in a post COVID-19 world, particularly in expanding into the digital realm (Tan 2020). While online platforms offer cultural engagements from afar, cultural spaces in neighbourhoods are complementary in allowing residents to physically experience and participate in cultural activities in their specific localities. These ideas are also opportunities to encourage greater community participation in shaping the cultural character of their neighbourhoods, and in the process, building bonds and strengthening social resilience against future crises. With greater community participation and ownership in the creation of everyday spaces of culture, Singapore's neighbourhoods can become even more vibrant and liveable places that offer a high quality of life for its residents. ☐

About the Author

Michael Koh is Executive Fellow with Centre for Liveable Cities, Ministry of National Development, Singapore, where he is involved in research, organisation of the World Cities Summit and Mayors Forum, capability development and international advisory projects. He served 6.5 years as CEO of National Heritage Board (NHB) and 3.5 years as concurrent CEO of National Art Gallery. As CEO of NHB, he is credited for the rebranding and repositioning of the national museums to new highs, making heritage accessible to the people, and leading architectural projects such as the planning and design of the $532 million National Art Gallery, heritage institutions, renovations to the 8Q@Singapore Art Museum and Asian Civilisations Museum. Before joining NHB, Michael held appointments at Urban Redevelopment Authority, including as Director of Urban Planning & Design and Director of Physical Planning. He also sits on the boards and committees of various organisations including National Library Board and Public Library Advisory Committee.

Tan Xin Wei Andy is a researcher at Centre for Liveable Cities, Ministry of National Development, where he drives research on inclusivity, religious spaces and culture and heritage. He is author of *Religious Harmony in Singapore: Spaces, Practices and Communities*. Trained as an urban and cultural geographer, his research interests include changing landscapes and social life in Asian cities, the creative economy, informal urbanism, geographies of aspirations, and non-representational theory. He has presented his research at local and international conferences and has published in journals such as *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*.

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Notes:

1. A Stay-Home Notice is issued to travellers who are granted entry into Singapore requiring them to be isolated for 14 days. The notice may be served in a dedicated facility or in residential premises.
2. The Concept Plan is a strategic land use and transportation plan that guides Singapore's development over the next 40 to 50 years. It is reviewed regularly, and ensures that there is sufficient land to meet Singapore's long-term needs while providing good quality living environment for people. Being a small country with limited land capacity, the plan plays a critical role in balancing our land use needs.
3. The Singapore government announced a period of Circuit Breaker on 3 April 2020 to pre-empt the trend of increasing local transmission of COVID-19. During Circuit Breaker, elevated safe distancing measures were implemented. Singapore exited Circuit Breaker on 1 June 2020.
4. The Park Connector Network is an island-wide network of linear open spaces around major residential areas, linking up parks and nature sites in Singapore. Singapore has 340km of park connectors islandwide and this will be increased to 500km by 2030.
5. The NHB Heritage Trail Adoption Scheme is a flexible programme where schools are encouraged to adopt an existing or new NHB Heritage Trail or school-developed trail, and to integrate key heritage sites as unique learning spaces for students.
6. The "Streets for People" programme by Urban Redevelopment Authority that provides support for community-initiated projects to transform streets into meaningful public spaces such as weekend car-free zones; The "Friendly Faces, Lively Places" fund by Housing & Development Board (HDB) supports ground-up community projects proposed by residents; The "Arts in Your Neighbourhood" initiative by National Arts Council brings art activities and experiences, performed and facilitated by artists and arts group to various neighbourhoods across the island.
7. The void deck is a unique feature of Singapore's public housing estates. Introduced in the 1970s by the HDB, void decks freed up ground-level spaces of HDB flats to create opportunities for residents to meet and interact through the regular use of shared common spaces and to provide residents with the space to hold social and religious functions.
8. Set up by Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth, "Our Singapore Fund" supports groups of individuals or registered organisations to initiate projects that promote the Singapore Spirit and shared values and build more socially inclusive communities. The aim is to partner Singaporeans to co-create the future of Singapore and explore solutions to strengthen the social fabric and develop a stronger sense of belonging, pride, confidence and commitment towards Singapore.
9. The Singapore Together movement aims for Singaporeans to partner the government, and one another, to own, shape and act on Singapore's shared future together. The movement opens up partnership opportunities for Singaporeans to participate in, and to provide support for more citizen-led initiatives.

The future of culture post COVID-19 in France

Jack Lang
Former Minister of Culture, France, and President of the Institut du Monde Arabe

The pandemic has brought about severe challenges to the renowned arts and culture sector in France. Given the economic and social significance of the sector, the author argues that a "New Deal", similar to what was implemented in the United States of America during the Great Depression, is needed to support the sector through the current crisis, and that countries must continue to commit to cultural exchange in the face of such adversity.

The health crisis due to the COVID-19 virus and the resulting lockdown have hit the cultural sphere hard in France and in all other countries. Performance venues, museums, bookstores, cinemas, and other cultural institutions were closed. As cultural life revolves around coming together, to deprive it of its core is to take away one of its primary sources of funding. The economic, social and political repercussions are considerable.

Culture is economically more important than the automotive industry

According to a survey conducted in July 2020 by the Department of Prospective Studies and Statistics at the Ministry of Culture, losses in the cultural sector are estimated at 22.3 billion euros, a 25 per cent decrease from the previous year. In France, cultural activity accounts for 700,000 jobs, far more than the 200,000 jobs in the automotive industry. To that figure, one could also add a good portion of jobs in the tourism industry, or about 900,000 jobs. In terms of Gross Domestic Product, it weighs twice as much as the automotive industry.

Despite this, culture is often seen as an accessory in times of health and economic crises (rising unemployment, poverty, inequalities). I think, however, that it is especially in times of crises that we must affirm loud and clear that culture is a pressing obligation. The artists, with their creativity and inventiveness, have shown how necessary their actions were during the lockdown. They provide an inexhaustible source of motivation, inventiveness, happiness, generosity, new encounters, and discoveries. By working around the constraints of confinement, notably through new technologies, they have made access to all kinds of creation available for a majority of people. Through the use of online broadcasting and social networks, they also helped to maintain social bonds among citizens forced into isolation.

As of October 2020, the cultural sphere has not recovered from the detrimental effects of the health crisis and one continues to fear the coming bankruptcies of bookstores, cinemas, theatres, etc. Nevertheless, the cultural sphere is trying to adapt to the new health guidelines and seize new opportunities that are opening up, in particular in the field of new technologies and the digital realm which offer great tools for innovation in practice and improving accessibility for all.

As an economic sector in its own right, culture, like other sectors, needs strong governmental action to support these changes and avoid the looming disaster. Tens of thousands of places all over the French territory—such as bookstores, museums, theatres, cinemas, libraries—risk closure if the state does not implement the necessary means and actions. This economic and cultural issue is also a real political issue because culture is essential for societal cohesion, considering how societies are divided today. As Jean Vilar—French actor and theatre director of great importance and fame in France—said, "Theatre is therefore, first and foremost, a public

service. Just like gas, water and electricity." This vision applies to all cultural sectors.

While digital technology is one of the solutions available in the world of culture, it is of concern that many museums are turning to tech giants such as Google to digitise their collections, and producing virtual tours of their exhibitions with tech giants.

France and Europe must promote the emergence of French or European companies. In addition, they should create a set of rules to regulate and prevent these companies from dominating and controlling activities of which freedom of creation is at its core.

Culture has always been an essential component of French public policy. Through soft diplomacy, French culture has acquired a reputation and significant influence on the international stage.

To tackle the consequences of the pandemic, several measures have been taken by the French government, such as a "blank year" for the *intermittents du spectacle* (part-time workers in the entertainment industry with a specific status in France) which gives them access to unemployment benefits, as well as the creation of a temporary compensation fund for TV series and film shoots. In total, five billion euros were allocated to the culture and media industry. In addition, a recovery plan of two billion euros was launched in September 2020.

But the cultural sector remains under threat, especially with the resurgence of the pandemic and the strengthening of the sanitary measures. Only a real "New Deal" will be able to save businesses and cultural institutions, and provide the country with the capacity to rebound.

A New Deal for culture

This New Deal for culture must be implemented, as President Roosevelt of the United States did in 1929 during the Great Depression, to provide adequate support for artistic and cultural creation[1]. Approximately 7,000 writers, 16,000 musicians, 13,000 actors were employed by state-supported initiatives. For example, a Federal Theatre was created and public commissions from painters like Rothko, Pollock, De Kooning multiplied. It was truly thanks to this New Deal that the triumphant rise of the United States on the world cultural scene was made possible.

This French New Deal for culture would be beneficial for artists and creators, and for society as a whole. As in 1929, misfortune can pave a way for happiness. In the history of France, moments of reinvention in the arts, knowledge and research often coincided with periods of rupture: the Popular Front in 1936, the Liberation in 1944, the birth of the Fifth Republic with De Gaulle and Malraux in 1958 and the election of François Mitterrand in 1981. The 2020 pandemic opens a rupture of this nature. It necessitates a committed effort to this cultural New Deal.

Culture can help to tackle social divides and re-create connections among French citizens. It is necessary to invest in associations, cultural centres, local organisations and all sorts of initiatives, by encouraging local authorities to formulate public policies adapted to local needs.

One of the priorities of this plan would be to invest significantly in the arts within schools and to breathe new life into creativity. This is especially among young people in schools all over the country, with the help of artists-in-residency

programmes. This way, we would be able to help artists and at the same time, develop the creativity of young people.

Recreating links between societies

Culture not only creates links within one society, it also helps to build bridges and develop greater understanding among people and cultures around the world. Temporary border closures and lockdowns must not lead to a withdrawal into oneself and from others. This is why exchanges between countries, particularly cultural exchanges, are essential.

It is with this mindset that the exhibition *Once Upon a Time, the Orient Express*, initiated by the Arab World Institute (IMA), will be coming to Singapore in December 2020. The exhibition was first organised by the IMA in Paris in 2014 and is now initiating its international tour with Singapore.

This achievement is a real feat because it was necessary to maintain the fervour of the teams and good understanding between all the partners, to bring together the works that will travel from France to Singapore, to restore the locomotive the cars of the *Compagnie internationale des wagons-lits* and to ship these historic monuments on wheels, weighing more than 200 tonnes, over a distance of 11,000 km for 45 days. All of this took place in the midst of a period of lockdown and restriction measures on international trade and travel and accompanied by threats on contractual commitments and financing!

This exhibition is a three-fold adventure. Firstly, it is a technological and industrial one, as the railway network enabled the promotion, generosity and universalism of the end of the 19th century. It is also artistic and cultural, as the railway network was at the heart of French and Middle Eastern relations that were forged between 1880 and 1970. Finally, it is an intellectual adventure, because the technological advance of the railways made it possible to facilitate exchanges, in particular the exchanges between people, as embodied in the figure of Abdelkader ibn Muhieddine who, thanks to the train, was able to interact with Christians of Damascus, whom he defended against the intolerance and discrimination they faced at the time.

This moment will therefore be the occasion for great rapprochements between France, Singapore, and the Arab world. This project will show that cultural commitment is one of the most beautiful indicators of personal and collective resilience in the face of adversity.

About the Author

Prominent cultural figure Jack Lang was formerly Minister of Culture (1981-1986, 1988-1993) and Minister of Education (1992-1993, 2000-2002) in France. He had also held various other positions, such as Dean of the Law Faculty at Nancy-Universite's Law Faculty, director of International University Theatre Festival in Nancy, director of Chaillot National Theatre, Mayor of Blois, Professor of Law at Paris X-Nanterre University, President of the Foreign Affairs Commission of France's National Assembly, President of the Jury at the Berlin International Film Festival and head of Milan's Piccolo Theatre. In 2013, French President Francois Hollande appointed him President of Institut du Monde Arabe (Arab World Institute) in Paris. Jack Lang has authored various reference books and articles.

Notes:

1. The New Deal was a series of public programmes and projects enacted in the United States of America during the Great Depression to help mitigate the impact of the financial crisis.

Staying COVID-19 secure: Navigating the new normal for museums

Alvin Tan Tze Ee
Deputy Chief Executive (Policy & Community), National Heritage Board, Singapore

Museums around the world experienced plummeting visitorship, cancellation of exhibitions and revenue losses as the pandemic broke out. In this essay, Alvin Tan provides a look at how museums in various countries have coped during lockdowns, and explores how the museum experience may adapt to the new normal, from curating hyperlocal exhibitions to designing touch-free interactives.

In the words of Queen Elizabeth II, 2020 has turned out to be an *annus horribilis* for museums as well as the wider arts and culture sector. As COVID-19 spreads across the globe, museums find themselves confronted with plummeting visitorship numbers, postponement or cancellation of exhibitions and programmes, and unprecedented revenue losses. While the COVID-19 pandemic may have led to museum closures and threatened the livelihoods of museum professionals, it has also resulted in many museums having to rethink and revise their immediate and mid-term strategies, and more significantly, pivoting to the digital realm in order to stay connected with their audiences and reach out to new audiences during the stay-at-home period.

Impact on museums worldwide

According to the report *Museums, Museum Professionals and COVID-19* released by the International Council of Museums (ICOM), by April 2020, almost all the museums around the world had been closed due to the COVID-19

Figure 1. A visual from a COVID-19 dos and don'ts marketing campaign featuring mannequins at the Indian Heritage Centre's permanent exhibition. Image courtesy of Indian Heritage Centre, Singapore.

pandemic, and more than one in ten might be forced to close permanently (International Council of Museums 2020, 2). Likewise, UNESCO's *Museums Around the World in the Face of COVID-19* report painted an equally dire picture with 90 per cent of museums worldwide closing their doors during the crisis and more than 10 per cent of museums indicating that they may never reopen again (UNESCO 2020, 4).

Based on research reports, published surveys, newspaper and online articles, museums and museum associations worldwide have responded to the COVID-19 outbreak in the following three ways: first, temporary closures and cancellations or postponements of exhibitions and programmes; second, ramping up their digital offerings and sharing available resources to support one another nationally and internationally; and third, making the necessary preparations for re-opening and operating in a post-COVID-19 environment.

In Singapore, National Heritage Board (NHB) launched a survey to determine the impact of COVID-19 on the Museum Roundtable (MR), a collective of more than 55 public and private sector museums in Singapore. Based on the responses from 43 MR members, close to 75 per cent indicated that they suffered a severe drop in visitorship numbers (especially from tourists and school groups) and revenue prior to mandatory closure. The remaining 25 per cent were unaffected as they had already closed temporarily for various reasons such as renovations and/or redevelopment works prior to COVID-19. Many of the respondents also indicated that they had to cope with budget cuts for exhibitions and programmes as well as the postponement or cancellation of projects. Fortunately, close to 90 per cent of respondents indicated that they did not have to furlough their staff.

Going digital

Prior to the onset of COVID-19, museums had already been engaging audiences digitally, with varying degrees of success, as part of their

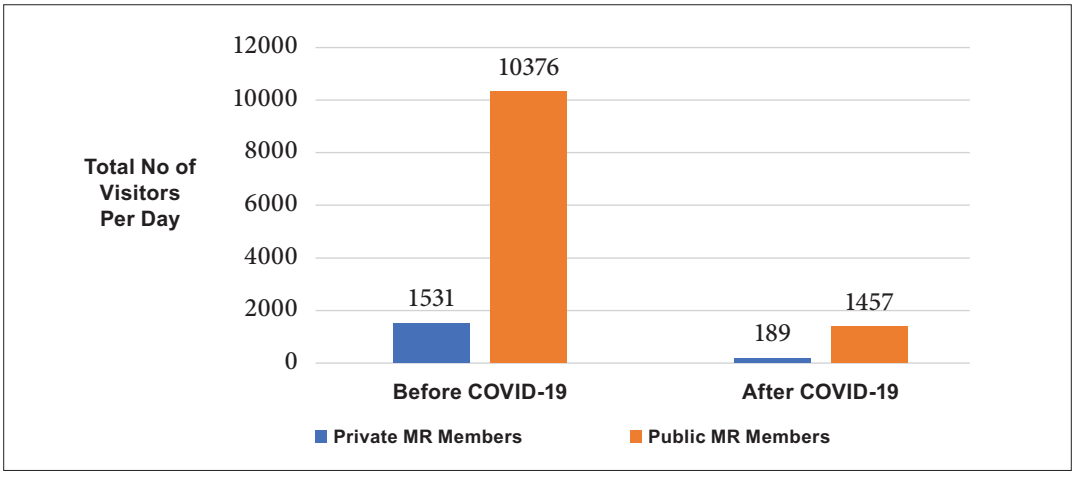

Figure 2. Comparison of average daily visitorship figures for Museum Roundtable members before COVID-19 (i.e. months of December 2019 and January 2020) and after COVID-19 (i.e. months of February and March 2020 before mandatory closure of museums in Singapore in April 2020). Infomation courtesy of International & Museum Relations Division, National Heritage Board.

efforts to attract more visitors online and to convert these digital visitors to actual museum visitors. With museum closures and more people spending more time online, many museums have hopped on the digital bandwagon in an effort to remain physically closed but digitally open. This has resulted in an unprecedented buffet of "click-as-much-as-you-can-consume" digital content as museums rush to put their collections online, launch social media campaigns and offer collections- or institution-based quizzes, contests, jigsaw puzzles etc.

In a survey on the impact of COVID-19, the Network of European Museum Organisations reported that four out of five museums in Europe have increased their digital services to reach their audiences while another Art Fund survey in the UK revealed that 86 per cent of their museums and galleries have increased their online presence and content (Network of European Museum Organisations 2020, 2; Wafer Hadley 2020, 7). In its report, ICOM noted that while all digital activities have increased after the lockdowns for at least 15 per cent of its museum respondents, activity on the museums' social media networks increased or started for almost 50 per cent of its respondents (International Council of Museums 2020, 10).

Not surprisingly, museums which had invested resources to establish their online presence and develop their digital offerings prior to COVID-19 found themselves in "a better position to succeed than those just now coming to the keyboard" (Dilenschneider 2020d). In this regard, the Chinese museums have a strong lead. Between the months of January and February 2020 alone, more than 1,300 Chinese museums were already offering more than 2,000 online exhibitions (Jing Travel 2020). However, it would appear that digital resources and efforts from museums worldwide and locally have been uneven, and many museums have only begun to take their first digital baby steps.

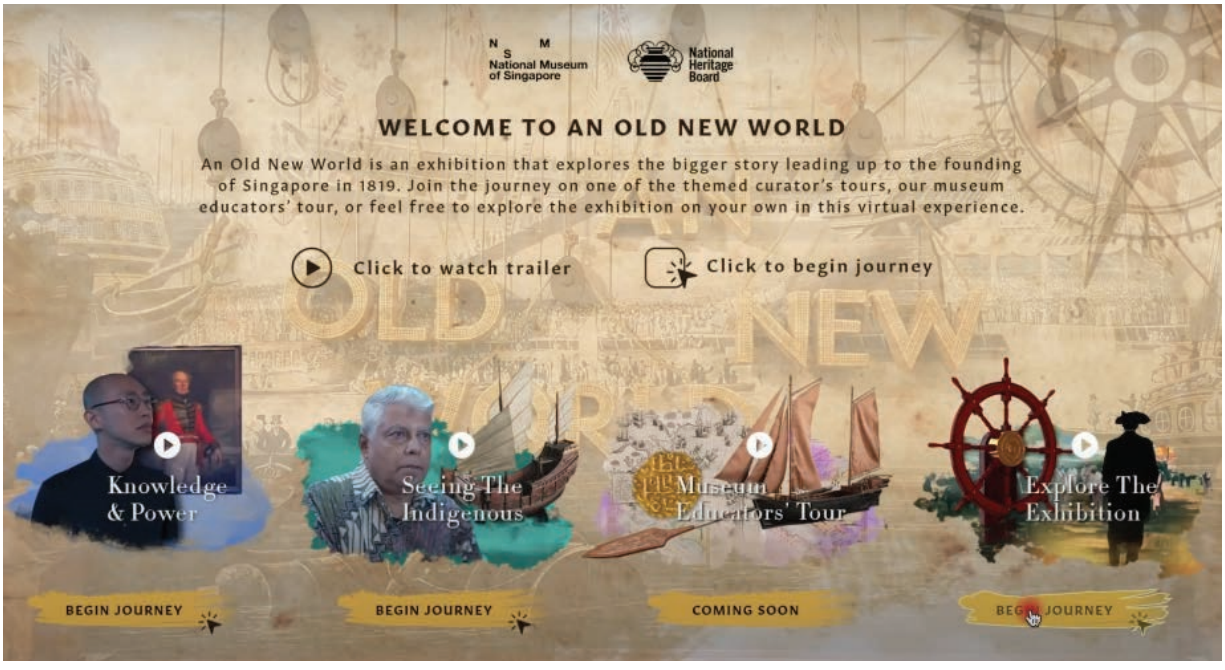

Figure 3. National Museum of Singapore launched a digital edition of its exhibition "An Old New World" during the lockdown. Image courtesy of National Museum of Singapore.

In Singapore, the heritage institutions comprising Indian Heritage Centre, Malay Heritage Centre and Sun Yat Sen Nanyang Memorial Hall were first off the starting blocks by using their collections to offer COVID-19 related tips and presenting online versions of their special exhibitions, organising stay-home activities such as their "(re)create art" and mask-a-rade challenges (a call to recreate artefacts and artworks from the institutions' collections using objects found around the house and a "design a face mask" competition for children respectively). They also provided digital docent tours, and even offered their audiences behind-the-scene glimpses of the essential services that were being carried out when the institutions were closed. Likewise, National Museum of Singapore launched a virtual tour of its special exhibition with both guided and self-exploratory options, while ArtScience Museum offered video tours of its exhibitions. Other museums such as National Gallery Singapore, Asian Civilisations Museum and Singapore Art Museum have also rolled out curators' talks and tours, DIY activities etc.

Figure 4. A digital jigsaw puzzle based on an artwork was created for online audiences. Image courtesy of Malay Heritage Centre, Singapore.

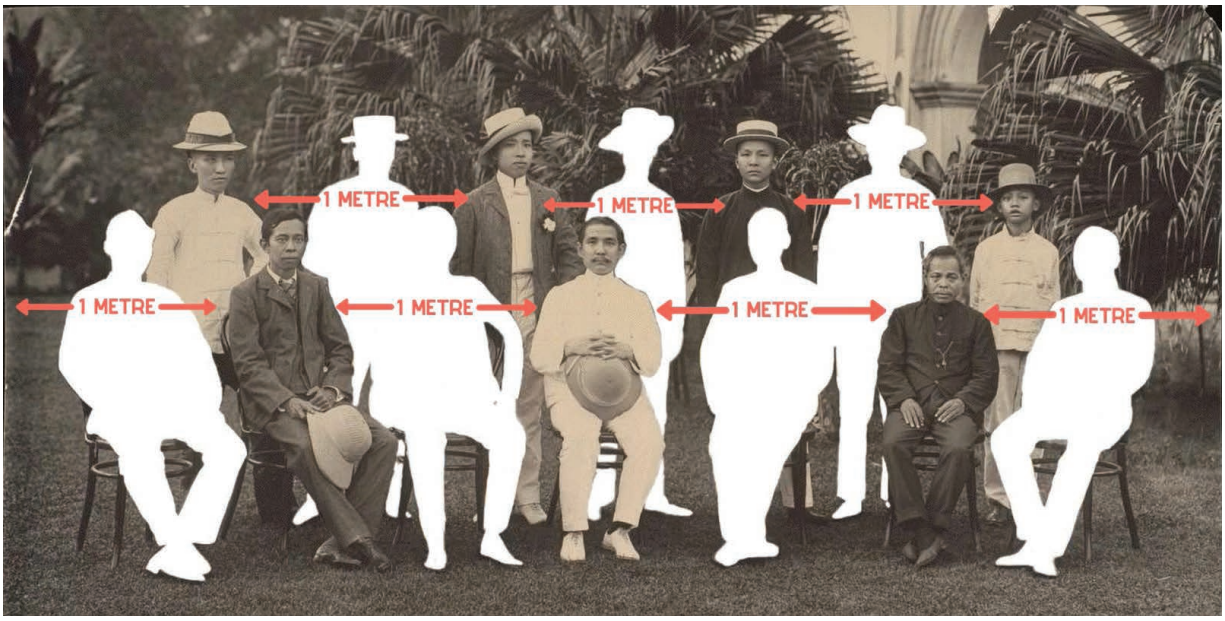

Figure 5. An online quiz with a safe distancing message.
Image courtesy of Sun Yat Sen Nanyang Memorial Hall, Singapore.

However, some commentators such as Andrew McIntyre have noted that while museums may have "pushed some people further along the digital adoption curve … that will merely enhance, not replace, the analogue" and that the digital offerings of museums, however excellent, "will only ever be an extra: a wrap-around enhancement" (McIntyre 2020a, 2020b). Yet another school of thought holds the view that "the online museum is here to stay" and will become an essential part of how audiences experience museums and their collections going forward (Grynsztejn 2020).

Whatever the case may be, it remains undeniable that museum digital offerings play an important role in augmenting the museum-going experience and maintaining top-of-mind recall, and hold the potential of translating digital visitorship to actual museum visitorship. According to NHB's Digital Consumer Survey (Wave 1) conducted in May 2020 comprising 269 respondents, NHB's digital offerings successfully reached out to 43.5 per cent new audiences (i.e., users who had never consumed NHB's digital content before) during the circuit breaker period. 87.4 per cent of survey respondents agreed that NHB's digital offerings piqued their interest in visiting Singapore's museums when they re-open.

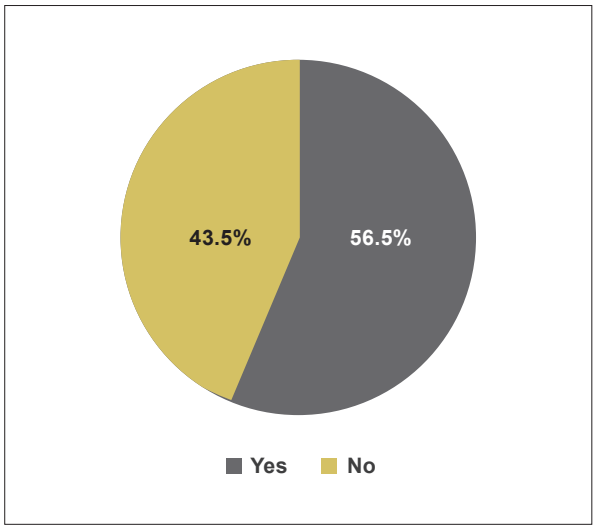

Figure 6. NHB's survey results show that 43.5 per cent of 269 respondents were new to its digital offerings.

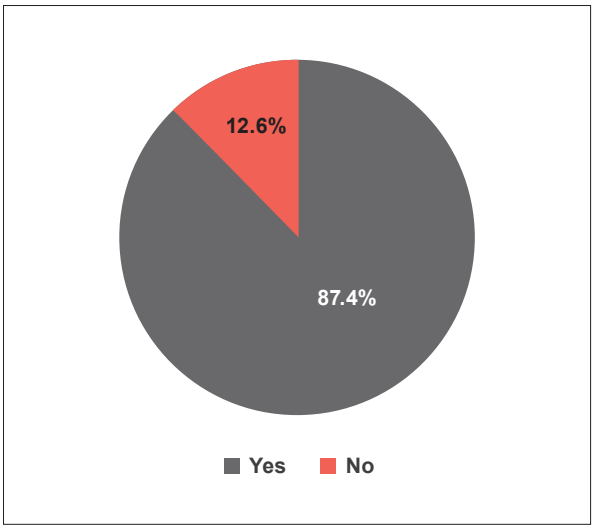

Figure 7. Survey results showing 87.4 per cent of respondents agreed that NHB's digital offerings made them interested in visiting a museum in Singapore.

Intent to return

Despite the efforts of museums to stay digitally connected with their audiences, the question of who will return and who will stay away when museums eventually re-open, and what will make visitors feel reassured enough to return, are pressing issues that most museum authorities and directors are grappling with. To quote Mary Ceruti, Director of Walker Art Center: "the hardest part is understanding not just the risks, but the psychology. Because there is so much uncertainty, there is a big range in terms of how people feel—both staff and potential audience. That is the biggest challenge: to give people confidence that we are doing everything we can, but also recognising that we can't create zero risk for everybody" (Halperin 2020).

According to ongoing research by IMPACTS Experience, audiences in the United States intend to return to their usual attendance behaviours within three months (Dilenschneider 2020e). This is perhaps a natural reaction to restricted overseas travel options. More importantly, the research has revealed that, while "demand isn't necessarily increasing or decreasing … it's being redistributed" towards certain types of cultural organisations and away from others (Dilenschneider 2020a). In this regard, there will be increased demand for cultural experiences that feature outdoor spaces and/or allow for relative freedom of movement (Dilenschneider 2020f). As such, museums are generally expected to fare better as compared to enclosed performance arts spaces due to the increased "perceptual risk" of contracting COVID-19 (Dilenschneider 2020b).

Figure 8. Sample pages from Malay Heritage Centre's re-opening resource booklet which was uploaded on its social media platforms (together with the booklets from Sun Yat Sen Nanyang Memorial Hall and Indian Heritage Centre) three days prior to its re-opening. Image courtesy of Malay Heritage Centre, Singapore.

The above findings are corroborated by Audience Outlook Monitor, a tracking study of audience attitudes with regard to arts and cultural programmes during and after the COVID-19 crisis, which reveals that the outlook for museums is "looking positive" with most audiences saying that they would be at least "somewhat comfortable" walking around a museum gallery (88 per cent) today, if they have open spaces and are following recommended safety measures. However, the same study reveals that while the public is comfortable with visiting museums and galleries, the majority remains uncomfortable with using interactive exhibits (Patternmakers, Wolfbrown, and Audience Outlook Monitor 2020, 5).

In the latest research published by Dilenschneider in June 2020, "availability of a coronavirus vaccine" remains the leading factor that will make the public feel safe about visiting cultural organisations again, followed by factors such as seeing others visit, mandatory face coverings and government lifting restrictions. More than 30 per cent of the respondents indicated that they would feel comfortable visiting cultural organisations as they trust that cultural organisations will not re-open unless they are "ready to do so and can safely welcome back their audiences" (Dilenschneider 2020c).

Overall, while there may be pent-up demand for museum visits as audiences yearn to reconnect directly with arts and culture, it is likely that the museum-going market will remain highly cautious, at least in the first few months following the re-opening of museums, and that there will be a period of adjustments and readjustments. As such, it is more likely that museum-goers will adopt a wait-and-see attitude to assess if there will be overcrowding at museums when they re-open and to see how well museums cope in terms of implementing and policing the various safety management measures.

Figure 9. Indian Heritage Centre curator, Nalina Gopal, carrying out condition checks and maintenance works inside the galleries. Image courtesy of Indian Heritage Centre, Singapore.

Considerations for re-opening

With countries lifting or easing COVID-19 restrictions, museums have either re-opened or are preparing for re-opening, and museum associations have issued and shared advisories and guidelines. All these documents share common and common-sensical advice that recommend that museums be guided by and comply with official government guidelines, and to re-open responsibly and only when the necessary safe management measures are in place for staff, volunteers, and visitors.

In view of the above, some countries such as Singapore, France and the United States have adopted a phased approach with staggered museum re-openings over a period of time. The staggered re-openings will be complemented by a likewise staggered approach to visitorship numbers (i.e., museums to allow more visitors in phases) and to the resumption of guided tours and museum programmes. This is perhaps a wise approach as different museums will be at different stages of readiness.

In NHB's Museum Roundtable survey which also measures members' "readiness to reopen", close to 75 per cent of the survey respondents indicated that they would be able to conduct temperature screening, disinfect and clean premises and frequently-touched surfaces, provide hand sanitisers in key locations, display signage within their premises, collect travel and health declarations from visitors, and implement visitor registration and contact tracing measures (Tan 2020).

Yet in spite of all the pre-planning and preparatory efforts of museum authorities and museums, and with no end in sight to the COVID-19 pandemic, museums that have re-opened and/or are planning to re-open have realised that "the museum we closed will not be the museum we reopen" (Stulen 2020). Moreover, museums will not only have to find ways to overcome the public's safer-at-home mentality and ensure public safety at all times—they will have to come up with a back-to-business model that makes economic sense. This is because the operational costs of re-opening museums are likely to remain the same as before COVID-19 (and in some cases, possibly higher in view of the implementation of safe management measures) while ticket revenues and profits from retail and food and beverage offerings will remain at an all-time low for an indeterminable length of time.

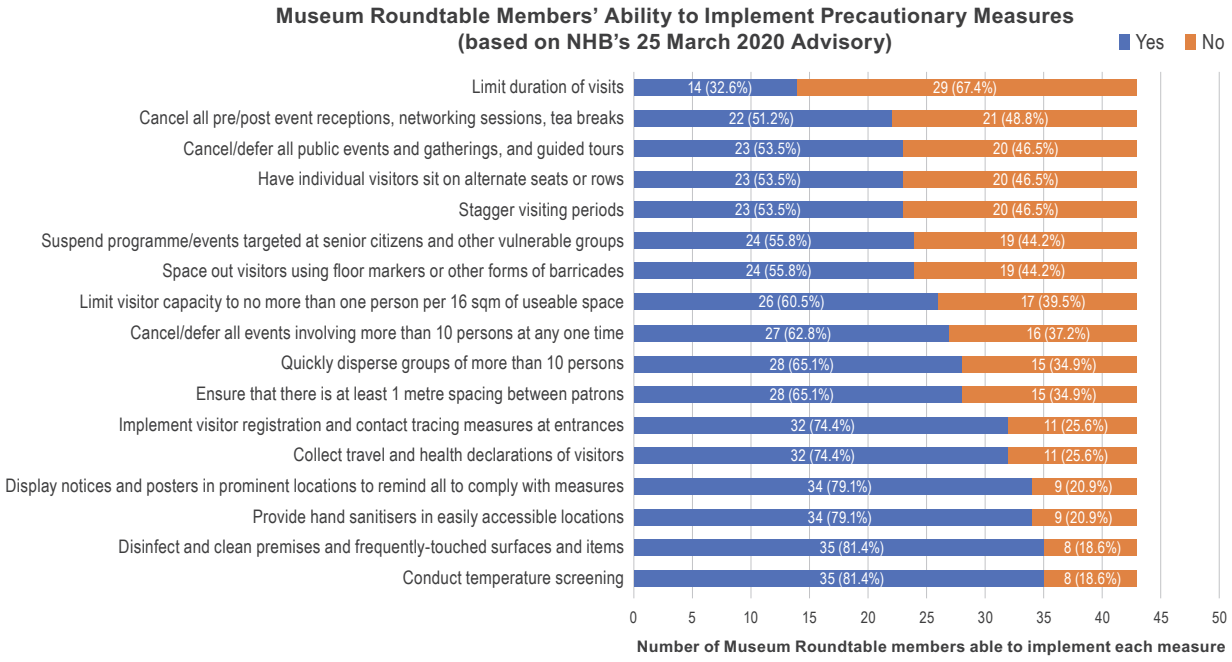

Figure 10. Findings for Museum Roundtable's "readiness to reopen" ranked according to safe management measures issued in March 2020. Image courtesy of National Heritage Board.

Figure 11. A safe distancing signage. Image courtesy of National Gallery Singapore.

New normal for museums

However museums prepare to re-open their galleries to the public in an era of mandatory social distancing, one thing is certain—they will be greeted by a much changed museum landscape. In this new operating environment, museum and gallery capacity will be drastically reduced. In Singapore, museum visitor capacity has been reduced to 25 per cent; Beijing and Borneo to 30 per cent; Abu Dhabi to 40 per cent and Dubai to 50 per cent. According to a recent article in *The Art Newspaper*, museums in the UK are projected to attract only an estimated 20 per cent of their pre-COVID-19 visitorship numbers when they re-open (Bailey 2020) while museums such as the Guggenheim Bilbao is expecting only 10-20 per cent of its normal visitorship over summer and 45-50 per cent of its typical numbers over fall (Kenney 2020).

Figure 12. Temperature screening in progress during the second day of Sun Yat Sen Nanyang Memorial Hall's reopening on 4 July 2020. Image courtesy of Sun Yat Sen Nanyang Memorial Hall, Singapore.

In addition, with limited international travel and the need to watch the bottom line resulting in international exhibitions and loans cancelled and/or put on hold, there has been speculation in the museum world that it may be time to bid goodbye to imported blockbuster exhibitions (Dickson 2020)—at least for the short term—and for museums to focus on bringing out more of their collections from storage. Moreover, with tourism practically non-existent, museum audiences are likely to become "hyperlocal with increased appetites for engaging, dynamic experiences in their backyards" (Atkins 2020) and museums will have to think, curate and show local and shine the spotlight on the treasures already in their possession.

The museum experience post-COVID-19 is also likely to be characterised by contactless or hands-free solutions including self-service models such as online reserve-ahead ticketing system with timed entry, virtual queues, and contactless payment as museums strive to strike a fine balance between public safety and an engaging and hassle-free visitor experience. In China, participating institutions are listed on an online WeChat mini programme, "Culture and Tourism Green Code", which allows visitors to apply for museum entry by providing their personal information and health status declaration, followed by the selection of the date and time of intended visit. Once the entry slot has been successfully secured, the user receives a QR code which is scanned for entry into the museum (Parulis-Cook 2020).

With concerns surrounding high-touch surfaces, many museums have also relooked hands-on experiences. While the immediate strategy is to close off these interactives from public use and/or use antiviral coatings or conduct more frequent cleaning and sanitisation, there is a movement to explore and adopt alternatives that are not hand-operated, such as switch mats, voice- or gesture-based tools and proximity-based activations.

Many museums have also ceased to offer docent guided tours and discontinued the use of shared audio tour devices. Instead, museums such as Mauritshuis in the Netherlands are turning to personal devices to continue to provide curated tours to visitors and even offer indoor wayfinding.

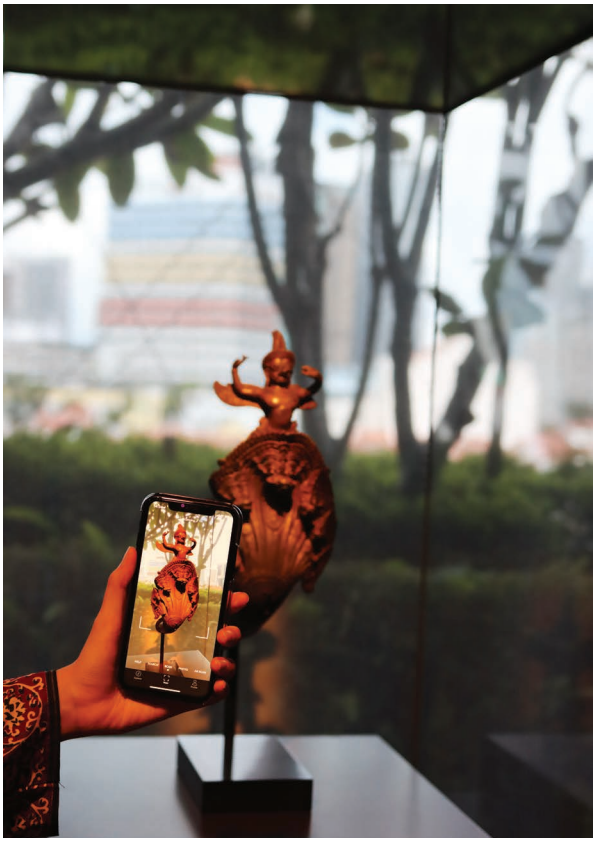

Figure 13. The Smartify mobile application allows visitors to scan an artefact to retrieve more information and enjoy audio tours of the galleries. Image courtesy of Indian Heritage Centre, Singapore.

Conclusion

It is undeniable that, unless a vaccine for the coronavirus is found, the road to recovery for museums will be long and hard. Even then, we will not be able to completely pandemic-proof our museums. However, as the days go by and more and more museums start to reopen, we are getting a better sense of what the transformed museum landscape looks like, and we will get more adept at navigating our way through a much changed museum world. This is all thanks to museums worldwide sharing what they are doing and learning, and in the process, becoming, as Hollander described, "both resourceful and a resource" (Hollander 2020).

Still, a few good things have come out of the pandemic. First, it has demonstrated that museums are resilient entities that are able to improvise and reinvent themselves by pushing their collections online, launching viral social media campaigns, taking fund-raising online, offering free collections- or institution-based content etc. Second, and more importantly, it is the validation of the role that museums (and other cultural organisations) play in the wellbeing of their audience and the wider community in terms of alleviating the "challenges of confinement" (UNESCO 2020, 6), reducing the social isolation, and boosting national morale. ☐

About the Author

Alvin Tan is Deputy Chief Executive of Policy & Community at National Heritage Board, Singapore. He oversees strategies, operations and projects pertaining to heritage impact assessment and mitigation, National Monuments and heritage sites, National Collection, collections care and management, community outreach and education, volunteer engagement, the heritage institutions, heritage grants, language campaigns, international relations and Museum Roundtable. He also leads a COVID-19 rapid response team that conducts international scans of museum strategies and responses, and contributes to COVID-19 related policy formulation and operational guidelines for the museum and heritage sector.

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Staying the course, adopting new mindsets: the arts in the time of COVID-19

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As the COVID-19 crisis unfolded, the National Arts Council in Singapore marshalled resources to support the arts sector, from galvanising artists and commissioning significant projects of scale to incentivising arts companies and artists to engage in training and capability building. Paul Tan shares insights from the agency's experiences and his thoughts on the way forward for the arts in the light of the pandemic.

At the point of writing, the COVID-19 numbers around the world are on an alarming upward trend. For sure, no country is out of the woods yet and the pandemic continues to pose a grave threat to humanity. With such a dynamic situation, it is impossible to predict when the global culture scene can return to any semblance of normalcy, with artists and audiences coming together. Concert halls are closed or underutilised, choirs and wind bands are not rehearsing and the face-to-face intimacy of a performance in a black box seems almost a distant memory. One dramatic headline capturing the grim zeitgeist was Broadway's announcement that it would be curtains down for New York theatres for the rest of 2020 (Paulson 2020).

Here in Singapore, the Dorscon Orange alert[1] announced in early February already created ripples of anxiety, within and beyond the arts and culture community. Initially, with minimal community transmissions, it appeared that the proverbial show could go on, and many performances did, albeit at reduced capacities. National Arts Council (NAC) was even able to galvanise leading artists to put out a public video with a "Stay Strong, Don't *Kancheong*[2]" message, encouraging Singaporeans to observe safety measures while carrying on with day-to-day life responsibly (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Singaporean artists encouraging everyone to observe safety measures through a video message. Images courtesy of National Arts Council.

But as the cases of infection climbed in Singapore, it was soon clear that the risks of public gatherings in enclosed spaces were too high, thus resulting in further tightening of public-facing activities. When Circuit Breaker was announced in April 2020[3], life came to what felt like a standstill.

Shows that had been months, even years, in the making were abruptly cancelled, tickets were refunded while schools and community clubs deferred their arts programmes. Independent freelancers, who form a substantial part of the arts community, found their gigs drying up overnight. It became quickly apparent that this was an unprecedented crisis, that the sustainability of livelihoods and arts companies was at stake; and alongside that, the important, soul-nourishing work of telling our stories and reflecting on Singapore's unique cultural identity.

Such a crisis requires an agile and sustained response from the larger community as well as NAC in its role as the government agency championing the sector.

Recognising the potentially disastrous impact of the pandemic motivated my colleagues in NAC to respond quickly. Working within the government, we were able to secure resources in the form of a SGD$55 million Arts and Culture Resilience Package (ACRP) and at the same time, persuade decision makers that jobs in the sector warranted additional protection with the enhanced Jobs Support Scheme (JSS). As announced in Singapore's fourth budget for 2020, the Fortitude Budget, qualifying arts companies were able to get a higher tier of employment support similar to the retail and food sectors.

Arts freelancers, whose roles are as diverse as actors, curators, writers and stage managers, were particularly badly affected as JSS was focused on keeping salaried Singaporean employees on their wage bill. Fortunately, some relief came in the form of the Self-Employed Person Income Relief Scheme (SIRS) launched by Ministry of Manpower and administered by National Trades Union Congress (NTUC). While the scheme was unveiled in early April and has been welcomed by all freelancers, there was still a need for the NAC to get an arts specific perspective and push out its own targeted initiatives and programmes.

Arts Resource Hub (ARH), set up by NAC in 2019, has turned out to be an invaluable resource for this. Even though ARH's co-working spaces had to close, ARH had become a platform for NAC to reach out to the community by conducting surveys, holding useful engagement sessions and pushing practical resources like online clinics and courses. It has provided NAC a direct line to the community, and insights from our surveys and conversations have found their way to refinements in the government's support schemes.

One key feature of ACRP was to incentivise artists and arts companies to productively make the most of the "down time" during the pandemic. It seemed an opportune time for artists to think about upskilling and to consider ways to deepen their craft and new modes of arts making or presentation. NAC's intention was simple: every economic sector faces an uncertain and possibly rocky future. COVID-19 aside, with technology developing at breakneck speed and changing consumption patterns, how would NAC persuade artists to consider new modes of delivery and new ways to sustain careers? What new capabilities were required? We debated how best to support training during this period, including commissioning courses to be conducted by veteran artists while encouraging other practitioners to sign up for new courses, some of them with training allowances.

That is how NAC came to launch two grant schemes early in the pandemic. The Capability Development Scheme for the Arts (CDSA) and Digital Presentation Scheme (DPG) were created in record speed to support this intent. In recognition of the COVID-19 crisis, funding quanta were set at a higher percentage of total project expenditure, even potentially funding projects in full. At the time of writing, there have been about 170 successful applicants for CDSA with 440 training opportunities provided for artists and arts workers and more than 250 successful DPG projects funded benefitting over 3,000 artists and arts groups. Readers may have experienced and enjoyed some of these offerings on mobile devices and laptops in the last few months.

NAC also made sure it commissioned significant projects of scale during this period, with an eye to providing meaningful gigs for our artists. These ranged from literary reflections in *The Straits Times* to reproducing the works of over 350 visual artists on the city's Streets of Hope banners (Figure 2) and a month-long Facebook concert series "From the Living Room" (Figure 3). This popular series invited musicians and dancers to showcase their skills and craft from their homes in informal sessions hosted by actors. There are more of such commissions in the pipeline, including collaborations with other arts groups, media companies and government agencies.

While NAC has the resources to keep this level of activity going for the short and medium terms, there may be challenges in the long run, especially with the fiscal constraints the government will face in the coming years. Resources are finite after all. Thus there is, more than ever, an imperative to relook at the way culture is created, presented and supported. The whole populace must step up to sustain the arts, especially with the possibility of an enduring pandemic with no effective vaccine till 2021, and

Figure 2. Streets of Hope banners on lamp posts featuring the works of over 350 visual artists. Image courtesy of National Arts Council.

Figure 3. Home-grown Chinese string quintet StringWerkz performing in the "From the Living Room" series. Image courtesy of National Arts Council.

an explosion of global infections leading to more imported cases in Singapore. The responsibility of caring for the cultural sector in a crisis like this must be a shared one. In pre-COVID times, we must have laughed and cried in the theatre, raved over a favourite book or song, or taken immense pleasure in the arts and culture. In bad times, surely, we should then encourage our artists and find ways to keep the arts companies thriving.

At the start of this pandemic, there was criticism that artists were being pressured to jump on the digital bandwagon, that it was a drab substitute for live performances, and that there was a surfeit of hastily-stitched content from the archives being put online. A few artists also felt they were being nudged to say something when there was nothing to say, when more pressing life and death matters confronted frontline workers daily. Art seemed almost superfluous.

But as the months went on, two things became clear—when people are physically isolated and in low spirits, the arts, even if experienced via the screen of a laptop or mobile device, can bring much joy, relief and a sense of human connection. The arts, as many artists instinctively know, can be a balm to troubled psyches and revive weary minds. Stirring music and comic theatre from our Singaporean arts groups as well as virtual museum tours were just some of many options available at one's fingertips.

The other realisation was that the arts can deal with difficult topics—it can chronicle pain, explore silver linings in dark clouds and celebrate things we take for granted. It can also help us see a crisis such as this pandemic in a different way and process our sense of loss and helplessness. In a poem commissioned to reflect on life in

Singapore during COVID-19, Amanda Chong writes movingly:

> "Perhaps all this was to awaken us shapes
> of suffering: the bruise encircling
> a nurse's mouth as she peels off her mask…
>
> Our comfort feels like shame at first,
> then swells into an unsettling need
> for change. We must find the cracks
> where light comes through, then prise
> them wider.[4]

Of course, there is no doubt live performances are special—we can all recall how a stadium can be electrified by a rock band or how an audience is set abuzz by spectacular theatre—and we can only hope such performances can return to our cultural calendar sooner rather than later. But in the same breath, the online arts experience should not be summarily dismissed either. Such experiences can readily translate into meaningful arts education, development of new audiences and even internationalisation opportunities. A good online arts experience can also engender a sense of community, especially when a show is livestreamed and performers are able to interact with audiences. Such intimacy is unique and is a different experience from live performances in a venue.

Given so many unknowns with this tricky virus, who can predict when we can see full theatres and concert halls again? Till then, is it not necessary to think out of the box on how to deliver the arts given this current health crisis, and the proscriptions on large gatherings? The answer may not be a simple binary of live versus online.

When shows reopen with reduced capacities and social distancing, there will also be a need to rethink business models. What will ticket prices look like, if capacities of performing arts spaces are reduced? What are the optimal ways to monetise the content that companies put up online? How will fund-raising change in the future? Challenging times are clearly ahead and everywhere there is talk of consolidations and closures. But crises often seed—even force—innovations, so we have reason to be optimistic. Certainly, NAC will be there to journey with the arts community, testing new solutions, building bridges with new partners and lending meaningful support.

Humankind and its leading artists have always adapted despite the vicissitudes of history, be it changing geopolitics, man-made wars, natural disasters or the advent of radical technology. Through the long lens of history, COVID-19 will probably be viewed in a similar vein. As society changes, along with new challenges thrown up by COVID-19, everyone will have to adapt. But with the collective efforts of Singaporeans, the arts community and cultural institutions, we can be confident our artists will discover new ways to communicate, to enthral, and to provoke thought and discussion about contemporary society, just as their creative forebears did for millennia past. ☐

About the Author

Paul Tan is Deputy Chief Executive Officer of National Arts Council, the government agency championing arts by nurturing creative excellence and supporting broad audience engagement. Tan joined NAC in 2011 and currently sits on the boards of Singapore Chinese Orchestra, Singapore Symphony Group and Singapore Chinese Cultural Centre. An accomplished writer and poet, Tan has also published five volumes of poetry.

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Notes:

1. DORSCON stands for Disease Outbreak Response System Condition, a colour-coded framework deployed by Singapore government to address disease situations. The Orange alert indicates severe but not widespread transmission, hence requiring more stringent measures of containment. The government announced DORSCON Orange on 7 February.
2. *Kancheong* is a Singlish phrase of Hokkien origin, which means anxious, harried or panicky.
3. The Singapore government announced a period of "Circuit Breaker" on 3 April 2020 to pre-empt the trend of increasing local transmission of COVID-19. During the Circuit Breaker, elevated safe distancing measures were implemented. Singapore exited the Circuit Breaker on 1 June 2020.
4. *Lamentations* by Amanda Chong, was first published in *The Straits Times*, July 6, 2020 as part of "30 Days of Art" series, commissioned by NAC.

Never a dull moment in Jogja

Mella Jaarsma
Co-founder, Cemeti Institute for Art & Society, Yogyakarta, Indonesia

The artist communities in Indonesia have always been known for their ability to self-organise and initiate responses to wider social events. Artist Mella Jaarsma shares how the artists in Yogyakarta, one of the most vibrant hubs of arts and culture in the country, took the pandemic in their stride and responded creatively to continue engaging audiences, generate means of living and support the vulnerable among them.

When the pandemic hit, all art spaces and communities in Yogyakarta had to cancel their regular programmes from the beginning of March 2020, but it took only a few weeks before the arts community started to think about alternatives.

The arts community in Yogyakarta is used to having to respond to political and social upheaval, as well as natural disasters. The self-reliant community turns adversity into an approach of helping one another to get through turbulent times. For example, Yustina Neni, director of Kedai Kebun Forum[1], cooked every day over two months hundreds of meals to deliver to "Dapur Aksi Berbagi" (Share Action Kitchen), a free food delivery for people who had lost their income, like the transgender community, students from East Indonesia who could not go home, and others in need.

In 1997 during the *Krismon* economic crisis (Asian financial crisis), and up to May 1998 when President Suharto finally resigned after months of demonstrations, I remember at Cemeti that we had to survive with nine months of no income. When the big earthquake hit in 2006 in Yogyakarta, artists had to spend at least one year to help rebuild and re-vitalise communities with social art projects for the many inhabitants who lost their homes before the artists returned to their previous practices[2].

This time, the arts community is one of the most affected by the virus outbreak, with performers hit the hardest. But '*gotong royong*' or community collaboration set in motion. The musician Leilani Hermiasih, also known as Frau, released a new album and tickets for online listening were sold. Together with other musicians, after consulting with doctors, she also created a music list based on acoustemology, to be played in hospitals for patients and medical staff (www.meruang.com) with the hope of lifting their spirits.

Ruang Mes 56, a community of photographers and video artists, turned their art space into a kitchen. They started to cook for the artist community and volunteers who came to sew masks. They collected textile donations and produced thousands of masks in the first weeks of the pandemic to hand out to people in the local markets, *becak* drivers[3], and those in other small businesses. The production of these masks needed support and was advertised on Instagram, so one could, for example, donate money for 100 masks.

With no end of the pandemic on the horizon, the Ruang Mes 56 artists started to create different programmes with the hope of generating some income for their own community. They made a special series of works to be sold in an online store called Unstocking Room. All members also gave virtual individual workshops, which generated some income.

One of the members and founders of Ruang Mes 56, Wimo Ambala Bayang, decided to wander through the empty streets at night to take photographs of the city and his surroundings (Figure 1). Personally, I like to do this during uncertain times as well. For example, I did this when Jogja (local shortened name for Yogyakarta) got hit by the big earthquake in 2006, and whenever Jogja was covered in ashes after

a volcanic eruption. Especially in these times when we are flooded with photography, I like working with a specific photographic aesthetic, using a more dramatic black and white approach. The black and white photographs look like fiction.

To capture the signs of life in the pandemic, Wimo told me that he had to focus on personal night series, otherwise he would have been lost and depressed. Besides being involved in the activities at Ruang Mes 56, he needed to make personal notes through these still images. He said, "To be a photographer and using a camera. we can work in the moment, respond directly and be reflective at the same time. You witness the moment and this extraordinary situation, and its conditions are experienced by everyone in the world. So it becomes very important documented footage".

Wimo was already using several platforms to promote his work before the pandemic. But this time, he started to explore more intensively his visibility as an artist in social media and the various platforms that emerged during the pandemic. He learned to work more specifically with hashtags. A photo he posted on Instagram with #ICPConcerned was nominated out of thousands by International Center of Photography to be printed, exhibited and archived.

Figure 1. *30 April 2020-Night Letters*—a series of photographs taken by artist Wimo Ambala Bayang at night as he wandered through the empty streets of Jogja. Images courtesy of Wimo Ambala Bayang.

Figure 2. *Tupu, Mezzotint, 8 x 10cm, 2020*—a mezzo print of a Papermoon puppet character using a small etching press. Artwork and image courtesy of visual artist Iwan Effendi.

Iwan Effendi, a visual artist and one of the founders of Papermoon Puppet Theatre, saw many of his friends getting passive and depressed. As such, he began looking for some activity to do other than staring at a screen. Using a small etching press that he never had time to use, he started producing tiny aqua and mezzo prints of characters from the Papermoon puppet plays (Figure 2). Each etching was produced in sets of 10 prints, and he invited artists Uji 'Hahan' Handoko, Ruth Marbun, Maryanto Beb and Hendra 'Hehe' Harsono to co-produce with him.

Concentrating for weeks on honing his etching skills, Iwan mastered the diverse etching techniques during these months of isolation. By selling them online, the artists received a basic income. In July 2020, Iwan Effendi and Maria Tri Sulistyani, the original founder of Papermoon Puppet Theatre, started working on a new Papermoon production. The international puppet festival they organised later in 2020 has to change shape due to the pandemic. At the point of writing, they are working on an alternative online festival. The lockdown fortunately allowed them to focus on the publication of their first book, called *Selepas Napas*, which provides profound insights into their performances and beautiful projects.

The online space has changed for the art community during this time. No art hub wanted to lag behind when it came to conceptualising and organising a new masterclass, workshop or Zoom discussion. The virtual space became very intense and we were forced to reread 'public space' in the

context of lockdown. I think that most online programmes during these months had the purpose to reach the public, to entertain instead of creating a quality work. Previously, social media was most commonly used as a platform for promoting the art projects and artworks. Now social media has become the art platform itself. The artworks created only exist on the web. Papermoon Puppet Theatre initiated in March and April two series of virtual performances called Story Tailor #1 and #2. They advertised the performances through Instagram where the Papermoon account had 42,000 followers (Figure 3). The noteworthy feature is that every performance was created and tailored for individuals who had donated to the programme and who were then given the privilege to set the theme for the customised performance. The themes were wide-ranging, for example, blue sky, rice field, tension, uncertainty, blindness, recovery, birthday etc.

Figure 3. Two series of virtual performances called Story Tailor #1 and #2 were advertised through Papermoon Puppet Theatre's Instagram account which helped ensure a sold-out event. Image courtesy of Papermoon Puppet Theatre.

Figure 4. Staff working in the exhibition space while observing safe distancing.
Image courtesy of Cemeti Institute for Art & Society.

Our sense of time has been questioned during the pandemic. We need to create experiences or moments in our lives, in order to remember and look back and have the feeling that we have progressed in enriching our lives. The pandemic is taking its toll on the human need to undergo specific experiences after almost five months at home, with movement in a limited space. In my opinion, connecting every day to virtual reality and undergoing daily routine, these moments became blurred into one undifferentiated period, changing our sense of time. I believe that we survive through specific experiences in which all our senses are activated.

The exhibition space at Cemeti Institute for Art & Society is now empty, except for staff spread around working on their laptops (Figure 4). They are no longer working in the original small office space, sitting side by side. Instead, they have decided not to work from home, but meet each other in Cemeti while observing social distancing. Rimpang Nusantara (Rhizomatic Archipelago), a project that already started one and half years ago, is an exchange project with 13 artists from 11 regions—Yogyakarta, Madura, Aceh, Pontianak, Palu, Polewali Mandar (Sulawesi Barat), Samarinda, Tanjung Pinang, Ambon, Kupang, and Atambua. These artists have met in person in short residencies, which were held in various river, sea and land residencies throughout the Indonesian archipelago. The last months were used to strengthen the relationships with discussions online, and to share work and creative processes with the focus on various forms of contextual art practices and knowledge production.

In July 2020, Cemeti has also started the Impossible Projector Proyek Mustahil. Twenty paper notebooks were distributed to artists, curators and arts communities. One thing that is certain and which we want to continue to believe

in, is, in times of COVID-19, digital and virtual spaces are not the only platforms for art, because the opportunities for art experimentations are wide. The goal of the Impossible Project is to place "(the) impossible" and "Impossibility" as the subject matter, with the focus on the necessity of the arts in accordance with the actual context in contemporary society. Twenty books will be filled with writings and drawings about "Impossible Ideas", and like a relay, the book will circulate from one artist/art worker to another. In the end, Cemeti hopes to receive these books back and exhibit them, sharing them with a larger public and initiating discussions.

As mentioned earlier, I believe that we survive through specific experiences in which all our senses are activated. The participatory art projects with physical involvement, is an encounter with space and time, and provide such specific experiences. I am curious what the future will bring. We are suddenly in a fast-shifting culture, but in which direction are we shifting, and what impact has this on our cultural values? What is the role of visual art, its artists and the art world now and in the future? We have to reinvent and have strategies to position ourselves during this moment in history and after. □

About the Author

Co-founder of Cemeti Institute for Art and Society in Yogyakarta, the first space for contemporary art in Indonesia when it was established in 1988, Mella Jaarsma was born in the Netherlands and studied visual art at Minerva Art Academy in Groningen. Jaarsma is known for her complex costume installations and her focus on forms of cultural and racial diversity embedded within clothing, the body and food. Her works have been presented widely in exhibitions and art events in Indonesia and internationally.

Notes:

1. Kedai Kebun Forum is an alternative art space managed by artists and consists of a gallery, performance space, bookstore and restaurant.
2. More than 300,000 homes were destroyed and 6,000 people killed.
3. The cycle rickshaw, a popular form of transport in Indonesia, is also known as *becak* locally.