

Reflections and practices: Renaissance Thoughts for the Empty Museum

by

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The plight and humongous challenges that museums are and have been facing at this point in time has been making the headlines across the globe. Indeed, a microscopic virus has coerced the vast majority of long-standing and well-established museum institutions into closure, leaving them practically reliable on nothing other than their online presence. The museum landscape has, perhaps, never felt so fragile, as it comes to terms with its inherent institutional fragility. It is, indeed, a painful process as the vast majority of museums deal with a state of liminality, as they have moved into the new normal as they strive to function behind closed doors to contemplate or envisage leaving doors ajar for their publics to visit once again in the immediate future. It is at this very moment, at this unprecedented point in time, that the museum's very own existence comes under discussion. Perhaps, the question to ask is the one suggested by Mami Kataoka, Director of the Mori Art Museum in Tokyo and President of the International Committee for Museum and Collections of Modern Art, informed by the 2011 Japan earthquake and tsunami.

“What are the essential reasons for the museum, art communities and art itself to exist?”

The point certainly holds true for any museum typology. With the prospect of an indefinite closure now slowly fading, the need for museums to re-open continues to be underpinned by many on social media platforms. Re-opening is being mooted, at least in part, in response to the need of museums living up to their mission and ethos as spaces of solace. There is a perceived ambition to restart again, as many seek to regain their lost normality which might not be anywhere close in the next twelve to twenty-four months.

As the transition unfolds, and a new reality slowly emerges, museums might be hopefully becoming much more aware of the potential to reinvent themselves in new and creative ways. I live in the hope that looking back in a couple of years 'time, armed and informed

with the benefit of hindsight, museums might be living the golden opportunity to engage with meaningful change. Much of this thinking is already there, published in books and presented in conferences. It might have been labelled radical or inspired by utopia before COVID-19 struck, but as the unthinkable is now the new reality, labels of utopia and dreams have faded leaving the space, relatively overnight, for this thinking to gain much more relevance and importance. Just as Forbes speaks about the ways and means how the [coronavirus pandemic is accelerating the future of work in a recently published article](#), the same is true for museums.

I choose to focus on three key elements of this change process out of many more to consider. The first concerns the ways and means how museums tend to forget the answer to a very simple question - **what do we stand for?** By questioning their very own existence, and identify the reasons why institutions should continue to exist in the first place, would help identify what they really stand for today as the immediate past slowly fades away. This would be the point of departure where to seed meaningful change. The second question is equally relevant - **for whom?** It might be the case that your institution was reckoned to be more of an exclusive place, detached from your neighbourhood, their needs and ambitions. A clear understanding for which publics and communities your museum stands could be the beginning of a soul-searching journey leading museums to become truly relevant, perhaps to a much bigger audience base too. There are stories to be told, ideas to be explored, languages to be learnt and information to be provided... that go beyond what you might have always been considered to be the right and only way forward. The third equally simple question follows on the previous two - **how do we then engage?** It is about how, then, to engage with publics and how to empower them, reach out to them, welcome them and create meaningful conversations. This is where the current impasse, with museums relying much more on the virtual as the physical is at a standstill, comes into the picture. There is no question that museum futures shall rely much more on the online but there is potential for this improved presence to be much more far-reaching to include not just a broader cache of lectures, live streams and interactive experiences that are public-centred and useful to the now. This brings me to

the immediate future museums are now facing or close to which can also be summarised in a simple question - What relevance will the digital have when the physical recovers?

The news from Chinese museums, and a handful of Northern European museums that have kept their doors open, is indicative of this immediate future. In the immediate, the museum can only aspire to be a solitary place, welcoming a restricted number of visitors booked in advance via a QR code system, wearing a face mask, and with a health certificate of sorts. The number of visitors is also kept under control by limiting numbers to 50 per cent of total capacity. Going by the Chinese experience, the post-COVID19 visit shall be beyond comparison to the previous normal as museums deal with services and spaces that were not designed and conceived with the risks of a pandemic in mind.

At the other end of the landscape, museum netizens are on the increase albeit not with perceived rate that the first few days might have suggested. The new museum netizen has the luxury to access museum content at any time of the day from anywhere on the planet. The choice was always there, but the time to do so was not. Indeed, the latest findings suggest that virtual audiences would like to hear from museums even though they might not be searching museums. With a new museum netizen slowly emerging, museums run the real risks of forgetting that this new netizen is also beyond time zones and geographies. The risk in forgetting that this may also be one and the same visitor who might be coming through the main door in a few weeks time may also be overlooked.

The solution may lie, at least in part, in transmedia thinking defined as a process whereby *“... integral elements of a fiction get dispersed systematically across multiple delivery channels for the purpose of creating a unified and coordinated entertainment experience. Ideally, each medium makes its own unique contribution to the unfolding of the story.”*

Henry Jenkins first wrote about transmedia way back in 2003 and this thinking is certainly not entirely new to the museum world. It is perhaps the ways and means how this has been applied until now that has limited its impact and the full exploitation of its potential. Adopting transmedia thinking at concept stage, rather than as an adjunct or a complementary addition to a bigger project, can guide the project team's thinking mode

in shaping content in a broad range of media. This would empower museums to reach out to a much more stratified audience base and make inroads with audience categories that were generally considered secondary to the physical museum publics. But transmedia is not just about the digital, social media or some other hi-tech platform that requires extensive and costly digitisation. Going by empathy it might also be a radio communication, a telephone call or a traditional letter. What matters is not the technology used but the ways and means how to reach your public. Each experience can certainly be a stand-alone. The sum total of experiences originating in a broader choice of media can make for a richer and much more engaging experience.

With museums facing the prospect of increased expenses for much lower visitor numbers in return, it is perhaps the right time to sow the seeds of a human centred museum experience in answer to the fundamental question that the American educator, media theorist and social critic Neil Postman raised way back:

*“As I see it, a museum is an answer to a fundamental question:
What does it mean to be a human being?”*