

## 'Isolation as a collective experience': Museums' first responses to COVID-19

Amy K. Levin

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In this issue, Cassandra Kist describes 'isolation as a collective experience', encapsulating the paradox at the heart of the human experience in 2020. This expression captures the challenges museums and other exhibitionary institutions face as they adapt to rapidly changing conditions. These have caused physical site closures, staff furloughs, unprecedented budget shortfalls, the digitization of exhibitions and programmes, and audience assessments. It is no wonder, perhaps, that almost none of the more than fifty submissions we received focused on COVID-19 as a physical disease with significant effects on real bodies, and we received no submissions from medical museums. The majority of articles explored the epidemic as a social, psychological, economic, and cultural phenomenon in the context of a simultaneous popular uprising against racism. Other perspectives will no doubt emerge later.

Our submissions imply a second paradox: even though the disease wreaks its havoc on the body – the quintessential expression of human materiality – authors discuss the epidemic largely in terms of its less tangible or material effects. This leads to an important theme of this issue. According to Areti Galani and Jenny Kidd, the epidemic has 'forced a de-prioritization of touch and physicality' as individuals have been forced to isolate or socially distance themselves and institutions have shifted to digital formats. In the opening article of this issue, these authors complicate the binary of physical/digital by applying the concept of hybridity; further, they propose 'a continuum of materialities', built through interaction and mediation. These notions open possibilities for (re)imagining museums and allow for consideration of the ethical aspects of digital environments. Lindsay Balfour, too, addresses materiality when she discusses the epidemic in the context of the 9/11 Museum and Memorial in New York. How does one convey the 'enormity and gravity' of absence and death through digital media? She concludes that the very inadequacy of the digital becomes an expression of these losses.

This stark physical and psychological truth is behind many institutions' efforts to promote individual and community wellbeing. Elizabeth Crooke argues that museums must use the forced 'pause' to consider 'what we really want . . . from our cultural institutions' in the face of inequalities brought into relief by the pandemic and the Black Lives Matter movement. Drawing her examples from Northern Ireland, she notes that digitization is important but not appropriate for all populations within a community.

The remaining articles offer case studies that expand on the themes in the first pieces while presenting distinctive responses to the coronavirus. Many of these activities come in tandem with the re-examination of goals and purposes that Crooke recommends. Anna Guboglo recognizes the limits of virtual museum tours or exhibitions while praising Russian museums' efforts to serve 'as models of public service and collaboration'. Noting that Russian museums offer more online courses than the nation's universities, she argues for the importance of virtual offerings that educate, reduce isolation, and decrease boredom. At the same time, she recognizes significant challenges confronting Russian institutions, comparing them to those in the wider European museum community.

Community wellbeing is at the heart of the following article, in which Jade French, Nic Lunt, and Martin Pearson describe how the Catalyst science centre in the UK shifted an existing mental health project, Mindlab, into a virtual format. This project is unique in the way that it uses techniques from cognitive-behavioral therapy even as it explores the scientific and emotional meanings of terms like *pressure*. An added benefit is the satisfaction that staff members derive from working with youth and members of vulnerable communities.

When Thanksgiving Point in the USA closed because of the pandemic, its founders subsidized payroll. Employees found meaning in writing letters of thanks. When they decided to survey visitors about their needs and wants, employees in turn received expressions of gratitude. They also began helping medical workers and the elderly in their community. The author, Kari Ross Nelson, concludes that while gratitude will not solve all problems, it does have mental health benefits and creates unity.

Nikki Sullivan, too, presents a case study relating to community and togetherness. She describes how Australia's Centre for Democracy took *Stitch and Resist*, a programme that had already been planned, and refocused it on the pandemic. This craftivism project is designed to 'facilitate active citizenship through the creation of political statements in cross stitch; to create safe spaces . . . and to contribute to building and nurturing connection, community and wellbeing'. Those involved address injustice and inequality, demonstrating remarkable ingenuity in maintaining contact through various media – not limiting themselves to digital affordances.

Home is a focus of the project Zoe Hendon analyzes, which is also built on previously planned activities. At the UK Museum of Domestic Design and Architecture (MoDA), a series of podcasts titled 'That Feels Like Home' remains somewhat object-based, but has pivoted to explore the effects of COVID-19 on 'shared experiences and perceptions of home.' Guest speakers theorize about how private living spaces have become increasingly visible through software such as Zoom. Museums re-orienting themselves to visitors tuning in from home may find the podcasts particularly useful.

Sarah Laurenson, together with Calum Robertson and Sophie Goggins, presents another object-based perspective – that of building a COVID-19 collection for National Museums of Scotland. Their experiences will resonate with those creating similar collections and facing the difficulties of doing so remotely. The ethics of such collecting must be considered as well, because many items, such as personal protective equipment (PPE) and ventilators, may be linked to intense losses or still be in use. This project, which exposes and complicates the interrelationships between the material and digital, gains inflection as the authors examine the effects of the epidemic on education and policing in an environment different from England's.

Anna Catalani and Heather Hughes focus exclusively on youth and education in their article on engaging audiences during the epidemic, especially in institutions that have relied heavily on field trips. The International Bomber Command Centre deploys gratitude as one of its strategies, using social media to call for digital contributions such as letters from children to lessen veterans' isolation. Creswell Crags creates activities for at-home learning even as it uses social media to mount a youth fundraising campaign. Both institutions face the prospect of charging for certain outreach activities – fortunately, the latter may reach more children than traditional field trips.

'Reconceptualizing the Classroom' shifts the focus to university students. The staff at the Nabb Research Center (USA) had to move a class exercise online in the middle of term – a common predicament. The activity they devised connects an eighteenth-century mahogany desk to its owners, using digitized primary sources. One of them, the family inventory, lists both the secretary and transactions involving enslaved people. This exercise illustrates the way that the digital and the material exist on a continuum, as well as revealing previously hidden archival histories.

The Museum of Chinese in America (MoCA) likewise engages in opposition to racism. Employees were appalled by anti-Chinese prejudice in the early phases of the pandemic. They started the *OneWorld* project to collect stories of Asian Americans combating hate by helping community members. The collecting initiative is also intended to increase the availability in schools of historical materials pertaining to minorities. After the killing of George Floyd, the museum broadened its commitment, promoting solidarity among minority groups.

Cassandra Kist's concluding article also examines difficult or 'challenging' issues. Kist acknowledges ethical concerns, ranging from inappropriate responses

in digital venues to the profits of behemoth social media corporations in a time of scarcity and want. She simultaneously condemns the cruelty of focusing too heavily on positive messaging and avoiding darker issues. In this context, she commends the responses of sites such as the Auschwitz-Birkenau Memorial and Museum as well as the Anne Frank House. Both emphasize shared experiences of isolation as well as social responsibility; for instance, one institution featured a debate over mask wearing.

The epidemic and resulting closures have engaged institutions in multiple challenges. Many have lost supporters and employees to the disease. Other difficulties relate to sustainability and the materiality of object collections. But the crisis has simultaneously forced institutions to fulfil longstanding promises: to reach more diverse audiences, to enrich digital offerings, and to build community. The surge of the Black Lives Matter movement beginning at the end of May threw social inequalities into even greater relief – another reminder that even at times of great isolation, we must all commit to helping each other.