INSAM

JOURNAL OF CONTEMPORARY MUSIC. ART AND TECHNOLOGY

Space Crisis: Encounter in the Museum Building or Online?
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SPACE CRISIS: ENCOUNTER IN THE MUSEUM BUILDING OR ONLINE?[1]

Abstract: After witnessing a huge turnaround in the wider social context in the previous period, it seems that the question of the future of museums in the digital environment has begun to take on a very optimistic tone full of potential. There is a growing visibility of these heritage institutions on social networks and an increasingly diverse offer of virtual tours, as well as the use of modern virtual and augmented reality technologies in the interpretation and presentation of cultural heritage, while some works of art and collections are created exclusively for cyberspace. Nevertheless, the museum as a meeting place still seems irreplaceable. At a time of isolation, growing loneliness and fears, studies on the emotions of visitors during their stay in the museum in the last few years show that real, physical spaces of the museum encourage constructive attitudes. Encounters with other visitors as well as with the exhibited artifacts especially prove to be important for positive feelings and the need to visit the museum. We will issue these theoretical premises on selected examples and examine whether modern technologies serve as additional tools of promotion and other possible ways of presenting museum content or, oppositely, whether social media and NFT galleries manage to overcome the need for the museum itself as a place of physical encounter.

Keywords: museum space, Wunderkammer, digital art, wellbeing, heterotopia.

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Spaces of the digital Wunderkammer?

Dating back to the 1960s when analogue photos were for the first time transformed into computer pixels – pieces of a graphic that when put together create a whole image – digital art started developing and has today become a widely spread medium of expression. By the end of the 20th century, digital museum presentations have been created, at the beginning on CD-ROMs, soon developing for online appearances and becoming more popular in parallel with an increase in the use of personal computers, mobile phones and gadgets (Jokanović 2020). While at first different curatorial approaches explored how to represent digital artefacts in physical gallery spaces, with the development and availability of computer technology and the Internet we have reached the moment when some collections exist only in the digital format. Moreover, one of the biggest technological disruptions of the past decade has been the rise of social media. It's estimated that in 2019 there were 3.2 billion people using platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and Snapchat every day. That's roughly 42% of the world's population and during pandemics these numbers are increasing dramatically. Every day the growing use of social media is more noticeable through the percentage of millennials that log into social media platforms on a regular basis (90.4%), compared to 48.2% of baby boomers (those born between 1946 and 1964). Museums have been keen adopters of social media platforms, with institutions like MoMA, Guggenheim, Tate, and the Van Gogh Museum attracting millions of followers (Museum Next 2022). The spread in the use of social networks have influenced not only art creation but also audience participation, as well as different curatorial processes. However, even though there are many great examples of the use of online platforms and social media for art creation, heritage and art presentation, as well as many attempts to completely surpass physical exhibiting spaces and move to the vast digital environment, it seems that this media is still dominantly promotional and only sometimes digital, as when presented a collection often demands appearance in the physical space in order to immerse the audience and provoke the emotional experience.

On the other hand, the 2017 Hiscox Art Trade Report indicated that 91% of the galleries surveyed actively use social media as a promotional tool for their business, and the artists and art they exhibit. With Instagram considered by 57% of this community as the most effective social media channel, it's clear that the consumption of art is broadening outside of traditional mediums. Digital artist Chris Labrooy stated:

> It's difficult to see how one can exist without a digital presence. That's how important it is to my career. I don't think I have such a thing as an

offline fan base. Some of my most interesting projects have happened through Instagram […] It's very different to the traditional structure whereby a creative agency reaches out to an artist to produce work for a client (Artwork Archive, n.d.).

Furthermore, due to the development of digital artefact copyright protection and the online cryptocurrency trade, over the last two years a real shift in the increasing creation and presentation of digital art has occurred. Actually, the recent introduction of non-fungible tokens (NFTs) and blockchain technology has for the first time enabled artists and collectors to verify the authenticity of a digital work of art. This has rapidly created a completely new trade channel in the art world but it has also raised many issues considering the quality of the content and the methodology of collecting and exhibiting these artefacts in contemporary art museums. The greatest boom occurred in 2020 when Mike Winkelmann, the digital artist Beeple, sold his digital collage for $69,346,250 at a Christie's auction. Since 2007, this artist had been creating digital artworks every single day for 13-and-a-half years, documenting the political turbulence in the USA, society's obsession with and fear of technology, personal feelings and his family events. By bringing individual works together Beeple created an impressive collage: *Everydays: the first 5000 days*:

Minted exclusively for Christie's, the monumental digital collage was offered as a single lot sale concurrently with First Open, and realized $69,346,250. Marking two industry firsts, Christie's is the first major auction house to offer a purely digital work with a unique NFT (Non-fungible token) – effectively a guarantee of its authenticity – and to accept cryptocurrency, in this case Ether, in addition to standard forms of payment for the singular lot (Christies, n.d.).

As stated on the official channels of communication by Christie's, this auction house has never offered a new media artwork of this scale of importance before, and it was the first time it entered into blockchain and started a new chapter in art history.

The collage itself is composed out of a range of different pictures, from simple drawings to 3D models and digital depictions, covering the artist's reactions on contemporary events and colourful abstract themes. Therefore, the "Everydays" could be considered as a particular digital Wunderkammer, the creator's image of the world encompassing the selected memories from the everyday life, the imaginary beings and abstract representations of inner states and feelings.[2]

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2   For more about the meaning and models of Wunderkammer collections see Jokanović 2021.

However, even our mind is invited to wander while zooming-in on images of this monumental collage, it seems that the lack of body movement through the space and any encounter with physical objects slows down or sometimes even disables our emotional reaction. This argument will be issued through the further research in which we will get back to the origins of the concept of both the mental and physical wandering bond to the mentioned predecessors of modern museum exhibitions in the real space. It will further rely on the concept of performative heritage, which is perceived as a bodily interaction with the site in which particular space, relations and values are formed. Also, we will turn to the therapeutic potential of encounter with physically exhibited art and museum collections and visitors, which enables a displacement of a consumer into a particular fiction and is recognised as a tool for wellbeing practice. Finally, even the art market is definitely passing through a real shift and moving fast to digital spaces, and many scholars advocate for so-called *phygital* approach (Debono 2022) which would combine both the traditional and digital exhibition spaces, offering a unique transmedia communication to the audience.

Origins of museum space

Despite the proliferation of digital art and various processes of the digitization of archival and museum artefacts, as well as an increasing number of virtual collections and exhibition tours, the museum is still often identified with the space it occupies. As curator and museum theoretician, Ana Sladojević explained that space is like a semi-permeable membrane in which there is a seemingly special world, more precisely: an image of the world (Sladojević 2012). This author also based her thesis on the notion of Wunderkammer – a collection of marvellous objects characteristic of the Renaissance and Baroque Europe. Spaces formed as chambers filled with different objects of curiosity, natural species, man-made artifacts, machines and literature were aimed at contemplation, as well as representation of the identity of the owners. These piles of objects, delicately assembled and exhibited in vitrines, cabinet-shrank or various boxes, are thought to be predecessors of modern museums. Things which were gathered tended to represent the microcosms, to be tridimensional encyclopaedias of the whole world or at least of the world seen from the perspective of their creator. Revealing the melancholy of every collector who never manages to complete his collection but continues to wander and explore the world, these *islands of meaning*, although seemingly very chaotic collections, had clear criteria by which they were arranged. The juxtapositions of the objects encouraged the selected observers to wander both physically and mentally through the exhibition and revealed the attitude of the man of the early modern age towards the knowledge and understanding of the world.

The concept of wandering (inseparably physical and mental), discovering the meaning *behind* the object itself, collecting and directly studying the object in order to understand the world, is therefore characteristic of the period of creating the forerunner of today's museums, the curiosity cabinet. Therefore, such collections, together with the change of attitude towards the notion of knowledge during the Enlightenment period, are transformed into assemblies of art, technology, minerals and natural species, and other corpuses of modern museum institutions on the one hand, and spaces for experiment and scientific discovery on the other (Jokanović 2017).

Such particular worlds in small were at the same time a status symbol, an indicator of power, a testimony to distant exotic landscapes, but also the base for numerous scientific experiments. It is consequently, on the idea of summarising time and space, through the comparative existence of elements from different geographical climates and from different epochs, that the idea of a museum, descendant of the curiosity cabinet, was formed. This space is at the same time a phenomenological, cultural and ideological space, which was seemingly separated from the everyday life of space and time outside it, Sladojević will argue (2012). Often occupying chambers of the University or the Academy i.e., positions of knowledge and truth, museum spaces therefore offered an accurate and confidential view to the world. Still, even though they have been transformed and divided into much more disciplinary collections then the ones of curiosity cabinets, museum institutions are today hardly leaving the primary idea that these collections were based on, never the less if it comes to the artistic, natural collection or some other.

Thinking further in the context of the construction and spatial comprehension of the world, it is important to introduce the Foucauldian idea of heterotopia to this discussion.

First there are the utopias. Utopias are sites with no real place. They are sites that have a general relation of direct or inverted analogy with the real space of Society. They present society itself in a perfected form, or else society turned upside down, but in any case these utopias are fundamentally unreal spaces. There are also, probably in every culture, in every civilization, real places – places that do exist and that are formed in the very founding of society – which are something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted. Places of this kind are outside of all places, even though it may be possible to indicate their location in reality. Because these places are absolutely different from all the sites that they reflect and speak about, I shall call them, by way of contrast to utopias, heterotopias (Foucault 1967).

Writing about museums as particular heterotopias, Michael Foucault argued:

> (…) the idea of accumulating everything, of establishing a sort of general archive, the will to enclose in one place all times, all epochs, all forms, all tastes, the idea of constituting a place of all times that is itself outside of time and inaccessible to its ravages, the project of organizing in this way a sort of perpetual and indefinite accumulation of time in an immobile place (…) (1967).

…confirming once more an understanding of a museum as a particular *imago mundi,* the reflex of the world.

Moreover, these places are very intense and transformative, while a particular border from the real places to this "other place" needs to be crossed, "(…) the individual has to submit to rites and purifications; to get in one must have a certain permission and make certain gestures" (Foucault 1967), which is a very important notion for our further discussion.

Performing in the space of fiction

The importance of space and the bodily experience of a museum or heritage site visit could be understood as well through the notion of *entering into fiction* on one hand, as well as the idea of *performing heritage* on the other.

Namely, traditional institutions, such as museums and theatres, are a fiction in which the visitor should reach a state of forgetting his own self – to forget everything about the space in which he is. Only in this way can he be able to spiritually leave the reality of everyday life and immerse himself in the presented fictional world. Boris Groys concluded:

> The art museum visitor had to forget the art museum to become spiritually absorbed in the contemplation of art. In other words, the precondition for the functioning of fiction as fiction is the dissimulation of the material, technological, institutional framing that makes this functioning possible (Groys 2016, 172)

The digital art work or the whole museum on the Internet, on the other hand, although today very technologically well-versed, has the problem that the network itself – the Internet – operates under the assumption of a non-fictional character. The Internet is a medium of information and it is assumed that every piece of information has a reference in reality offline. So, information is always about something, and this something is always off the Internet, that is, offline. Otherwise, Groys believes, all economic transactions on the Internet would be

impossible, as well as all military and security operations. "Of course, fiction can be created on the Internet – for example, a fictional user. However, in that case, the fiction becomes a fraud that can be – and even must be – revealed" (Groys 2016, 173).

On the Internet, art and literature operate in the same space as military planning, tourism, capital investment and so on; Google, among other things, shows that there are no walls on the Internet. Of course, there are special websites or art blogs. But in order to address them, the user has to click and frame them on the surface of his own computer, tablet or mobile phone. Thus, framing becomes deinstitutionalised, and framed fiction becomes defictionalised. The user cannot ignore the frame because he created it. Framing – and the action of framing – becomes explicit and remains explicit during the thinking and writing experience. Here the dissimulation of the framework that has defined our fictional experience for centuries comes to an end. Art and literature can still refer to fiction, not reality. However, we, as users, do not immerse ourselves in that fiction, we will not go through the mirror like Alice; instead, we experience art production as a real process, and works of art as real things. It can be said that there is no art or literature on the Internet but only information about art and literature, along with other information about other fields of human activity (Groys 2016, 174). This conclusion directly brings us to the issue: is it then possible in the cyber, web, museum or work of art on the Internet to reach the moment when a visitor can embark on a contemplative path and become completely overwhelmed with emotions? Technological achievements such as augmented and virtual reality very successfully represent fictional worlds, but concentrating mostly on the visual, while other senses still seem to fail to be involved enough to immerse the visitor into the space of fiction.

When it comes to the bodily experience of museum visit, we could definitely follow its genesis from the wandering of a visitor through curiosity cabinets – as we discussed above the mental wandering was always inseparable from the physical one – to the modern period. On the other hand, today's visitor of a virtual museum tour is limited in experiencing possibilities of movement because the reality in virtual galleries is defined almost exclusively in visual and occasionally auditory categories (Makteviš 2013).

However, the idea of performative heritage introduced by contemporary museum and heritage theoreticians is even more directly suggesting the importance of the presence of body for the perception and even creation of art and heritage space, which helps the stirring of emotional reaction to it. In the very title of their book, Jenny Kidd and Anthony Jackson bring the phrase *performing heritage* connecting seemingly opposite terms – heritage as an eternal and, most often, material value that has been previously formulated, and performance as an action, an act that necessarily takes place at the moment of observation (Jack-

son and Kidd 2012). Studying commemorative events in the context of socialist Yugoslav monuments, Marija Đorđević has come to the conclusion that these grandiose memorial units and parks are meant, constructed and planned for different and often neglected structures, however still invite visitors for certain gestures, interactions and particular performances in that space (Đorđević 2021). The idea of "doing heritage" at the museum or heritage space is also recognised by Australian scholar, Laurajane Smith (Smith 2011). The same author will, analysing various examples of audience reactions to a heritage site, conclude that "museum visiting is an act of *heritage making*":

> Visiting heritage places and museums is an embodied performance that is not only about negotiating what the past may "mean" for the present, but is also involved in exploring and expressing a sense of self and belonging, and understandings of the "other"; (…) It is a process that can reinforce received narratives of self and "otherness" or challenge and remake them – but it is a process in which meaning is actively made. Further, it is a process that is emotional, and in which people emotionally invest in certain understandings of the past and their links to contemporary identity and sense of place (Smith 2016, 17).

Moreover, it is not just the space but, more importantly, the interaction of the body with the artefact and with others that is making a difference between the experience of a physical visit and the online one. Particularly the bodily interaction of the visitor and accompanying emotional experience, which could be gained during art in the real space consumption and exhibition or heritage site visit, still remains irreplaceable. Therefore, we will pay more attention to potentials of these encounters in further research.

Emotional encounters in the museum space

The issue of an encounter with an object and its aura in the museum space is already a very frequent issue in scholarly papers, while an encounter with other visitors is also an important theme. Conducting research 15 years ago, which is a very long period when it comes to themes bond to new media due to fast technical developments and the digital shift, Canadian critical museologist Liana Mctavish came to a conclusion which is still unchanged: there is no massive interest in virtual galleries and users feel constrained, lonely and very limited when visiting. She argued:

> Instead of showing various visitors at exhibitions, virtual galleries are empty. Virtual observers were placed in the circumstances in which there are independent observers – although various studies show that

> people usually visit museums in groups. [...] In that sense, virtual museums do not provide visitors with greater freedom of movement and opinion; these rather confirm than transform conventional relationship between museum and audience (Makteviš 2013, 285).

In addition to clearly indicating the museum as a place of exchange and education, today's researchers insist on a museum visit (physical) as a time during which a better mood is achieved, and the visitor, though perhaps alone, wandering through exhibition spaces and absorbing new knowledge and/or aesthetic forms, gains a sense of fulfilment and constructive personal progress (Jokanović 2021).

The attention towards different emotions, which could and usually are expected to be induced during the visit to a museum or heritage site, was especially prevalent with the planning of the conference at the Institute for Public Understanding of the Past at the University of York in March 2020. Although the programme is constituted out of many international scholars bringing examples from all around the world, this event was postponed due to the Covid-19 pandemic outbreak.

However, even though the period of lockdown brought about a proliferation of digital content and virtual museum tours, feelings of constant isolation, fear and loneliness have finally resulted in the need of a stronger creation of *safe spaces,* in between others, museums as places in which dealing with emotions is encouraged and wellbeing is supported. Therefore, the "Museums for Health and Wellbeing, a Preliminary Report" given by the National Alliance for Museums, Health and Wellbeing in the United Kingdom in 2016 seems more relevant today than ever. The Director of Alliance Daniel Heborn explained:

> Over the past few years, an increasing number of museums have been exploring the impact their collections can have on people's health and wellbeing. This has emerged against a backdrop of an increasing interest from the health sector in the impact of cultural engagement on health outcomes, coinciding with changes in health funding which has given more autonomy to local commissioners to explore new models of health and social care provision (Lackoi, Patsou, and Chatterjee 2016, 3).

There are various strategies and various target groups when it comes to the support of mental health and positive emotions in the museum space or at the heritage site. Many programmes use the therapeutical effect of art and creativity, engaging visitors in some of the workshops and immersing them into the artworld exposed. Yorkshire Sculpture Park, for instance, invites people to take part in sculpting and arts and crafts activities. Their "Breathing Space" project

is directed at vulnerable young people combining art therapy, the outdoors, art, and structured and unstructured wellbeing activities. Equally innovative in approach is the Aspex Gallery in Portsmouth which worked with young people aged 11 – 25 who had low self-esteem about their body image, using art and food in collaboration with mental health workers.

On the other hand, initiatives in the museums of Serbia show as well a step forward to these issues. Therefore, the Gallery of Matica Srpska in Novi Sad has created a "Room for Indulging in Art" within the museum space. Inviting visitors to slow down and relax from the stressful everyday life, curators select one work of visual art every month and expose it across the comfortable armchair in a dark space in which just this peace is under the light and appropriate classical music is played.

Similarly, many mindfulness meditations and practices of enhancing awareness and fully inhabiting the present moment are organised in international museums seen as safe spaces where collections can be used to focus the mind, enhance ways of seeing and experience the surroundings.

In the mentioned Report a special category of museum audience with mental health issues is also singled out, while there is a set of activities dedicated to them in different British museums. Consequently, the authors of the Report explained:

> This audience category encompasses all mental health related activity, including mild to severe depression and anxiety disorders (including phobias) or episodes of extreme stress. With mental health-related (or neurological) issues affecting one in four people worldwide and in the UK and with continuous funding cuts to the mental health sector it is not surprising that museums are focusing on this area, though changes towards a community-led, prevention-based health care model are also important drivers for this work. The majority of museums engaging with mental health service users do not tend to target specific disorders and instead aim to build confidence, reduce social isolation and foster a greater ownership over life (Lackoi, Patsou and Chatterjee 2016, 16).

On the other hand, many projects are developed in order to help visitors with dementia, often involving object handling activities revolving around reminiscence while some museums also use a model of new learning and activities based on Cognitive Stimulation Therapy, which encourages people with early to mid-stage dementia to engage in activities that will help them formulate new memories and knowledge. A range of programmes offered to people with dementia and their carers always relies on the two principles: the aspect of socialisation (in dementia cafes – which is the information point as well as the informal socialising hub, through art and health walks, joining in choirs etc.) as well

as the use of a box of objects and a book of memories in the workshops. Truly, there is a number of recent research projects investigating different aspects of the impact that objects and object handling have not just on dementia, but on general wellbeing. A collaborative project between the University of Leeds and Leeds Museums and Galleries named "Value Inside" looked at whether access to museum objects improved the subjective wellbeing of high-security prisoners. Within this project: "Participants kept a diary throughout the 12 weeks of the project and all involved felt a sense of pride and achievement, and the theme of pride and privilege at being allowed to handle ancient and precious objects emerged strongly" (Lackoi, Patsou and Chatterjee 2016, 28).

Objects are often used to trigger a memory and bring it to the surface. To give a local example, the Museum of Yugoslavia in Belgrade has recently dedicated a couple-of-years conception to recalling and preserving memories of older, living witnesses of the period of Yugoslavia. Next to many talks and social media content, the most effective was the setting in the House of Flowers, around the tombstone of the socialist president Josip Broz Tito. The space of this mausoleum itself already has a particular atmosphere in which Yugo-nostalgic visitors become especially emotional. However, the exhibition named "Figures of Memories", based on the theoretical concept given by Aleida Asman, provoked even more feelings of visitors to whom selected artefacts were initiators of individual memories, strong emotions linked to their youth and life in Yugoslavia and longing for the past.

These issues are more highlighted and present in the museum and heritage sector worldwide during the period of crisis caused by the pandemic, social isolation, and fears for health, the economy, and other aspects of life. In December 2020, while almost all museums in Western Europe and the US were closed, in a public letter written to The Times, Alistair Hudson, Director of Manchester Art Gallery and the Whitworth, urged the government to reconsider its lockdown of the culture sector, which allowed gyms and non-essential retail, including museum shops, to open, but not the museums themselves. The argument for such a reconsideration was that: "This is not about the visitor economy, it is about the lifeline that art and culture provide to so many people, especially now – and all provided within an environment of care, consideration, and wonder" (Bradley 2020). Therefore, big conferences, toolkits and books dedicated to the topic of museums and wellbeing are today very present (MuseumNext 2022), while at the same time NFT artworks and virtual galleries are becoming a regular segment of every heritage institution.

Following the increasing use of social networks, virtual spaces and the digital market in museums and the art world, in this paper we have examined whether the physical, real museum space is finally becoming surpassed. However, we came to the conclusion that, as much as technology and the digital environment

is being developed, contemporary society is more than ever in the need of real encounters with others while mind displacing and heritage perception is still dependent on bodily performance and a particular entering into fiction. After we have seen the origins of the idea of the museum as a peculiar *Imago Mundi*, we could understand better why wellbeing and mental health could be one of the priorities of today's museum programmes. On the other hand, new media studies and the development of digital art work and NFTs will undoubtedly reveal their emotional impact on users, creators and collectors in the virtual spaces. However, the museum place as a particular still remains an important societal *safe space* in which rituals of wandering through the setting, interactions with the collection, recalling of memories and indulging in art and creativity are practised and welcome.

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SPACE CRISIS: ENCOUNTER IN THE MUSEUM BUILDING OR ONLINE?
(summary)

Starting from the notion of the proliferation of digital art and museum content over the last few years and an ever-more growing online art market, in this paper we examine whether the real, physical museum space and non-digital art will finally be overcome. However, even proven to be almost indispensable for today's functioning, it is noted that social media and the appearances of artists and art and heritage institutions in virtual spaces is still just another manner of communication, more a promotional tool than a space completely independent of the physical world. Therefore, after considering one of the most prominent digital artworks today and many virtual museum tours in the context of their potential to indulge the viewer, we could come to the conclusion that the lack of bodily experience and the lack of encounters with others in the digital space is influencing the whole perception and emotional reaction of the viewer. Consequently, in the second part of the paper we look back to the origins of the museum space and models characteristic for each collecting and exposing process. Seeing that the wandering of a mind is inseparable from the physical one, we observe a museum space as a space of particular heterotopia, a separate world or, more precisely, an image of the world in which each visitor is entering into the fiction. A performative act of the museum or heritage site visit is seen as crucial. Finally, we see that a museum space today, in a period of crisis, increasing stress, loneliness and fears, is a place where well-being could be supported and encouraged through different programmes, while a real encounter with artefact as well as with other visitors is still unprecedented.