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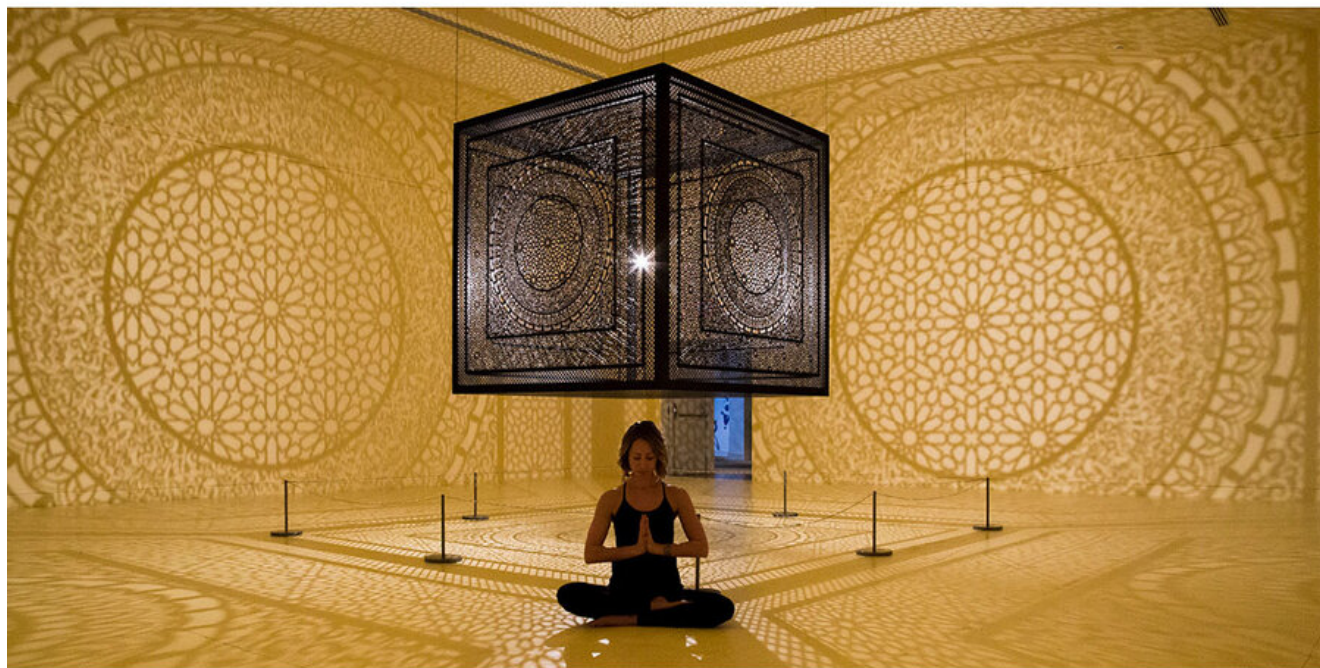
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Beyond the gallery wall: Art world retrains the public, virtually

WHY WE WROTE THIS

How will the pandemic change the way the public interacts with art and artists? As galleries and museums look to technology, they are creating ways to enhance the online experience.



Courtesy of The Peabody Essex Museum

The Peabody Essex Museum offers livestreamed yoga classes like this one, held within artist Anila Quayyum Agha's "All the Flowers Are for Me" installation.

September 14, 2020

By Jennifer G. Wolcott, Correspondent

When a pipe burst in January at the Center for Maine Contemporary Art, it caused a flood that shuttered the popular museum in Rockland for a few months. The crisis forced a deep dive into technology to keep audiences engaged – and it left the CMCA staff better prepared for the pandemic-related shutdown in mid-March.

“The flood gave us a head start so that when COVID hit, we could respond rapidly and continue to offer the three-dimensional, virtual tours that we’d just produced,” says CMCA Executive Director Suzette McAvoy. “We’d also received some great feedback by then, so we were awarded a grant that has helped us move forward.”

As museums and art galleries look for the resources to stay open and preserve staffing, some are finding that a hybrid approach – part virtual, part in-person – is the best way to engage with the public.

“For a long time, it’s been hard for people to understand the role that digital can play in the life of a museum. But since we were forced to go digital in March, even our directors now refer to digital as our ‘third campus,’” says Derek O’Brien, chief marketing officer for the Peabody Essex Museum in Salem, Massachusetts. The PEM, with campuses for both the museum and a collection center, recently reopened at limited capacity for fewer days than usual and will continue to host virtual events.

At a time of uncertainty, the art world is mustering as many options as it can. Museums from Los Angeles to New York have been laying off and furloughing hundreds of employees since March. In July, the American Alliance of Museums (AAM) released findings of its survey of 760 museum directors, including those from non-art institutions, confirming the extent of the economic toll caused by pandemic closures. The group warned that 1 out of every 3 museums could close permanently as financial reserves and funding sources dry up.



Courtesy of CMCA

The Center for Maine Contemporary Art in Rockland is inviting visitors to its airy in-person space, while also offering online events such as art lab workshops.

All told, the ripple effect could be devastating, according to the AAM. “Museums support 726,000 direct and indirect jobs and contribute \$50 billion each year to the economy,” the group said in a statement in July.

Lasting success for galleries in particular could come down to survival of the most innovative, according to Barry Schwabsky, art critic for *The Nation*. “Many galleries may not survive the crisis, but those that do will have to be more creative in their thinking, and perhaps smaller and more nimble as well as more collaborative in their ways of working,” he wrote in a July 1 article, “What Are Art Galleries For?”

Reimagining interaction with art

After six months of thinking on their feet, many galleries – and museums – are proving Mr. Schwabsky’s point. They are stepping into the virtual realm with exhibit tours, artist interviews, educational classes, and more. They are also discovering some surprising benefits: the ability to reach a global audience, to provide access to those with restricted mobility, and to attract young people.

Also, with travel limited, artists and their promoters are less busy jetting around the globe in a whirlwind of networking events. Likewise, art collectors and aficionados are staying home more, offering more opportunities to assess blank walls that need filling.

Those interviewed concur that even the most dazzling virtual presentation cannot replicate the experience of viewing art in person, but they acknowledge the vital importance of what’s often referred to as net art, and even seem upbeat about the hybrid experience that they agree is likely here to stay.

“It’s a bit of a silver lining,” says Mr. O’Brien, at the PEM, who previously worked in the tech industry. He has been spearheading the online shift at PEM, and while excited about it, says it was difficult in early March when the museum had just opened a major exhibit on Jacob Lawrence and then, because of the pandemic, had to quickly capture it digitally for a virtual tour.

Transcending boundaries

Sundaram Tagore, owner of the 20-year-old Sundaram Tagore Gallery with locations in New York, Singapore, and Hong Kong, says the pandemic-induced plunge into the digital realm was bound to happen. “No matter how old school one might be,” he says, “people in the art world were recognizing that technology is pervasive, and we all need to adapt to it. COVID-19 has accelerated that process.”



Courtesy of The Peabody Essex Museum

In April 2020, the Peabody Essex Museum held a virtual Q&A with producer and director DeMane Davis, whose most recent work is "Self Made: Inspired by The Life of Madam C.J. Walker," which debuted March 20 on Netflix. The four-part series stars Octavia Spencer, Blair Underwood, Carmen Ejogo, and Tiffany Haddish.

His gallery, which states that its goal is to “provide venues for art that transcends boundaries” and is now open in all three cities, has embraced technology. His team has developed sophisticated 3D virtual tours, set aside private viewing rooms, and provided clients a tool to visualize how paintings would look in their homes. Mr. Tagore also likes to promote studio visits with artists – but they must have a bit of star quality, he says. Hiroshi Senju is one artist, he says, who is a natural for this medium. “Just producing art is no longer good enough,” he explains. “An artist needs to speak well and be engaging and entertaining, or they will be left behind.”

Jeanne Rosier Smith is one artist who has learned to love the camera. But it took a bit of time. Ms. Rosier Smith, who paints in her studio outside Boston and is represented by several East Coast galleries from Boothbay Harbor, Maine, to St.

Simons Island, Georgia, typically enjoys mingling with people at art openings and was tentative at first about taking these events online.

But with pandemic restrictions halting those in-person openings, she realized she needed to jump in. With 35,000 followers on Instagram, she recently chose Instagram Live as a venue for a virtual tour of her exhibit at Gallery 31 in Orleans, Massachusetts. To her delight, the event generated the brisker month of sales of her two-decade career. “I’ve been shaking my head in disbelief,” she says. “More than 400 people watched, from California to Colorado and Texas. That would never have been possible in person.”

While she credits the virtual venue for helping to broaden her reach, she also says the response speaks to something deeper. “People are staying home with their families. Their worlds have become smaller. They are looking around their space and wanting to bring joy and beauty into their lives now more than ever.”

Editor’s note: As a public service, we have removed our paywall for all pandemic-related stories.

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