

... the museum in lockdown

Owen Hopkins The protean museum

*'[...] as my eyes grew accustomed to the light, details of the room within emerged slowly from the mist, strange animals, statues, and gold – everywhere the glint of gold.'*¹

(Howard Carter)



¹ Olafur Eliasson, *In Real Life*, 2019. Aluminum, colour-effect filter glass (green, yellow, orange, red, pink, cyan), bulb, LED light. Diameter 208 cm. Installation view: Guggenheim Museum Bilbao, 2020, where the exhibition was restaged after its run at Tate Modern.

For visitors to 'Treasures of Tutankhamun' at the British Museum in 1972, the sense of revelation engendered by stepping into the exhibition was a surreally dislocated echo of what Carter had experienced fifty years before. While Carter had entered the tomb from the intense, unrelenting sun of the Valley of the Kings, visitors to the exhibition had queued up in the wind and rain before being transported to the far-off world of Ancient Egypt.

Remarkably, given the geopolitical complexities of the time, the deal struck with the Egyptian government had ensured that the exhibition featured all the finest objects from the tomb – including, as its centrepiece, Tutankhamun's iconic golden death mask. The objects were displayed in darkened galleries in a way intended to evoke something of their original setting, with visitors encouraged to move around in a state of reverential awe.

The exhibition proved a sensation, attracting a previously unheard of 1.7 million visitors. Even the Queen paid a visit. In a relatively unusual move for the time, the British Museum created an extensive range of merchandise to sell in the museum's gift shop, which saw King Tut's image appear on everything from posters and postcards to a set of commemorative stamps. The merchandise, like the show, was an instant hit. The age of the blockbuster exhibition had begun.

As museums look to cautiously emerge from their Covid lockdown-enforced closure, that model of the high-profile, 'once in a lifetime' exhibition, with

visitors jostling to see iconic works of art, seems as if from another age. And in many ways it is. The age of the blockbuster exhibition that 'Treasures of Tutankhamun' inaugurated, and which has entranced museums and audiences ever since, is surely now over.

Covid is not the cause of this break, but, as in other areas of life, it has acted to accelerate existing trends. Blockbusters in the model of 'Treasures of Tutankhamun' have been on the wane for some time, with many museums becoming increasingly reluctant to lend their star objects, while transport and installation costs have risen substantially. As the financial investment required to stage major exhibitions increases, so museums inevitably become more conservative in their curatorial choices – just witness the endless array of bankable impressionist exhibitions in recent years. There are only so many artists whose name recognition is guaranteed to attract the mass audiences required to make the sums add up, with the resulting reliance on big names leads inevitably to a situation of diminishing returns – both financially and creatively.

Museums in crisis

In the post-pandemic world, the model of the blockbuster exhibition is now irrevocably broken. Yet, the challenges that museums face in fact run even deeper. It is no overstatement to say that the entire conceptual and ideological edifice that has supported the concept of the museum over its history is crumbling.

From their inception during the Enlightenment, museums have relied implicitly and explicitly on their apparent 'exceptionalism' – the notion that the experience they offer is of an inherently higher order than visiting another visitor attraction. This exceptionalism rests not just on their public and educational missions – although that is important – but upon the way they are somehow perceived to exist outside of time, and above the mundane, transient realities of everyday life.

This is quite obviously a fiction – or rather, an ideology that serves to sustain the fiction that museums are non-ideological or neutral spaces. And taking the

long view, one of the consequences of the extraordinary success and proliferation of museums over the last two hundred years has been to obscure and distract from the shakiness of their ideological underpinnings. But today, as we belatedly confront the legacies of empire and the issues of race, representation, and identity that run through the very idea of the museum (not simply those institutions that have colonial era collections), exceptionalism is no longer tenable. While the museum emerged from the age of reason, it is also inescapably a product of the age of empire and all the horrors that came with it. Museums reflect both sides of the coin.

The crisis that museums are now dealing with is, therefore, financial *and* philosophical – and on both counts it may very well be existential. But while some museums may end up folding as a result of the lockdown, we should not discount the vested interests that all institutions have in sustaining themselves one way or another. Nor should we underestimate museums' ability to recognise the situation they face and adapt in response to it. For several years now London's V&A Museum has been running its 'Rapid Response Collecting' initiative in which 'Contemporary objects are acquired in response to major moments in recent history that touch the world of design and manufacturing.' This has seen objects as varying as the 'Liberator' 3D-printed gun, the Extinction Rebellion logotype, the Pussyhat worn at Women's Marches in 2017, all enter the V&A's collection. This has in turn spawned 'Pandemic Objects' – an editorial project that compiles and reflects on objects that have taken on new meaning and purpose during the Coronavirus pandemic.

These projects have an implicit dual purpose in the way they both make the museum more responsive to current events, and by collecting objects self-consciously outside traditional notions of what museums *should* be collecting, inevitably generate major press interest. The museum – and dare I say, the curators responsible – become the story as much as the object and the story it has been collected to tell.

This aspiration to better engage with contemporary life – and to be seen doing it – also extends to how museums manifest themselves

architecturally. Notable here is the project for a new home for the Museum of London in the historic Smithfield meat market. The move from the museum's existing, somewhat austere Powell and Moya building is not simply about more space and better facilities, but reflects a broader institutional shift from being the museum of London *history* to a museum of *contemporary* London or even of *Londoners*. The architectural renders already published illustrate this by showing an institution apparently embedded in the city, conceived more as a meeting place than as somewhere to wander around in hushed tones, and with a playful mix of 'high and low' in the objects on display and the way they are presented. One render even shows people queuing up to get in the museum after dark, echoing the nearby Fabric nightclub.

Back to first principles

The self-consciousness with which the Museum of London aspires to be a radical reimagining of the museum betrays the fact that it is really maintaining the status quo – and therefore cannot evade the crisis that museums face. As a monolithic institution, acting as a centralised visitor destination that is defined by its architecture, it is wholly in keeping with the triumvirate of characteristics that distinguish a museum from other types of institutions.

In my forthcoming book on the history of museums, to be published in autumn 2021, I argue that museums are distinguished from other institutions by the way their combination of three characteristics: being organised around collections of objects, open to the public, and housed in a building that is not just a container but in some way symbolises its values and mission. Museums, as traditionally understood, only come into being when all three of these characteristics are present. If we are looking to reinvent the museum, then it is necessary to go back to these first principles and find ways to challenge, reframe, and rethink them. If museums are about centralising – which is inherent to the very idea of collecting – are there different ways of holding and displaying objects that are decentralised or polycentric, and which foreground the unavoidable ideologies that

have determined what has been collected at different moments in time? Rather than pretending to be objective or neutral as museums tend to do, might it be better to embrace overt subjectivity, or else, adopt properly objective, randomised approaches to object selection?

To rethink the museums' relationship with the public, we need to abolish the idea of museums' exceptionalism. This means dissolving the boundaries between the museum and everyday life and meeting people on their own terms and in their own spaces. As it stands, museums only reach a demographic subset of the public at large – one that skews towards the wealthy, middle class, and white. To rectify this situation means employing a more representative workforce, and actively working to find and recruit among demographics that are underrepresented. Furthermore, if museums want to continue claiming that they are unlike other institutional organisations, then they need to think of their staff in a way that is fundamentally different from the commercial organisations they are becoming increasingly like.

Embracing the digital

As for the architecture – and, more specifically, the space – of the museum, the emptiness imposed by the closure of museums during lockdown has already prompted a number of ideas for imagining a 'post-museum cultural space', as architect and writer, Sam Jacob, characterises it. 'Released from its role as a patrician trophy cabinet and national treasure, its emptiness', Jacob argues, 'offers the chance to accept doubt and to project questions into the spaces in which history is narrated'. Yet that emptiness still lies behind a facade in which museums' historical role is explicitly encoded. Rather than a 'post-museum cultural space', what we really need is a 'post-architectural museum space'.

If the blockbuster building allowed the museum building to transcend the collection and the object, we need the idea of the museum itself to transcend its own architectural manifestation. On one level the Covid lockdown has already forced museums to do this. With no-one coming through the doors, museums have met their audiences online. Recent months



2 Mamou-Mani, *Catharsis, Burning Man, Black Rock City, 2020*, viewed in the AltspaceVR virtual environment.

have seen virtual exhibition tours and curators talks, DIY-making workshop for kids using everyday household items, and various attempts to go viral, from the #GettyMuseumChallenge to the Royal Academy's #RADailydoodle. Still, for all the enthusiasm behind these initiatives there is a palpable restlessness in the museum community to get back to normal, to move from the screen back to the object. Interviewed for an article in *The Guardian*, Tate Modern director Frances Morris recognised that the era of the blockbuster exhibition was now over, but rather than offering the opportunity for museums to rethink their broader mission, she suggested a return to previous modes of operating and engagement. 'It'd be great for museums to focus on their permanent collections, the amazing things we already possess. We've taken our eye off the core mission. I'd love a return to slower looking.'

This is all well and good, but who is doing the looking? Blockbusters did not just bring in money, but different kinds of visitors. How many of the visitors to the Tutankhamun exhibition in 1972 had never been to the British Museum before – I would wager a very high proportion. The same is true for more recent 'crossover' hits that expand the market, to use the mareters' parlance, such as David Hockney at the Royal Academy in 2012, David Bowie at the V&A in 2013, or Olafur Eliasson at Morris's own Tate Modern in 2019 [1].

The inevitable tradeoff that museums make when they have

a sell-out show on their hands is in the quality of experience. Popular shows are crowded, as museums are keen to get as many visitors in as possible – not simply to maximise revenue, but in my experience through a genuine desire for as many people to see a show as possible. Curators (as opposed to heads of finance) tend to be more reticent, however, with Achim Borchardt-Hume, director of exhibitions at Tate Modern, recently admitting that 'our exhibitions are overcrowded' and that at the Eliason show 'nobody could see anything for the crush'.

But maybe the crush is part of why people wanted to go? It is that sense of being at the most popular event in town, of not being present in front of an artwork but in the crowd. Frances Morris is onto something when she suggests that 'people are missing the social space of being in a museum'. The isolation of lockdown has made us to recognise how much we ache for being with people, for experiencing something collectively. It is partly what fueled the resurgence of rave culture in summer 2020, but is also increasingly playing out in spaces that are not physical but virtual.

Virtual spaces

Spaces is the operative word when thinking about the online world. It's what distinguishes the atomised experience of social media where algorithms tailor content to each individual user, from the more collective immersive experiences of virtual reality. Today VR is still in its comparative infancy, and it lacks the 'killer app' that will see it gain

crossover appeal and a mass user base. Nevertheless, a number of platforms are gaining momentum, users, and cultural currency. One of these is Sansar, which started out as a VR successor to *Second Life* – the ‘game’ where you live out a parallel life in an online world, which came to prominence fifteen years ago and still has nearly a million users. More recently, Sansar has been spun-off and refocused as a live events destination similar to the model operated by AltspaceVR, a startup that was acquired by Microsoft in 2017. At this stage content is obviously a key driver for new users, as it is for any platform, but the ultimate goal for something like AltspaceVR is quite clearly for the platform itself – and the forms of social interactivity it offers – to be what makes users stay, and ‘feel present with others’.

This may seem distant from the world of the museum, but we are already seeing cultural applications on these platforms. With last year’s Burning Man festival unable to take place in physical reality, it went virtual, complete with its signature ‘temples’, such as those created by the architects Mamou-Mani, free to explore in the AltspaceVR virtual environment [2]. And unlike the real Burning Man, the tickets for which are expensive and hard to obtain, this virtual ‘multiverse’ was open to anyone to experience.

Another rather more museum-like example is the exhibition ‘Freestyle – Architectural Adventures in Mass Media’ by Space Popular [3–5]. When the physical exhibition at London’s RIBA was forced to close not long after it opened in March 2020, Space Popular created a virtual exhibition using Mozilla Hubs, a free open-source VR hosting platform. Unconstrained by the RIBA’s pokey galleries, the exhibition was able to take on a wholly new form and be accessible to anyone, anywhere in the world. The exhibition’s new virtual existence was fitting, not simply because of it already had some VR elements, but in relation to its theme, which looked at the connection between style and technology across architectural history. Space Popular’s thesis was that once style becomes fully virtualised then architecture will no longer be the preserve of the elite as it has been throughout its



history – a forecast that perhaps applies even more so to the museum itself, given how much museums and virtual spaces have in common: both offer fundamentally spatial experiences, proceeding over a series of ‘rooms’ of different qualities, characters, and scales. Both are able to transport to you to different places and periods. Both collapse time and space, with everything in a kind of perpetual simultaneity. Both offer intensified, hyper-real experiences, quite different to the everyday. And both are spaces we experience with others.

The naysayers will point to the loss of the seemingly fundamental relationship between viewer and physical object – which has defined the experience of museums over history – as a major deficiency of virtual spaces. But really it is the privileging of, and reliance upon the physical object itself that we

should be questioning. Objects are not what they used to be. So much of our daily experience is now mediated through the immaterialities of the digital world, so not embracing this shift risks museums being left as relics of the pre-digital world. More broadly, we should also remember that physical objects themselves are inherently limited as records of human history or cultural achievement. Those objects that end up in the museum are those that have happened to survive – either through their physical durability, because someone has decided to keep them, or simply by chance. Objects are far from impartial or objective records. What really matters is the visitor’s response and broader experience – and here virtual spaces offer a multitude of exciting new possibilities for how and where this might take place.

The protean museum

Virtual spaces allow museums the possibility of being open and non-hierarchical, of speaking in and listening to multiple voices, to exist in multiple forms simultaneously, and to be dynamic, infinitely reconfigurable and constantly remade. This is what we mean by being 'protean'. Over the last few decades, the blockbuster exhibition has opened up museums to new audiences, and by bringing works from across the world allowed us to form new connections, new interpretations, and new understandings. The protean museum allows us to do all this, but in real time, with a much lower carbon footprint than is required for objects and people to travel physically. But VR is no panacea, and there are inevitable downsides: the dynamic can soon become superficial. Free spaces can quickly be taken over by trolls. And how is it financed? But if museums do not take this leap into the virtual they are on a one-way street to irrelevance.

This is not an argument for the abolition of traditional museums. There will always be a place and need for encounters with physical objects – but with the virtual as a supplement or counterpart. With the physical and the digital each mutually reinforcing the other, there's the potential not just for museums to adapt and survive, but to radically reinvent themselves and the vital social and cultural roles they play.

We need museums more than ever. At their best they offer shared cultural experiences, where everyone can feel they have a stake and that their voices can be heard. Needless to say there is much work for museums to do to live up to this ideal, rethinking what they are and who they are for. Rather than shy away from the transformations offered by virtual spaces, as yet another challenge to museum's ideological basis, the virtual in fact offers a vital way forward. The irony is that the only way museums can hope to maintain their exceptionalism is by embracing the world outside – real and virtual.

Notes

1. Howard Carter recalling entering the tomb of Tutankhamen on 4 November 1922.

Illustration credits

arq gratefully acknowledges:

- Erika Ede, 1
 Olafur Eliasson, 1
 neugerriemschneider, Berlin, 1
 Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York /
 Los Angeles, 1
 Mamou-Mani, 2
 Space Popular, 3–5
 Francis Ware, 3

Competing interests

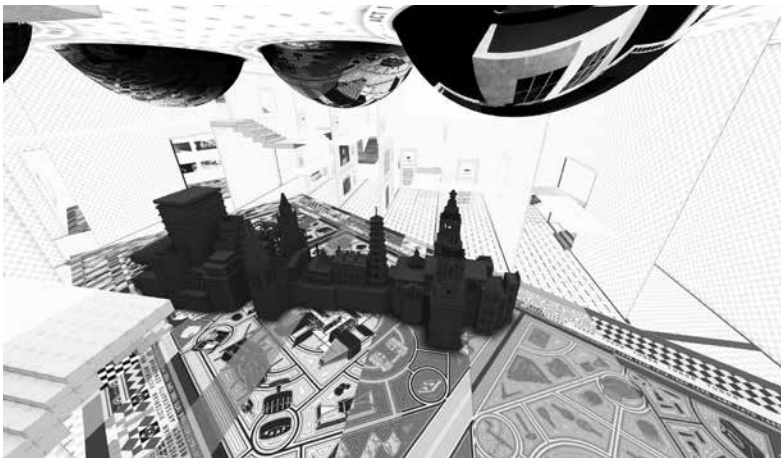
The author declares none.

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Owen Hopkins is an architectural writer and curator. He is Director of the Farrell Centre at Newcastle University. Previously, he was Senior Curator of Exhibitions and Education at Sir John Soane's Museum, and before that Architecture Programme Curator at the Royal Academy of Arts.

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3–5 Space Popular, 'Freestyle – Architectural Adventures in Mass Media'.