Chapter 18
An Investigation of the Visitor's Spatial Experience in Virtual Exhibitions

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ABSTRACT

Along with the technological advancements in the digitalisation of physical objects and spaces, the COVID-19 pandemic has created an urgent necessity for cultural institutions to display exhibition content online. Exhibition making is a process of knowledge production through an order of display that is integrated into the spatial and architectural context of an exhibition space. The authors believe that virtual tours that are developed by simply creating a replica of the physical exhibition and the virtual display of individual artifacts offer limited spatial experience. They believe that virtual exhibitions as alternatives to physical experience of exhibitions still require a critical reflection in terms of their spatial context, effectiveness, benefits, and limitations. By examining the results of a three-week workshop with communication design students, the chapter discusses the current use of staging and navigation possibilities for displaying digital content. It further highlights the spatial relationality as a key concern for the translation of physical exhibitions into virtual space.
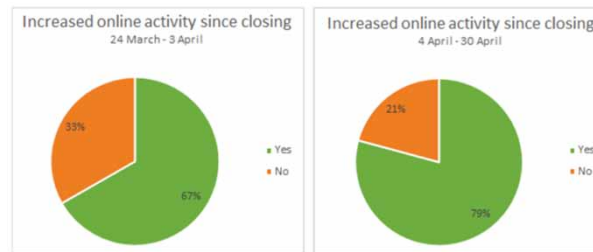
INTRODUCTION

The Covid 19 pandemic has created an urgent necessity to operate in the online world for institutions and professionals working across all sectors, including arts and culture. The pandemic and the enforced lockdowns have radically changed how people interact with their physical environments and dramatically effected the economic, social and cultural operations of societies across the globe. The closing down of public spaces and services also brought to a halt the regular activities of cultural spaces. Social distance

Figure 1. Shows the difference in increase in online activity just in two weeks
(Nemo, 2020, p.12)

and isolation enforcements effected the functioning of museums and galleries that host exhibitions. Many exhibitions have been closed or postponed interrupting cultural activities and the access of audiences to cultural heritage and art. This has caused devastating financial consequences for the museums, forcing them to find other ways of accessing audiences using the Internet and digital technologies. Museums started to take immediate steps to provide their services using digital technologies to overcome this loss, which seemed to be going to last for an unknown period. There was a sudden increase in the production of digital content offered on the Internet, from small-scale cultural events, talks, screenings, etc. to larger scale festivals, performances, exhibitions, and even international art biennials. Many museums also directed their audience to virtual tours of their exhibitions, even though most were already available through Google Art and Culture.

According to a survey by the Network of European Museums Association in May 2020, three weeks after the closure, more than 80 per cent of the museums have increased their online services and the visibility of their cultural displays on online platforms. (figure 1). Between 10 to 150 per cent increase was observed in virtual visits to 2 out of every 5 museum. Work tasks of 30 per cent of museum staff have been reconfigured to support online services. Museums and galleries initially increased their use of social media, which was later followed by the increasing of their virtual and online exhibitions to reach their audiences. (figure 2) As a result, digital technologies became central for museums' adaptation to this new global situation. The report also says that these digital services helped museums to reach their audiences in social isolation. They also provided participation possibilities for the audience, enabling them share their own stories and items online. At the same time, the museums also offered their educational materials online and acted as informal education institutions, instilling a sense of safety within the society (NEMO, 2020).

While virtual tours were promoted as substitutes for actual museum visits and a good way to spend time during closure, the potential of virtual exhibitions as alternatives to physical experience of exhibitions still requires a critical reflection in terms of their effectiveness, benefits and limitations.

In this chapter, we will focus on virtual exhibition as one of the major online tools to provide artistic and cultural works to distant audiences and discuss how effectively they translate the actual experience of the museum visit to an online one. After a close look at some examples of virtual versions of physical exhibitions held by national and international institutions, we recognized that in the virtual tours, the architectural space and the artifacts in the exhibition were simply copied and installed in 3D format in parallel with the capabilities of the technology, whereas no concern was given to the possibility that a virtual exhibition would not be able to provide same spatial experience like the experience in the physical world (Nack and Waern, 2012). However, physical bodily movements are restricted to hands

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