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Ruth Lang follows the online shift of architectural culture

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Practice networks have proved their worth during the crisis, says Tim O'Callaghan

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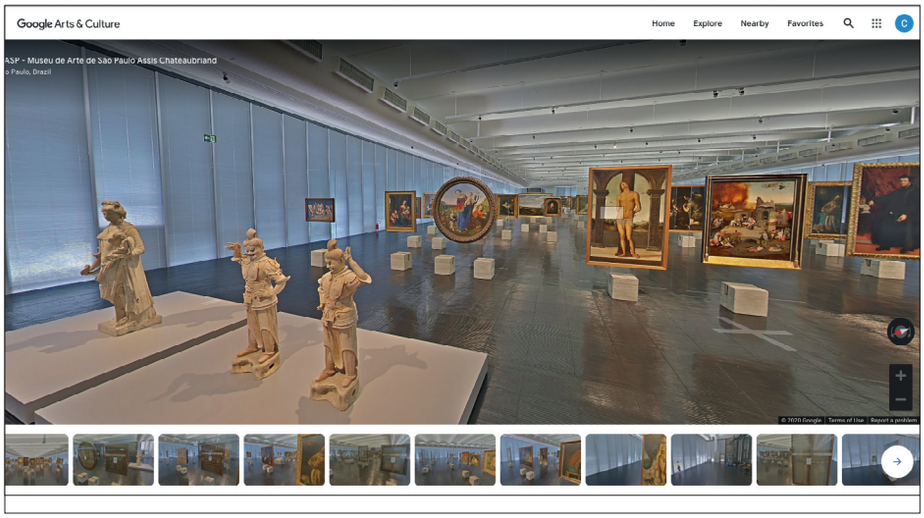
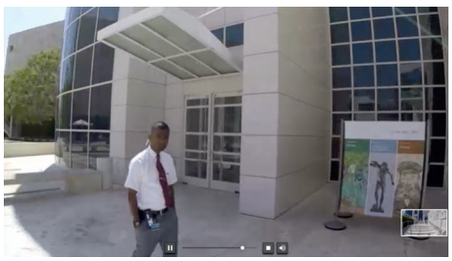
Forum





Remote Viewing

Digital events have allowed the continuation of cultural life during lockdown, but will we want them when it's over, asks Ruth Lang?

The shift of our cultural experiences from IRL to URL has brought a sea change in what we are able to do, and how. But it has also raised questions about what we might hold dear in a post-Covid society. When lockdown came into force and we were advised not to visit — and then banned from visiting — so many of the institutions which form the heart of the British cultural experience (among which I include the pub), there was a sense of despair at the cancelled events, and the tragedy of the impact on the institutions and their staff. But there was also the glorious death of FOMO; after all, you can't miss out if nothing is happening, right?

Then things got out of hand. As institutions got accustomed to digital platforms, the opportunities taken by theatres, cinemas, and galleries to engage with the public have taken new forms in the personal space of our homes. There are advantages to this online existence, which overcomes many issues raised by events that demand our physical presence.

Digital platforms open up architecture to new audiences whose economic status, cultural background, or physical disability might ordinarily mean they'd feel precluded from such experiences, and that can only be a good thing. Participation transcends the usual obstacles, vaulting the economic (and ecological) barrier of long-distance travel, for example, to allow us to attend events such as the discussions on resilience, equity and access currently being held as part of Open House New York, or to be taken on a private studio tour by Flores y Prats in Barcelona.

You can now walk through the famous floating galleries of Lina Bo Bardi's MASP in Brazil while walking the dog in South London, or attend multiple events in one evening from the comfort of your bedroom, without the pain of having to sprint across town in between. Or — even better — rather than choosing between events, you can use two different platforms to dip into both at once and see which one wins out.

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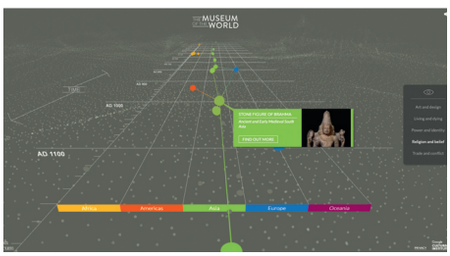
Left
Google Arts & Culture's interactive tour of MASP, São Paulo, by Lina Bo Bardi.

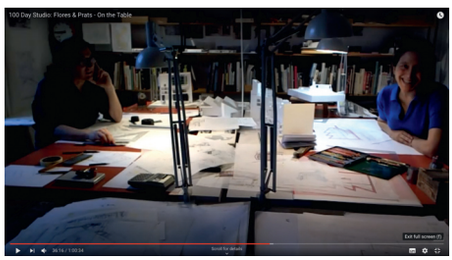
Left, below
Touring the Getty Centre via xplorit.com.

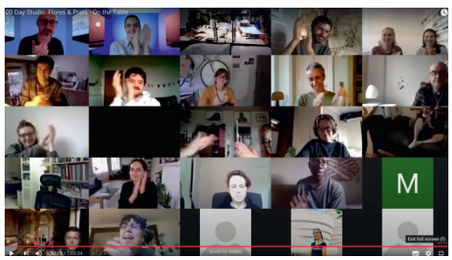
Below
The British Museum presents its contents in ways that are specific to the internet.

Right
Many events, including an architectural pub quiz, were recast in digital form for the London Festival of Architecture 2020, which runs throughout June.

Right, below
A studio tour by Barcelona-based Flores & Prats was part of the Architecture Foundation's '100 Day Studio' series of online talks, tours and discussions, which runs over 100 weekdays until 27 August.







Thanks to Google Arts & Culture, you can take a trip to Tae Soo Kim's National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art in Korea, or the Musée d'Orsay. At Richard Meier's Getty Centre in Los Angeles, you're free to view the permanent collection as though walking through the galleries, while temporary exhibitions are shown as a slideshow of images and captions. And as if anybody goes to the Getty for the art experience, it's also possible to take a walk through the eerily populated terraces and gardens via xplorit.com. (You can still exit through the gift shop — don't let an international pandemic get in the way of commercial opportunity).

These digital reinventions of the physical museum are not just about emulating the walk-through experience. The British Museum's 'Museum of The World' platform completely deconstructs the segregated experience of the artefacts they hold in the physical space of their galleries, to instead reveal how different themes span between the continents and develop over time, overcoming the cultural insularity that viewing them separately can imbue.

Curator tours — which ordinarily are neither the best environment for seeing the exhibition nor for hearing the curator — have taken on a life of their own, leaving the visitor to wander the digital galleries unimpeded, while tuning in to the curator talking separately, often from their own living room. Basel's Fondation Beyeler, for instance, has compiled a series of YouTube talks on key works from its current exhibition on Edward Hopper, the original artist of desolation. As the curators note, "It seems ironic that now the museum is closed and we must practice 'social distancing', Hopper's work has become more topical than ever — but can't be seen any longer." And if the talk begins to drag, of course you can just skip forwards.

Such environments have enabled the continuation of cultural life throughout the months of lockdown. So when everything opens up again, will we bother going back?

What is lost in the digital experience is serendipity, and the chance encounter. The experience of going to a gallery is never for the image alone. Digital media has been useful in maintaining contact between people, but there is less value in simply broadcasting content from empty galleries. As artist Francesco Vezzoli put it to O32c magazine: "It cannot just be that you're showing to me a film of your beautiful Donald Judd exhibition. I don't give a fuck."

The real joy of going to a gallery or to a talk comes from the unexpected juxtapositions and explorations arising from making your way to whatever you are visiting. In this respect, life online is more like a trained Exocet missile than the scattergun experience of day-to-day life. It's like taking the shortcut in Ikea, rather than meandering through the orchestrated living spaces set as commercial traps along your way. Online, you tend to only find what you are looking for, which is great for cutting out distraction. But maybe distraction can be beneficial, and all that efficiency and focus is what is exhausting us at the moment. We need to mosey a little.

There are good reasons for thinking that the online world might continue to host a greater part of our cultural life in the future — not least because of advantages outlined above. As formats continue to evolve, we should embrace the potential of new media, but ask what it should learn fom the old. With no bearings in time and place, what is the role of the institution, and how might digital events disrupt that binary choice between the efficient consumption of content and a richer type of experience? /+