

New Exhibition Practices and the Role of Museums in a Pandemic

Kareva Natalia

Moscow State Academic Art Institute named after V. I. Surikov of Russian Academy of Arts, Moscow, Russian Federation

The global epidemic caused by the COVID-19 virus has affected the behavior and consciousness of people. Fears associated with their own death, the death of loved ones, uncertainty in the future, insecurity and vulnerability combined with a new vision of the world around us, nature, their physicality, the value of other people, the value of society in general and their place in it. Various emotions, anxieties, and new discoveries found their expression in the pieces of art created during the pandemic and bearing its imprint. The new conditions influenced not only the content of the expositions of modern museums, but also the activities of the museum as a whole. That tendency conducted the relocation of the transfer of expositions to open spaces, emerging of the new exhibition formats, the active development of Internet projects, the creation of social clubs and groups to support each other by people in a pandemic. Thus, the contemporary museum takes on a new role. In a crisis, it becomes a place where it is possible to master complex emotions with the help of art, a platform for discussions, exchange of their impressions, experiences, with the aim of helping people find emotional balance and hope in the future in a crisis.

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At present, our planet has unexpectedly faced the global epidemic caused by the COVID-19 virus, which claimed the lives of more than a million people. The situation has changed the usual life and consciousness of people. This is reflected in contemporary art and, as a result, in the new museum practice. A large number of unexpected and tragic events, contradictory emotions caused by the pandemic have created a lot of interpretations of the present, past, and future environment and affected both individual and social perceptions of reality, forcing a man of today to take a new look at many questions, which seemed to be answered long before. There are now expositions in various museums all over the world and at exhibition venues dedicated to the pandemic, which showcase the latest pieces of art created by artists impressed by this world problem, as well as artworks of previous times being reassessed in the light of recent events. The examples are such projects as *20 Ways of Reading Through a Crisis* of the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York (2020a), *Bay Area Walls* exhibition at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (SFMOMA, 2020), *Making Art in Isolation* at the Tate Gallery in London (The Tate Gallery, 2020a), *Astro doubt and The Quarantine Chronicles* project of *Luca Buvoli* at the Phillips Collection in Washington (2020), *The Virus. What Was That?* exhibition at the Zaryadye Park Museum (2020), *The New Reality* project at Pop Up Museum in Moscow (2020), etc.

Negative emotions and fears initiated by the pandemic have affected different levels of human

self-awareness. First of all, it is the fear of one's own death, which, in the global space not currently troubled by another world war or catastrophe that imminently threatens human life, did not disturb people so acutely until recently. The fear of one's own death during the pandemic verges on the fear of losing loved ones, the fear of loneliness caused by the limitation of the ability to directly contact other people, leave the house, visit public places (Science Direct, 2020). In addition to this, there arose disturbing emotions provoked by the coming uncertainty, the unpredictability of progression of events. Empty city streets, silent playgrounds, parks closed to the public, dusty windows of closed shops and offices made it possible for a person to doubt one's own future.

Along with the abovementioned anxiety, people have a new understanding of physicality, as a threat of "getting dirty" from one's own hands, from other people's bodies and breath¹. The present emotional state of a person in the pandemic era resembles that of a person of the medieval period, intimidated by images of physical torture in hell, spiritual anguish, fears of fatal diseases and reduced to the "sickness of fear" (Huizinga, 1995, p. 216), besides, that person is deprived of the opportunity to reduce his or her internal tension by performing joint religious rituals, since temples and prayer houses have been quarantined.

However, people in general, and artists in particular, strive to overcome the critical state of panic of the first months of the pandemic and find an opportunity to identify some advantages of the current situation and see the environment in a positive way. Contemporary exhibitions devoted to the pandemic show how creators of art try to convey their diverse emotions and experiences through the art, while making unexpected accents. Thus, for example, the forced isolation and the slowing pace of life helped to take a fresh look at the usual space of one's own home, there was time to turn to the past and revise the archives². The disquiet concerning physicality and isolation contributed to, on the one hand, the emergence of a new level of erotic potencies and sexuality³, and, on the other hand, the inability to search for internal problems' solutions relying on adulthood, withdrawal into infantilism, which was reflected both in "children's drawing" manner and the appeal to children's vulnerability and fear in the plot⁴. Humor became an effective means to overcome anxiety. Since "total fearlessness cannot but be cheerful" (Bakhtin, 2000, p. 233), the fight against seriousness, fears of danger with the help of humor and laughter also manifested itself in the artworks created during the pandemic⁵.

The contradictory emotions that affected the individuality inevitably gave point to the issue of social existence, which is not surprising, since, according to Heidegger (1997), "being as such does not rest on the exclusive status of the subject separated from people, but is an existential modification of people as an essential existential" (p. 130). A person precluded from direct communicating in the pandemic era has experienced the meaning of the surrounding community and one's place in it in a new light. Encouraging one another, including virtual strangers, conveying can-do attitude without a word, but a glance on over the masked face, the unification of the world influenced by the new threat that made people of all countries, continents, traditions, and religious confessions equal—all of this moved to the forefront the social self, helped to discover one's deep connection not only with the loved ones, but also with humanity as a whole. The gratitude towards medical

¹ Which is shown, for example, in *Zombieland 2020* by Andrey Logvin, an imitation of a street sign bearing the legend "Caution, People on the Street".

² E.g., comments of *Martino Stierli* in the *20 Ways of Reading through a Crisis* project (The Tate Gallery, 2020b).

³ E.g., *Striking Woman—The Queen of Self-Imposed Isolation* (2020) by Julia Stepanova, depicting a nude woman sitting in a provocative pose behind hazard warning ribbons (ArtMoskovia, 2020).

⁴ E.g., *the Quarantine Chronicles* project by *Luca Buvoli* (The Phillips Collection, 2020).

⁵ E.g., the painting by Steffen Kraft aka ICONEO, where a girl jumps over an elastic rope of a protective mask (Zaryadye Park, 2020) or *Strategic Stock* by Anastasia Nilskaya (2020), depicting a customer hung from head to toe with rolls of toilet paper (ArtMoskovia, 2020).

workers rescuing the sick, the couriers delivering food and other essential goods, was mixed up with the sense of dependence and childish helplessness in relations with these people.

These ambivalent feelings were supplemented by immersion in the virtual space of the Internet in search of communication, support, and restoration of social roles lost due to the new reality. These conflicting emotions are reflected in the pieces of art created during the pandemic. Due to this situation, modern museums and exhibition sites inevitably adapt to the new demand of society, as well as to special conditions, including restrictions related to visiting closed premises and financial difficulties of museums that have been closed for a long time and deprived of income (The Tate Gallery, 2020b).

Fragmentary nature and impulsiveness of the artworks promoted the emergence of a special exhibition format of chronicles, reminding of screenshots of social media posts, where vivid impressions are rapidly replacing each other⁶. In addition, in the context of new conditions and, therefore, new interpretations, works of past eras are exhibited for their rethinking in the crisis conditions (MoMA, 2020b). The problems of restricted visiting of closed premises resulted, in a number of cases, in transfer of expositions to open spaces of parks and natural urban scenery⁷. The same reason provoked the activity of museums on the Internet realized in virtual exhibitions, Internet publications, and online clubs where people forced to stay at home because of quarantine may communicate. For example, the Tate Gallery in London organized Soapbox, a special Internet club for people over 60, the most vulnerable to the impact of the COVID-19 virus (The Tate Gallery, 2020c). Soapbox aims to support people by discussing art and life in a friendly atmosphere.

Thus, during a crisis situation associated with a pandemic, museums become not only a place for displaying artworks, but also a platform to discuss current topics, a public and philosophical center. According to Paola Antonelli, curator at the Museum of Modern Art in New York,

Museums are the Research and Development arm of society, and cultural institutions could—and should—play a pivotal role in civic life not only by providing inspiration, trust, and a sense of community, but also by addressing the most urgent issues with the clarity, honesty, and compassion that art and artists can provide. (MoMA, 2020c)

The pandemic era has raised new burning questions for the individual and the world community, the solution to which has not yet been found through science. However, the art offers its own ways of mastering the problem, giving people hope to overcome difficulties. In this regard, a modern museum, dynamically responding to the actual needs of people, takes on a new role and becomes a socially significant place, in a new global sense, a place for free expression of anxieties and worries and their mastering with the help of art, comprehending personal and universal human issues, a healing place that in present crisis conditions can help a person gain self-confidence and confidence about the future.

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⁶ E.g., such projects as *Astrodoubt and the Quarantine Chronicles* (The Phillips Collection, 2020) and *The Virus: What Was That?* (Zaryadye Park, 2020).

⁷ E.g., *Attraction* - installation by Marina Zvyagintseva in Tsaritsyno Park (2020) and *The Virus: What Was That?* project in the Northern tunnel of Zaryadye Park (2020).

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