

## Voices from the Field

To help narrow the gap between research and practice, as we reflect on the role of museums and cultural institutions at this moment in our collective history, the editors of JCMCP asked several international museum practitioners to write a few words about their institutions' responses to the COVID-19 pandemic. We asked them to write about current initiatives to help communities, projects that might be replicated by others, new roles that may continue post-pandemic, or long term change they envision in cultural organizations.

In response to the request, Lonnie Bunch, III, Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution and founding director of the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture, a historian, gave JCMCP permission to print in its entirety an address he gave on aspirational COVID-19 responses by museums. While written before the racial crisis erupted in the US, he addresses issues of race, as well.

Lonnie Bunch's address is followed by 14 responses listed by date they were sent to us.

### **American Alliance of Museums Virtual Annual Meeting Keynote Address (May 2020)<sup>1</sup> Reimagining Museums: Opportunities in Reopening**

*Lonnie G. Bunch III, Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution*

#### **Introduction**

Colleagues and friends: even spread apart the globe as we are, it's an honor to share this occasion with you. For as long as I can remember, the AAM has been the bedrock of the museum field. Although doing this conference virtually is new for us, I take comfort in the fact that we're still able to come together to share, to learn, and to support one another. There's no sugarcoating this. The COVID-19 pandemic has stolen family

1 This address was delivered on 2 June 2020, it was recorded before 25 May, 2020.

and friends, disrupted our lives, and made us wary of places that once felt safe – supermarkets, houses of worship, and museums. Just last week, UNESCO and the International Council of Museums released data suggesting that 13% of museums might not reopen. We know that we're losing vital revenue every week. But we don't need the numbers to tell us, because we've felt it ourselves: there is great fear across our community. Fear that we might not open again. Fear that museums will not have adequate resources. Fear that we can't afford to take risks or innovate. I'm here to today to tell you exactly the opposite. We can't afford *not to*. We can't afford not to transform. This is a moment of great pain, but also of great possibility. And we need to set our sights beyond survival. We have a radical opportunity here. Not just to recover the revenue we've lost, but to reimagine what's possible. To reconnect with audiences in new ways. To reinvigorate our offerings. To revitalize ourselves and our service to our nations. If we can do that, I am confident that we can emerge from this crisis as a unified museum field, strengthened by the challenges we have overcome. We can be more nimble, taking advantage of technology to find the right tension between tradition and innovation. We can be more inclusive: attracting new audiences and reaching populations we may have overlooked in the past. And we can be more cohesive: supporting, teaching, and learning from each other as we move forward. I am deeply optimistic about the future of our field. And I think you should be, too. Here's why. Despite all the radical challenges we face, we have two crucial advantages. First, our general attitudes toward change have shifted. I often think that when institutions are change-averse, it's because things are going fine. It's hard to see the benefits of change, but it's easy to see the potential downsides. Well, when you're facing a global pandemic, there's not a whole lot left to be scared of.

In many ways, this moment gives us license to dream as wildly as we can, to take risks, to recalibrate our sense of possibility. Museums have already evolved a great deal in the past 40 years. In our technology, in our programming, in our relationships to our communities, in our hiring practices, and more. Forty years ago, "radical reimagination" meant figuring out how to use slide projectors. But unlike these earlier shifts, we have the space to think holistically and intentionally. That's our second advantage. It's as if someone hit the pause button on normal operations. With our buildings closed, we have the freedom to redesign the old structure; to sweep the cobwebs off the walls; to reimagine what the space can become.

## Museums Are Open

I do want to stress that while many of our buildings remain closed, museums are not. This field continues to serve through one of the worst times of the century. Your creativity, your flexibility, and your dedication are astounding. I look around this field, and I am so proud to be your colleague. Across the globe, museum staff have risen to the challenge and found new ways to engage the public. We are serving digitally, making world-class collections, programs, exhibitions, and research available online. We are collecting for posterity. While we can't make contact as we usually do, folks around the world are ensuring that future generations will know what it was like to live during this time. And some of these objects are personal to me. I've asked my daughter – an emergency room doctor – to save pieces of her equipment. During school closures, museums are supporting students and educators. We're providing distance learning resources. We're working with administrators and families to understand their needs and how to support them effectively. I bring up all these examples not just as a well-deserved pat on the back. But because we are at a critical inflection point. The ways that we reopen will shape our growth for years to come.

## New Normal

As some of our colleagues can tell us, reopening does not mean that life goes back to normal. We won't just snap back. The fiscal, social, and operational impact of this moment will be with us for years to come. I envision serious changes to visitor expectations for museums, and serious changes to the way that we run ourselves as businesses. In his novel, *The Fire Next Time*, James Baldwin wrote of a people "trapped by traditions, traditions so strong that their origins are forgotten but they still carry great weight." So what can museums do to challenge the assumptions that weigh us down? How can we strike the right tension between tradition and innovation? As organizations that value tradition, we can build on decades of accumulated capital without being held captive by it. And just as the traditions we carry with us inform our daily operations, the choices we make in the coming weeks will shape the future of our field and our countries.

### Understanding Our Audiences

Our first step in moving forward must be to understand that the needs of our public have changed. We need to reaffirm our relationship with established audiences as they adapt to an unfamiliar new reality. The parent who doesn't know if it's safe to take his child to see a new exhibition... The educator trying to reach students through a spotty internet connection... The researcher hoping to collaborate with partners across her field...

We need to assess how our audiences' needs have changed, and how they will continue to evolve moving forward. As many of you can no doubt relate to, I've been house-bound these past months. During that time, I've had a Cole Porter lyric ringing around my head: "Give me land, lots of land under starry skies above... don't fence me in." The data we're seeing suggest that that our audiences will embrace that attitude even after the worst is over. They will prefer spaces with freedom of movement, and outdoor options. It may be a while before they feel comfortable engaging in activities as part of a crowd. To me, one of the great strengths of cultural institutions is that they bring people together from different places and backgrounds to share experiences and ideas. For the foreseeable future, the pandemic will test that strength. The ways that people come together, connect, and engage with each other will shift fundamentally. Whether we're offering hand sanitizer, shifting from touch-screens to voice-activated interfaces, or moving programs outdoors, it's our job to create contexts in which our audiences feel safe as they return.

I see three opportunities for us to become the institutions that our audiences need and deserve. We can grow digitally, we can grow more diverse, and we can grow more collaborative. This trifecta will enable us to become even more vital, valued, and visited as we move into a new, global normal.

### Growing Digital

The past few months have hammered home the importance of growing our digital capacities. All the digital resources that we have worked to develop are not just stopgap measures during a period of social distancing. To me, they are core functions of how we move forward as a field. In the past, we may of thought of digital content as an addendum to in-person offerings. When our buildings closed, online resources became our primary mode of connection. And even as we move out of stringent lockdowns, we know that the public will be much more comfortable receiv-

ing digital content than before. Even as museums reopen, a significant percentage of former audiences will be reluctant to return in person. These people are still our audiences. We still have the relationships. We just need to target them differently, now. I should say that going digital doesn't mean running away from the traditional strengths of our organizations. I've been getting up to speed on all things digital over the past few months, but as a historian who loves the stuff, I know that there's no substitution for seeing the real thing. That's why I don't believe we should think about online platforms as substitutes for our in-person offerings. They are complements that offer fundamentally different viewing and learning experiences. Take, for instance, the *Cosmic Buddha*, a limestone sculpture covered in intricate religious etchings housed at the National Museum of Asian Art. When the Smithsonian's Digitization Program Office created a 3-D model, scholars across the world were able to discover unexpected new revelations about the 1500-year-old masterpiece. We should be asking ourselves: what are the opportunities to engage with objects and stories you can have through a computer screen that you can't have in person? For one thing, you can get your face a whole lot closer to it. You can zoom, scroll, twist and turn. With the right license, you can download, modify, and repurpose.

Moving forward, I'd encourage our field to think about online exhibitions, virtual programming, and digital resources as stand-alone, compelling experiences in their own right. Experiences that attract audiences who can't or won't enter our buildings. Experiences that provide new modes of engagement and new avenues for discovery.

### **Growing Education**

We have a special obligation to use these digital resources to serve students and educators. There's an undeniable delight in watching young people's eyes light up when they see the portrait of Michelle Obama (in the National Portrait Gallery), or peer up in awed reverence at the bones of a million-year-old dinosaur (at the National Museum of Natural History). It reminds me of my own delight and the sense of possibility I felt when my dad took me to see the Spirit of St. Louis (at the National Air and Space Museum).

It's this curiosity and delight that we must seek to nourish, encouraging a generation of lifelong learners and future museum goers. Of course, millions of young people won't ever have the opportunity to see these objects in person or come participate in museum-bound programs.

That's why we need to find ways to supplement school curricula, support educators, and reach students where they are. We need to think critically about the obstacles they face and find creative ways to fill those gaps. COVID-19 has revealed how valuable such efforts are. In the first month of school closures, web traffic on the Smithsonian's distance learning resources was up by a whopping 346 percent. And if the numbers didn't paint the picture clearly enough, the outpouring of gratitude tells us all we need to know. Teachers on social media have reached out to thank us for lesson plan ideas. Parents have written in to say how much a piece of poetry we shared meant to their kids. So yes, we must recognize and value the historic strengths of our organizations. At the same time, we can find creative new modes to engage our audiences, especially where we can have the most profound impact: in the minds of young learners.

### **Growing More Diverse**

In this field, we tend to talk a big game about serving more diverse audiences. We now have a chance to do that. We know that COVID-19, like many other crises, affects low income communities and communities of color disproportionately – in employment, in education, and in health outcomes. As we think through how we serve, let's craft solutions that take these disparities into account. That might mean distributing no-tech resources to students who don't have an internet connection. That might mean expanding the languages in which we make our resources available. That might mean developing exhibitions that explore the experience of a particular community. When I was helping to bring the National Museum of African American History and Culture to life, there was concern over what our visitation would look like. And I am incredibly proud to say that since its opening, the museum has attracted one of the most diverse audiences of any in the Smithsonian. But I'm even more proud that 30 percent of our visitors were first time museum goers. As we worry about attracting visitors back to our museums, these numbers paint a clear picture. Complex, diverse, community-driven stories will increase interest in museums. To me, this evidence suggests that it is possible to expand our bases. That we hamstringing ourselves by serving only a narrow slice of our populations. That putting in the effort to serve non-traditional museum goers pays off. Candidly, we cannot serve these audiences if we do not hold ourselves internally accountable. We need

to model the diversity of our public in our exhibitions, our research, in our boardrooms, and in our staff. I recognize that this field has made significant strides. When I first started attending national and international meetings of museum professionals in the late '70s, I was always struck by how few individuals of color there were. If we were together in person, you'd only need to look around the room to know that our profession has changed. And I am so pleased by active steps the Alliance has taken. Steps like making Diversity, Equity, Access, and Inclusion a key focus area in its current strategic plan, or the working group convened to tackle these issues. But we also recognize that we have further to go, and that this profession and field only become stronger when we represent the full experiences of the public.

### **Growing Together**

The third and final lesson that I hope we take from this moment is how deeply interdependent we are. As a former museum director, I used to take comfort in focusing on what we held within our museum's walls. But I also know that our greatest successes came from reaching across those boundaries to build creative partnerships. This is a networked time. We're all paddling furiously to keep our heads above water. But we will have failed if our own institutions stay afloat while our peers don't. This moment requires us to look to the examples set by our domestic and international colleagues. To consider how other institutions at different stages of reopening are moving forward. What practices have our colleagues in Europe adopted to migrate to a post-COVID-19 world? What can we learn as states in America begin the reopening process? I have been so heartened to see institutions across the US collaborating on reopening plans: sharing timelines with peers in the region, offering suggestions on traffic flow, strategizing attendance and face-mask protocols. We can look outside the field, too. As we rethink our research and educational potential, we can partner with academic institutions. As we rebuild community relationships, we can seek advice and support from local government. As we revamp our own revenue streams, we can look to the corporate sector for guidance. John Cotton Dana, a great pioneer of the public institution, once wrote that "who dares teach must never cease to learn." I think how lucky we are to be a field of teachers and learners. And how lucky we are that we can rely on each other in this moment; for support, for advice, for ideas. I know that when this crisis

is over, we will emerge a more robust, more imaginative, more collaborative field.

### Conclusion

Before I conclude, I want to share with you a heartwarming note our Visitor Services staff received last month. A mother of three kids, 6 and under, wrote in to us saying that she'd asked her children what they wanted to be when they grew up. The oldest wanted to be an aerospace engineer or an astronaut, and their middle child wanted to be a Marine Biologist. The youngest? She proclaimed proudly that she wanted to work at a museum.

It's nice to be a role model, isn't it? Astronauts explore the mysteries of space, and marine biologists explore the mysteries of the deep. And museum people, I've always thought that we explore what it means to be human. We define reality and give hope. Museums provide context, insight, and expertise that the public can trust. Museums offer the comfort, healing, and inspiration that we all need to move forward. In moments of division, they show us our shared humanity. In moments of fear, they help us find hope. In moments of pain, they remind us that there is still beauty. Thank you.

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### 4 May 2020, Eindhoven, The Netherlands

Culture is a form of contact we are missing right now. With the stagnation of societal traffic, it has become difficult to meet and to gain positive provocation or stimulate incentive, let alone contribute to our collective cultural life. Onomatopee first began to notice this stagnation after distributors decreased orders after the shops they supply closed their doors in early March. This was then followed by the formal closing of bars, shops and restaurants in mid-March, alongside the more informal closure of cultural institutions across the Netherlands. Ever since, we have all been increasingly occupied in organizing our private lives. Our main concern goes out to freelancers who, in spite of the many actions of the government, often end up with pay gaps and loss of earnings for their services and practice. Throughout the sector, the engagement with freelancers is the most pressing issue. For Onomatopee, as we strive to work with and support fresh talent and students, we also care about the



lack of income students experience right now, noticeable amongst our interns and this is something we also look to address. Obviously, there is also a concern for institutions. Most pressing is the lack of entrance fees. As Onomatopée always wanted to be freely accessible, this is not an issue for us, but it implies direct financial pressure for many. Our second concern is the missing out on self-generated income such as hosting workshops, selling books, performing lectures and so forth. This is where Onomatopée does suffer a blow. Our third concern is our partners; institutions, funding bodies and other commissioners, who may be forced to pull back now or possibly in the near future. We ask: How will European support and solidarity sustain? Will current investments into the research and development of program that does not see the light of the audience be paid for? Our final concern lies abroad: how will the makers and partners that form part of our wider, international network come out of this? And how will all small independent bookstores, who often sell our books, find ways to survive? And will the people who buy our books internationally, still be able to buy later this year or even next year? We pride ourselves in working internationally, and as much as the international network is so diverse and exciting it is often sometimes unfamiliar or distant, so the answers to these questions remain to be seen. Onomatopée is committed as ever, from the behind the scenes where we work with makers and thinkers to the very front of stage where we advocate cultural life. Our understanding of distance might change, but our attitude to supporting life does not. Note: Onomatopée Projects, in Eindhoven, the Netherlands, is a free and accessible 'cultuurhuis' (culture house). It presents, alongside a bar and riso-workshop, a whole series of presentations, lectures, workshops, publications and more, to operate as a project-space, public gallery and publisher.

*Freek Lomme,  
Founding director Onomatopée Projects*

### **15 May 2020, Shanghai, China**

The preservation and presentation of memory is the profession of museums as well as the social responsibility that museums shall fulfill. Hence, museums being memory institutions shall play their instrumental part in the global catastrophe of the COVID-19 pandemic. Soon after the nation-wide outbreak of COVID-19, Chinese museums, with professional

sensitivity and responsibility, simultaneously organized some medium-scale “movements” — collections and themed exhibitions on all types of COVID-19 evidence to witness how we’ve squandered all the progress we were making in keeping a lid on coronavirus infections. The collecting was started on February 18, 2020, then in less than 10 days, thirty different levels and types of museums joined in the event. On March 18, the National Cultural Heritage Administration published *the Notice on Soliciting and Preserving Representative Evidence for COVID-19 epidemic containment*, which gave instructions on the organization, mechanism and security of the collecting work and made a formal start of a systematic and nation-wide collecting program of COVID-19 evidence. On March 20, the first exhibition on fighting against COVID-19 was launched online, with an estimate that more themed exhibitions will soon be held, either online or on-site. Brave it out against all odds, Chinese museums’ prompt actions during this pandemic have further demonstrated their professional and forward-looking achievements made in recent years.

*Laishun An, vice president of ICOM, Vice-President and Secretary General, Chinese Museums Association (2008-present), Curator, Lu Xun Museum, China (January 2019-present), Editor-in-Chief, Chinese Museum Magazine, China (2016-present)*

### **15 May 2020. Shanghai, China**

Since the late February 2020, museums from Beijing, Shanghai, Tianjin, Shaanxi, Zhejiang, Sichuan, Yunnan, Jiangxi, Guangdong and other provinces in China have arranged for collecting the hard-fought gains in the war against the COVID-19 through voluntary unpaid donation, including petitions for fighting against the coronavirus, manifestos, donation receipts, work diaries, apartment complex passes, registration forms, thermometers, banners, photos and videos, calligraphy and paintings, etc. For selected items, certificates of donation will be issued to corresponding institutions or individuals, and the un-selected items will be returned to the donors. National Museum of China, Guangdong Museum, Shaanxi History Museum and Capital Museum have already made the public announcements for the collections about COVID-19 and

set up working groups to carry out the programs. Different museums have different criteria for collecting, some targeting the local and some nation-wide and world-wide.

*Shouyong Pan, Professor of Anthropology and Museology,  
Shanghai University, China*

### **19 May 2020, Biel, Switzerland**

Kunsthhaus Pasquart in Biel is one of the largest and most important institutions for exhibitions of contemporary art in Switzerland. It is housed in the city's former hospital, to which a beautiful extension, designed by Diener & Diener, was added in 2000. Our programme presents exhibitions by Swiss and international artists in spaces totalling 1'600m<sup>2</sup>. We are governed by a foundation and are subsidised by the city of Biel and the canton of Bern. During the lockdown, it is very difficult to help communities and their residents aside from offering internet programming. The closure of the cultural sector has made many people more aware of the value of culture to their lives, so we can offer a sense of hope for the future by continuing to communicate our programming plans with optimism, whilst underlining our appreciation of our public's support during and after lockdown. After the pandemic but in the face of a possible repetition, I envisage cultural organisations will feel the necessity to be more open to having to adapt their programmes at short notice. We will have to live with unpredictability and uncertainty. It is likely that we will also be more willing to use digital forms of communication rather than travelling as much as we have done in the past. I don't feel my institution has undertaken any measures that differ widely from those adopted by most cultural organisations. We very quickly developed a series of activities on-line, whilst postponing rather than cancelling exhibitions and managing to pay all staff. Home office is being encouraged for after lockdown as a viable way of working for part of the time. It is clear that the situation for cultural institutions in Europe is of a completely different nature than outside the west, where many organisations will not survive the pandemic.

*Felicity Lunn, Director, Kunsthhaus Pasquart, Biel, Switzerland*

### **May 20, 2020, New York, USA**

A crisis makes visible all the inequities that are so easily ignored in times of relative plenty. The inequities that COVID-19 is exploiting with lightning speed and tragic consequences are profound and systemic, with deep roots that disenfranchise and marginalize, that limit access to health and restrict economic opportunities. By collectively navigating this crisis however, we are offered both a moment to consider our interdependence and a lens through which to view the divisions that, through compassion and care for the most vulnerable, might be bridged as we forge a post-COVID-19 future. Cultural institutions are perfectly positioned to serve as a fulcrum in this transformative process. The International Coalition of Sites of Conscience (ICSC) is a global network of museums, historic sites, and memorials that inspire millions of citizens each year to explore the parallels between past and present, build bridges of understanding, and, ultimately, take action on pressing social issues. Since 1999, ICSC has grown to include over 275 member sites in 65 countries, all working to facilitate collaboration, exchange, and action. In the weeks this pandemic has raged, we at ICSC have focused on internal goals such as helping our members pivot operations to accessible virtual platforms that can offer support to their communities, as well as external, public-facing goals such as how we might foster social resilience and healing by centering stories of inequality and exclusion. We are drawing on our work in post-conflict societies to launch programs that will seed this transformation. If our members' participation in our COVID-19 webinars is any indication, cultural institutions the world over are seeking tools that will allow them not only to operate with more agility and accessibility than they did pre-pandemic, but to build on the public's new awareness of the risks the most vulnerable among us face every day, to work collectively to better understand the systems that perpetuate rather than eradicate inequality, and to engage in shaping a more just post-COVID-19 world.

*Elizabeth Silkes, Executive Director,  
International Coalition of Sites of Conscience*

### **20 May 2020, New Plymouth, Taranaki, Aotearoa New Zealand**

Aotearoa New Zealand is now looking towards recovery, even as social distancing is practiced, hygiene protocols are in place, and borders re-

main shut for the foreseeable future. As we reflect on some of the devastating consequences of the measures taken to control the spread of COVID-19, the impacts on mental health and the terrible experiences of people staying home with abusers remain with us. We write as Co-Directors/Chief Curators of Govett-Brewster Art Gallery / Len Lye Centre, which is Aotearoa New Zealand's museum of contemporary art and the global home of modernist artist Len Lye.<sup>2</sup> We know that there will be new economic, social, wellbeing, and creative challenges faced by our community after the pandemic. The partnership with the Taranaki Retreat, described here, is the first of many new direct partnerships we are seeking with community groups to enable art to play an active role in imagining a new way forward. Just weeks before the arrival of COVID-19 in Aotearoa New Zealand, the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery / Len Lye Centre began a modest partnership with the mental health recovery organisation Taranaki Retreat. With the knowledge that more people would be seeking their support in new ways, to face unique experiences, we reached out to them to begin developing a new project that would seek to engage art as one of many strands of recovery being offered. The project, titled *Te Whare Pora*, or the house of weaving, is a place of weaving and the space of weaving ideas. Assistant Curator Hanahiva Rose is developing the project, in collaboration with the Taranaki Retreat. As envisioned, the Govett-Brewster proposes to invite a contemporary weaver to host a series of workshops that explore the theory and practice of *Te Whare Pora* and the history of weaving in Taranaki. The project will have three stages: community engagement, workshops and an exhibition. Weaving is well demonstrated as an effective tool in building mental and cultural wellbeing. Using the concept of *Te Whare Pora*, this project will focus on building four "walls" of wellbeing through weaving: *taha wairua* (spiritual wellbeing), *taha hinengaro* (mental and emotional wellbeing), *taha tinana* (physical wellbeing) and *taha whānau* (family and social wellbeing). All aspects of this project will be free of charge for interested community members. All ages and abilities will be welcome and encouraged to attend. We hope this project will contribute to the development and retention of local weaving practices and histories; contribute to community understandings of Taranaki's natural environment and its associated traditional narratives; build relationships both within

2 In the summer of 2020, the authors have taken up the role of Co-Executive Director and Chief Executive Officer of Remai Modern, a new museum of modern and contemporary art in Saskatoon, Canada.

the broader community and weaving communities; and promote the role of the arts in community wellbeing.

Because of the closed borders and a desire to support the struggling art sector locally, programming for the next year will be more focused on artists from across Aotearoa New Zealand, with the exception of projects that were near completion before the virus reached our region. Public programs will remain largely virtual and we will need to redevelop our strategies for working with schools, onsite and online. New models for learning were tried out during the lockdown period, such as YouTube tutorials, and we will continue to develop those further. At this point, there are still a lot of unknowns, but we are cautiously optimistic: There are so many creative and resourceful people in the arts.

*Aileen Burns & Johan Lundh, former Co-Directors/Chief Curators  
of Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, Aotearoa New Zealand*

## **20 May 2020, Munich, Germany**

In addition to the existing digital offerings, Munich's Haus der Kunst (HDK) has developed new digital formats, including audio tours as well as the artwork "Presence," designed by Franz Erhard Walther for presentation on the website and the exterior of the building. In a short loop during the Easter holidays, the statements "Bodies are the boundary," "Towards space," "The coincidence of history," and "Body in the present" were shown on the website. For maximum impact, for four days, all subpages of the website took the user to the [www.hausderkunst.de/anwesenheit](http://www.hausderkunst.de/anwesenheit) page. The artwork thus replaced all other contents of the website in the digital space. Advance announcements or explanations were dispensed with and an explanatory blog post was only posted online on Easter Monday. After the four days, the user found the website with all previous content.

At the same time, from nightfall and until dawn for 40 days, the same sentences were projected onto the wall facing the English Garden of the western façade. After Easter, another digital format was launched with "HDK Live": the live transmission of these images, in which a camera records and the images can be seen on the website. The first broadcast, "Presence," ended on May 18. With this work of art and the way to present it, Andrea Lissoni, the new artistic director of the Haus der Kunst since April 2020, has set a first accent pointing forward to the future. It

serves as a window for the events of the present and makes the artistic contents in the building more easily visible from the outside.

Imagine the Haus der Kunst in a different way - from a different perspective, as the exhibition title of Franz Erhard Walther suggests. It changes its shape. At dusk, the shadows of the trees fade. Slowly, a sequence of sentences appears, becomes bright and lively in the dark and functions like a window inside, in the first room of the Franz Erhard Walther exhibition, to the 'word images,' a series from the 1950s. The invisible window breaks through time. Walther's most recent works and his earliest form a loop. When the sun rises, the projection disappears. The building is left behind. The sky is blue or cloudy, sometimes birds fly over the house, and suddenly, on the terrace, a skateboarder practices new tricks in a corner. The building is alive and 'presence' its nocturnal heartbeat. What does it mean to 'write new history?' What does it mean for the Haus der Kunst to be alive? I want visions to become perceptions. Imagine a spider web that suddenly appears before your eyes. Imagine what a tree sees, hears, smells and feels. Imagine what a night bird experiences. (Andrea Lissoni)

*Andrea Lissoni, Director & Elena Heitsch,  
Head of Communication and Press Haus der Kunst*

### **30 May 2020, Beijing, China**

The China Customs Museum is national industry-specific museum, located in Beijing, southwest to Jianguomen Bridge. Our museum is a professional museum with the mission of exhibiting the history, evolution and development of Customs and their functions and responsibilities in ancient, modern and contemporary China. Faced with this public health crisis, the museum assumed the responsibility to provide the public with therapeutic services and the to popularize the associated scientific knowledge. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the Customs had such tasks as supervision of import and export, taxation, border health and quarantine enforcement as its social concerns. In response to intensified concerns, we designed the first anti-COVID-19 exhibition in China, titled Anti-pandemic Frontline at the National Gate by using HTML5, an interactive web technique. With data on the inspection of prevention and protective equipment as well as confirmed and suspected cases of COVID-19 diagnosed at ports, the exhibition showcased Customs' mission and responsibility as well as the patriotism and devotion of frontline officers, with the goal of bringing the Customs closer to the public and alleviating the detrimental effects of this pandemic on people's well-beings. In addition, we solicited various kinds of objects that witnessed the

fight against the pandemic and artistic creations from customs offices and the public. Later we held another exhibition themed Anti-pandemic through Art at the National Gate, where works from creators of all ages impressed viewers with a variety of perspectives and techniques, reflected the feelings and expectations of Chinese people, and the affection and praise given to the Customs personnel. Highlighting the courage and faith needed to overcome the difficulties and fight against the pandemic, the exhibition demonstrates the nation-wide courage and belief required to get a grip on the pandemic.

*Xing Yuchen, Curator, China Customs Museum*

### **30 May 2020, Shanghai, China**

The sudden outbreak of The Covid-19 epidemic has spread all over the globe. For China, which is in the midst of “museum fever,” it gave the opportunity of “cold thinking” behind closed doors. Since late January 2020, museums, art galleries and other public cultural institutions have been closed in support of COVID-19 prevention. It was not until mid-March, when the epidemic became more stable, that they began to open again. During this period of closure and reopening, three timely new measures were adopted throughout Chinese museums. First, the National Cultural Heritage Administration issued the *Notice on Soliciting and Preserving Representative Evidence for COVID-19 Epidemic Containment*. Nation-wide museums, such as those in Hubei, Shanghai, Tianjin, Shaanxi, Zhejiang, Sichuan, Yunnan, Jiangxi and Guangdong, are also actively collecting evidence to fight against COVID-19. Second, some museums have launched temporary exhibitions themed on the epidemic. For example, the *Dancing Ghosts: the New Crown* exhibited by the Shanghai Science & Technology Museum. Third, we pushed online exhibitions and data platforms, so that the public can appreciate the exhibitions during their stay-at-home period. For example, since February 1, the National Cultural Heritage Administration has launched six batches with 300 online exhibitions and data platforms. In addition, Chen Lusheng, Deputy Director of the National Museum of China, advocated the establishment of a national museum for epidemic disease prevention. It would document the history from SARS to COVID-19 and showcase the Chinese people’s hard-fought for life in the new century. In the future, the response to hot issues might become a norm, as museums



have experienced three stages of development. The first stage simply presented the object; the second stage was to impart knowledge related to objects. In the third stage, the relevance between collections and individuals is well examined and communicated, so as to shape personal meanings. Hot topics and global events like the COVID-19 pandemic provide a good opportunity for museums to build new relationships with their audiences. On the whole, there are two ways of thinking about museums. One is the collection-oriented museum, which is the practice of traditional museums focusing on displaying the relationship between objects in the collections, given their huge treasures. However, faced with the dilemma of fewer collections, some museums increasingly embrace another way of thinking—the idea-oriented museum—in response to changes in the times and the public needs. This will inevitably require more and more hot issues as topics, micro stories, cutting-edge technology and other topics that are domestic, native and resonate with us.

*Zhou Jingjing, Department of Cultural Heritage and Museology,  
Fudan University*

### **30 May 2020, Yangzhou, Jiangsu Province, China**

The Yangzhou Museum opened its doors in 1951, as a comprehensive city museum, with collections such as jade, paintings, porcelain, and lacquer — 140,000 objects that range from the Neolithic age to the present. The city of Yangzhou is located at the intersection of the Yangtze River and the Great Canal in southwest-central Jiangsu Province, China. The city won the UN Habitat Scroll of Honour award in 2006 and the UNESCO Creative City of Gastronomy in 2019. To fight the COVID-19 outbreak, residents in Yangzhou went through extremely strict social distancing with a month-long stay-at-home period: all restaurants, cinemas, and public spaces were closed, while gatherings with relatives and friends were canceled. With streaming media being the only access to the outside world, people started to feel isolated and bored. To help people get through this difficult time, Yangzhou Museum, along with the local intangible cultural heritage association, launched an online session on Weibo (the Chinese “Twitter”), which introduced rice-paper flowers, one of the Yangzhou’s intangible cultural heritages to the audience. Rice-paper flowers are made of the thin peeled and dried pith of the rice-paper plant (also known as *Tetrapanax papyrifer*, or Tongcao in Chinese). Rice

paper was widely used in the late 19th century as a common material for gouache paintings sold to Western clients and then got its name from a mistaken idea that it was made from rice. The technique for making rice-paper flowers spread widely in Yangzhou in the early Qing dynasty, as rice paper flowers are easier to preserve than real one. The mid-Qing dynasty saw the peak of the prosperity of Yangzhou's rice-paper flower business. However, with plastic flowers getting more popular since the 1980s, rice-paper flowers started to lose their market. Therefore, the online sessions aimed to attract more people to learn this traditional skill and appreciate the ancient beauty of Chinese costume and hair accessories. The craftswoman on the online session wore a Hanfu (one of the traditional types of Chinese clothing) with rice-paper flowers as hair decoration. To make it possible for everyone to engage in the activity, the craftswoman used eye shadow to dye flowers as a replacement of traditional pigments. As a follow up to the online sessions, the museum launched an exhibition about rice-paper flowers after the city reopened, as one of the events on International Museum Day 2020 (May). The exhibition displays many precious collections of rice-paper flowers, as well as tells the behind stories of craftspeople.

*Xingli Wang, Department of Conservation  
and Collections, Yangzhou Museum*

#### **4 June 2020, Xi'an, Shaanxi Province, China**

The sudden outbreak of COVID-19 has impacted our lives profoundly, and also greatly challenged the museums, which are dedicated to social harmony and sustainable development. Faced with the pandemic, Chinese museums have responded actively to fulfill their social responsibilities and obligations with the true spirit of the museums. In response to this sudden public event, however, we should also be soberly aware that there are still many shortcomings and defects in the security services and cultural communications of the museums. These need to be carefully reflected upon and considered. Let's join efforts to preserve today for tomorrow, and to provide an inexhaustible driving force for the construction of an intimate community of the shared destiny of human kind.

*Hou Ningbing, Director, Shaanxi History Museum*

#### **4 June 2020, Xi'an, Shaanxi Province, China**

Museums in China had to shut down due to the outbreak of COVID-19. Without audience, these institutions seem to stop suddenly, like someone pushed the pause button. However, museum staff are still busy keeping the curtain of the network platform open by acting as “anchors” to introduce exhibitions, collections, cultural relics and cultural creativity to the online audience. “Virtual museum” has become a new mode of exhibition, the collections have become “stars” in museum live streams, and the cultural heritage of the museums has been able to continue.

*Tian Jing, Vice-Director of Emperor Qin Shihuang's  
Mausoleum Site Museum*

#### **14 June 2020, Amsterdam the Netherlands**

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought the world into a situation that no one could have imagined one year ago. After the first shock and the immediate search for a new way to operate professionally in an uncertain and constantly changing reality, I realized the pandemic also creates chances. The new inevitable reality demands that we reconsider our role in society as cultural institutions. One of the positive changes I see is the fast development of digital communication and the creative use of digital capabilities. Two weeks after the lockdown I discovered that meeting via TEAMS or ZOOM can be very effective and efficient. Suddenly, the lack of sufficient office space was no longer relevant. The attendees at meetings were better prepared, so we saved time, travel time, travel costs. An important disadvantage, however, is the impossibility to make use of the non-verbal communication in creative meetings. In my opinion, the biggest gain is the fast development of the digitalization of schooling. In The Netherlands formal education, especially in primary and secondary schools, is still very traditional and the added value of digital applications are not fully used. The pandemic has forced teachers to fully use digital possibilities through the means of home schooling. As a museum, in close contact with teachers, we have been able to add significant value to home schooling using our collections, to make lessons meaningful and make digital learning challenging and more fun. With our education partners – educational Publisher ThiemeMeulenhoff and the

public broadcasting company NTR – we enriched digital schoolbooks and developed a national history examination broadcast on prime time. The first paid digital lesson, with live support from our museum docents, will be offered from June onwards. As an optimistic person and museum professional, I realize constant change is part of life. And although we constantly try to anticipate the future, this future can arrive faster than expected.

*Annemies Broekgaarden, Head Public and Education Rijksmuseum*

### **16 June 2020, Los Angeles, California**

I appreciate the opportunity to the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact over the past three months at the Autry Museum of the American West. The topic did not include – as it had not yet happened for purposes of your invitation – the current human and civil rights crisis surrounding Black Lives Matter (BLM). But I am hard-pressed to separate the two, and much of what I say about the former pertains, too, to the latter. The Autry’s response to the COVID-19 was in certain parts predictable and in others less so. The Museum closed to the public in mid-March, which required a variety of logistical and scheduling changes that needed to be made and communicated promptly – events canceled altogether or for specified periods of time and staffing arrangements that were put in place because most of the staff began “working from home” rather than on site. Internal task forces were established, first a fluctuating group of 10 – 15 to determine how best we might “stay alive in public view” with no audiences coming through our front doors. More recently, we have created a second task force on “reopening the Autry” to staff and then the public in incremental and steady if not large or hasty steps.

Like most cultural and arts institutions and museums, we turned promptly to the development and communication of a broad and diverse menu of virtual programming given the extensive bandwidth of the Museum’s collections – cultural objects, art, Native objects, Native art, archeology, photographic archives, music archives and intellectual property, and history objects and papers. Consistent with the audiences of the museum when open to public, the programming was multi-generational, culturally inclusive and diverse, and historical and contemporary, all with an accent on the interactive and a wide use of several social media platforms. This use of virtual programming at the Autry is, in all likeli-

hood, not a passing phenomenon driven only the COVID-19 crisis. From lessons and practice learned in the past three months, virtual platforms and programming will continue to be a more vital and extensive component of exhibitions and public programming. While both normally take place primarily within the four walls of the Autry, with forethought and by design, the Museum will include more virtual collaterals to strengthen the Museum's ability to reach beyond those who visit on site. I also want to cite another dimension regarding outreach and community connection, used by the Autry for much of its existence, that has been magnified for all museums by the COVID-19 crisis. By mission statement the Autry is committed to "telling all the stories of the peoples and communities of the American West." This mission is intentionally inclusive of the broad diversity of cultural communities that constitute the American West, past and present, and, as an epistemological matter, taps into first and originating curatorial and interpretive voices consistently. Through these means, we seek to actualize Museum as an integrated and relevant component of the communities in which the institution sits – which in Los Angeles is a broad spectrum, indeed. We are a part of them, and they are a part of us. The Autry is envisioned as a forum, a gathering place, civic and social space for conversation, debate, even controversy, rather than only as a "house of objects" distant from relevant communities of interest. We strove to make this museology concrete and real instead of only conceptual. I offer two examples of that intention from the past three months. First, as part of the virtual programming rollout, the Museum created the *Collecting Community History Initiative: the West during COVID 19*. It seeks to gather ephemera, beginning with face masks and venturing widely, that creates paths of interpretation and conversation regarding community impact and experience (we have expanded the scope to include BLM) that are far more than "ephemeral." In addition, which the Museum believes are fully within the scope of our institution as a community citizen, we contributed hundreds of PPE and N95 masks surplus to our conservation needs to a local children's hospital. I believe that the COVID-19 crisis has accelerated trends already evident in museums and their practice for a generation as the examples of the Autry response described above affirm. Museums will become far less "palaces of collections" and "temples on the hill" than integral, interconnected, and relevant components of and gathering place for the communities of which they are a part and purport to serve.

*W. Richard West, Jr., President and CEO,  
Autry Museum of the American West*