

Why Should Museums Remain Open and Operational?



In 2020, museums and collections all over the world were deeply affected by the COVID-19 pandemic; consequently, many public-facing institutions were required to take a position on their operations. The Museum Watch Committee saw the extent to which museums played a specific role in the discussions on COVID-related lockdown measures within wider fields such as arts and culture, entertainment, and leisure.

To monitor the roles and positions of institutions internationally, **the Museum Watch Committee asked CIMAM members to identify the main arguments used worldwide to keep museums open and operational** in these difficult times. It launched this project in November 2020.

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This call to action activated contemporary art professionals worldwide, spanning **Argentina, Australia, Belgium, India, Italy, Peru, Russia, Singapore, Spain, and the United States**. They presented their main arguments to keep their museums open or reopen them soon and shared their experiences from the pandemic.

The below conclusions and examples **aim to encourage and inspire** modern and contemporary art museum professionals worldwide to keep their museums operational.

1. MUSEUMS ARE SAFE SPACES

The scale of exhibition spaces, temperature and air controls, as well as crowd management make museums some of the safest public spaces. Museums have established very clear protocols and guidelines to enable both staff and visitors to remain safe in the museum and workspace.

2. MUSEUMS ARE AN ESSENTIAL SERVICE

Art and culture are essential to our individual and collective well-being. They offer one of the most positive ways of engaging with complexity and uncertainty in these difficult times. Museums contribute by engaging with and supporting the emotional and intellectual health and growth of citizens. They offer much-needed contact with the material, the physical, and the real, in a safe environment.

3. MUSEUMS ARE DRIVERS FOR ECONOMIC RECOVERY

Museums support thousands of jobs and should be seen as drivers for economic recovery in the cities and countries where they are situated. Each museum is encouraged to demonstrate the numbers of jobs that it sustains in its city.

4. MUSEUMS CAN ACT COLLECTIVELY

Museums are advised to come together with other museums and cultural institutions in their city. To have a common position and voice. To get stronger and stand collectively to push forward their petition. During the pandemic, many museums and cultural associations have worked closely with one another for the betterment of cultural sectors as a whole.

5. MUSEUMS CAN ADAPT

Without access to physical spaces, museums have seen an increase in the digitalization of their programs and activities. Either for survival or as an opportunity, museums have taken advantage of technology to upgrade their online presence and build new online audiences from all over the world. While many museums have seen their international visitor numbers reduced, they are now focused on engaging and attracting new local audiences.

6. MUSEUMS SHOULD MAINTAIN DIALOGUE WITH THE GOVERNMENT

Whether or not the government supports arts and culture, it is of key importance to maintain an open dialogue. Museums should keep insisting on their significance to society at large, leveraging on arguments for why they are crucial spaces for citizenship and economic recovery.



→ Read the examples and ideas submitted by CIMAM Members.

ARGENTINA



Victoria Noorthoorn
Director, Museo de
Arte Moderno de
Buenos Aires



Gabriela Rangel
Artistic Director,
MALBA – Museo de Arte
Latinoamericano de
Buenos Aires



Adriana Rosenberg
President, Fundación
Proa, Buenos Aires

The first stage took place from March 2020 following the closure by presidential decree of all cultural spaces in Argentina. As a reaction to this, **in May 2020 the following museums in Buenos Aires formed a working group** to jointly address the pandemic and negotiate with the various governments (municipal and national):

- a. **Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes** (public, national museum, under the Ministry of Culture of the Nation)
- b. **Museo de Arte Moderno de Buenos Aires** (public, local museum, under the Ministry of Culture of the Government of the City of Buenos Aires GCBA)
- c. **Museo de Arte Latinoamericano de Buenos Aires – MALBA** (private museum)
- d. **Fundación Proa** (private institution)

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Two main actions were conceived by the museums' working group:

i. **May 2020:** Establishment of **protocols** for the various stages of reopening that we jointly **submitted to the Ministry of Culture of the GCBA** – where the four museums are geographically located – proposing that the authorities follow the professional guidelines proposed by the participating institutions.

ii. **June 2020: Foundation of Red Argentina de Museos y Espacios de Arte (RAME)**, a network in which more than 100 museums and cultural spaces of all kinds have already subscribed and which is dedicated to the most diverse patrimonies and actions, public and private, of everything in the country.

In the **second stage**, while already associated as RAME, the four museums generated the following **actions**, whose ultimate goal was to prepare for the reopening of our cultural institutions:



- **RAME ACTION 1:** From June 2020, RAME organized a **series of talks** in Spanish titled “Managing Uncertainty” with the aim of bringing together museum directors from around the world and the country to share how they are addressing the pandemic and the closure, as well as their plans and actions for reopening. (See [Annex 1. Series of talks](#))

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- **RAME ACTION 2:** From July 2020, RAME submitted successive **formal reopening requests** to the GCBA and contributed to the preparation of the **reopening protocols**. (See [Annex 2. Reopening arguments](#))



“Museums Illuminate” action at MALBA

- **RAME ACTION 3:** During October 2020, while reiterating to the various governments the need to reopen museums according to the arguments presented, we also called upon over 100 museums in the network to participate in **“Museums Illuminate”**, an action to illuminate their facades on Friday, October 23 at 8:00 p.m., and to broadcast a pre-recorded video showing this throughout the country.

The action was an attempt to **make visible the importance of museums for society** in a time of pandemic and to pressure the various governments – national, regional, and municipal – into reopening in a poetic way that avoided the appearance of a protest. One week before the action, RAME met with the GCBA authorities who agreed to reopen the museums. The “Museums Illuminate” action was then used to accompany the reopening announcement made in the media that same day. Museums were authorized to open from the following Monday, which happened gradually throughout the country. (See [Annex 3. Announcement Action Museums Illuminate](#) & [Link to the Video](#))

AUSTRALIA



Rhana Devenport
Director, Art Gallery of
South Australia,
Australia

- The **Government of South Australia** was committed to ensuring that the **Art Gallery of South Australia (AGSA)** and other major cultural institutions were open to the public as much as possible within safe parameters. **AGSA** was one the last state art museums in Australia to close in late March and **one of the first to reopen** 10 weeks later. Temporary closure and reopening dates were negotiated closely with the Government.

- **Government support** for museums was through general Australian Government avenues i.e. '**JobKeeper**' to retain staff in the Restaurant and rent relief for the Restaurant contractors. State Government support for COVID-19 related financial impacts is also available through **State Government Insurance**.

- Public expressions of the value of culture have been directed to individual artists and small arts organisations such as the \$10.2 million '[Arts Recovery Fund](#)' announced in September 2020 by the SA Government, with a focus on live arts and digital.

The Australian Government through the [Australia Council for the Arts](#) has also offered a series of grants for artists and arts organisations totalling \$250 million.

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- The **leadership team at AGSA** redirected particular philanthropic funds from public programs **to offer six \$10,000 Artist Bursaries for South Australian artists** experiencing hardship due to the pandemic.



Also, the **Membership Campaign for 2020 was directed to raising funds for the South Australian Artists Fund** to be able to acquire contemporary works of art by South Australian artists. (This proved to be one of the most successful Membership Campaigns to date). AGSA worked very closely with the State Government and the Health Department to ensure alignment with extensive new Health Department COVID-19 Guidelines.

- **Art Gallery of South Australia supported South Australian artists through the Artists Bursaries and the South Australian Artists Fund.** We worked **in tandem with the Government of South Australia** who were very supportive of our initiatives and approach.

BELGIUM



Bart de Baere
Director, M HKA
Museum van
Hedendaagse Kunst
Antwerpen, Antwerpen

- In **Belgium museums became a 'first tier'** component of the corona pandemics reopening discussion: in the **first lockdown** museums were **reopened early**. They were then the first **'positive signal'** for the **cultural sector**, which had until then been mainly portrayed as a sector catastrophically damaged. In the **second lockdown** museums were once more one of the **three first sectors to be allowed to reopen**.

- This was spearheaded by consultations **in the Flemish museum meeting**. They combined a reflection on the **fundamental position of museums in society**, with the development of clear, **detailed protocols** that were condensed into attractively formulated structural plans. In the spring this was a **'seven point plan'**; for the second reopening this was reformulated into a **'ten point plan'**, **officially endorsed by the Flemish minister-president** who also **actively lobbied for reopening the museums** early in the National Coordination Committee.

- The trajectory combined **formal advisory trajectories** and **good coordination with museum organisations in the other parts of the country**, with clearly formulated synoptic basic arguments that were also informally pitched to key scientific advisors and decision-making politicians.

- These arguments would focus on the fact **that museums are the safest covered public spaces**, combining large scale halls, top level air control and **a sophisticated expertise in crowd**

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management. Added to that was an underlying concern about the cultural quality of the public offer.



- In the second lockdown the focus was on the huge pressure on public space in cities, museums being an extension to this that might relieve part of the pressure and give qualitative experience. All of this was the outcome of reflections of **museums as an essential public service** that was also reflected in punctual initiatives by individual museums.

Welcome back to our museum! National poster developed by the Flemish Museum Council.



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M HKA, the Antwerp contemporary art museum, **asked artist Anne-Mie Van Kerckhoven to work with the quite clinical plexi panels** established everywhere to shield of staff from visitors, to turn them into a positive experience.



She upgraded them into an artwork with three 'square' images turned into a sphere; the images coming from three different sources; mysticism with the heavenly, avant-garde with Hilma Av Klimt, and a scientific bionics scheme.

When the museums had to close down again unexpectedly on October 30th, SMAK, **the Ghent contemporary art museum 'opened' an exhibition of 400 drawings that had been made during the first lockdown**, presented to the media as 'shown as of now, behind closed doors', a move that was widely remarked upon.

INDIA



Tasneem Mehta
Managing Trustee &
Honorary Director, Dr Bhau
Daji Lad Museum, Mumbai

- **Museums in Mumbai and in India** have been **clubbed together** with public spaces and there has been no discussion regarding their reopening. As public museums in India receive a high footfall, the authorities are concerned that till there has been a significant decline in COVID-19 numbers, **museums and public spaces are unlikely to open soon.**

- Like other Indian museums, we have been **badly affected by the loss of revenue**, leading to cuts in salaries, but fortunately no staff losses. However, we have used the

time for research and **to build our online audiences.** We are in the process of a major review and **upgrade of our online presence.** We work three days a week for conservation and maintenance purposes.

- There have been no calls in India to open **museums as most are government controlled.** Nor has the press been proactive as there is a nervousness about the disease. At present, a partial lockdown is in operation, with trains, which are the lifeline of Mumbai, only open to government employees and essential workers. At present schools are closed.

- We have had **no interaction with the government** as **museums are not viewed as essential** community institutions and therefore not considered a priority.

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- The government does not have an understanding of the true value and potential of museums. We have tried over the years to make them understand, but **in a poor country sadly they view museums as elitist**. Our programming and audiences are far from elitist but these perceptions will take time to change.

ITALY



Alessandro Bianchi,
General Manager,
Pirelli HangarBicocca,
Milan

- **Museums** are considered **essential services for citizens**, structures that allow maintaining social distance and health requirements should remain open.

- **The government** response has been to **standardize very different structures** such as theaters, museums, and cinemas.

- As a **collective position**, many museum directors have written publicly to the government to ask for the opening of Italian museums.

- **Our museum** has **made a stand collectively** with other Italian museums.

PERU



José Carlos Mariategui
Curator, Alta
Tecnología Andina,
Lima

- More than ever, **art and culture are means of social cohesion and citizenship.**

- **In Peru** most publicly funded museums our archaeological and art museums are **mostly privately managed though they are usually based on public premises**, such as the Lima Art Museum (MALI).

- Since the lockdown and the pandemic began in Lima there was **no commitment and no real effort from the government** and the Ministry of Culture to help the museums **apart from the ones** that are being **managed by the ministry.**

- Many of us were **in touch with the authorities of the Ministry of Culture** and we were able to **secure around \$15,000,000 USD of funding for the arts and culture.** However, this funding did not help the daily running of museums. They were mostly for specific creative projects on some implementations that had been disrupted due to the pandemic. That meant that **85% of the museums in Peru that are not funded by the Ministry of Culture were in serious trouble.**

- In Peru it is not common to have associations or institutional groups that can give collective positions. The **Peruvian Association of Curators** legitimised our position with data and solid information. However, the **funding for museums** during the emergency **never happened** and therefore **most museums are in a terrible economic situation.**

- **Some museums we're in touch** with had the idea of **writing a letter** to the minister of culture and **talking with him** about the

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problems museums were facing. Unfortunately, in those meetings, **we were not able to secure any financial support**. However, we **realized** that it was not efficient to continue working by ourselves and that **there was a need to create a Peruvian Association of Museums**. In order to do so in the best possible way we studied the **data of the 450 museums in Peru** and invited the most representative ones to start the Association with the intention of inviting the other museums in a second phase.

- The Peruvian Association of Museums **aims to have a collective voice** with both the government as well as other institutions and to push forward best practices for all museums in Peru.

RUSSIA



Olga Sviblova
Director, Multimedia
Art Museum, Moscow

- After the first quarantine closure, for the re-opening in summer 2020 all **sanitary measures** were respected in the Multimedia Art Museum, Moscow, especially regarding visitor numbers and social distancing. Each visitor was given a free new mask and a pair of gloves.

- Total disinfection of the museum was made every three hours during the day.

- Tickets were only sold electronically, giving specific time-slots for visiting the exhibitions.

SINGAPORE



Eugene Tan
Director, National
Gallery Singapore and
Singapore Art Museum,
Singapore

The case for reopening of museums in Singapore is a unique one. The Singapore government, while prioritising the health and safety of the population, proceeded with COVID-19 measures and restrictions with **the view of getting its economy (and by extension everyday life) operational as soon as possible**. Reopening the museum sectors was a part of that plan.

Singapore implemented a lockdown ('Circuit Breaker') in early April. Like other countries around the world, this involved home confinement, the closure of 'non-essential' businesses, and home-based learning for students. Lockdown measures were meant to ease in early May, but a resurgence of COVID-19 cases saw this extended instead till early in June. Plans were put in place for when these restrictions were eased—the gradual reopening of non-essential businesses, schools, and leisure activities was to be rolled out in phases.

Colleagues from various divisions across the **Visual Arts Cluster (consisting of National Gallery Singapore, the Singapore Art Museum, and STPI)** were appointed to a **Crisis Management Team to coordinate with the authorities** and keep abreast of the latest COVID-19 prevention measures while work-from-home was underway, at the same time also planning for the eventual return of both staff and public to museum spaces. When lockdown measures were lifted in June, staff were permitted to return to the office in a split-team arrangement, and only if absolutely essential

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to operations. This allowed the maintenance and installation of physical exhibitions in preparation for the Gallery's reopening.

In the interim, the Gallery pivoted online: onsite programmes and tours were digitally re-presented. This includes the [Gallery Children's Festival 2020](#), artistic programmes in the series [ART + LIVE](#), and [bilingual docent-led highlight tours](#). On-site educational programmes shifted its engagement online through [GalleryKids!](#). *Perspectives*, the Gallery's digital magazine, began the series [out of isolation: artists respond to covid-19](#) which features artists' reflections on the pandemic. In addition, as the world grappled with new ways of being, the visual arts community in Singapore came together to present a series of exhibitions and programmes titled [Proposals for Novel Ways of Being](#). National Gallery Singapore and Singapore Art Museum (SAM) partnered with 10 other local art institutions, independent art spaces and collectives, featuring the works of over 170 artists and cultural workers in physical and digital presentations.



Proposals for Novel Ways of Being key visual with all participating institutions.

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The initiative kicked off in late July, after museums reopened at the end of June. **Reopening was attached with necessary conditions:** museums could operate at 25% of their capacity, while temperature-taking and contact tracing were made mandatory as still remains the case in every business venue in Singapore. Floor markers were installed to ensure safe distancing, while tours, programmes, and interactive exhibitions were only gradually resumed.



Safe distancing signage in National Gallery Singapore. Image courtesy of TodayOnline

With human interactions tempered by fear and caution, it is imperative that people have a safe space to interact with each other and connect through a shared physical encounter with art. Now, approximately six months from the Gallery's reopening, new exhibitions have opened to a demographic different than before. **Visitorship currently stands at about 60%, with local visitors forming about 60% of that. A larger segment of the Gallery's audience is now local, a trend likely to continue given restrictions on international travel worldwide.**

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Just after lockdown measures were lifted in June, Singapore's national broadsheet The Straits Times [released the results of a poll](#) that asked a thousand respondents to rank jobs "most essential" to keep Singapore running, and which thus 'deserved' a wage boost. According to 71% of respondents, artists came in dead last. The Gallery's current visitorship trends hint at a shift in the reception of art in Singapore, and hopefully with this a positive shift in the role of art and culture in Singapore.

SPAIN



Marko Daniel
Director, Fundació Joan
Miró, Barcelona

- **Art and culture are essential** to our individual and collective well-being. **Art is one of the best ways of engaging with complexity and uncertainty**, not just in and through works of art but also as a transferrable skill that helps us deal with the complexity and uncertainty of the world around us.

- We can guarantee safe and secure environments for our visitors. After spending so much of our lives on screens, we offer the public much-needed contact with the material, the physical, the real, in a safe environment.

- The **arts have to be seen as a driver of recovery** and need support to be able to discharge that role.

- We have **collectively defended** the importance of and need for art in these times, as providing **a space where reflection and doubt**

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are possible and where we can imagine and create new possibilities for the future.

- As a **private** foundation that **depends** to a high degree on **visitor income**, we have had to **negotiate very hard, at the highest political levels**, for emergency funding and have been **fortunate in the response**, at least for 2020, of a number of different public agencies.

UNITED STATES



Jessica Morgan,
Director, DIA Art
Foundation, New York



Sally Tallant
Director, Queens
Museum, New York

- New York City's museums, at their core, are neighborhood institutions whose missions are **to engage** and **support** the emotional and intellectual **health and growth** of our City's **residents**.

- New York City's **museums employ thousands of people** across all five boroughs and from diverse backgrounds and professions, all of whom serve our missions. Our museums are committed to

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returning staff to our workplaces on a thoughtful, careful, and rigorously planned way that prioritizes the health and safety of our employees.

- Cultural institutions **are central to the recovery of the City**. We **can provide safe, well** managed, and ventilated **spaces** where physical distancing is easy to monitor.
- During the summer, the **NYC Museums Reopening Task Force** prepared **COVID-19 Guidelines** for Reopening NYC Museums. The document contained four components: Guidelines for **Safely Reopening Museums**, Guidelines for **Safely Returning Museum Staff** to the Workplace, and a **Reopening Readiness "Punch List."**
- November 20, 2020. The **museum working group** (Adam D. Weinberg, Alice Pratt Brown Director of the Whitney Museum of American Art, on behalf of the New York City Museums Reopening Task Force) **sent a letter to the governor** (Steve Cohen, New York Forward Advisory Board; Eric Gertler, Empire State Development) regarding further protocols and the reasons for museums to remain open in New York.
- The letter to the governor summarizes the following points:
 1. Thanks to New York State's guidance, we can confidently report that our **museums are safe places** for New Yorkers to visit during this pandemic.
 2. **Collectively** we have already welcomed back more than half a million visitors, the vast majority of them New Yorkers.
 3. Reopening the museum **sector has supported thousands of New York State residents' jobs**.
 4. Below the list of the **involved institutions**:

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American Museum of Natural History
The Bronx Museum of the Arts
Brooklyn Museum
Children's Museum of Manhattan
Dia Art Foundation
El Museo del Barrio
The Frick Collection
Intrepid Sea, Air & Space Museum
The Jewish Museum
The Metropolitan Museum of Art
The Morgan Library & Museum
Museum of Arts and Design
Museum of the City of New York
Museum of Modern Art
Museum of the Moving Image
National September 11 Memorial & Museum
Neue Galerie
New Museum
New York Historical Society
Queens Museum
Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum
Staten Island Museum
The Studio Museum in Harlem
The Tenement Museum
Whitney Museum of American Art