

# Museums During the COVID19 Pandemic: an Exploration of New Forms of Communication and Mediation of Artworks<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract.** The emergency situation generated by the pandemic is contributing to generate profound changes in museum institutions: forcing them to rethink objectives, explore new targets, experiment with new modes of communication, even to the point of reconsidering in some cases their overall positioning and identity. The impossibility of physical access to public spaces has contributed to accelerating a process of change in museums management, bringing back the focus of attention, for example, on the importance of the phatic dimension of signification, on the ability to generate, incentivize and maintain contact with visitors, profoundly rethinking spaces, times and modes of the museum experience. Many cultural institutions have responded to this profound and unexpected crisis by radically rethinking established modes of enunciation while transforming themselves into generators of new content. In this context, forms of mediation of museums are marked by certain recurring characteristics: the multiplication of communication channels, the massive use of new technologies, with the use of short forms, narrativization and irony (see the case, famous and debated, of the opening of the TikTok channel of the Uffizi in Florence) the encouragement of playful use of artworks by users (#tussenkunstenquarantine), popularized by Google Art Culture but also taken over and institutionalized by landmark museums such as the Getty, the acceleration of the synergy between art and entertainment worlds with the possibility of enjoying artworks within gaming platforms such as Animal Crossing: New Horizons (MET, Getty, the National Museum of Science and Technology). The complex processes of renegotiating the meaning of institutions responsible for the preservation and promotion of works of art and the strategic role they play in the tourist destination market urge semiotics to explore the meaning-rich scenario of the new museums of our (new) present.

## 1. From one space to another

For those who love art, there is nothing more beautiful than physically visiting a museum. A museum is generally located on a site that constitutes its surroundings and of which it is, so to speak, the spearhead, sometimes an actual logo. It's hard to visit the Louvre while ignoring Paris. Or, at Beaubourg, not to notice how the presence of the city is constitutive throughout the entire visit, from the large entrance plaza to the escalators leading to the various galleries and the panoramic terraces, from which one can for a time gaze out over the city's greatest work of art. The same goes for the more recent Fondation Louis Vuitton, it not only opens directly onto the Bois de Boulogne, with which it interacts continuously through the transparency of its structures, but shows inside, on a large wall, a video broadcasted on a loop that allows to recognize and admire from a bird's eye view (read drone) the city in all its character and extension, establishing Gerhy's building as the ideal attractor/focal point capable of allowing this extraordinary overview. And it also happens that a place without any particular character is enhanced by the construction

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<sup>1</sup> The article has been elaborated entirely by the two authors. For practical purposes Isabella Pezzini wrote the first paragraph and Paolo Peverini the second.



of a museum, as, taking two examples at random, in Switzerland the Zentrum Paul Klee, located in the countryside around Bern, or the DIA in Beacon, an anonymous town located on the Hudson River about an hour by train from New York.

As Calum Storrie theorizes, in his *Delirious Museum* (2006-2017), the way museums are visited in their relationship with the city can give rise to beautiful itineraries, as significant as they are rhizomatic, given that “Every city,” as he writes, “as a place where layers of history and a multitude of situations overlap, events and objects open to infinite interpretations – is in some ways a delusional delirious museum”, that is, a museum that goes beyond the canonical forms of art narrative, and opens itself up to the montages and anachronies related to the “drifts” of its visitors (Storrie 2017). As we will see in this article, the pandemic has actually provoked and encouraged, in and with respect to museums, various forms of “drift” and “détournement,” the effects and evaluation of which, so to speak, must necessarily still be provisional. Although the museum has always been a symbol of “urbanity” in the broad sense that we attribute to this term, twenty years ago, with the construction of the Guggenheim in Bilbao, Portugal (1997), the museum, in this specific declination, has been reconfirmed not only as a powerful attractor for publics and forms of tourism of various kinds, but also as a powerful driver of urban regeneration. The city of Bilbao has positively changed its image by shifting the cornerstones of its economy from steel production, in crisis, to cultural production and tourism. Encouraged by this success, as is well known, many cities have seen in the formula of the “new museum” an opportunity for redevelopment and positioning in the great circuit of smart cities and international tourism.

But what are the characteristics of the new museums? Here are some of the most obvious ones (Pezzini 2011):

1. A strong architectural character of the *work*, in dialectic relation with the contents, *vs.* the typical conception of the modern museum of having to be a neutral container: if it is true that by entering the museum the object changes its status, the new museum emphasizes its spatial qualities, focusing the visit in terms primarily of an experience of the place;
2. A significant availability of multi-functional spaces, designed for the enjoyment of large audiences, often related to theme parks and/or transit spaces of our time, offering consumption experiences at various levels (information, shopping, quality catering, etc.);
3. A program of major exhibitions or temporary initiatives that would act as a counterpoint and/or flywheel to the museum's collection;
4. A constant focus on the public, towards whom it addresses with various initiatives, pedagogical attitude and entertainment.

As can be seen, these are for the most part characters linked to physicality and mobility, strong traits of the cultural and touristic industry prior to the pandemic. And it is in this direction that semiotic research dedicated to the museum and its visitors has moved, focusing mainly on the physical visit, especially on the role of sight in relation to the experience of space, up to the ethnosemiotic approach (Pezzini 2019; Marsciani 2020).

With the pandemic of COVID19, the restrictions and the *lockdown* everything has evidently changed, outside and inside the museum, moreover, perhaps unfairly penalized by too rigid directives of total closure (in Italy the closure arrived with the DCPM of March 8, 2020, the reopening with that of April 26, 2021). How did the museum institutions react? For some museums it has been a real catastrophe, at least from an economic point of view. Perhaps not everyone knows, for example, that the Vatican Museums devolve a large part of their income (about 70%) to the maintenance of the other Vatican structures. But if for everyone it has been a shock, for many it has been an opportunity to re-organize and re-orient, linked to the need to rethink their mission and their communication strategies. After the initial bewilderment, much has moved online, as in many other sectors of culture and education. Museums themselves, after all, had long since entrusted an important part of their identity and services



to the Internet, developing an online dimension through their institutional website and its informative and educational content. Another very important aspect of the “new museums” had been precisely their aptitude for integrating the dual physical and digital dimensions, where the possibilities that had been unanimously pursued during the pandemic were already anticipated: the construction of archives, online conference programs, educational packages, analysis of works, videos, interviews, public involvement calls, and so on.

With the pandemic a further effort of communication – and above all a *reinvention of a presence* – became necessary. The *online* has become not only the vehicle for attracting and organizing the actual visit of the recipients but has become in some ways a substitute for the museum itself. “Going to the museum” has thus meant, in essence, *connecting to the museum site*, and in some way adhering to or at least experimenting with the theses of the “electronic museum” advocated as far back as the late 1960s by Marshall McLuhan and his collaborators. Salient features of this should have been: immersiveness in a non-linear and non-passive space; the change, thanks to virtuality, of the sensory and perceptual disposition of the visitor, and therefore the promotion of possible experiences of spaces and relational times that are not homogeneous with each other, put back into motion thanks to the sensitive (aesthesia) experience before than aesthetic of the visitors, imagined as participatory and interactive (Capaldi 2018). A first and significant experience of “online museums” had already begun at least a decade ago through Google's platform. In the beginning it was the Google Art Project, with its potentialities and its criticalities. The initial plan had been to incorporate and to google as many physical museums as possible – which, for their part, had mostly thought positively about this digitization opportunity, also in terms of a communication tool, useful for their own visibility and for the possible expansion of their audiences. With the pandemic, however, physical museums have had to take on the task of reinventing themselves. Many of them, then, have looked to Google with new eyes to understand how to digitally enhance their heritage and mission.

In the meantime, Google, from the Google Image Search database, which started in 2009 with an experimental project at the Prado Museum in Madrid, has undergone a portentous evolution. In 2011 the Google Art Project was launched, and a few years later it was possible to begin to make an initial assessment of this experience. In the book *Uno sguardo su Google*, two essays offer it to us, respectively by Lucia Corrain with Anita Macaudo and by Francesca Polacci (Del Marco, Pezzini, 2017). The first highlights above all the positive aspects of this project, linking back to the theme of the parallel development that art history has experienced thanks to the evolution of the means of reproduction of works. The spread of photography, for example, gave rise to André Malraux's idea of the Imaginary Museum, a fertile metaphor for a personal museum that can be infinitely recombined through the images of works of art, detached from their physicality, size and spatial locations, dispersed throughout the world and encapsulated within countless museums. Moreover, the tools made available by Google Art Project, such as the User's Gallery, allow a series of operations that represent the digital version of the “methodical eye” of the art historian à la Berenson. But also much more: the possibility of concentrating on details, of making comparisons and montages between texts and their parts, of carrying out analytical work thanks to enlargements, of extraordinary quality due to the very high definition reproductive techniques, of showing, for example, the passage from the figurative to the plastic dimension of a work of art.

Francesca Polacci offers instead a more critical view, first of all dismantling, at least in part, the analogy with Malraux's Imaginary Museum, underlining how for the latter “the creation of an imaginary museum was a process that required a strong individual competence and experience, which GAP instead does not allow to build, and offering instead a synthesis of the imaginaries of the museums present on the platform, an “imaginary museum of imaginaries” (*ivi*, p. 103). The “total access to art” promised by GAP, in short, would on the one hand respond more to an *ideology of democratization* of art than to the offer of an actual



acquisition of well-structured skills, and on the other hand it would satisfy our scopical urge for the intimate details of the work, without, however, accompanying it with a cognitive deepening.

Nine years later, that is now, “scrolling through” Google Art and Culture we can see how much this platform and this project have profoundly changed compared to the past, transforming itself also and above all into a showcase of the world of Google and its gadgets. From a technical point of view, things are much improved: the online experience of visiting a museum, for example, thanks to the dual technique of street view and the focus placed on individual digitized works regains relevance, potentially restoring exhibition contexts. But, in general, it seems there had been a reversal compared to the first phase of GAP: at the time it seemed that the goal was to make available to all Internet users tools typical of scholars – actually unlikely to be used by the common user – or worse, capable of exalting the idea of “accessing art with a click”, as Francesca Polacci effectively wrote. Now we are witnessing an almost total redirection of the technological possibilities of manipulating the works of art towards an increasingly accentuated *ludic* dimension... A feature that is highly valued, in the current Google Art and Culture, is that of *interactivity* with the user, and we can ask ourselves whether it is real or simulated. The APP that promises/proposes interactive experiences, for example, is articulated in:

1. Art transfer (turning photos into works of art);
2. Art Selfie (turn your selfie into a work of art);
3. Art Projector (look at life-size works of art);
4. Pocket Gallery (wander around the immersive galleries and get close to the works);
5. Color Palette (choose a color and find all works of that color).

The promised interactivity is actually very poor, insofar as the user cannot change the rules of the game, i.e. of the app's functioning, but, as often happens, it is he who becomes a “prosthesis” of the machine rather than the opposite. And in general, the idea that underlies the whole operation is that one can “entertain oneself” by playing and deconstructing the immense heritage of the works, which have become to all intents and purposes “picture cards”.

With all due caution, it would seem that the developers have enjoyed applying in a rather systematic way Benjamin's theses in his *The Work of Art in the Age of Technical Reproducibility*, thus set out, in a preliminary version, in the materials for the first draft of the essay (1935):

1. The technical reproducibility of the work of art leads to its reassembly
2. The technical reproducibility of the work of art leads to its actualization
3. The technical reproducibility of the work of art leads to its politicization
4. The technical reproducibility of the work of art leads to its wear and tear
5. The technical reproducibility of the work of art gets the best functionality in cinema [...]
6. The technical reproducibility of the work of art makes it an opportunity for diversion
7. The technical reproducibility of the work of art intensifies the struggle for existence among the works of art of past eras
8. The technical reproducibility of the work of art modifies the relationship of the masses to art, which changes from being extremely retrogressive, e.g. towards painting, to being extremely progressive, e.g. towards comic cinema (Benjamin-Archiv Ms 997, in Benjamin, authors translation)

A particularly pregnant case, which seems to exemplify point 5. of these almost prophetic considerations – is the tendency to animate, with the help of digital technologies, the works of art of the past, and transform them into videos, as science fiction and cinema had already imagined – think of the Harry Potter photo album, or the successful film series *One Night at the Museum*. This is what Rino Stefano Tagliaferro and his team realise in a superb and at the same time disquieting way in the video promoted by the newspaper *El Pais* to celebrate the 200th anniversary of the Prado in Madrid (1819-2019),





celebrated a few days before the first cases of the pandemic appeared. Entitled *El Prado: belleza y locura*, it can still be seen on the web. In four minutes, it stages some of the museum's best-known masterpieces by animating them, i.e. by activating the frozen temporality of the paintings, the instantaneousness of their representation, in the completion of the gesture(s) it presupposes, as a condensation of past and future: the great ladies adjust their jewellery with soft gestures, Maja Desnuda provocatively flutters her eyelashes, the flowers of a superb still life finish blooming, patriots of 3 May 1808 by Francisco Goya fall to the ground struck to death. In this way, the narrativity intrinsic to the paintings is made explicit and manifested, along with a narrativity internal to the video, which begins with the triumph of the celebratory painting of the reigning nobility and ends with the increasingly gloomy images of Goya's "peinturas negras", passing through the Hells imagined by Hieronimus Bosch. An operation of technological virtuosity, which obviously somehow "distorts" the works on which it is applied, which substitutes itself for the imaginative activity of the interpreter, but certainly a sign of the times, in which the narrative key proves to be prevailing.

Evelina Christillin and Christian Greco, in their book *Le memorie del futuro. Musei e ricerca* (2021), interpret the opportunities for reflection offered by the pandemic, including the contribution of new technologies, in a very different way, compared to those briefly seen so far. For them, it is not simply a matter of looking online for a temporary alternative to the direct, physical enjoyment of the museum, but starting again from the meaning of the museum's own "mission", which they interpret in accordance with a semiotic perspective on culture. Evelina Christillin is, moreover, the current president of the Egyptian Museum of Turin, for which she oversaw the "re-functionalization" project, completed in 2015: those who have visited the museum in its new guise in Turin know that there is no lack of spectacular settings à la "Raiders of the Lost Ark", curated by Oscar-winning set designer Dante Ferretti, and that there is therefore no lack of attention to communication and attractiveness for the public. And even the museum's website has a captivating and, in some parts, decidedly playful look.

On the other hand, the specificity of this museum, the oldest in the world of Egyptian antiquities (1824), is that it contains finds from royal purchases and from the excavations in Egypt by Schiaparelli and Farina at the beginning of the 20th century, which brought as many as 30,000 finds to the Museum. Therefore, also this museum is involved in the critical movement of the "where was/ as it was", which advocates the return of objects to their places of origin and their symbolic return to the communities they belong to. The museum's website, moreover, puts into practice in its formulation the theses sustained in the book: in the "Collection and research" section, for example, a selection of 3,000 of the 40,000 objects can be consulted, whose scientific data and images are freely usable by those interested. Therefore, "The museum – our authors write – must first of all draw strength from what distinguishes it: the objects it possesses" (p. 111 authors translation), which, arranged according to specific itineraries, are able to provoke a virtual journey through time and space. What emerges clearly is the idea of the object as a *semiophore* (Pomian), that is, as the material support of a dense network of semantic relationships that connect the artifact to the community of reference. It is a question of taking artefacts off their pedestal – that is to say, of leaving behind a logic of ownership and their value understood as a "market price" and giving objects back their biography, the *agency* they still carry, but also the polysemy they acquire starting from the different possible interpretative paths, open and not closed in on themselves once and for all. Thanks to the new technologies, understood as *digital humanities*, it will not be a matter of presenting copies or animated images of objects – we would say simulacra – but of presenting more interpretative and reconstructive models of ancient buildings and landscapes. Then the museum can and should really bring added value to the community: "research, technical-scientific innovation, heritage and society are inextricably linked, and from this relationship must originate the renaissance for the whole cultural sector" (p. 130).



## 2. New forms of artworks mediation during the pandemic

During pandemic, redefining the relationship between museum and visitors, enhancing the recreational dimension has become a real trend, accelerating a process, in some cases already started, of a real repositioning of the museum institutions, organizations aware of the need to renew their brand discourse to involve target consumers of strategic importance: the members of the “Y” and “Z” generations.

The impossibility of physically accessing spaces and collection, has contributed to enhancing the importance of the physical dimension of signification, the ability to generate, stimulate and maintain a contact with possible visitors, profoundly rethinking spaces, times and modes of the aesthetic experience. Many museums have responded to this profound and unexpected crisis by radically rethinking the established modes of enunciation, while at the same time becoming generators of new content. In this context, the forms of mediation of museums appear marked by certain recurring characteristics: the *multiplication of communication channels* and the massive use of new technologies, with the recourse to *short forms, narrativization and irony* (Uffizi), the encouragement of the *ludic use of artworks* by users, taken over and institutionalized by landmark museums such as the Getty, the acceleration of synergy between art and entertainment with the possibility of enjoying artworks within game platforms such as “Animal Crossing: New Horizons” (MET, Getty, the National Museum of Science and Technology).

An exemplary case of renewal in terms of the language used to encourage the involvement of users is undoubtedly that of the Uffizi Gallery, which on the initiative of the director Eike Schmidt inaugurated at the end of April 2020 the account on the TikTok platform, obtaining over half a million likes in a year (growing to over a million today, with 117600 followers). The polarization of reactions generated by this decision, the unpredictability of the opening of a new official channel of communication (the Uffizi were already present in the social networks but this did not foresee the “landing” on TikTok), finally, the impact generated in terms of awareness and sales (+120% of visitors in the young segment where 90% of users of the account on the platform are under 25 years old) make the presence of the Uffizi on TikTok a relevant phenomenon in a sociosemiotic perspective. As known, the choice to use a channel extremely popular among young people as a platform for the production and sharing of entertainment content has generated strongly divergent reactions towards the museum. If, on the one hand, the critical comments have focused essentially on the inadequacy of the platform with respect to the function of the institution, on the other hand, the positive evaluations have highlighted the legitimacy of the use of irony in the metadiscourse on art, with particular reference to the period of the pandemic, arousing the appreciation of newspapers such as “The Art Newspaper” that has judged the communicative management on the platform as one of the best cases in the world of social media managers dedicated to museum institutions during the lockdown, recognizing the value of the strategic decision taken by the museum's top management.

For a reflection on the processes of signification employed in the enunciation of an ironic and at the same time institutional discourse on works of art, the considerations by Pietro Montani (2020) on the tendency, still widespread today, to underestimate the potential for expressive renewal implied in digital technologies, appear meaningful. We are faced with “classic cases of imputation” that denounce the risks of oversimplification, to generate forms of real addiction, to disable the virtuous practices of memory and attention, to the point of triggering “primitive and aggressive instincts”. Rather, a reconnaissance of the types of content produced allows us to detect the presence of a peculiar institutional meta-discourse on art, on its languages, on the modalities of its valorisation and dissemination.

A first consideration concerns shortness, understood here not only as a formal requirement (format) imposed by the platform and consolidated in its practices of use, but above all as a semiotically relevant phenomenon, as a way of structuring meaning, that is, as a compositional mode relevant in structuring the content plan. Exemplary, in this regard, the first post published on the account Uffizigalleries, a small



video starring an oil painting on canvas (183x104 cm) by Giovan Battista Moroni, made in 1563, dedicated to the knight Pietro Secco Suardo, whose portrait is here “forced to celebrate at home” during the restrictions imposed by the lockdown, moving through the rooms of the museum against the backdrop of the song “Le feste di Pablo” by Cara and Fedez.

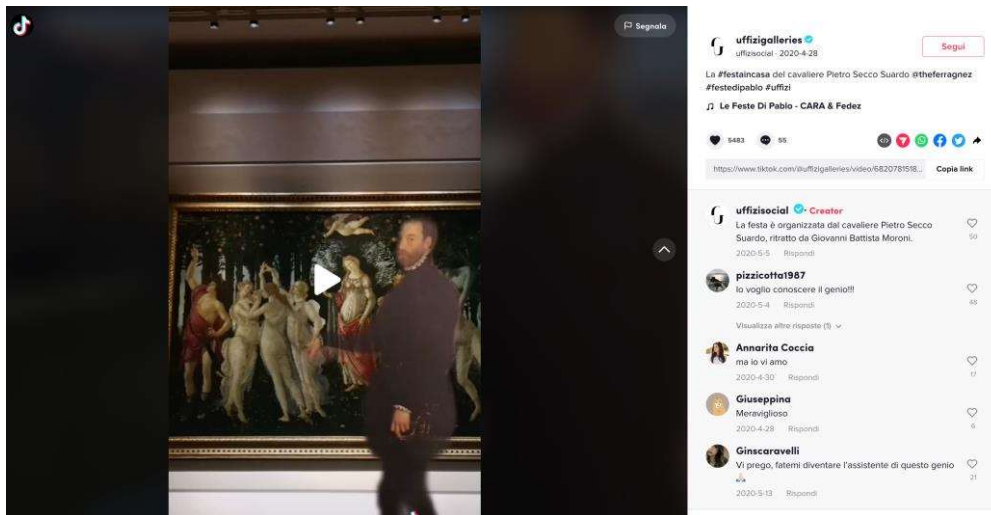


Fig. 1 – The first post published on the Uffizi Galleries TikTok account.

The short duration of the content and the loop mode that enables repeated viewing are accompanied by a form of playful rewriting that inaugurates the institution's presence on TikTok, manifesting the communication strategy illustrated by Eike Schmidt.

Just as a newspaper is not complete without the cartoon and the caricature on the front page, so a museum can be humorous too [...] It serves the purpose of bringing the works closer to an audience different from the one addressed by the official critics, but also to look at the works in a different and light-hearted way. In particular, in difficult times like this, it is important, every now and then, to allow yourself a smile and a bit of self-irony. And if it is possible to do so thanks to great art, even better (authors translation)

Therefore, once again, the short forms of the advertising language, seemingly texts “born to sell and to die”, with a declared pragmatic purpose, confirm themselves as a semiotically relevant phenomenon for their ability to reach “points of semiotic intensity at various and different levels - for their workmanship, for the way they are able to make an idea communicative or to ignite a desire, for some dose of experimentation and creativity” (Pezzini 2002, p. 7). In this perspective, the short videos that narrate the works of art of the collection kept in the Uffizi Gallery, re-actualising their meaning on the background of current events of global importance, make even more evident the relevance of remix, remake and mashup practices that are anything but predictable, relaunching what semiotic research already pointed out at the beginning of the 2000s (Dusi, Spaziante 2006; Peverini 2010, 2012, 2015).

Contemporary textual landscapes are increasingly dense and multiform, difficult to cut out and decipher according to unitary reading strategies. On the one hand, they seem to respond to a logic of infinite germination: of media, languages, and forms. On the other hand, communication technologies tend to produce hypermedia capable of digitizing and re-transmitting, and therefore in some way re-enunciating, everything, reshaping it, and then languages and forms tend to fuse, contaminate and hybridize each

other. In a communicative environment of this kind, short promotion formats take on an increasingly marked and characteristic role (Pezzini 2002, p. 7)

Thus, observing the characteristics of the content produced by the museum account from its inception to the present day does indeed reveal how shortness is used to:

1. enhance the reflexivity of the text and multimodality, manipulating the works on a plastic and/or figurative level to allow them to re-present themselves to the public;
2. facilitate the access and the continuous implementation of an archive of semiotic resources that focuses again on the use/interpretation distinction of textuality with all the consolidated forms of textual reworking (remix, remake, mashup) centered on irony and parody;
3. encourage productive consumption by users, flaunting an aesthetic of low definition, functional to increase the meaning effect of authenticity of the rewriting operation.

The closure of spaces imposed by the pandemic seems to have favored, by contrast, the opening of the text's boundaries, accentuating the practices of intertextuality, interdiscursivity and intermediality. In fact, the museum institution's branded discourse moves out of the realm of aesthetic experience and breaks into the sphere of public discourse. As in the case of the post published in the aftermath of the victory of the Italian football team in the European Championships in which a series of paintings kept in the Uffizi undergoes photo retouching as elementary as deliberately amateurish, aimed at reaffirming the pride of belonging to the nation.



Fig. 2 – The post published on the Uffizi Galleries TikTok account after the Italian football team victory.

Or, again, the post published to promote the visit to the paintings of Garibaldi and the battles of the Risorgimento preserved in the Gallery of Modern Art in Palazzo Pitti in which the great popularity of the hit “Mille” by Fedez, Achille Lauro and Orietta Berti is used to make fun of the problems that still plague the country after the process of unification. In particular, this type of content is particularly relevant from a semiotic perspective because it reveals how the playful dimension inherent in the rewriting of works of art does not exclude the possibility of also involving the user on a cognitive level, for example by resorting to a pedagogical and/or informative enunciative contract, as in this case in which irony is used to set up a small history lesson on the unification of Italy and some of its protagonists.





Fig. 3 – The post published on the Uffizi Galleries TikTok account making irony on the unification of Italy.

Enunciation plays an essential role in adapting the mediation of works of art to the creative consumption practices that characterize the platform, such as in the posts in which the movements of a face are juxtaposed in an amateurish manner with famous portraits to simulate the performance of an improbable karaoke on the basis of pop songs.



Fig. 4 – The Uffizi Galleries TikTok account playing karaoke with portraits.

Drawing on the vast repertoire of practices of irony on the web (Finocchi 2015), the museum's metadiscourse eventually extends to include the role of the social media team that presides over the planning and production of content. Exemplary is the post published on March, 5th 2021 in which irony is used by the enunciation instance to highlight the gap between the unattainable genius of the young

artist Bernini (“Bernini, aged 19, sculpts the San Lorenzo”) and the social media strategist in charge of the TikTok profile of the Uffizi (“while me at 30, I still live with my mom”). The caption “some people are Bernini and others...” and the hashtag #notaperfectperson (extremely popular on the platform, with more than 923 million views) are used to reduce the distance from the unusual operation of remediation of the work of art, reaffirming, by contrast, its originality.

In the remediation of the aesthetic experience during the pandemic there is a widespread recourse to the practice of remake, understood as a collective phenomenon of assimilation and reconfiguration of pre-existing semiotic resources, as a process of reinvention definitely extended and implementable, in semiotic terms as an *enunciative practice* in which what is important is no longer the passage from the language system to its individual realization, but rather the way in which the collective dimension of *semiotic use* that characterizes, for example, the forms of common sense, stereotypes, discourse genres, is able to influence signification. As it happens with practices of remix and mash-up, also with remakes it is important to recognize that in the most innovative cases, the operation of selecting and reworking a work responds to certain basic criteria, manifesting a distinctive logic of reinvention. Some of the main aspects to be taken into consideration concern:

1. the choice of source text;
2. the degree of analogy and reworking that the final text expresses in relation to the source material;
3. the format of the target text;
4. the degree of professionalism of the authors;
5. the technologies used to produce the remake.

Concerning this point, an exemplary case is that of a remake operation started by a single user, which grew so rapidly in terms of diffusion that gave rise to a real collective challenge, to the point of obtaining the support of the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam and the Getty Museum in Los Angeles. The initiative was taken by an Instagram user, Anneloes Officier, during the pandemic, as a response to the constraints imposed by the lockdown. She launched a challenge, still widely ongoing and of wide resonance, based on three rules: choose a pre-existing work of art, imitate its characteristics using three objects available in one's own home, use the tag “tussenkunstenquarantaine” inaugurated for the occasion and constituting a parody of a local television program translatable as “between art and quarantine”. The first remake consisted of a reproduction of “Girl with a Pearl Earring”, made with a towel, a small tablecloth from Ikea and a clove of garlic, giving rise to a sequence of remakes by users that has aroused the interest of various museum institutions up to the direct involvement of the Getty, that relaunched the initiative, further institutionalizing the operation and contributing decisively to increasing its diffusion, up to the recent publication of a volume entitled “Off the Walls: Inspired Re-Creations of Iconic Artworks”, a testimony to the variegated collective process of reproducing works of art and the value of the playful dimension in the aesthetic experience, which emerged powerfully during the pandemic.



Fig. 5 – The first post published on the tussenkunstenquarantaine Instagram account.

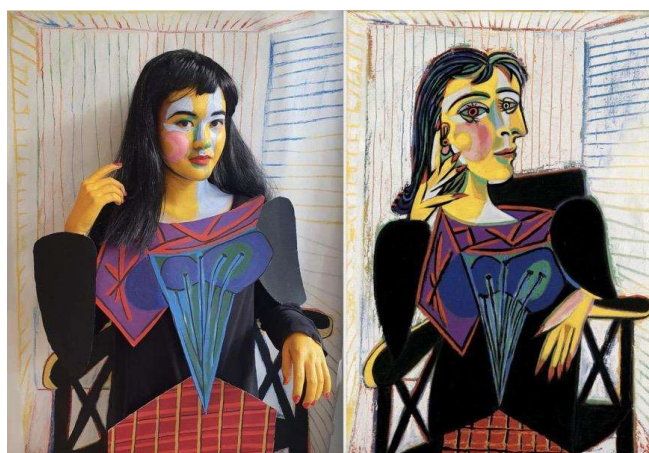


Fig. 6 – An example of the tussenkunstenquarantaine challenge.

If these remake practices are characterized by the reuse of pre-existing materials of various kinds, enhanced according to their form, their substance of expression, their function of use, in other words by the recourse to a logic of *bricolage* as a resource to respond to an unpredictable and radical change in everyday life, the pandemic has helped to accelerate a complementary process of gamification in which works of art and, in a broader sense, the brand discourse of museums extend far beyond the perimeter of institutional communication channels to enter virtual game environments that allow users, through avatars, to build, nurture and share a series of digital worlds.

This is the case of the partnership between “Animal Crossing: New Horizons”, the famous life simulation video game developed and published by Nintendo, launched with great success during the pandemic, and prestigious museums such as the Getty and the Metropolitan Museum, which in 2020, marked by the forced closure of cultural venues, have made digital reproductions of the works contained in their collections accessible to over thirteen million video game users, allowing them to set up and share their own personal museum in the game dynamics.



Fig. 7 – The partnership between Getty and Animal Crossing: New Horizons.



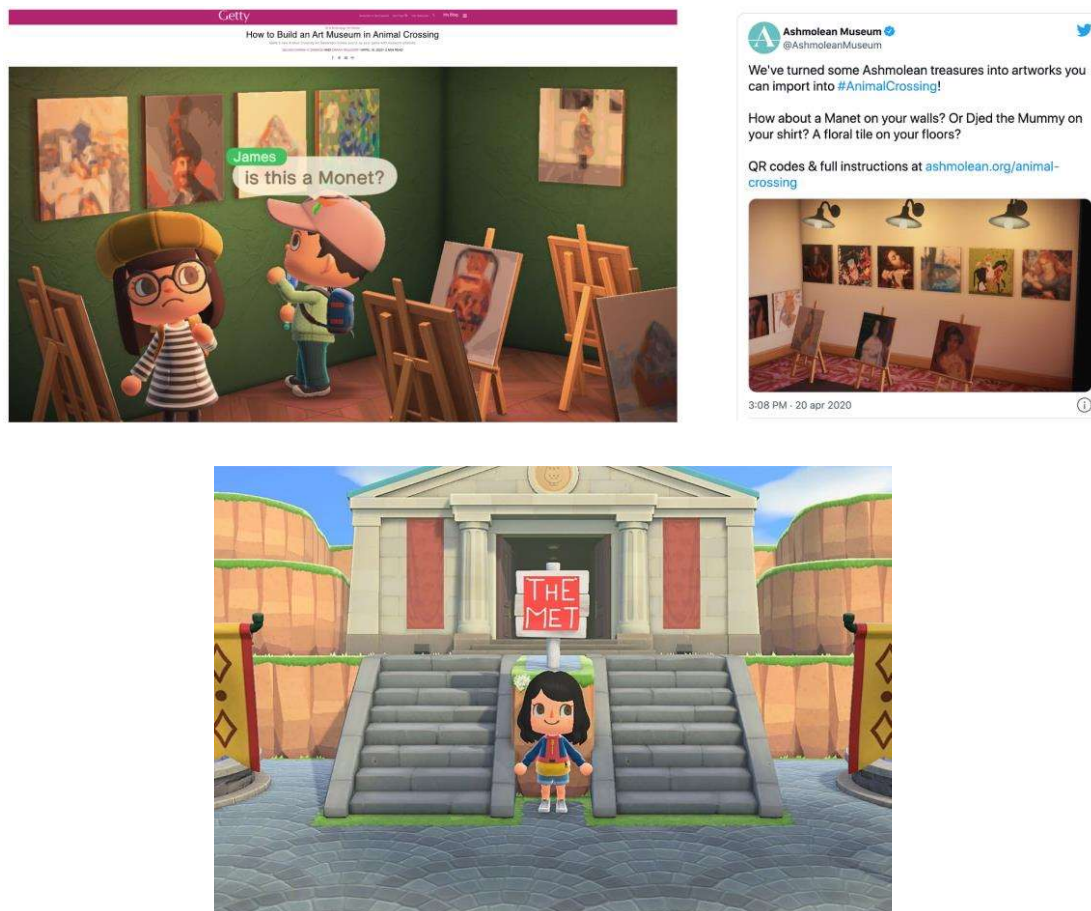


Fig. 8 – The partnership between the Metropolitan Museum and Animal Crossing: New Horizons.

Using a tool called “Animal Crossing Art Generator” users can access an archive of over seventy thousand works from the museum's collection, made accessible in low definition digital format, to select and use at will in their own virtual world, displaying them on the walls of the digital environments for example but also as elements to customize the clothing of their avatar.

Once the operation of selection and manipulation has been completed, users are encouraged to share their work on social platforms, tagging not only the Getty Museum but also other museums participating in this partnership, fuelling the interactions.

Fashion understood in a broad sense as a tool of self-representation therefore plays a far from marginal role in the search for a new link between museums and users of gaming platforms. Significant is the Italian case of the National Museum of Science and Technology that, in addition to inviting users to select artefacts and works of art to set up their own digital exhibition, organized an event to preview a limited collection inspired by scientific instruments and technological objects to be worn by the avatars themselves. The technical reproducibility of the work of art during the pandemic thus ends up feeding a process of *playful democratization of the aesthetic experience* that celebrates the uniqueness of a masterpiece of genius by exhibiting its manipulations. In this process of collective reuse, what is enhanced by the institution is the maximum circulation of its archive, combined with the potential of an almost infinite customization that allows the digital copy of an original to be used as a virtual photograph to be hung in a simulated space, as well as a piece of paper, a carpet or a print on a t-shirt.



Exploring forms of mediation of the aesthetic experience during the pandemic thus seems to bring out a new dialectic between public and private spaces, in which discourses of museums and discourses about museums relate to each other in new ways.



Fig. 9 – An event of the National Museum of Science and Technology on *Animal Crossing: New Horizons*.

In some cases (Uffizi Gallery) the reduction of distance through the unprecedented mediation of the work is manifested in the form of a playful rewriting operation that, while drawing on the repertoire of forms of irony on the web, remains in any case within the institutional space of the organization.

Other experiments (*tussenkunstenquarantaine*) testify to a different kind of discourse that starts from the reinvention of everyday life in the form of a process of selection and reworking of the work of art within the domestic space, amplified, according to the logic of word of mouth, through an initially spontaneous social circulation that in a second phase generates the support (*embrayage*) by the museum institution and that in turn proves decisive to further relaunch (*loop*) the spread of the collective rewriting.

Finally, gamification (Getty, MET, National Museum of Science and Technology...) manifests the presence of a real process of remediation (Bolter, Grusin 1998) of the works and their fruition, favoured by the digital potentialities that amplify the possibilities of setting up and reconfiguring immaterial worlds inhabited by simulacra, in a process of assimilation of the museum and its discourses within play spaces that can be shaped on an individual basis, with the declared aim of being shared and encouraging interaction.

With all evidence, the pandemic has therefore accelerated a process by which the fruition appears increasingly inseparable from the interaction with the complex organizations in charge of the preservation and enhancement of the artworks, prefiguring a composite scenario where museums seem increasingly oriented to experiment with forms of hybridization between physical reality and digital environments, against the backdrop of a further, potential acceleration, that represented by the Metaverse, as recently acknowledged in an interview by Christian Greco<sup>2</sup>, director of the Egyptian Museum of Turin and protagonist of a successful initiative during the pandemic: the “Walks of the Director”.

[...] I think of three museums, the physical but irreplaceable one that, as I said, should be open to everyone [...] Then I think of a virtual museum. The potential is enormous. It is always said that with ten million visitors the Louvre is the most visited in the world But at the same time it excludes over 7 billion people every year. That's why a virtual museum that is not a substitute for the physical museum makes sense to me. An entirely different experience, with digital curators as well.

<sup>2</sup> Interview with *Il Corriere della Sera*, June 7, 2022.



“Don't tell me the third one is in the metaverse...”

Yes, and I strongly believe in it, a museum in the metaverse as an epistemological process; think what it might mean for an archaeologist to recreate an ancient world environment where one could see the evolution of a site and where one could set and place artefacts. It would be an impossible museum to have in physical reality (authors translation).

The complex processes of renegotiation of the meaning of the institutions in charge of the valorization of works of art and of the strategic role they play in the market of tourist destinations urge semiotics to explore the scenario, rich in meaning, of the new museums of our (new) present.



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