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Culture, Corona, Crisis: Best Practices and the Future of Dutch Museums

LISELORE N. M. TISSEN 

SHORT REPORT

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ABSTRACT

The consequences of the coronavirus and the physical limitations it imposes on museums and their visitors force museums to rethink cultural identity and to approach the exhibition of material artworks differently. Only a limited number of people are allowed to visit the museum at one time, booking time slots is mandatory, making it difficult to welcome visitors. As most Dutch museums are largely self-funded, the lack of tourists, visitors, educational programmes that generate income, together with the insufficient financial support of the Dutch government, have greatly impacted their policies. This report analyses the coronavirus' effects on the role of museums within the Dutch 'anderhalvemetersamenleving' (one and a half meter society). This report offers an overview of the changes that have taken place in Dutch society due to the limitations of physical interaction with artworks and the museum space as well as the way Dutch museums have reacted to these consequences. Lastly, this report offers an analysis of the success of these new developments and the challenges that still need to be overcome. Thus, ways will be proposed in which Dutch museums can learn from these actions in maintaining their critical function in society.

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On March 12th and again on November 2nd 2020, the Dutch government decided to cease all public activities, which meant that museums had to close their doors. Carefully curated exhibitions that took years of preparation, such as the Drents Museum's long anticipated *Viva la Frida! – Life and art of Frida Kahlo* exhibition, the first visit of Kahlo's artworks to the Netherlands, were cancelled and public events such as the Museum Association's (*Museumvereniging*) National Museum Week (*Nationale Museumweek*) could not be held (Dijksterhuis [1] 2020). Even when museums are allowed to reopen, there is an awareness that the museum experience will not be the same as it was pre-COVID-19. The limited number of visitors allowed in museums and the obligation to book time slots in advance make it difficult to visit museums spontaneously, let alone to welcome tourists from outside the Netherlands. Most Dutch museums do not receive government support and are largely self-funded, relying on 'blockbuster' exhibitions to generate income through visitor engagement. Therefore, the lack of tourists, visitors, and educational programmes, together with the financial shortcomings of the Dutch government, has required museums to drastically rethink their policy and change their engagement with visitors.

This report provides an analysis of the impact of the coronavirus crisis on the cultural field of the Netherlands and the ways museums have adapted to the '*anderhalvemetersamenleving*' (one and a half meter society). The conclusions in this report are based on publications by the Museum Association – an organization connecting the majority of Dutch museums; Digital Heritage of the Netherlands (*Digitaal Erfgoed Nederland* (DEN)) – a specialized institute for digitization of culture; the Network of European Museum Organization's (NEMO) survey report* and my personal findings as an art historian working in and with Dutch museums.

FROM PHYSICAL TO DIGITAL

One of the most obvious transitions museums in the Netherlands had to make was the shift from physical exhibitions hosted in their buildings to digital alternatives. Although many Dutch museums had to some extent already used digital tools to engage with visitors, for example the Rijksmuseum's *Rijksstudio*, which allows visitors to curate personal digital collections using highly detailed photographs of the museum's collection, the use of digital tools for enhancing museum experiences and engagement beyond the museum's walls was not a major part of the regular programming for Dutch museums, unlike in other European countries (e.g. Norway, Spain and Austria) (NEMO 2020). The reports of the Museum Association and DEN show that the use of digital tools has rapidly gained momentum and popularity (Heijkoop 2020). Digital exhibitions like Rijksmuseum Twente's *Picasso & Matisse – Beauty is a line* and virtual reality (VR) tours like the Anne Frank House VR experience, have been used to maintain a connection between the visitor, the museum and its objects. Furthermore, high definition photography projects like the Rijksmuseum's *Project Nightwatch* and the Mauritshuis' *Second Canvas* app has allowed visitors a closer look at Dutch masterpieces, than would be possible in the usually crowded galleries of the museums.

This shift to digitized collections and interactive digital programming has contributed to a wider local and global reach of Dutch museums. According to DEN, museums saw an increase in their engagement with visitors from outside of the Netherlands (Heijkoop 2020). As visiting exhibitions no longer requires the physical transportation of both visitor and artwork, visiting museums has become more accessible to a larger and more diverse audience, primarily those with physical disabilities and the younger generations (18–24 years old) (Cultuurmarketing 2020). Prior to this digital move, 25% of 'millennials' had never visited a museum and 30% only visited once per year (Motivaction 2019). This was because the programming of Dutch museums seemed too complicated and focused on a niche group of art fanatic and connoisseurs, making them less appealing and accessible. The idea of spending money on a ticket or group visits to museums as a means of relaxation, was not as appealing to the Dutch millennial, as it was to younger visitors in other European countries, such as Italy, France and Spain (NEMO 2020). In these times of Instagram and social media, the increased use of digital tools by Dutch museums has made them more relatable to this younger generation of potential visitors, as it provides them with accessible forms of engagement and specialized content. As a result, museums have become more interesting and this group has become more reachable (Motivaction 2019). However,

according to DEN's report, it must be emphasized that, although this physical barrier has been partially lifted, the digitization of exhibitions highlights a polarization between visitor groups. The Museum Association and DEN both note that, whilst prior to the crisis the main visitor demographic of Dutch museums consisted of individuals aged 55 and over, many of these people often do not have access to computers or smartphones, nor are they as digitally fluent as younger generations (Heijkoop 2020). Thus, the digitization of collections has caused less engagement amongst older generations. Furthermore, Culture Marketing's (*Cultuurmarketing*) survey revealed that this polarization becomes even larger as this group is more cautious when it comes to their health (Cultuurmarketing 2020). This exclusion from both physical and digital museum participation has resulted in a feeling of loss, when it comes to cultural engagement, amongst the older generations.

However, although this rapid shift towards providing digital access to Museum collections has been successful so far, the Museum Association's National Museum Research (*Nationaal Museum Onderzoek* 2020) shows that, despite, and maybe even because of, the isolation imposed by the virus, there is an increasing desire to interact with the tangible collections. As theater producer Viktorien van Hulst explains: '[...] because of the dispersion of digital content, there is an extreme hunger to see the *real thing*.' (Dijksterhuis [2] 2020). One way that Dutch museums have tried to satisfy this 'hunger', whilst maintaining a safe distance between visitors, has been organizing exhibitions outside of the museum walls. For instance, the Van Gogh Museum has brought life-like reproductions of its collection to people's homes, hospitals and nursing homes, as a way of providing happiness and support (*Figure 1*). In contrast to Italy, Spain and France, which use reproductions outside the museum (e.g. Michelangelo's *David* statue in front of the Palazzo Vecchio in Florence), the use of art reproductions in and outside the museum is rare in the Netherlands. However, the interaction with art reproductions appeared to be such a great success that the Rijksmuseum and het Kunstmuseum (The Hague) have also started bringing reproductions of artworks to the public. Whilst, Museum Boijmans van Beuningen (Rotterdam) provided a unique and creative form of engagement with authentic artworks via their 'drive-through museum', in which visitors borrowed electric cars to drive through Ahoy's 10,000 m² hall to see more than fifty high-profile artworks from their collection (*Figure 2*).



Figure 1 Nachtwacht on tour.
Image by Janiek Dam.

FROM GLOBAL TO LOCAL

As the Netherlands is a small country with a high museum density (Amsterdam has the highest number of museums per capita in the world), its dependence on tourism, travel and global outreach has been far larger than that of other European countries (Pontzen 2015; Museumvereniging [5]). For instance, the Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam, reported that 85% of their visitors are from a foreign country (Verhoeven 2020; Kruijt 2020). However, whilst

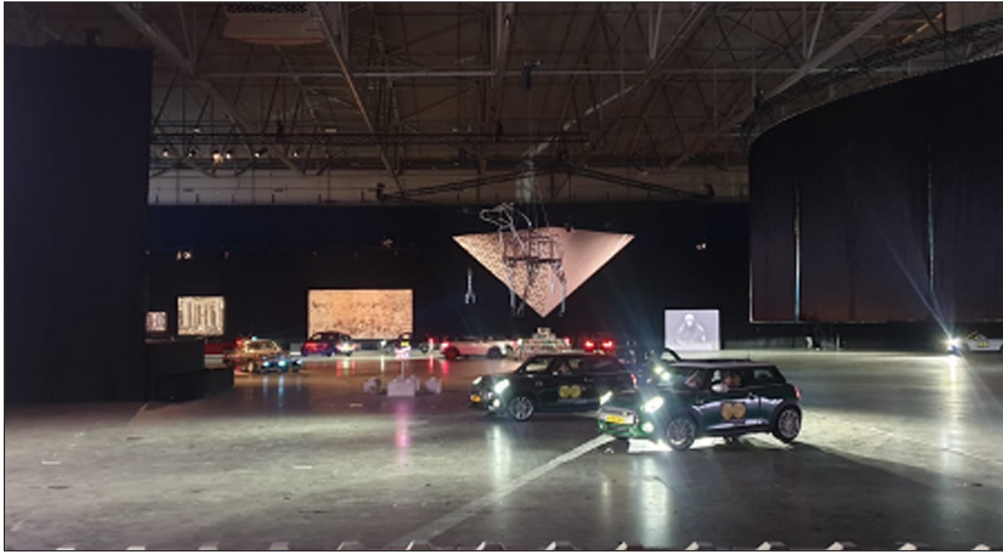


Figure 2 Museum Boijmans van Beuningen's 'Drive through' museum in Ahoy. Image by Wouter Klem.

Dutch museums have greater engagement with global audiences, they have witnessed an increase in local participation (Verhoeven 2020). As predicted by Meta Knol, Director of Museum de Lakenhal in Leiden, it is becoming of pivotal importance for Dutch museums to shift their focus to more small scale, personal and local experiences (Pontzen 2020). Instead of hosting blockbuster exhibitions, museums should organize smaller, but more profound, detailed and recognizable exhibitions and events, which will satisfy the public's growing desire for a personal connection with Dutch collections. Knol's prediction, it seems, is already being confirmed; with the obligation to maintain a one and a half meter distance and the restrictions on traveling, museums have had to forge a stronger connection with a smaller network, as noted by DEN (Heijkoop 2020). Cities like Amsterdam, Rotterdam and The Hague saw a 40% increase in their cultural engagement with locals (Baarspul 2020), whilst the Museum Association's National Museum Week (*Nationale Museumweek*), an annual event in which more than 400 museums put their collections in the spotlight with the aim to forge a stronger bond with all inhabitants of the Netherlands, reached a record number of visitors (Museumvereniging [1 & 2] 2020). Furthermore, initiatives such as the Haags Historisch Museum's (The Hague) 'Corona Collection' campaigns and Stedelijk Museum Schiedam's photo exhibition *Behind the silence of corona* (*Achter de stilte van corona*), show the increasing focus of connecting with local visitors, their experiences and the museum's important societal role for Dutch citizens. This development can also contribute to an increase in engagement with younger Dutch generations.

FROM PASSIVE MASS CROWDS TO (INTER)ACTIVE PERSONALIZED EXPERIENCES

Smaller scale exhibitions and a (partial) shift to the digital realm have also caused a shift in visitor activity and engagement. Social distancing and travel restrictions prevent the optimal use of museums and exhibition spaces. However, this can also be a positive thing; visitors are no longer restricted to a series of rapidly succeeding, carefully curated, blockbuster shows and accompanying educational programmes hosted on site. Instead, they are free to roam in 'museum spaces' (though virtually) as long as they please and interact with objects of museum collections according to their personal liking. The elimination of physical boundaries, together with the fact that visitors have become more isolated and digitally skilled, has resulted in a more interactive, yet more individualistic way of engaging with museum collections (Dijksterhuis [2] 2020). Using 360stories, multiple museums in Amsterdam, such as the Rembrandt Huis, offer virtual tours, where visitors can walk around freely and have a choice in the information they want to receive (*Figure 3*).

What this elucidates is a shift from a passive, yet receptive museum experience, to one that is more active and creative than it was prior to the pandemic. Transmedia museum visits allow visitors to engage more deeply with the narratives of these museums and to dive deeper into the history of the objects of their interest. One example that displays this more creative and interactive engagement between visitors of different age groups with museums and their



Figure 3 VR-experience of De Dam in Amsterdam with a wall including the interactive and digital programming of 400+ museums in the Netherlands. Image by author.

artworks is the Instagram page Between Art and Quarantine (*Tussen Kunst en Quarantaine*) (Officier & Weger 2020). Here, inventors Anneloes Officier en Floor de Weger encourage visitors to dress up as their favorite artworks using 3 household items (*Figure 4*).

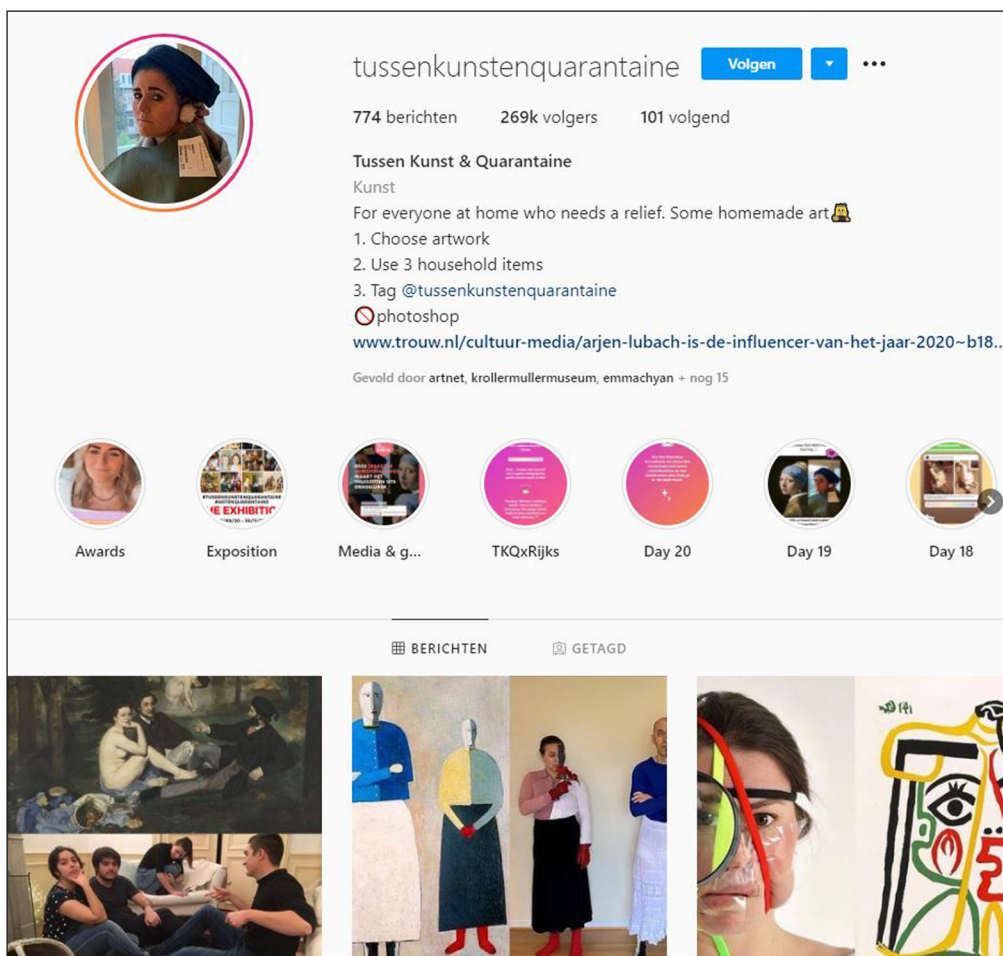


Figure 4 Tussen Kunst en Quarantaine Instagram page. Image by author.

Even though museums in the Netherlands were allowed to welcome visitors back from June 1st 2020 and again after a second lockdown in November 2020, it does not mean that the work is over. As the Museum Association announced, at least one fifth of Dutch museums will not be able to survive until the end of 2020. Small local museums (less than 40,000 visitors per year), such as Het Tassenmuseum, Amsterdam and Museum Rotterdam, rely on the support of their province and on ticket sales. With the significant decrease in visitor numbers and little to no governmental support, it became impossible for these museums to adjust to the new requirements of the cultural field, and they have had to close their doors (Museumvereniging [3] 2020). More of these types of museums – of which there are many in the Netherlands – which largely rely on ticket sales (comprising about 50% of their income), public events and the aid of volunteers, are on the verge of closing their doors and making their staff redundant.

Furthermore, although museums have been reopened and people have been allowed to visit, under strict conditions, museums do not receive as many visitors as allowed or expected. The fear of infection has prevented Dutch people, especially the older generation from going to museums and public places overall (Museumvereniging [4] 2020.; Verhoeven 2020.). In order to avoid further closures and redundancies, museums will have to continue to reinvent themselves in new and creative ways, outside the museum and with a different demographic.

As this report has shown, museums in the Netherlands have, to a large extent, experienced the same transitions as many other museums around the globe; from physical to digital, global to local and passive to active. The longing of visitors to engage with Dutch museums and their collections continues to exist. However, restrictions enforced on museums by the coronavirus pandemic, have led to a wakeup call; relying on physical museums visits alone is no longer sustainable, and the increased use of digital tools for engagement with the public is of pivotal importance for the survival of Dutch museums. The fact that visits by tourists and seniors, Dutch museum's largest group of visitors, has significantly decreased, if not ceased altogether, has caused Dutch museums to radically start transforming their programming and to develop an entirely new way of engaging with the public. Not knowing where this pandemic will take us, when and if a third wave will hit or if the museum experience will ever be the same again, means there are critical questions that need to be asked at this point.

- What do we stand for?
- For whom do we make exhibitions?
- What are the ways to engage with visitors?

What matters now and in the post-COVID-19 museum, is the careful reorganization of digital and virtual tools for greater engagement with a more diverse and complex group of visitors, in ways that comply with a museum's message, ideals and the experiences it wants to create. Instead of hosting a sequence of blockbuster exhibitions, museums will have to focus on creating more sustainable exhibitions that are personal and long lasting. Furthermore, this careful curation and use of different tools of interaction can make the museum more flexible and agile, which may help overcome unforeseen hurdles in the future. This way, a renewed and exciting Dutch cultural field can be created in which the longevity of museums would not be stopped by any future crisis.

** NEMO has published their first report in April and have organized a follow up survey in October. The conclusions of the follow up survey are not included in this report.*

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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