#MuseumFromHome

As I write this, five months have passed since the first COVID-19 case was recorded in New York State. Governor Cuomo declared a disaster emergency on March 7, 2020. On March 16, he announced restrictions on public gatherings. The NY on Pause Executive Order closing all nonessential businesses statewide was issued on March 20. The governor's NY Forward reopening plan designated museums as "attractive nuisances," unable to open until a region safely reached phase four. Recent upticks in the spread of the virus and the expansion of infection rates in densely populated areas has slowed the opening of museums. Although we are still gathering data, MANY's most recent COVID-19 impact study indicates that half of New York's museums have reopened, 40 percent plan to open in August or September, and 10 percent will not be opening in 2020. New York's museums have lost more than $500 million in earned income since closing their gallery doors.

Museum professionals creatively combine practice from business, art, tourism, academia, and cultural sectors to share the stories embodied in collections. The pace at which museum professionals leveraged these combined skills and refocused their work to deliver content digitally is astonishing. The economic and health care crisis caused by the insufficient response to this worldwide pandemic required a shift for which most were unprepared. Those museums who had resources prior to the pandemic to invest in robust websites, a library of digital images of their collections, and dedicated social media staff were well positioned to leverage their staff's creativity to reach beyond their walls with digital programming. Eighty-one percent of museums who responded to MANY's first COVID-19 Impact Survey (report issued May 27, 2020; https://nysmuseums.org/COVID19resources) increased their social media within the first month of NY on Pause. The Museum Computer Network (https://mcn.edu/a-guide-to-virtual-museum-resources/) has a comprehensive list of virtual museum resources. American Alliance of Museums has compiled a

section on their website about how museums have gone virtual (see https://www.aam-us
.org/category/covid-19/), and selected examples of best practices are available on the MANY
website (https://nysmuseums.org/COVID19resources#digitalengagement). This article is a
more personal perspective on how, under the pressure of a pandemic, museums combined
staff talent and creativity with virtual program delivery and digital images to extend their
reach beyond most of our imaginations.

I was fortunate to spend two days as part of a group of photography students at the
birth of MIT's Media Lab thirty-five years ago (see https://www.media.mit.edu/about
/history/). We stood around a room with a computer the size of five refrigerators at the
center and watched as the image on a Kodachrome slide was read by the computer, pix-
elated and projected on a small screen. The operator then changed the color and density of
the image pixel by pixel. What took hours, now takes seconds, formerly room-size equip-
ment fits in our hands, and although the investment in professionally digitized images re-
mains unachievable for many museums, few of us hesitate to take out our mobile devices
and capture what we see to create personal visual libraries shared across time and space.

As digital technologies became more accessible in the late 1990s, museums expanded
access to their collections through websites. Virtual galleries became substitute display
spaces for curators, homepages transformed into alternative visitor entranceways, and edu-
cators used virtual learning platforms to reach students in classes beyond the districts in
which the museums were located. At the time I was seeking support for greater funding
for digital initiatives, my mantra became "many more people will never walk through your
doors than will ever walk through your doors." I could not imagine the path we would
travel to reach the tipping point that defines our operational "new normal."

#MuseumFromHome blossomed in the cultural soil tilled by French author and art

critic André Malraux (1901–76) who wrote of an "imaginary museum," a dislocated place where one could assemble a collection from the world's art to hang in a personally defined museum. In the first step away from the original object, photography in the nineteenth century made it possible to gather on printed pages objects that could never be physically assembled. The role of the photographer was eventually elevated in the museum hierarchy of the early twentieth century. As the cost of mass printing declined after World War II, objects became within the reach of those who could afford publications that re-formed narratives and built new connections between objects from around the world.

Illustrated art books, heavy volumes filling oversized shelves, served as the primary learning resource for generations of museum professionals like me who fall into the category of digital immigrants. I have been laughed at by a digital native (people born after 1980) who called up an image faster on their computer than I could locate it in the book I took from the shelf. Website collections and databases replaced books, and now smart phones have replaced websites as the primary tool to access images from museum collections.

For this article I wandered around Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn, and Instagram looking at #MuseumFromHome and quickly concluded that there is no way to consume all of the content museums and followers created during quarantine. Google Analytics records the first use of the hashtag on March 15; their graph line continues to trend upward. Fifteen thousand people follow #MuseumFromHome on Facebook. A search on Instagram brings up 152,000 posts. On LinkedIn you can find 117,000 posts by museum professionals who share how they have delivered gallery-based content virtually. It is impossible to follow the threads on the hundreds of thousands of Tweets that use the hashtag.

As my searches branched off, collections that I had never hoped to see in person were at my fingertips. As expected, the backs of dresses, bottoms of vessels, details of wood carvings, glaze crazing on ceramics, and fingerprints on castings were not part of the experience. But as I scrolled through #MuseumFromHome on Instagram, my vision was washed with color, form, figure, light, and highly random adjacencies that created their own visual meaning. The hierarchy of architectural space in museums traditionally relegated the work of non-European cultures to lower-level galleries and less trafficked corners of display spaces. Those physical barriers dissolve in the virtual space into a new kind of consumption unfiltered by authoritative interpretation or a dominant curatorial narrative. By removing physical and temporal boundaries, #MuseumFromHome drew through lines across the globe, sparking hope that collections will be accessible to more than those who can afford the price of admission.

When reflecting upon how far museums have come in the digital space, it helped me to remember that we have traveled very far very quickly. Creative Commons began to change how museums think about copyright law in 2001. LinkedIn launched in 2002, Facebook in 2004, Twitter in 2006, Instagram in 2010, and Google Arts and Culture in 2011. Over the past five months I lingered at the edges of #MuseumFromHome when my eyes
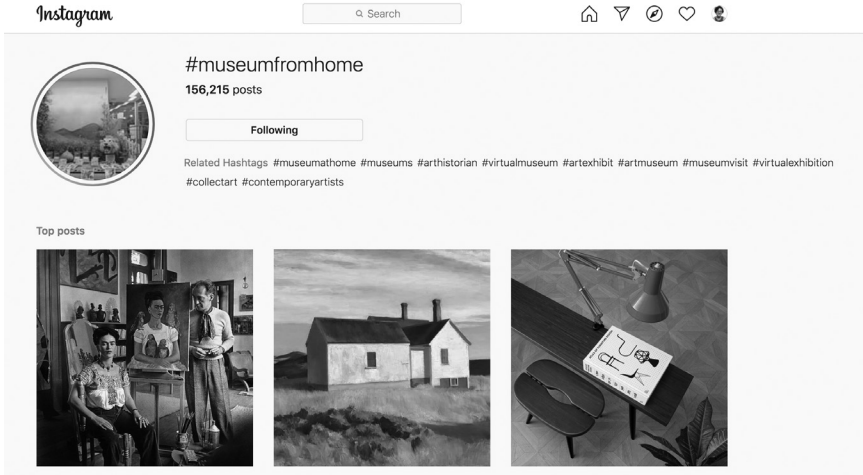
recovered from the blur of a seemingly endless schedule packed with meetings on Zoom. I dipped into art making lessons, took a writing class, listened to stories, drank cocktails with curators, watched digitally remastered archival films, asked questions in the chat box of virtual field trips, bid during online silent auctions, and took virtual tours of galleries that were closed to the public. My not-so-guilty pleasure was following Cowboy Tim from the National Cowboy Museum on Twitter who unwittingly redefined the tone of museum communications.

I miss visiting museums. In the past four years I have spent time in hundreds of museums, sometimes several in a day—as many as a dozen in a week. If you are reading this article, chances are you miss museums, too. The virtual museum experience will never replace my desire to examine original objects and experience a gallery's architectural space, but until we can all travel again, #MuseumFromHome creates a positive balance to doom-scrolling media headlines.

I did not address the tremendous loss of life and livelihood in these past five months, and how the cracks in our economic and health care systems revealed the deep roots of systemic racism in our nation and in our museums. Each time I look at the crowd-sourced Museum Staff COVID-19 Impact Chart (https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1acEaRss ONaAlFjThEFybfhBBIb3OIuOne-NHsghOMxg/edit#gid=0), I am crushed to see that so many colleagues have lost their jobs. As a field, we have lost the most racially and culturally diverse, digitally knowledgeable generation to enter the museum sector. I know that in some museums where educators and visitors services staff have been laid off, they could have been put to work taking collections, exhibitions, and programs into the digital realm. I also know that 30 percent of New York's museums closed 2018 in a deficit position, and the pandemic made hard economic choices and the loss of staff positions a necessity.

At this time, we know we will not be able to welcome large numbers of people into our museum galleries. We also know, especially in rural regions of our state and nation that internet access remains a real barrier to the ways in which museums can engage a wider audience. The pandemic has exposed the ways in which museums can and should conduct business differently in a post-COVID world, but social media metrics have allowed us to quantify the ways in which people value the role of museums in our society. I hope that funders will see the profound need for investment in technology to support digital infrastructure. It is time to think constructively about how we move forward in this new normal changing our primary relationship with our audiences and expanding our programs and policies to reflect the contributions of everyone who calls our nation their home.

Review by Erika Sanger. Sanger is the executive director of the Museum Association of New York (MANY) and has held positions at the International Center of Photography, the Jewish Museum, the New-York Historical Society, the Brooklyn Museum, the Asheville Art Museum (NC), and the Albany Institute of History & Art. She also served as director of development at Penland School of Crafts in western North Carolina. Sanger holds a BFA from Clark University and an MA from NYU's Steinhardt School of Culture, Education, and Human Development.