

Decolonizing the Museum Space in India: The Pandemic Influence

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Large state museums thrive on global exchange and international movement, and rapidly opened their doors to virtual tourism soon after the COVID-19 pandemic struck. They already have a strong online presence with technical teams ready to adapt to online modes of viewing and visiting. However, there is no collaborative platform for museums in India thus far. Private museums are emerging as the new players to fill in this gap. They provide a space for collectors to showcase their work in a curated display and a platform for artists to push boundaries in the expression of local art forms, fusing knowledge from varied influences and consequently decolonizing their showcase. However, they would be facing a harder time during this period as not only do they need to curate their displays online, they also have to keep visitors engaged or even create new audiences when they may be fairly fresh ventures. In this essay, I examine select Indian private museums in the context of Georg Simmel's seminal essay "The Stranger," which provides an apt metaphor for the current global situation. Dwelling on museums such as Kiran Nadar Museum of Art, New Delhi and Noida; Museum of Goa, Goa; and Museum of Art and Photography, Bengaluru, the article also includes insights from founders of digital collections such as the Museum of Material Memory and the Museum Memories Project. I draw attention to spaces that have made virtual presence their strength from the get-go, and engage with some of the coping strategies that museums are using to deal with the staggering changes that are suddenly required in 2020. Throughout the essay, I bring in Simmel's conceptualization of the stranger as a group member who is simultaneously near and far. This provides an opening to think about the universalizing strategies that local museums need to adapt to build a "characteristic of relations founded only on generally human commonness."

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Private Museums and Digital Initiatives in India

Museums offer us a space to wander as we wonder at the marvels they present: the geographical distance they allow us to leapfrog over, the historical times they immerse us in. "If wandering," then, "is the liberation from every given point in space, and thus the conceptional opposite to fixation at such a point, the sociological form of the 'stranger' presents the unity, as it were, of these two characteristics." Surely, this is what museums, in spatial terms, accord us the liberty to do—to be not "the wanderer who comes today and leaves tomorrow" but rather "the person who comes today and

stays tomorrow,” replete in the knowledge we are granted access to. “This phenomenon too, however, reveals that spatial relations are only the condition, on the one hand, and the symbol, on the other, of human relations.”[1]

Georg Simmel’s brief and illuminating essay “The Stranger” is an apt metaphor for the global situation that has arisen due to the COVID-19 pandemic and that we as individuals are grappling with these days, in various ingenious ways. We could choose to perceive this seemingly interminable time with objectivity, which Simmel posits in his essay as freedom “bound by no commitments which could prejudice [our] perception, understanding, and evaluation...”[2] However, when we are home and unable to participate in social spaces of interactivity, questions of distance or the lack of it are pushed out of the equation. Instead, if our perception involves looking at oneself as “a group member” who is “near and far at the same time,” we find, as Simmel states, that we are part of a “general[ly] human commonness.”[3] Connecting anew with art and culture can stave off the detached space of solitary existence that we have collectively been thrust into. “[I]n these tense and trying times, we are seeing art and culture play a significant role in providing some sort of comfort and normalcy to people,” confirm Aanchal Malhotra and Navdha Malhotra, Co-Founders of the Museum of Material Memory (founded in 2017).[4] In this article, I explore the strategies that select private museums in India employ to bring art lovers together during the quarantine period necessitated by the pandemic, so as to generate community and connection. State-run museums in countries such as India often operate on the basis of a grand narrative that frequently enables “a material and curatorial erasure.”[5] The proliferation of private museums in India, on the other hand, is a welcome move towards establishing alternative identities for heterogeneous populations that are already divided on the basis of states. This article also thus highlights the cultural imperative that private museums in particular have a responsibility towards: that of visibly or invisibly decolonizing the hegemonic locations they are traditionally thought to occupy—particularly in deconstructing the colonial aura they are historically imbued with—by infusing new life into their structures. Art is, after all, regulated by the forces of consumption and regulation, giving curators, artists, and politicians the opportunity to produce museums in a given culture that articulate the values and priorities that make a museum possible and desirable.[6]

Material objects are imbued with imaginative narratives that, in former colonies with their own histories of civil unrest, are attached with layered and troubling histories. India’s background of colonization and subsequent partition reverberates to this day, and objectual memory is of utmost importance, as also narrative histories. Malhotra and Malhotra delineate the aim of their museum as being “always ... to focus on stories of people through the objects that either belong to them or were bequeathed to them.” Through these items, they explore “family history, identity, gender and gender roles, caste, trauma, migration and at times, things that may have never been uttered before.” For them, “the object reveals its years of history, particularly as it is often recorded and archived by subsequent generations.”[7] Indeed, the emergence of private museums in the early 2000s has gained in intensity and popularity, with young artists, fresh voices, and audiences keen to challenge and question traditionalist thought patterns. And in this new decade, interestingly, such museums have been pushed to reevaluate their game plan and chart new experiential paths of generating stories with audience participation in unanticipated ways.

To begin with, though, all is not rosy. The expectation would be that national museums would take the lead in reshaping the collective consciousness in these months, the never-ending days of which could be painted in vibrant colors as if they are blank canvas. It would be supposed that large

museums are familiar with and thrive on global exchange with international communities of artists, practitioners, conservators, provenance experts, and most importantly, museum visitors. In several cities globally, museums swiftly opened their doors to virtual tourism soon after the announcement of the pandemic. In India, a conversation, that brought together five museum experts, was started with a webinar on Facebook on May 18, 2020;[8] in concluding, it was mentioned that there is much yet to be done in terms of improving on online presence and working on collaborative platforms to link museums around the country. Poulomi Das, Founder of the Museum Memories Project that was launched in April 2020 in an entirely digital model, states: “Museums in India are governed by decadent colonial laws and are highly structured ... where the visitor is, sadly, not central to their vision and existence. They do not have accurate visitor statistics... It is shocking for me that not a single Indian museum has their collection available online, though some have started thinking on those lines.”[9]

Private museums have seen a boom in India in recent years, and are actively seeking to fill this gap. They provide a space for collectors to showcase their work in a curated display and a platform for artists to push boundaries in the expression of local art forms. Their focus on diversity and inclusion of marginalized voices—that is, Simmel’s stranger who settles down in the place of his activity—and are expressive in their individual focus on actively fusing knowledges from varied influences and consequently decolonizing their showcase. The Museum of Art and Photography (MAP), Bengaluru, for instance, views the question of accessibility holistically by focusing on people with disabilities while showcasing artwork, photography, textiles, craft, and design from the subcontinent.



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Collaborative Platforms in Virtual Space

Museums are usually dependent on spatial configurations to define their collections and exhibitions. Instead, they now have to cope with the staggering changes that they are suddenly required to make in 2020. Kiran Nadar Museum of Art (KNMA), the first private museum in India for contemporary and modern art, opened its doors to the public in a shopping mall in 2010, and is now in two locations in New Delhi and Noida; Chairperson Kiran Nadar says it remains closed for the moment as per Indian government guidelines, and that, being a public space, is not a priority during a pandemic. She stresses the importance of putting in basic procedures on reopening, when they do, such as restricting the number of visitors, employing social distancing measures and sanitization “as per government and international standards.” Guidelines set forth by international museum bodies “for safety measures and caretaking of artworks” would also be taken into account.[10]

Not only do museums now need to curate their displays online, they are required to, by necessity, interest visitors when they may be fairly new ventures. MAP has planned to open in 2020. “When the lockdown began,” they say, “we were working on a research project that would help us understand audiences for the physical museum site but actually the pandemic has really drawn us to the thought that digital engagement is just as crucial.”[11] Those that already started as virtual platforms would possibly be doing even better at this time. Das’ project, for instance, “aims to be an accessible and inclusive educational platform to reach out to those who might have been forgotten, are isolated, depressed and lack access to museums or heritage sites.”[12] Her attempt, through it, is of looking forward with excitement to an undiscovered future. Malhotra and Malhotra affirm: “Crowdsourcing and sharing [the] stories digitally has enabled an exchange of our shared values, customs and traditions.”[13]

It is becoming increasingly imperative for small museums to build on collaborative platforms and extend their localized focus to a wider international framework. And they are indeed rising to the new normal, viewing it as an opportunity. In Nadar’s words, “this may be a good thing, since it will enable a more diverse audience to have access to the world of art.”[14] Her sentiment is echoed by Subodh Kerkar, Director and Founder, Museum of Goa (MOG), whose dream it is to democratize Indian art and increase the masses’ exposure to it. “Even a farmer should feel curious about walking in,” he avers.[15] MOG focuses on the heritage, art, and architecture of Goa and the Konkan coast, and is set to reopen towards the end of June. Over the four years that the museum has been functioning—it opened in 2015—it has become completely sustainable. But now, Kerkar and his team have been employing unusual ideas to draw locals into the museum in the absence of tourists. They are arranging for pamphlets on select exhibits to be delivered to local homes via the bread man along with pao, the crispy Goan bread, in the mornings, recalling the PAO artwork that is displayed on MOG’s walls. Motivated by the belief of museums playing a positive role in society, MAP too envisions taking art and culture to the heart of the community and making it accessible to diverse audiences.[16]

To this aim, MAP is positioned as “a space for ideas and conversations that are initiated through its collection enabling engagement with audiences in multiple ways.” Their digital presence has been strong: “for example through the months of June and July,” they “are exploring the theme of ‘Art as Witness,’” looking through their collection at the role that “art has played in responding to both times of crisis and celebration, making comment and documenting proceedings.”[17] KNMA has ramped up their online offerings, underscoring the importance of remaining aggressive virtually and keeping

a solid engagement with audiences. They assert that a lot of art and art-related activities that have moved online may stay that way, which might be a good thing, since it would enable a more diverse audience to have access to the world of art. MOG, on the other hand, is working on an illustrated book of 200 interesting facts about Goa for children, some of which are shared on their Instagram page.

Education and Online Engagement

Museums should help in educating and informing audiences at different levels, and some are certainly making attempts to do so. Specifically, KNMA is offering “a constant program of online engagement,” inclusive of worksheets, conversations, workshops, contests, online summer camps for children like Craftopia, and virtual exhibitions like an online glimpse of Mrinalini Mukherjee and Jayashree Chakravarty’s *Abstracting Nature*.^[18] MAP launched various initiatives through April and May to help people connect with their collection online, “right from something as easy as adding a Zoom background to learning something new through our online exhibitions.”^[19] The Museum of Material Memory strives to “record the nuances of material history among families across the subcontinent, by means of storytelling and oral testimony. The archive is online and free to access for all, making it a democratic space for citizens across the countries of the subcontinent to interact, unencumbered by borders.”^[20] Virtual guided tours, a blog, and a host of digital initiatives, still innovative in India, are the highlights of the Museum Memories Project. Das affirms that the idea of reaching out came to her easily. “I knew I didn’t want to do this alone, it had to be a large community effort where everyone is involved and responsible for the other.” Contributors to her project delve into happy travel memories and share them to feel part of a global community, giving strength to individuals and granting meaning to one’s existence.^[21]

Indeed, community is the defining element in this period of maintaining supreme levels of emotional resilience and conceptualizing art institutions as a process of the collective. For instance, MAP is posited as “a space for ideas and conversations that are initiated through its collection enabling engagement with audiences in multiple ways.”^[22] Steps at KNMA are underway to help art and artists weather this difficult time. “Our objective,” Nadar declares, “continues to be to help art reach as many people as possible and to grow art appreciation and museum (now virtual museum) culture.”^[23] Malhotra and Malhotra believe that crowdsourcing and sharing stories digitally has enabled the exchange of shared values, customs and traditions.^[24] Certainly, issues of how much to reveal in the fashioning of the digital self ties in with Simmel’s proposition of the stranger receiving “the most surprising openness—confidences which sometimes have the character of a confessional and which would be carefully withheld from a more closely related person.”^[25] And how can museum visitors portray bonds to render them concrete in a shifting environment? Malhotra and Malhotra surmise that a familiar object, an heirloom, a material “thing” used in homes across the subcontinent, can act as a catalyst for intimate and nuanced conversation, especially when a crisis or larger geopolitical frameworks may not allow a space for that conversation otherwise.^[26]

It is evident, then, that private museums, each with their distinctive defined mission, are here to grow. Digital projects may be perceived as borderless endeavours, as Malhotra and Malhotra reflect, “to record the nuances of material history across families in the subcontinent, by means of storytelling and oral testimony.” Nadar emphasizes the relevance of art in a country like India with its rich artistic and cultural heritage, maintaining that shifting to online programming would permit more people to access art, culture and museums, “spark[ing] curiosity and limit[ing] hesitation towards the

unknown.”[27] This article has sought to provide an opening into considering the universalizing approach that small museums need to adapt to offer, in Simmel’s formulation, “many possibilities of commonness.”[28] By bringing together varied collections of objects and narratives, they show us that strangeness is not insurmountable or due to different or incomprehensible matters. Similarity, harmony and nearness are not dependent on “inner and exclusive necessity” but are more general qualities.[29]

Notes

[1] Georg Simmel, “The Stranger” (1908), in *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*, 402, translated and edited by Kurt H. Wolff (Glencoe, IL: The Free Press, 1950).

[2] *Ibid.*, 405.

[3] *Ibid.*, 407.

[4] E-mail communication with Aanchal Malhotra and Navdha Malhotra, Co-Founders, Museum of Material Memory, June 14, 2020. See <http://www.museumofmaterialmemory.com/> for more information on the digital repository.

[5] Chantal Georgel, “The Museum as Metaphor, in Nineteenth-Century France,” trans. Marc Roudebush, in *Museum Culture: Histories Discourses Spectacles*, ed. Daniel J. Sherman and Irit Rogoff (London: Routledge [1994] 2003), 113.

[6] Peter M. Mclsaacs, *Museums of the Mind: German Modernity and the Dynamics of Collecting* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2007), 5.

[7] E-mail communication with Malhotra and Malhotra.

[8] “A Webinar—‘Revitalising Museums and Cultural Spaces,’” hosted on Facebook by Development of Museums and Cultural Spaces, Sahapedia, India Heritage Walks, Showcraft Productions, and CulTre, May 18, 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/events/258795708602590/> [last accessed June 18, 2020].

[9] E-mail communication with Poulomi Das, Founder, Museum Memories Project, June 6, 2020. See <https://www.facebook.com/projectinterpret> for more information on the digital documentation project [last accessed June 19, 2020].

[10] E-mail communication with Apurva Kacker, Chief Marketing Officer, Kiran Nadar Museum of Art and Pia Desai, PR, June 15, 2020. My thanks to Mrs Kiran Nadar for providing her quote for this article. See <https://www.knma.in/> for information on the museum [last accessed June 19, 2020].

[11] E-mail communication with Priscilla Roxburgh, Head of Communications and PR, Museum of Art and Photography, Bengaluru, June 15, 2020. See <https://map-india.org/> for information on the museum [last accessed June 19, 2020].

[12] E-mail communication with Das.

[13] E-mail communication with Malhotra and Malhotra.

[14] E-mail communication with Desai.

[15] Phone interview with Subodh Kerkar, June 14, 2020. See <https://museumofgoa.com/> for information on the museum [last accessed June 19, 2020]. My thanks to photographer Chirodeep Chaudhuri for connecting me with Dr Kerkar.

[16] E-mail communication with Roxburgh.

[17] *Ibid.*

[18] E-mail communication with Desai.

[19] E-mail communication with Roxburgh.

- [20] E-mail communication with Malhotra and Malhotra.
[21] E-mail communication with Das.
[22] E-mail communication with Roxburgh.
[23] E-mail communication with Desai.
[24] E-mail communication with Malhotra and Malhotra.
[25] Simmel, "The Stranger," 404.
[26] E-mail communication with Malhotra and Malhotra.
[27] E-mail communication with Desai.
[28] Simmel, "The Stranger," 406–407.
[29] *Ibid.*, 407.

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