



Italian Cultural Institutions Across and Beyond Covid-19: Designing Digital Cultural Experiences in Extra-Ordinary Times

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Abstract. Covid-19 has accelerated the digital transformation of cultural institutions. They have tackled the temporary shutdowns of their spaces shaping digital cultural experiences, to go beyond their ‘walls’ and enter their audiences’ homes with the aim of fostering existing relationships or creating new ones. Focusing on Italy, this research poses the question: how has the pandemic changed the design of cultural experiences? The five case studies track the evolution of cultural experiences during the health emergency. The assumption is that the pandemic has shaped the supply side as much as the demand, generating possibilities and scenarios for cultural experiences that could coexist with traditional modes. The cases are selected and interpreted based on a survey conducted from July 2020 to January 2021. The results suggest that online and onsite cultural experiences are converging, with important implications for accessibility and inclusion.

Keywords: Cultural Experiences · Digital Transformation · Cultural Institutions · Covid-19

1 Introduction and Literature Review

With the abrupt advent of covid-19, museums, theatres, and other cultural institutions faced, as much as any other societal party, an extraordinary circumstance, being obliged to shut their doors and repair to that through a predominantly online, socially distanced dialogue with their audiences. They had to quickly adapt their offer, thus partaking to the inevitable acceleration of technological transformation (Dal Pozzolo 2021; Sacco and Calveri 2021). Their newly developed digital formats have crowded the internet with virtual visits, artists in live streaming, auctions on Instagram, theatrical plays on Zoom, creative workshops for children, and much more (Massi and Turrini 2020).

Cultural institutions have reacted to the lockdown reaching out of their traditional walls, finding their audience at home. Research has promptly investigated the impact of covid-19 on the cultural sector, mainly through early policy analyses. In Europe,

studies have dealt with the negative effects of the abrupt shutdowns, tackled through welfare measures to support cultural and creative labour (Betzler et al. 2020, Comunian and England 2020, Eikhof 2020, Banks and O'Connor 2021). These investigations have focused on the government's support to the supply side of the cultural sector. Regarding the United Kingdom, Comunian and England (2020) point out that policy measures have concerned the economic sustainability of a sector that is inherently based on precarious labour, with covid-19 augmenting structural criticalities of the cultural and creative industries. In a comparative policy analysis, Betzler et al. (2020) have classified early aids to the arts and culture sector in the Netherlands, Switzerland, Slovenia, and Portugal as: employment-related measures, tax-measures, and stimulus measures. In August 2021, Banks and O'Connor (2021) edited an entire issue about the responses to the crisis in many countries across the globe, all addressing the state intervention (or non-intervention) in the sector in support of the artists, the institutions, and the other organisations. Eikhof (2020), in a pre/post pandemic investigation, has highlighted the consequences of the pandemic on the cultural workforce and its diversity, and has explored the perspectives of the sector in the aftermath of the crisis. Some have pointed out that more attention should be paid to the demand side of such a process, about which data lack, even though it is strictly connected with the design of the offer, being culture an experience good (Radermecker 2021). In fact, with few exceptions (see, for instance, Ceobanu et al. 2020; Feder et al. 2021), it seems that research has overlooked the ways in which covid-19 may have affected demand for cultural experiences and in particular how so in relation to the digital dimension. To fill this gap, this research explores the ways in which cultural experiences of cultural institutions have been impacted by the covid-induced digitalisation of, jointly, production and consumption. In particular, the research focuses on Italian case studies and refers to cultural institutions as the *luoghi della cultura* described by Italy's Codice dei Beni Culturali [Code of Cultural Heritage], article no. 101¹, namely: museums, libraries and archives, archaeological sites and parks, and monumental complexes. One reason for such a choice is certainly the familiarity of the authors with the Italian context and language that has enabled ease in navigating the data. Other reasons are the facts that Italy is country notably rich in cultural heritage², and, at the same time, it has been the country where covid-19 has impacted the hardest in the first phase of the outbreak and its lockdown policies have been draconian compared to the rest of Europe. The combination of these two conditions makes Italy a paradigmatic context to investigate.

Long before the pandemic, digitalisation was crucial for the cultural sector (Benghozi 2016, Towse 2010). While technological innovation, as a matter of fact, has continuously impacted the production and consumption of cultural and creative goods, the advent of the internet has changed that in a radical way, and research indulges in the investigation of copyright implications for the artists (Handke et al. 2016) and competition in markets for digitized cultural goods (Benhamou 2015). Digitalisation deals mainly with a new disintermediate form of art appreciation that has big consequences for the various actors of the industry. Artists and cultural institutions can reach their audiences easily and acquire

¹ Art. 10 dlgs 42/2004.

² At present, Italy has the highest number of Unesco sites: <http://www.unesco.it/it/ItaliaNellUnesco/Detail/188>.

data about them, new actors emerge such as digital platforms that change the institutional environment of gatekeeping and certification, new business models arise, and visitors can access the arts supposedly in a more interactive and democratic way (Massi et al. 2020). Heritage collections with a social rather than commercial purpose have embraced the digital transformation, on the one hand, through the digitalisation of their collections, making their artworks and artifacts available to online fruition (Borowieki and Navarrete 2017), and, on the other hand, through the going-online shift of art auctions and emergence of digital intermediaries (Arora and Vermeylen 2013). The investment in digital transformation is a consequence of a shift of cultural institutions' purpose from one of protection and conservation to one of accessibility and valorisation (Carù et al. 2020). Digital technologies have been adopted by heritage collections on site, and immersive installations have diffused, with consequences for the experience of the artworks, now mediated by digital devices. There are, however, multiple ways in which technology can be integrated with the site. Carù et al. (2020) identify various typologies of immersive installation based on the degree of connection with the original site and the integration between physical and digital elements. Their analysis of an experiential exhibition in Milan, that is, one with low connection to the site and low integration between physical and digital, highlights the role of technology as a facilitator of cognitive and emotional values, and at the same time they found that the social aspects of the experience were hindered by the highly immersive setting, whereas it has been argued that museums and similar institutions function as third places (Tate 2012). On-site digital technology has proven to work as a reagent, meaning that they amplify visitors and contents, and that they also enlarge the directions of the relations between consumers and contents and across media (Bollati 2021). In fact, while the impact of digitalisation is more evident in the markets for reproducible cultural goods, "even live performances of opera, ballet, spoken theatre and orchestral concerts have felt the impact of digitization and Internet, as they are digitally streamed and delivered by satellite in virtually simultaneous time to computers and, for better sound and visual quality, to venues such as cinemas" (Handke et al. 2017: 296). But and even if "It remains to be seen whether online dissemination will stimulate interest in these elite art forms"(ivi) some scenarios have already opened up, such as the perspective of co-production through crowdsourcing in the making of librettos, as described by Carbone and Trimarchi (2012). Given such premises, it seems particularly important to investigate how the digital elements of cultural experiences in cultural institutions have evolved during the pandemic-related lockdowns that have induced, and sometimes forced, digitalisation of a broad spectrum of practices, from work to education to leisure.

Data collected during the lockdown phases of the pandemic show the current state of the digital sphere and its adoption by cultural institutions and, consequently, shed light on how cultural experiences are evolving, both from the consumers' perspective and from the perspective of those who design such experiences. A research conducted by NEMO - the Network of European Museum Organisations - between March and April 2020 and repeated in November 2020 shows that, since the covid-19 breakout, 93% of European museums have increased their online services or created new ones. More than 75% of them have increased their social media activity, 53% have created new video contents and one third of the museums have allocated budget to develop their online

segment. However, museums that have hired dedicated personnel are no more than 7% of them. In addition, 40% declared to have simply adjusted the tasks of their staff to tackle the emergency (NEMO 2020). Looking closely at Italy, about which this research focuses, new evidence that cultural institutions were undertaking a digitalisation process was collected just before the beginning of the lockdowns by *Osservatorio Innovazione Digitale nei Beni e Attività Culturali della School of Management* of Politecnico di Milano. The research reports that before the pandemic, onsite and online experiences were clearly distinct: the former as the predominant mode of offering culture, the latter as an advertising or follow-up instrument, never as a part of the actual cultural experience, and mainly on social media, on which 76% of Italian cultural institutions were active (Politecnico di Milano 2020). Further research finds, however, that the pandemic has dramatically augmented the adoption of digital formats, including social media presence. Average number of cultural institutions' Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram accounts have doubled in March and April 2020 (Politecnico di Milano 2020). Nonetheless, the interaction between cultural institutions and their audience is still weary: only 24% of the cultural institutions who participated in the study have a strategy for digital innovation. Only 1 museum over 4 thinks about a long-term digital strategy (Politecnico di Milano 2020). During spring 2020, the Italian Ministry of Culture has conducted an extensive survey of museum visitors, to assess the impact of covid-19 on cultural consumption. The results show new perspectives on the future of cultural experiences. In fact, 75.5% of the respondents have experienced cultural activities online, via websites or social media, and 90% of them are satisfied with the experience and wish it continues to be offered. Moreover, 44.2% of visitors would continue to consume online even after covid-19 restrictions were lifted (Cicerchia and Solima 2021).

2 Materials and Methods

The purpose of this work is to understand how the pandemic has changed the design of cultural experiences as a consequence of a change in both their supply and demand due to the pandemic. The research tackles this by analysing five exemplary case studies (Farquhar 2012) that explain the evolution of cultural consumption in the digital age in which cultural institutions have been abruptly thrown out by the crisis. Although case study research does not allow for generalizability of results, this method is effective in producing insights rich in detail (Farquhar 2012). Considered that "case study research is ideal for looking at research questions which are closely connected to their context or situation" (Farquhar 2012, p. 8), it has been chosen as the most suitable method to achieve this research's objective, that is obtain in-depth knowledge of the way in which cultural experiences have evolved during the pandemic's emergency thus understanding future scenarios.

The assumption is that covid-19 has impacted the demand side as much as the supply, generating possibilities and scenarios for cultural experiences that could coexist with the traditional modes. As noted in the literature review, previous studies on the matter and the works on the economics of culture and the arts largely focus on how digitalisation has impacted artistic production, and collections' management. In regard to the literature that tackles the immediate effects of the pandemic, attention is mostly paid to the supply

side of the cultural sector. However, little has been investigated on how digitalisation, as accelerated by the pandemic, has impacted the experience of cultural heritage. Cultural experiences are the output of the productive process of cultural institutions; thus, they are a vantage point from which both cultural demand and supply can be investigated. This is supported by the fact that cultural experiences can be interpreted as experience goods. In fact, they are goods whose quality information is bundled with the product itself, making it hard for the consumers to assess their quality beforehand (Shapiro 1983) and, consequently, they are “stage experiences” in the experience economy as identified by Pine and Gilmore who assert that “While prior economic offerings – commodities, goods, and services – are external to the buyer, experiences are inherently personal, existing only in the mind of an individual who has been engaged on an emotional, physical, intellectual, or even spiritual level” (Pine and Gilmore 1998: 99).

The selection of the case studies is based on a preliminary survey developed to explore the potential of the digital in cultural institutions during covid-19 in Italy. To do so, we have conducted a double survey, one for institutions and one for visitors, designed in a way that the same topics could be understood from both the supply and demand sides. The survey revolved around the following questions: How can cultural institutions ally with digital technologies and create new encounters with their *central*, *occasional*, and *potential* (Bollo 2014) audiences? What opportunities have emerged for cultural managers? How can cultural experiences be designed for them to be fertile amplifiers and not mere filters? The survey has been organised to acquire information specifically for the different phases of the pandemic (before lockdown/post lockdown), and this enabled for a variety of scenarios to open due to the subversive, or at least catalytic, advent of covid-19. The surveys were online and have been diffused by the authors following a strategy that pursued random sampling, that is the way to achieve the most representative sample (Schreier 2018). At the same time, the dissemination of the surveys has occurred in a highly under-pressure contingency for the entire target population, that of an unprecedented global pandemic, that has negatively impacted the process of data gathering limiting the generalizability of the sample. The dissemination strategy has included distribution of the visitors’ survey link on social networks such as Facebook and Instagram, in particular on Facebook’s groups for survey dissemination and groups that promote cultural activities at large. Cultural institutions were, instead, a much more defined population thus possible to target in a more systematic way through direct emails and messages. Finally, the two surveys have been featured on *Artribune* (Ronchi 2020), a popular Italian arts and culture online magazine followed by both cultural consumers and institutions. The surveys have been online from July 2020 to January 2021 and reached 56 institutions and 658 visitors: thus, encompassing the two major lockdowns. For the purpose of this research, that is concerned with the latest trends in cultural experiences in Italy as induced by the lockdowns, a part of the survey has been directly utilised. In particular, we used the open-ended question “*what is the best online cultural experience that you know of during covid-19*” to obtain a relatively unbiased and bottom-up dataset of about 100 cultural experiences. More general questions of the surveys have been used to gain an overview of how cultural institutions and visitors have experienced the lockdowns. Based on this information, four key elements have emerged that have been then deductively applied to the selection and analysis of the case studies.

These key elements constitute two couples of opposite features: content vs. narration of the content and physical atmosphere vs. serendipity. To elucidate on the elaboration of such criteria, an overview of the study follows.

Among the institutions who responded to our survey, 94.5% of them have started digital actions to tackle the closing of their spaces. A more heterogeneous situation is offered by the visitors: 48.3% of the respondents has experienced culture online; 46.7% has not; 5% did not know about this possibility and, among this small percentage of respondents, 45% say they are interested in the option. The relationship of trust between institutions and users built before the pandemic seems not to be a necessary condition for cultural participation in the digital realm. This connotes the cultural consumer as one that is keen on experimenting, intrigued by a specific show or exhibition (82.4%) and who gets informed about the cultural options on social media (49.8%) and word of mouth (35.8%). Moreover, 88.5% of the institutions declare that their audience appreciates from-home cultural experiences but do not know precisely what the consumers like about that. In fact, a large part of them (42.3%) only collects basic information about their audience, such as the number of visitors or interactions on websites and social media. Instead, as previous research suggests (Bollati 2021), it would be important that each institution could assess qualitatively how their digital offer functions to design it increasingly better. In this perspective, the double survey has been functional to bring together the perceptions of both the institutions and the users. We have found that the most valued aspect of online cultural experiences is not the fact that it is free of charge, in fact only 28.3% of institutions and 29.9% of visitors believe so. Instead, the curatorial element of the digital experience is valued the most (89.1% of institutions and 61.8% of visitors), as well as the narratives (56.5% of institutions and 31.2% of visitors). One last appreciated aspect of digital cultural experiences during lockdown is the fact that one can switch it off at any time (33.4% of visitors). In addition, cultural consumption online implies, say 87.4% of visitors and 53.8% of institutions, that they are missing the *here and now*. In fact, the element of serendipity and the connection with the physical atmosphere are perceived as lacking by 47.5% of visitors but only 17.3% of institutions. The home experience showed how important is the one done in person, in fact 41.7% of visitors feel that they miss analogue visits and shows. This consciousness seems to stem some stress off cultural managers who may have realised that the digital experience is not a substitute but rather a complement to the onsite cultural experience, a concern that implies cannibalisation of products as stated in literature (Handke et al. 2017). Based on the materials derived from the above-mentioned survey and the hypothesis that cultural experiences can be positively cross-pollinated by the digital instead of being substituted by it (Bollati 2021), the next section presents a selection of case studies emerging from the responses to the surveys and further desk research, as additional support to the primary data.

3 Case Studies: The Trials of Cultural Institutions Towards Shaping a New Offer

Based on the insights gained by means of the mentioned survey, the analysis has traced a process of sophistication that the design of digital cultural experiences has undergone during the pandemic. In addition to that, one question of the surveys, namely *what is*

the best online cultural experience that you know of during covid-19? allowed us to collect about 100 different experiences. From this list, we selected five exemplary case studies based in Italy. Thus, we identified five key elements of the process and then deductively applied them to the pool of cases to interpret them and answer the research questions. These elements, or criteria, are directly derived from the primary data about the cultural experiences during the lockdowns, as shown in Sect. 2. The criteria form the ends of two spectra of phenomena detected. At one end, we identified a tension between the attention for the artistic content (that is, the inner core of the experience) and the way such contents are narrated and how the experience is designed. At the other end, a contrast lies between the absence of the physical atmosphere of the space and the lurking of serendipity in digital experiences as opposed to the in-person visit. Such opposite poles - content vs. narration of the content, and physical atmosphere vs. serendipity - represent the key features that our respondents identified as what they missed the most or paid most attention to during the crisis. The following section delves into the five cases that exemplify the process underway, to which the additional element of time is added, to also map the evolution of the design of digital cultural experiences. In fact, we found that the degree of sophistication and integration of digital and analogue elements increases in more advanced phases of the lockdown, as a consequence of a process of adaptation to the new circumstances. The five cases are located in Italy, to pursue contextual comparability of both anti-covid measures and cultural environment. The cases selected are: *Le Passeggiate del Direttore*, from Museo Egizio of Turin; *The Sky in the Room*, at Fondazione Trussardi, Milan and *Aria* at Palazzo Strozzi, Florence; *Opere al Telefono*, from Fondazione Palazzo Magnani, Reggio Emilia; *Il Filo Invisibile*, by Teatro Franco Parenti in Milan; and finally *BreraPLUS +*, by Pinacoteca di Brera in Milan.

3.1 Le Passeggiate del Direttore, Museo Egizio, Turin

Museo Egizio of Turin is probably among those who have stood out in terms of digital presence during the first lockdown. To reach out to their audience, the museum has translated online the *Passeggiate del Direttore* [*Walks with the Director*], originally meant to be a physical tour for no more than 30 persons, once a month, to a digital walk uploaded on social networks, hence with a much larger user-base. Room after room, it has been possible to virtually visit the museum guided by its director. A simple format yet promptly provided and effective in its yield. Many respondents of our survey, in fact, based in other regions of the country, have identified this as their favourite experience. Given the simplicity of its design, and the passive rather than active role of the visitor in the experience, *Passeggiate del Direttore* has performed well in reaching both loyal and new audiences. The physicality of the director walking in the museum gave a tangible twist to the home experience. As soon as the museum reopened months later, its tickets went sold out.

3.2 *The Sky in the Room*, Fondazione Trussardi, Milan and *Aria*, Palazzo Strozzi, Florence

After some months of lockdown, at the beginning of summer 2020, museums have reopened gradually, allowing a limited number of visitors at a time. At this stage, the challenge is how to design interesting experiences for a few people, with social distancing and other restrictions, without losing the atmosphere of the space and the magic of being *here and now*. In this period, between June and October 2020, many institutions developed physical experiences that also involved a digital phase, be it for the booking process or the organisation of the visit itself. Artistic projects like *The Sky in a Room* by Icelandic artist Ragnar Kjartansson, promoted by Fondazione Nicola Trussardi between September and October 2020, have replied to the difficulties of lockdown by means of nonstop performances. In fact, for about a month, professional singers have performed an arrangement of Italian songwriter Gino Paoli's popular *Il cielo in una stanza*. The artists sang the song for six hours per day, with no interruptions, on the pipe organ of San Carlo al Lazzaretto Church, as if it were a lullaby, transforming the interpersonal restrictions in an intimate situation. Similarly, Argentinian artist Tomás Saraceno presented an exhibition at Palazzo Strozzi in Florence in September and October 2020. Every Monday, for two hours, an intimate, individual experience was made available in which visitors could consult an oracle and a psychotherapist. In both cases, the digital becomes functional to the cultural experience in its intimacy. It anticipates the experience, enables it, so that it can happen physically yet according to the current restrictions, to make this a private form of cultural consumption although not from home.

3.3 *Opere al Telefono*, Fondazione Palazzo Magnani, Reggio Emilia

At the beginning of the second wave of contagion, that coincided in Italy with a second period of strict lockdown, cultural institutions were more aware and perhaps better prepared about the closings and the potential opportunities of digital technologies. As a consequence, they experimented more with the design of their cultural experiences. A case that exemplifies this phase is *Opere al Telefono* at *Palazzo Magnani* in November 2020. The project is inspired by Italian poet Gianni Rodari's *Favole al Telefono* (Rodari 1962). As the author used to tell bedtime stories to her far away daughter, the Foundation's staff would narrate the photographic exhibition *True Fictions*, on the phone, every Wednesday from 3 to 5 pm, to their 'visitors'. The aid of low-tech support let the institution set a bilateral interaction with their audience, who was led by the format itself, to talk to the staff and the experts, just like any informal phone call. People would ask questions about the artworks, and, at the same time, this constituted an immediate feedback to the institution, that could collect important information about what interests the audience. Such feedback is crucial for future design of experiences and set ups. The visitors acquire knowledge and leave traces behind. In this example, technology is not at the centre of the show. Rather, it enables communication, mutual listening, and cross-pollination, including the fringes of the audience who may resist digital installations.

3.4 *Il Filo Invisibile*, Teatro Franco Parenti, Milan

Like the previous, the third case selected belongs to the second lockdown. In a virtual 26 seats theatre, play director Andrea Rizzolini places a special jukebox that merges illusionism, performance, and philosophy. The purpose is to narrate and evoke five imaginary tales that involve the audience. Each tale is tied by an invisible thread that is only revealed at the end of the play and invites reflection upon the topic of distance and togetherness beyond covid-19 restrictions. After buying a ticket for the show, the audience can join the play from home with their families and friends. Each participant receives, some days before the event, an envelope containing all that will be needed to partake to the performance. This practice rewrites the show anew, based on who attends the Zoom meeting, in a process of generation of contents by users. Contents are not prepared and presented online. Rather, they are conceived in the digital dimension, putting forth radically new narrations regarding time, habits, scenes, and costumes. The interaction with the audience itself becomes the plot of the play, in a new dialogue between the observer and the observant that invites them to act and participate. Even those who are relatively new to performing arts are brought closer to them, in their comfortable domestic dimension. In addition, the use of digital technologies is nurtured and mitigated by analogue features such as the prep materials posted at home: a letter from the director of the play, some objects, the envelope itself. They make the atmosphere of a physical space that is missing, instigate curiosity and anticipation, and foster willingness to participate.

3.5 *BreraPLUS +*, Pinacoteca di Brera, Milan

The last example is *BreraPLUS +*, a platform that completes the experience of the Pinacoteca di Brera with multimedia contents, documentaries, special shows, concerts, and premières. In sum, *BreraPLUS +* allows for a nonstop update about the institution. Based on three segments, *doc*, *spot*, and *live*, the digital dimension is a complement, not a substitute, of the physical experience in time, space, contents, and narratives. In fact, it answers to the need for aperçu, material close-ups on some works of art of the collection, and other cross-media events. *BreraPLUS +* was accessible for free until early 2021. This was the most frequently mentioned experience in the survey. Since then, its access is connected to the purchase of a ticket for the Pinacoteca. A price scheme for this ticket has also been implemented, proving the platform to be a part of a larger, long-term strategy. Those who buy a ticket now can access the physical gallery and the digital platform for three months, as many times as they wish. This changed paradigm of consumption (and production of the cultural offer) is emphasised by the digital dimension, that nonetheless does not overshadow the physical experience. In fact, the contents for the platform do not replicate or merely disseminate the knowledge treasured by the Pinacoteca. Instead, they are created *ad hoc*, with great attention to the curatorial aspects of the digital experience. Consequently, new knowledge is produced for the platform. Moreover, such a novel approach to design cultural experiences facilitates the return of visitors, who may not be habitué or geographically close.

4 Discussion and Conclusions: Digital Voyage of Discovery, Design with Care

This paper has demonstrated how cultural institutions in Italy have increasingly modelled the design of their digital experiences during the lockdown. At first, museums, theatres, and analogous institutions have felt the urge to react quickly to the shutdown of their spaces. In doing so, they have proposed simple elaborations. Over time, as the crisis showed persistence, they have understood the development opportunity of the lockdown and accepted the challenge of a real integration of digital and analogue elements. Among the visitors who responded to the survey, 34.7% declared that they would keep on consuming culture online after covid-19. Similarly, 57.7% of the institutions are willing to change priorities and build a long-term digital strategy that would not just add depth to the visits, but one that is able to instigate new encounters as well as information exchange, in the perspective of going beyond the engagement of the existing audience, thus aiming at augmenting the visitors' base.

The survey has helped mapping the experiences and delineate what scenarios open regarding potential strategies that will lead tomorrow's cultural experiences based on the renewed needs, expectations, and objectives of both visitors and institutions. The results of the survey and the cases selected accordingly suggest that, while the importance of tailor-made experience design still stands, the process initiated by the pandemic is generally shared and is based on more attention to the audience and augmented intuition and awareness of the possibilities brought by new technological means. The key results of the analysis of the case studies can be grouped in three main branches:

- **Increasing value of narratives.** Initially, most of the institutions reacted by merely shifting the medium of the existing contents, such as online archives (Trocchianesi and Zanella 2021). With the enduring lockdown a sense of awareness about the importance that culture could not wait for the pandemic to end has emerged. What counts is not so much the cultural institutions' simple online presence and free availability on the web, but telling a story that binds them, that makes them truly available to the visitor, cognitively and emotionally. The five cases selected, and before that proposed by visitors and institutions, are a clear example of this. In fact, narration plays a leading role in all the cases studied. Their narratives have been designed - with different intensities - *ad hoc*, not just respecting the rules of digital and distanced consumption but using them to their own benefit.
- **The idea of meeting halfway.** The persistence of the pandemic condition and the need for multiple and continuous lockdowns led the visitor to perceive some key deficits during the online experience. As previously noted, the public mostly felt a lack of atmosphere - usually generated by the encounter with the *hinc et nunc* of the artworks (Benjamin 2011[1935]) to be found in physical experience - and an absence of serendipity - proper to the encounter with other people. *The Sky in the Room*, *Il Filo Invisibile* and *Opere al Telefono* proposed different ways to deal with this issue. *The Sky in the Room* has worked on the spatial atmosphere and intimate recollection of the visitor, *Il filo invisibile* has proposed a new mode of encounter between the spectators during the show itself and has recreated a domestic atmosphere in a shrewd dialogue between online and onsite. Finally, *Opere al Telefono* has investigated a new

low-tech and oral serendipity between institution and visitor/listener. In this regard, technology and traditional cultural experience have met halfway. Thus, the forced shutdowns as well as the incremental and cautious reopening may have stimulated the emergence of a new type of cultural experience that is neither fully space-less, digital, nor fully traditional.

- **Increasing trust of institutions towards the new means available.** The lack of encounters between places and visitors soothed institutions' immediate fear of conveying a mistaken message that the online experience is an easy replacement for the physical experience within the institution (Mandarano et al. 2008). Over time, they understood how much the online experience could be seen as a trigger for subsequent in-person enjoyments or post-experience insights, capable of stimulating relaxed and curious exploration. The threat of product cannibalisation has turned into the opportunity of audience development and, potentially, of digital alphabetisation and inclusion. The process of incorporation of the digital elements is one of incremental integration of that into the traditional means, proving that institutions have learnt how to master technological means. Over time, the museums, theatres, and similar institutions surveyed have familiarised with alternative ways to convey their collections to their and new audiences, creatively responding to the destructive force of the virus.

A question to the visitors asked to associate their image of a cultural experience to either an open book, a *piazza* of encounter, a sacred untouched temple, an exclusive club, or a voyage of discovery. It is no coincidence that 72.9% of the visitors associate the cultural experience with a *voyage of discovery*³, introducing almost an oxymoron in times of lockdown. Through digital technology, a sound, a word, a colour, or an image can open, on the one hand, to explorations, albeit from home, in both space and time, and, on the other hand, to new components invisible to the 'naked eye' that amplify senses and meanings. Cultural institutions have learnt, amplified their horizons, and leveraged on a condition in which consumers were induced to access culture online. Museums, theatres, archaeological sites, libraries, and archives may have started a new chapter of their exhibitions' productions. At the same time, their reach out actions may have functioned as initiatives of inclusions both in terms of accessibility and digital literacy. In fact, the evolution of the design of digital cultural experiences testifies a learning process in which the institutions have become increasingly at ease in integrating the analogue and the digital. In this sense, the case studies presented here could constitute best practices for cultural policy. For this to happen, cultural managers, curators, and artists are required to face new paradigms of consumption without translating them into the mere pouring of endless stocks of digital content, according to pre-packaged methods and software. Only a versatile and original use of technology, when appropriately modulated, can lead to the improvement of the existing experience and the meeting with new audiences. There is a lot at stake, and it is necessary to gamble with wisdom and vision, distancing oneself from easy prejudices or excessive trust in an uncharted terrain.

³ The authors hint at Proust's idea of the voyage of discovery, that does not consist in seeking new lands but having new eyes. Such a statement seems a contradiction and at the same a good description of the cultural experiences as they have adapted to and evolved as a consequence of the covid-19.

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