Hold on, the statue's buffering
Virtual museums for a post-physical world

It was a pleasant sunny afternoon in Bilbao on the day I paid a visit to the Guggenheim. I'd been planning for my trip to Spain three months prior, and it would be a grave error for anyone remotely interested in art to have skipped one of the country's largest, most well-designed museums. No queues at the ticket office – for once! – and the already-affordable ticket of 6.5 EUR? Now complimentary. The catch, of course, was that I was nowhere in Basque County itself. Far from it: in the midst of a general lockdown Singapore, I was free to wander the halls of among the world's most iconic museums to take in Cubist paintings, Richard Serra sculptures, even strut along its north and south terraces.

On the face of it, virtual museums hardly seem like an adequate substitute for the real thing. This isn't to say that they're a net negative in accessing art, history and culture. People all around the world are certainly better off for having the chance to view artwork, artefacts and installations where huge travel costs, time, and the temporariness of special exhibitions would otherwise stand in the way. Amidst a pandemic, virtual museums might even be the only way to appreciate many specific works of art and other exhibits, given that their physical analogues are shuttered. Nonetheless, a huge component of experiencing a museum simply cannot be replicated online for the vast majority of visitors from home.

There's something uncanny about traversing the Guggenheim [one click at a time](). You don't *move* through space, as anyone familiar with the Google Maps technology that virtual relies will know, but rather jump between different points on a pre-defined route to view your surroundings in a 360° panorama. The level of photographic detail isn't fantastic either, resembling the output of the latest iPhone… from 2013. Occasionally details are obscured or artists' names a tad hard to read, and rather than walking up to the relevant wall panel, one scrolls to zoom in with the camera's field of vision changing dizzyingly fast. At other times entire works are blurred out, presumably for copyright reasons , unless I was lucky enough to chance upon an incredibly to-the-letter exhibition on censorship.

The exterior of the Guggenheim Bilbao, Google Street View UI conspicuous as you enter.
Image Source: [Guggenheim Bilbao on Google Arts & Culture](#)

Still, I was grateful to be viewing Jean-Michael Basquiat's *Man from Naples,* Google's cameraman maintaining a respectful distance from the work. My eyes were still drawn to the striking red-and-blue head of a red pig, before wandering over the numerous other phrases, thoughts, and symbols scrawled playfully over the rest of the canvas. Curious as to how this fit into the rest of his work – influential antecedents of later hip-hop culture and street art – one click brought me to an informative write-up of the painting, with the possibility to read a concise biography of Basquiat too. Yet the digitally-derived ability to scrutinize the painting down to the most minute detail, was less of a benefit than a necessary corrective to a shortfall of my experience, namely my inability to establish what material the work had been painted on. This normally simple, albeit subconscious-reliant, judgment – get up close, see how the light bounces off the work, the texture of paint on canvas – is simply inaccessible from your browser. The most arresting and emotive of brushstrokes (I recall my encounter at the Tate Britain with the Romantic J.M.W Turner's paintings of ships at sea) now look muddy and haphazard in their high-resolution snapshots, while some of my favourite works from the gallery above Kraków's Sukiennice are downright disappointing. Leon Wyczółkowski's *Plowing in Ukraine* is far less resplendent in digital form, its rich colours and soft light flattened. To say nothing of various other artistic forms that are rendered even more poorly on a two-dimensional screen. Fully appreciating sculpture does not just require being able to take in their material composition, or moving about to see them from multiple angles, but entails their presence and how they interact with gallery space itself. This phenomenological dimension is ill-suited to most virtual forms: even the most immersive of videogames have difficulty embodying their users in three-dimensional space. This applies beyond the constraints of

Google's own approach: whether it's the 'on-rails' feeling of the [Metropolitan Museum of Art's panoramic videos,](#) or the artifice of [Hasting Contemporary's 'robot tours'](#). In some sense these constraints surrounding virtual museum visits boil down the inherent limitations of hardware itself: it is difficult to feel *small*, to feel *awed*, when the object of admiration must appear within the confines of a laptop screen.


If you squint, you can just about see one of my favourite paintings past the statue.
Image source: [The National Museum in Krakow, Google Arts & Culture](#)

A museum is greater than the sum of its parts, as any curator will tell you. Galleries are not disparate collection of art pieces, but require careful engagement with the space and architecture of the physical museum, framing and physically situating exhibits, taking into account how they interact with lighting and shadow, or the physical movement and flow of visitors, to name just a few aspects of curation. Often, what precedes these technical arrangements are substantive decisions to group paintings into different exhibits, decisions not just limited to country/time period/individual artist/theme. Further thought goes into how to contextualise and explain artwork: too much information contributes to a sense of being overwhelmed, too little information may lead to a sense of haphazardness. Virtual galleries often rupture these traditional curatorial approaches, particularly underlying assumptions surrounding the relationship between museum and visitor. The physical museum inevitably structures and guides the viewer's experience. Whether through multicoloured floor plans distinguishing between different exhibitions, directional arrows that take the visitor on a chronological journey through a country's art history, or

guided tours centering on the docent, the aesthetic and intellectual authority of the hour, there is an implicitly pedagogical and experiential slant to museum visits.

On the other hand, virtual museums are now experienced in cyberspace, where user freedom is paramount. Webpages are easily opened and closed, hyperlinks encourage a proliferation of information and jumping between different exhibits, and there is no need to undertake the given route prescribed or suggested by museums. Still on the Google Arts and Culture page on *Man from Naples,* I scrolled down and noticed several automatically-generated recommendations for other art a visitor to the page might enjoy. Between *Vesuvius* ('uses same medium'), *Portrait* ('by same artist'), and the cover art to *Teen Titans No. 45* ('Created around the same time'), I opted for the former after careful consideration of the various thumbnails. Immediately I am presented a colourful representation of the volcano, its comic-book palette bordering on the garish. It is an Andy Warhol work dating from 1985, and I am whisked into the gallery of another participant of Google's art repository, the Museo e Real Bosco di Capodimonte in Naples, Italy. Whatever shaky spell and aura the (virtual) Guggenheim Bilbao might have cast over me, with all its imperfections, is now broken, and for the rest of the afternoon, from my bedroom in Singapore, I asynchronously navigate galleries in Italy, Spain, and later, New York, Paris and Hong Kong (it is only with the faintest of discipline that I refrain from littering my browser with more tabs). I can't help but wonder – am *I* now the curator? Thwarting this feeling of freedom is, of course, the recognition that my search results for 'virtual museum', 'panorama art tour', or 'online art [artist name]' are continually being updated, revised, and tailored along the fast-learning algorithms of my search engine.
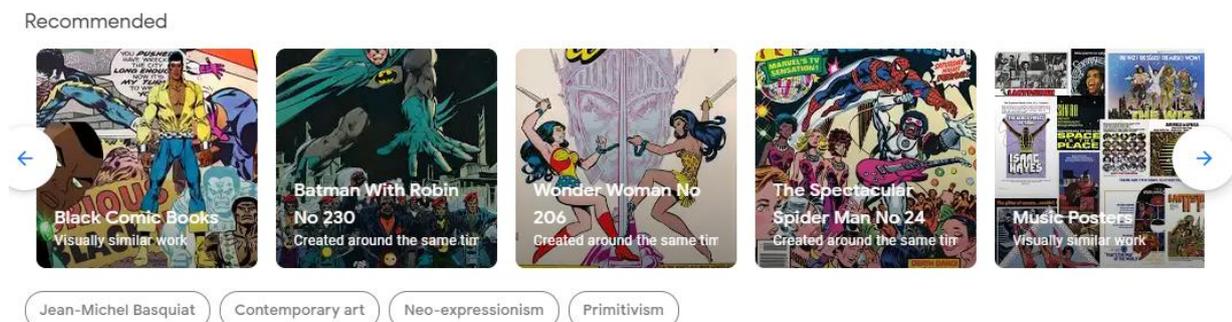
More suggestions for the curious museum-goer.

Image Source: Man from Naples, Google Arts & Culture page

The status of art in a virtual space is an interesting one, lying somewhere between close reproduction, digital facsimile, and object of reproduction. So long as virtual museums seek to be digital versions of their physical selves, the yardstick for viewing virtual art will always be against the in-person experience of actually being in the gallery. This dynamic is apparent with how virtual museums seem to have proliferated in response to the pandemic, both compromise and experiment with democratising access to art. The draw of a museum partly lies the uniqueness of its contents. If coffeetable art books or postcards can scarcely be said to contain art, then *true,* authentic art must be what lies in museums and galleries, the product of individual artists' labour, historical and social relationships of studio systems and patronage, before being acquired and displayed in specific institutional contexts. To experience the work itself is akin to a historical communion, the journey to this museum tantamount to a spiritual and aesthetic pilgrimage. Yet, more than eight decades ago, cultural critic Walter Benjamin observed that "[e]ven the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element: its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be." (2008) Museums have always been dogged by questions of 'authenticity', especially when issues of physical deterioration have made the display of restored or reproduced work, not the original, more prudent. The *aura* of reproduced work, encompassing its "authenticity", "historical testimony", and "ritual value", is jeopardized. Nonetheless, no one is mistaking a .jpeg file hosted on the Tate Gallery's website for the real deal. They are consciously digital artefacts, their imperfections consciously digital art*i*facts too. Neither does the virtual museum completely de-historicize its contents, bearing in mind Benjamin's critique of artistic reproduction. Although its relationship with the virtual visitor may be less programmatic and purposive, online catalogues and descriptions often have the effect of situating their work within a wider network of art movements, artists' biographies, or even museums' relationships. Each work of art in a virtual museum becomes largely removed from their individual containers and ordered intent within the physical museum, and consciously situated in a more transnational collective of art online (White, 1997). It is a process as liberating as it is anarchic. After all, to historicize art is to understand that their inclusion in particular museum collections were contingent outcomes of past actions and processes, ranging from specific donor relationships, public policy decisions surrounding artist commissions, or even the appropriation or looting of other cultures' art heritage following (neo)colonial practices. If so, the lives – or more accurately, the double-lives,

should virtual museums continue to co-exist with their physical selves after the latter reopen – of virtual art reflect the evolving relationship between societies and technology.

Finally, virtual museums also alter the popular significance of art, reminding us of the rich social and communicative potentials that art can inspire. The earlier mention of Andy Warhol may bring to mind critiques of the commodification and popular reproduction of art too. The eager, even aggressive use of social media from museums and museum-goers alike have saturated digital feeds – particularly if one has been profiled by these sites as more receptive to arts-related content – with images of art, and art-inspired images. Nonetheless, the fact that most museums have opened their collections for free averts the worst of this critique of commodification. Rather, just like other institutions that have worked with pandemic-imposed constraints on their activities, museums have found new and innovative ways to use their collections. The Getty Museum challenge calls on internet users to recreate works of art, with the scope of potential parody and bricolage not constrained to the Getty's own collection. Everyday household objects, creative editing, and human bodies are mobilized towards the recreation of iconic and less-iconic pieces from all-around the world. Oxford's own [Ashmolean Museum](#) has also begun to pluck items from their collection out of their intended exhibition contexts, instead highlighting a new piece of art or artefact as the source of potential artistic, literary, and personal reflection or inspiration. Amidst the pandemic, the accessibility of art has also been closely tied to social and therapeutic purposes: consider the various articles in mainstream newspapers and websites encouraging readers to pay a visit to virtual museums and galleries, alongside attending virtual concerts, or videocalling friends and family. Consider yesterday's Guardian article, recommending a virtual visit to the Rijksmuseum and Van Gogh museum as one way to experience the best of Amsterdam's tourist sights from the safety of home. Virtual galleries open up new avenues of understanding something that has always contained a multiplicity of meanings, from a dedicated institutional context for aesthetic inquiry and appreciation, to a means of social interaction, or one facet of globalized tourism.

The choice between visiting virtual museum and no museum at all is clear. What the surging popularity, if not necessity, of these virtual avenues of experiencing art has done is to expand and intensify an existing conversation surrounding the nature of art and museum-going itself. My focus on the virtual equivalents of existing museums, in some sense, reflects a 'tyranny of the physical' from my past travel experiences, one that many dedicated virtual galleries and museums have sought to overturn. While writing this essay I glimpse new possibilities surrounding virtual galleries – a new Instagram account documenting the the use of tape as 'pandemic architecture', a somewhat-serious suggestion to a friend to browse art online for their virtual date, a course-related suggestion to visit an exhibit on environmental history hosted by the Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society rather than a museum closed for the foreseeable future. Now a message pops up on my phone, notifying that me players of the popular Animal Crossing videogame can now take advantage of the Getty museum's open-source software allowing them to import more than 70,000 different types of artwork to decorate player 'homes'. What's more it's from a Singaporean arts and museums-related channel on the messaging app Telegram, reminding me that the shift in my relationship with art began long before the current pandemic. Still, I'll miss my museums. I'll miss the sense of wonder from laying my eyes on a beautiful work for the first time, the excited discussion with a companion,

annoying my family by stopping to read every panel, the ache of your feet by the time you reach the third floor, even the little trinkets in the gift shop. It's not just museums that have gone virtual, of course – many parts of our lives continue to move online for the coming months. There's something inherently humanistic about museums in any form, and it's the physicality and materiality of life which remains lamentably elusive.

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