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## **INVADING OTHERS' SPACES: HOW ROMANIAN PUBLIC MUSEUMS REINVENTED THEMSELVES THROUGH IMPROVISATION DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC**

**Abstract.** In public museums, there is a plethora of factors that influence the meaning-making process. In times of great uncertainty, such as the COVID-19 pandemic or the additional blockers brought about by the energy crisis, cultural institutions could not remain unruffled. This research seeks to understand how some museums from Brașov and Bucharest, Romania, adapted to the closure of their physical spaces, a structural crisis that set them against their implicit social role. This article focuses on decoding the discourses that became salient throughout museum workers and on the analysis of the dynamic between the online and offline spheres. Considering all these structural and functional adjustments, this approach will integrate data collected from curators, ethnographers, researchers, and museum managers into previous valuable research on the COVID-19 context.

**Keywords:** improvisation, change, museums, COVID-19 pandemic, jamming experience

### **1. Introduction**

Closing a museum stands for a fundamental crisis for the institution, as it goes against its inner scope. Public museums didn't remain unruffled by the COVID-19 pandemic, since many of them were forced to close their doors for the first time in their history (Museum Innovation Barometer 2021). In March 2020 in Romania, all museums were closed, as part of the first batch of measures taken, aimed at limiting the spread of the virus.

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Despite the obvious annulment of the purpose museums have, this decision has opened a multitude of opportunities for organisational improvisation to manifest itself. Improvisation is traditionally viewed as something that happens when routines fail and is represented as a localized practice, mostly responding to a specific issue of threat (Simpson et al. 2023). Although the sphere of improvisation has been treated as an exception, it goes further beyond that.

Against such backdrop, my current research aims to understand how museums from Bucharest and Braşov dealt with this challenge and the extent to which improvisation played a role in overcoming the structural crisis that the SARS-CoV-2 virus triggered. One analysis direction follows the modalities in which improvisation was conceptualised and implemented by curators and managers from public museums. In this sense, I refer to Braşov and Bucharest as cultural centres, seeking to uncover the depths of this enduring effect on the organisational level. The scope is exploratory, aiming to discover different extemporisation strategies put in place by ethnographers, curators, scientific researchers, and people from the cultural institutions' management.

This incipient research does not aim to be representative for museums in Bucharest and Braşov. It rather draws valuable conclusions regarding the diversity of approaches museums resorted to at a time when there was a lack of strategic approaches from public authorities, which took contradictory measures to stop the spread of COVID-19. Moreover, it could help understand how improvisation reshapes the museums personnel actions and conduct, the formal and informal power networks within, and how these cultural institutions functioned as organisational assemblages during the global health crisis.

## **2. Literature review**

Introduction of technology in museums was accelerated in the 1990s due to the popularization of the Internet. However, in those days, digital technology was perceived as an extension of the physical museum. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the usage of digital media became a coercion rather than a choice made by cultural institutions (Kwang-Suk

2022). The drive to go online and reach as wide audiences as possible using digital media increased significantly during the governmental lockdowns (Catalani & Hughes 2020; Kist 2020; Agostino et al. 2020; Tully 2020; Meng et al. 2023; Larkin et al. 2023).

Digital technologies and the online environment cannot be delimited from museum practices (Kimura 2022; Burke et al. 2020). However, these practices are not only expanded, but also limited through the migration of artefacts and collections to the digital environment. These content mobility processes do not “augment permanence or guarantee immunity from forgetting, but rather remind us that the material was never the thing that sustained us” (Balfour 2020: 304).

Moreover, in the context of the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic, there are in-depth discussions on the sustainability of cultural content migration to the online. These leads to the question if the number of visitors who come 'onsite' in museums will continue to decrease in the future (Tranta et al. 2021).

Additionally, the pandemic came with a new perspective regarding investing in machine learning and AI, to automate some processes or to facilitate the implementation of intelligent systems in order to reduce the operational costs of museums (Giannini & Bowen 2022).

The global pandemic has provided an opportunity for understanding organisational improvisation, a theoretical framework influenced by Miguel Pina e Cunha, Joao Vieira da Cunha, and Ken Kamochets' definition from 1999. They defined it as “conception of action as it unfolds, by an organization and/or its members, drawing on available material, cognitive, affective, and social resources” (Cuhna et al. 1999: 302). Organisational improvisation is intentional and unplanned, developed by acting on the problem, and stemming from available material, cognitive, affective, and social resources (idem).

To formulate a clear understanding of the organisational improvisation that I explore in this paper, I will also refer to the jamming experience, as proposed by Eric Eisenberg (1990). Jamming experience is the manifestation of an emotionally shared sphere that people within organisations could encounter from the full-blown crises to the mundane daily tasks. To facilitate it, the organisational leader should create a framework within which employees can find meaningful interactions (Bennis & Nanus 1985), risk-taken is valued, and work groups are sufficiently autonomous for innovative ideas to blossom (Eisenberg 1990).

While it might seem tempting to treat the experience of improvisation in these cultural institutions as a one-off event caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, I will understand the change as a process that happens through a multitude of mundane interactions, practices, activities, and conversations constituting the organisational living worlds of the museum, rather than a singular endeavour (Peacock 2013).

An ethnographic approach is well-suited for the exploration of museums and for decoding how organisation improvisation was utilised by museums' staff to navigate the uncertain waters of activity brought to the surface by, among other things, the global medical emergency that began early 2020.

### 3. Methodology and limitations

To investigate organisational improvisation during the COVID-19 pandemic, I used a classical research methodology focusing on in-depth semi-structured interviews (Fontana & Frey 1994) with curators, managers, and other museum workers. I will follow the methodological stance of the interviewer as a 'traveller', a researcher who gathers information and constructs it in interactions with others (Kvale 2007).

The nature of this research tool afforded the exploratory aspect of this paper, and the less structured approach helped in following a variety of themes during discussions. I collected data from 14 in-depth interviews with museum staff from Braşov and Bucharest<sup>2</sup> in the period between January 2023 and April 2024<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> There were 8 informants with whom I spoke, but I use quotes only from interviews conducted with 6 of them. I reached them using the snowball technique or after writing them an email using the public address I found on the internet. The list of informants is the following: informant 1 – director of a memorial house in Braşov; informant 2 – employee working in the scientific committee of a museum in Bucharest; informant 3 – museum ethnographer in Bucharest; informant 4 – cultural researcher at a museum in Braşov; informant 5 – museum curator in Bucharest; informant 6 – director of a museum in Braşov.

<sup>3</sup> I chose Braşov due to my personal connections with the city that facilitated reaching out to the informants, and Bucharest to see if there is a difference regarding the approach that was used to sketch improvisation between a "provincial" city and the capital.

In addition, I used content analysis to investigate the work-related communication of museum work groups (where I had access to it) and the work of museums during the pandemic period. Thus, I could build an overview of the improvisation sphere and its manifestations.

Even though there are slight differences between the approaches that museums followed in dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic, the data collected converges in most of the analysed topics. To be representative for Braşov and Bucharest museums, further research is needed, seeking to reach all cultural institutions of this kind in the two cities.

The limitations of the current paper are connected to a lack of analysis of digital interactions and digital exhibits. To build a comprehensive image of the extent to which the COVID-19 pandemic impacted the museums from the researched group, a comprehensive observation would be necessary.

Furthermore, there is an obvious deontological limitation connected to the informants' group. Analysing a group of highly educated professionals about the work conditions during a specific period accepts that some answers bear a high degree of generality. This was assumed from the beginning of the current research, and it could be overcome further through similar research that could focus on the group of museums' visitors.

## 5. Data analysis

The first domain of improvisation conceptualised by museums' staff referred to the formulation of strategic objectives to pursue in the coming period. This process has been achieved alongside a redefinition of informal power relations within the museum or has crystallized a model of obedience to the manager's formal authority.

It may take the leader some iterations of going through uncertainty before an effective paradox strategy can be embraced. This happens even when paradoxical thinking might be in a leader's nature (Le & Pradies 2023).

"In Brasov, in a moment of administrative panic, it was decided that all staff would go on technical unemployment. It was an unprecedented situation in the Romanian institutional history and in the local public administration [...] technical unemployment is

applied in companies that are in insolvency, and the last two employees of the institution are the financial officer and the manager, because they still must sign documents. But we were all put into this unemployment, it was a unique situation, I was at home and officially the institution no longer existed [...]. I decided on my own behalf to come every day to the two working points of the museum with one purpose, to make sure that nothing dramatic happened from one day to the next with the museum's patrimony",<sup>4</sup> said informant 1.

Confronted with an unprecedented situation and with a serious lack of capacity to anticipate the following decisions of local authorities with respect to the museums' activities, the development of a priority agenda for museums has, in some cases, fallen to the managers of cultural institutions.

"We clearly had an agenda coming from our manager at the beginning, we had a few points in our heads, but if someone came up with a good idea, we tried to implement it somehow. We all improvised, clearly, you didn't really have the necessary data on how to operate in a situation like this, everyone invented different means. Our museum director is very well grounded in the way cultural management works, he settled things down, reassured us and gave us a direction, otherwise there was a sense of panic. He was very well anchored; he gave us a bit of a grip and it was good", revealed informant 2.

On the one hand, the lack of time needed to draw up on a strategic plan following extensive consultation with all museum staff has in some cases imposed administrative governance by decree. This is a pattern examined extensively in organisational culture studies and it is a common type of response to the unknown to which organisations resort in extreme circumstances.

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<sup>4</sup> All quotes from this research are taken from discussions with informants that have happened in Romanian and they are translated by the author of this paper.

On the other hand, this type of organisational improvisation was not the only way in which the museums I examined adapted at the time of the outbreak of the pandemic in Romania; there are cultural institutions in which curators, ethnographers, and museologists have reconstructed power structures informally.

"Darlings, I know some of us have been wondering these days: how to reorganize our work in the context of the pandemic. We certainly all have a lot of unfinished work to complete during this period. However, I think that is not enough. We probably all feel that the world is profoundly reconfiguring and that museums are among those that need to act fast, smart, and expected to innovate. Once we have overcome the crisis [...] the world will be different [...] museums (including us) are kind of having to rethink from the ground up what and how they produce as cultural institutions. Most likely, from the board/management we won't get any strategy/direction on this. So, we are left to reorganise ourselves", wrote informant 3 in a work group.

There are different tendencies in performing organisational improvisation through decision making in museums. Though, there is a sphere where we observe a unitary exemplification. The COVID-19 pandemic has outlined a new sphere of museum activity that these public cultural institutions are currently undertaking. Whether it is an accentuation of a pattern started in the past or there is an awareness triggered by the global medical emergency, archiving is a priority in all the cultural institutions analysed.

"It seems to me that archiving is more and more visible, it became more and more important with the pandemic, but it started before, I see the need for archiving much more at the Art Museum among artists, the documentation of their work is much more important, it shows the transformations that contemporary art in Romania is going through", told me informant 4.

"Archiving is becoming an increasingly critical activity. We were able to create a new exhibition using modules from past ones and realised that through archiving we can take a reflective look at the

museum's work occasionally. This was shaped by the pandemic”, clearly stated informant 3.

Another way to investigate organisational improvisation is closely related to the test of time regarding the structure outlined at that moment. A multitude of solutions were devised to ensure the continuation of museum activity, but these were short-lived. The implementation of heritage digitisation projects, the recording of the openings and their publication in the digital environment, and the construction of purely digital artifacts to enter the institutional heritage, were representations of a temporary improvised structure that was almost totally abandoned later.

“We had improvised situations that worked on that structure, and when the situation ended, they didn't work either. It was a change that was imposed at the time because we couldn't cope with it any other way and it only worked briefly afterwards”, told me informant 2.

Moving further, I will draw on specific ways in which the experience of improvisation manifested in the museum's own activity, bringing to the surface a continuous process of change, cobbled together by the discourses that have become most salient in the sphere of activity for public cultural institutions in Braşov and Bucharest.

The COVID-19 pandemic was a trigger for accentuating digitalisation practices in cultural institutions or, rather, the right time to justify the urgency of achieving some long overdue heritage digitalisation objectives. In Romania, a project called Eculture – Romanian Digital Library started in the autumn of 2019 and ended in April 2021. Museums that were part of this process (only a few institutions were selected in the first phase) used this timespan to work in-depth on this initiative. Although the physical space of the museum was closed, the staff found a curatorial project to work on and to keep sustaining the museum's narrative.

The pandemic had in some cases significant impact and created new meaning inside public museums, in the context of technologization. Although museums worldwide use a plethora of technological tools to diversify the classical visitors' experience, in the context of analysed museums, the pandemic triggered most of these processes.



"Last year we changed the place of the permanent exhibition to the one used for temporary exhibitions. We had positive feedback from visitors. We have mixed content, one that is classic and consists of art, furniture, and decorative objects, but we have technological insertions, interactive tables, a virtual assistant built with artificial intelligence, we have this gamified tour, and the result of another project, you can visit the same physical space in an alternative way. This means that we have some places in the museum where QR codes exist, and you can access virtual guides, explained me one manager", told me informant 1.

The digitalised infrastructure that most cultural institutions from Romania use is minimal, and there are still many museums for which digitalisation of the tangible heritage has not started. The reasons for this institutional backwardness are complex, and separate research should further investigate them.

"We digitalised 20,000 items, and when we found something that could have been more interesting for the public, we posted it on Facebook. We accentuated online communication. Before the pandemic, we had one post every 2-3 days, but this changed significantly", emphasized informant 1.

The health crisis was a significant blocker for museum staff due to their profession's nature, which involves research activities on numerous levels. Ending up living in a period when the National Archives are entirely closed is not a foreseeable event in a researcher's career, but for some of these people, it facilitated an in-depth analysis of museums' documents.

The COVID-19 pandemic represented a time of adaptation, a grace period during which any initiative could be tried if it filled the activity gap generated by the physical closure of museums. The struggle was to find solutions to continue the curatorial work or implement projects with a relevant social value.

"For the research part, it was difficult, because, due to the museum's theme, you used to work at the National Archives, but they were

closed. We tried to catch up with the documents we collected so far, to analyse them, this part was attempted. There were two months of state of emergency, and afterwards, we started having access to archives again, but with stringent conditions”, revealed informant 3.

For others, the state of emergency was beneficial in terms of scientific work that was done analysing cultural institutions' tangible heritage. The lack of financial and temporal resources commonly places these kinds of activities outside the foreground. Historically, the cultural institutions that could be named 'national museums' benefit from an impressive tangible heritage. Its careful classification is an arduous task, which is never finished due to a mixture of resource scarcity and the fact that this activity does not immediately contribute to fulfilling the museums' social role, as most employees admit.

“It is almost impossible to know all your artefacts from the deposit, there are almost 100,000 objects, the registries are kind of sketchy, and we need to do extensive research to discover our heritage”, revealed informant 5.

Even though institutions were not necessarily part of concrete digitalisation projects, they tried to generate ad-hoc initiatives to continue having contact with their public. This suggests that the boundaries between offline and online spheres were easily dismantled to such a large extent that the world could be understood by looking at entities which possess informational corporeality and are mutually connected (Floridi 2014).

“It was a difficult period with a lot of uncertainty, and we tried a real quick digitalisation of the patrimony to keep the contact with the visitors outside the museum's space itself. The management emphasised Facebook, and they created a special virtual collections section on the website in which they not only presented the objects but included them in a concept”, explained informant 3.

Creating digital content that supports the museological discourse and is part of a defined concept is not accessible to untrained museum staff.

Moreover, in times of great financial uncertainty, local and national authorities use an economic gaze towards costs, which leaves no opportunity to attract specialists with vast experience in implementing digital tools for cultural institutions.

The perceived urge to create a narrative in the online sphere generated new processes of searching for ways to combine the offline and the online environments. Going to the museum used to be the only way to interact with the museological discourse, but the pandemic created an environment in which other opportunities arose.

Vernissages, exhibitions, book releases, and roundtables with curators or associated museum staff were broadcast live on social media or designated platforms. Audiences could interact with tangible heritage or learn about intangible heritage from the comfort of their home or while commuting. The technological capabilities open a new range of possibilities for museums to generate a constant presence outside their physical spaces.

This annulment of borders between spaces facilitated by the intertwining of online and offline spheres is an improvised emergency solution found by cultural institutions during the pandemic. Their commitment to continue integrating these changes in the running of day-to-day operations is a modification of the extent to which museums want to influence and regulate people's behaviours.

One form of extending the museum's space outside its walls was finding new physical places that were subordinated to the museum's logic. Since the indoor spaces were closed or avoided by people, the outdoor was used to continue the educational scope of the cultural institution.

*"We externalised a few workshops. If we were not able to organize them in the museum anymore, and we were able to do this outdoors, we had a workshop for painting on furniture or creating accessories for traditional costumes at craftsmen's houses. Where we were able to have 10-12 participants we moved further, because this type of activity requires a person to come multiple times. If you have 10-12 who came eight times, you can say that you had 100 participants, even though one came seven times, this doesn't matter anymore. The pandemic offered us reasons to exit the buildings and to see if we could do things outside. We invaded others' spaces", explained informant 6.*

This "invasion of others' spaces" represents an accurate depiction of the mainstream discourse through Romanian cultural institutions, in the context of a considerable conservative approach towards the materiality of museums and clear borders between museums' walls and other spaces.

The impact that the COVID-19 pandemic had on the development of museum's discourse should concern museologists and researchers who analyse these institutions, and it will probably represent an important topic in the future of anthropology.

"We are surely posting today on social media constantly. We still have access to exhibitions, and they could be beneficial for students, or anyone interested in these topics. We built a more human approach that is more focused on interaction because this is something that we have missed during the pandemic", in the words of informant 2 at the end of our interview.

## 6. Conclusions

To conclude, organisational improvisation in public museums from Braşov and Bucharest was conceptualised as a manner to tackle specific threats bounded by time and space and a way to experiment with a new suite of activities that was not a priority on the museum's work agenda before the pandemic.

On the one hand, the archiving of the museum's current activity, the desire to keep its digital trace, and the awareness of the digital gap between Romanian museums and similar institutions in other European countries are the points on which the organisational resilience of the museums in Braşov and Bucharest will be soon built, and this is influenced by the COVID-19 pandemic.

On the other hand, museums found alternative spaces outside their ordinary buildings and applied museological discourses to them. The pandemic meant a great challenge for public museums in Bucharest and Braşov regarding all types of museum workers and acted as a trigger for generating digitalisation projects either at the heritage level or by introducing new types of technologies to create a novel visitor

experience. Generating content on Facebook and moving the museum's narrative in the online environment was probably the first action implemented by all analysed museums and it still represents a constant activity of the staff.

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