

The 'Pandemic Academy of Visual Arts': A Museum online experience in the COVID-19 era

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➤ ABSTRACT

The development of new technologies, new media and social networking in combination with the vast social changes and challenges are topics of intensive discussion and relevant practices within museums. Constructing museum's digital identity is considered a very important aspect for the twenty-first century museum and for its globally connected digitally literate visitors. The COVID-19 pandemic outbreak led to an imperative shift from the physical to the digital museum experience through online visits, virtual tours, online exhibitions and other digital activities. The Internet appeared as the only way for museums to reach and expand their audiences during the COVID-19 crisis. Similarly, the higher education sector also had to adapt to the COVID-19 circumstances by using distance education. The common challenges in the museums and the Higher Education sector during the pandemic set the ground for collaboration in the case of Western Macedonia, an outermost region in Northern Greece. More precisely, the urgency to face and creatively respond to the COVID-19 crisis gave rise to the collaboration of the Department of Visual & Applied Arts (TEET) of the University of Western Macedonia (Greece) with the Archaeological Museum of Florina (Western Macedonia, Greece). These two bodies co-organized the virtual exhibition *Visual Arts e-Pandemic: Towards a creative diffusion of the arts* in the frame of the *International Museum Day 2020: "Museums for Equality: Diversity and Inclusion"* organized by the International Council of Museums (ICOM). Fifty-five (55) art students participated in the exhibition. The exhibition aims to manifest the triumph of human creativity which fosters resilience even in hard times. It faces the COVID-19 era as a creative opportunity for collaboration, artistic expression and therapy, in order to overcome difficult moments and situations. It also confirms the ICOM's words '*Museums have no borders, they have a network*'.

Keywords: Museum, higher education, visual arts, COVID-19, partnerships



➤ INTRODUCTION

The development of new technologies, new media and social networking in combination with the vast social changes and challenges are topics of intensive discussion and relevant practices within museums. Museum's role in the contemporary society, museums' audiences and users as well as the concept of cultural engagement are continuously being transformed in the twenty-first century (Black, 2012). Distance communication and digital participation strategies are being developed for museums to reach their audiences and to enrich museum experience in a way that technology forms the museum and vice versa (Yiannoutsou, 2015)

Thus, even before the pandemic, constructing museum's digital identity has been considered a very important aspect for the twenty-first century museum and for its globally connected digital literate visitors (Mitchell, 2019: 226). The aforementioned changes and new possibilities demonstrate that *"the pull of place has lost its power as we create other ways to "meet" (Black, 2012: 3)*. This notion has a great impact in social life –including museums– and in the ways in which we communicate and interact.

However, the pandemic outbreak led to an imperative shift from the physical to the digital museum experience through online visits, virtual tours, online exhibitions and other digital activities. The Internet appeared as the only way for museums to reach and expand their audiences during the COVID-19 crisis. According to the report of the International Council of Museums (ICOM) nearly all museums around the world closed in April 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The museum lockdown was followed by a turn towards reinforcing the online digital presence of the museums (ICOM, 2020b).

Although digital exhibitions constitute a creative response to the museums' lockdown and show a high level of museums' readiness and reactivity, there are many challenges to be faced. First of all, museums need to have the resources and staff in order to develop digital activities and effective communication strategies to reach diverse audiences. Another challenge is to have or develop the skills to substantially attract and sustain interest of the online visitors. Given the inequalities in Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) investments reported in the museum sector, with only a few 'big museums' having a strong digital presence, these particular challenges seem untackable for smaller or peripheral museums. A third challenge is to address inequalities with regards to digital literacy and (stability of) internet access in their audiences. (UNESCO, 2020)

While museums face the above challenges, the higher education sector also has to adapt to the COVID-19 circumstances by using and upgrading distance education structures (Souliotou, Zoi & Santorineos, 2020). Furthermore, Universities develop their own agenda of online cultural and academic events. The shift from the physical to the digital communication and learning in education raises similar inequalities, as those of the museums, with respect to internet literacy and access (Marinoni, van't Land & Jensen, 2020).



▼ THE CASE OF THE ONLINE EXHIBITION *VISUAL ARTS E-PANDEMIC*

Collaboration framework, the concept and the aims of the online exhibition *Visual Arts e-Pandemic*

The common challenges in the museum and the Higher Education sector during the pandemic set the ground for collaboration in the case of the University of Western Macedonia, which is located in an outermost region in Northern Greece. More precisely, the urgency to face and creatively respond to the COVID-19 crisis gave rise to the collaboration between the Department of Visual & Applied Arts (TEET) of the University of Western Macedonia (Greece) with the Archaeological Museum of Florina, the city where the TEET is located. These two bodies co-organized the virtual exhibition *Visual Arts e-Pandemic: Towards a creative diffusion of the arts* (Visual Arts e-Pandemic, 2020) in the frame of the *International Museum Day 2020: "Museums for Equality: Diversity and Inclusion"* (ICOM – IMD, 2020).

The idea of presenting art on and via the **Internet** closely relates with Marshal McLuhan's famous saying '*The medium is the message*', transcribed in the contemporary (post-) internet condition. The online exhibition *Visual Arts e-Pandemic: Towards a creative diffusion of the arts* used the Internet as a medium for presenting and at the same time as a network (Souliotou, 2015a; Souliotou, 2015b) for diffusing the arts. Furthermore, the indented message of the exhibition was to face the pandemic with creativity and to transmit this creativity through the Internet. Spreading globally online, the message of the exhibition encourages creative expression and forms an e-pandemic, i.e. a counter-pandemic of artistic creativity for facing the COVID-19 challenges.

This was very important since COVID-19 pandemic did not permit **University art students** to show physically their artworks. Thus, this online exhibition turned out to be an alternative way for them to bring their new artworks to the fore and send their own message of resilience through creativity in the COVID-19 circumstances.

On the other hand, the **Museum** in the case of *Visual Arts e-Pandemic* exhibition goes online and reaches international audience. The Museum is set free from physical restrictions and COVID-19 measures and expands its network, collaborations, audience, visibility and outreach, as well as its very nature and form(s) of being through digital technology. Furthermore, the network effect of rendering individual creation and creativity a community benefit (Simon, 2010: 88) in the frame of a collective exhibition acts, in turn, as a multiplier for the benefit of its audience as an expanding global community.

In this framework the aims of the virtual exhibition were to:

- a. reinforce students' artistic expression in the COVID-19 period of isolation,
- b. encourage students' participation in the public sphere through expressing their opinions about the COVID-19 circumstances and psychological and social impact,



- c. promote interaction and communication among students and academic staff in the University as a community, and
- d. encourage and develop collaboration networks and partnerships.

The Exhibition Coordinators from the Department of Visual and Applied Arts were Yannis Ziogas (President and Associate Professor of the Department of Visual and Applied Arts) and Angeliki Avgitidou (Associate Professor). The Exhibition Curator and Adjunct academic staff of the Department was the writer Dr Anastasia Zoi Souliotou who also proposed the idea of this exhibition. The Exhibition Coordinator for the Archaeological Museum of Florina was Dr Elpiniki Naoum. The following sections describe issues with regards to the process, the design and the development of the online exhibition *Visual Arts e-Pandemic*.

The process of the online exhibition ‘Visual Arts e-Pandemic’

After the first preliminary actions with regards to administrative issues and communication between the TEET and the Archaeological Museum of Florina, the coordinators and academic staff of the TEET and the representative of the Archaeological Museum of Florina (see section 2.1) proceeded to the schedule of the online exhibition’s design and development. Decisions were taken during Zoom meetings and via e-mail correspondence between the partners for the title, the concept and the timeline of the exhibition, the call for participation as well as issues of infrastructure for the development of the platform of the exhibition, the date of the exhibition inauguration, etc. It is worthwhile to mention that the online exhibition *Visual Arts e-Pandemic* was included in the ICOM Hellenic National Committee website, as well as in the ICOM’s International Museum Day interactive map (see section 2.4., Figure 10).

The call for participation in the online exhibition was addressed to the students of the Department of Visual and Applied Arts. The theme of the exhibition related with the art students’ creativity as well as with the COVID-19 pandemic situation. Art students were free to choose any kind of media and techniques: drawing, painting, digital media, mixed media techniques, etc. It was clear that *Visual Arts e-Pandemic: Towards a creative diffusion of the arts* online exhibition was, as already stated, a creative response to the COVID-19 challenging circumstances.

All students were informed about the concept of exhibition, the platform, the dissemination practices and they were reassured about issues of their intellectual property. Fifty-five (55) art students responded to the call by sending their artworks and participated in the exhibition.

The Virtual Opening of the exhibition took place in a virtual meeting room provided by the University’s Vice-Rector for Administrative Affairs Professor Anna Spyrtou.

The exhibition is publicly available, free of charge and showcases original art and posters made by 55 art students of the Department of Visual and Applied Arts who ‘built’ through this exhibition their own online Visual Arts Pandemic Academy. (Figure 1).

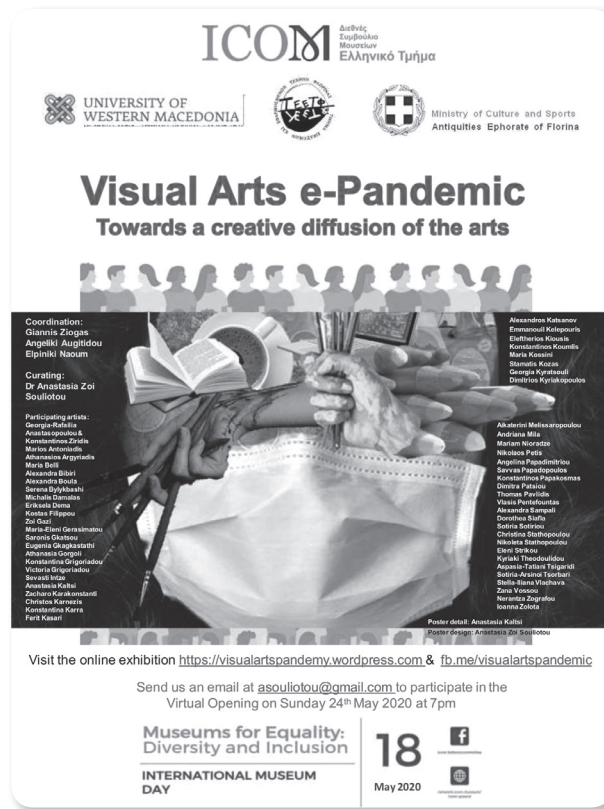


Figure 1. Poster of the online exhibition *Visual Arts e-Pandemic: Towards a creative diffusion of the arts*. Retrieved from <https://visualartspandemy.wordpress.com/about/>

Themes, techniques and messages of the artworks presented in the online 'Visual Arts e-Pandemic'

The artworks presented in the online exhibition are posters which were created with various media, materials and techniques including various forms of drawing, painting, collage, written text, mixed media techniques and digital media. All these visual media converge to the idea of visual culture enabled by digital technology (Mirzoeff, 2002: 6).

Throughout the history of art the poster has been associated with Futurism, Pop Art, Russian Avant-garde, New Realism, as well as the situationist, activist and feminist movements and public art. The poster is also a very popular medium of the late 19th, the 20th and the 21st century visual culture and has been widely used for communication, advertisement, campaign, propaganda, but also for encouragement in difficult situations. Looking back to poster's history one can figure out how the



poster also worked as a catalyst to bridge the gap between art and mass culture and to bring about modernist innovations regarding the reproduction and diffusion of the artwork (Iskin, 2014: 2).

The above prove that the poster is an all-embracing visual medium placed at the crossroad of art, design and popular culture. *Visual Arts e-Pandemic* online exhibition used the poster as a means to address a wide international audience with images and short written texts in the form of slogans. In this way the message of each poster is clear and direct which, in turn, renders the exhibition and its concept comprehensible in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

More analytically, by taking into account the condition of the global pandemic and based on the art students' artworks, the content of the exhibition was shaped in three main axes: a. the **School of Fine Arts of the University of Western Macedonia** as a community, b. the town of **Florina**, and c. the broader challenging **COVID-19 circumstances**.

These three axes were developed as follows:

- a. The **School of Fine Arts of the University of Western Macedonia** as a community. Many posters in the exhibition show artists' studios, images from artistic workshops and photos from the process of art making at the Department of Visual and Applied Arts in Florina (see for example the Figure 2).

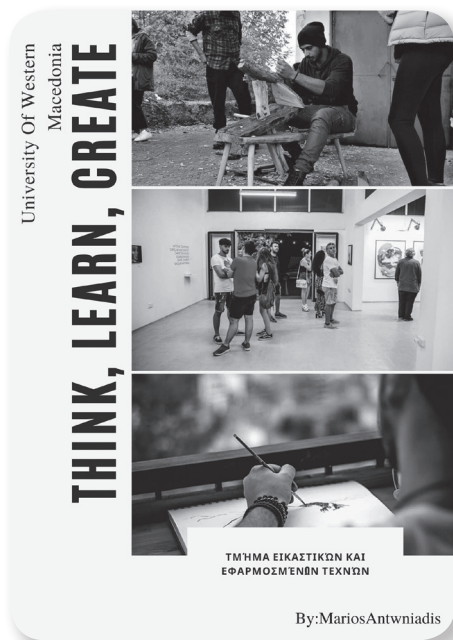


Figure 2. Marios Antoniadis, THINK, LEARN, CREATE, poster about the Department of Visual and Applied Arts in Florina, part of the online exhibition *Visual Arts e-Pandemic: Towards a creative diffusion of the arts*. Retrieved from <https://visualartspandemy.wordpress.com/>



- b. The city of **Florina**, as for example in *ART OF FLORINA* poster by Alexandros Katsanov (Figure 3). Although the online exhibition is placeless in that it doesn't happen in a physical place, it maintains its sense of place by referring to the town of Florina (axe b) and to the local Department of Visual and Applied Arts and art students' experiences (axe a), (see for example the Figure 3).

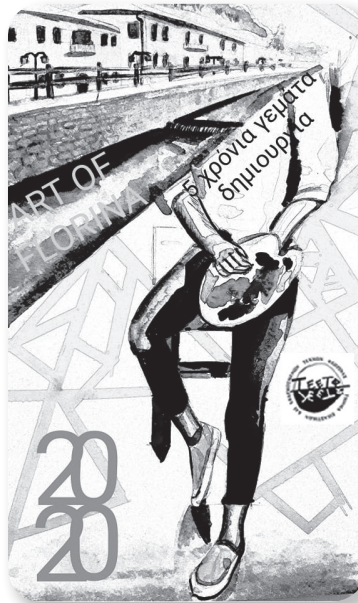


Figure 3. Alexandros Katsanov, *ART OF FLORINA*, poster for the online exhibition *Visual Arts e-Pandemic: Towards a creative diffusion of the arts*. Retrieved from <https://visualartspandemy.wordpress.com/>

- c. The broader challenging **COVID-19 circumstances** with regards to issues of changes in education and in everyday life. This category also includes the creative response to the COVID-19, as well as posters in relation to attitudinal and emotional aspects and other posters with messages about the health professionals. Some representative examples of these posters are the following:
- c.1. **Online distance education.** Many of the art students expressed their thoughts and feelings about how distance education affected their work, as for example in *ONLINE COURSES??* poster by Serena Bylykbashi (Figure 4) which exposes the difficulties of transforming a physical artistic workshop into an online course. There are also other posters about the online courses during the pandemic, as for example the *CONference VIDEO 19* by Georgia Kyratsouli, *A message from the Universe* by Eleni Strikou, the posters of Dimitris Kyriakopoulos and Christos Papakosmas and many others.



Figure 4. Serena Bylykbashi, *ONLINE COURSES??*, poster for the online exhibition *Visual Arts e-Pandemic: Towards a creative diffusion of the arts*. Retrieved from <https://visualartspandemy.wordpress.com/>



- c.2. **Everyday life in times of pandemic.** In *WE STAY AT HOME ...and take our line for a walk* (Figure 5) Nerantza Zografou gets inspired by the famous saying of Paul Klee “A line is a dot that went for a walk”. Her poster is a suggestion to draw our lines on the street, as well as through the art and the internet for our own walks during the pandemic.



Figure 5. Nerantza Zografou, *WE STAY AT HOME ...and take our line for a walk* [in Greek], poster for the online exhibition *Visual Arts e-Pandemic: Towards a creative diffusion of the arts*. Retrieved from <https://visualartspandemy.wordpress.com/>



- c.3. **The creative response to the COVID-19** pandemic clearly indicated in *We break our silence with our painting brushes* by Anastasia Kaltsi (Figure 6), *DRAW MORE CARE LESS* by Eleftherios Kiouisis, *STAY ART HOME* by Athanasios Argyriadis, *COVID-19: Face it with art* [in Greek] by Maria Kossini and many others.



Figure 6. Anastasia Kaltsi, *We break our silence with our painting brushes* [in Greek], poster for the online exhibition *Visual Arts e-Pandemic: Towards a creative diffusion of the arts*. Retrieved from <https://visualartspandemy.wordpress.com/>

- c.4. Personal thoughts, the **need to change habits** and to protect ourselves, as for example in the case of the poster *protect yourself* by Konstantina Karra. *WE STAY AT HOME BUT WE AVOID DIGITAL DECOMPOSITION* [in Greek] by Stamatis Kozas, *POSITIVE PERSISTENCE* by Ferit Kasari are also examples for the need to stay safe during the pandemic. In a similar concept, there are artworks for the **need for psychological support**, as in the posters of Dimitra Patsiou (see for example Figure 8) and in *IT'S OKAY TO ASK FOR HELP* by Georgia-Rafailia Anastasopoulou and Konstantinos Ziridis.



Figure 7 (left). Konstantina Karra, *protect yourself* and Figure 8 (right). Dimitra Patsiou, *WE WILL OVERCOME THIS TOGETHER!* [in Greek], posters for the online exhibition *Visual Arts e-Pandemic: Towards a creative diffusion of the arts*. Retrieved from <https://visualartspandemy.wordpress.com/>

c.5. Finally, **the effort of health professionals** during pandemic was not missing from art students' posters, as in *NOT ALL HEROES WEAR CAPES, SOMETIMES THEY WEAR MASKS AND GLOVES* by Eriksela Dema (Figure 9).

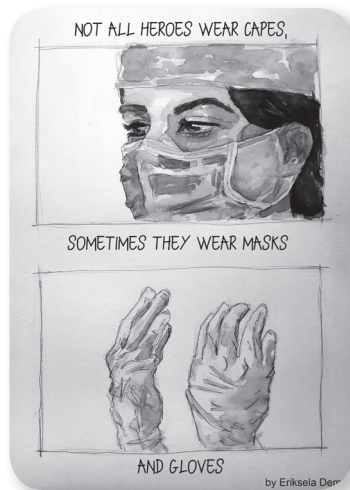


Figure 9. Eriksela Dema, *NOT ALL HEROES WEAR CAPES, SOMETIMES THEY WEAR MASKS AND GLOVES*, poster for the online exhibition *Visual Arts e-Pandemic: Towards a creative diffusion of the arts*. Retrieved from <https://visualartspandemy.wordpress.com/>



The broader impact of the online exhibition 'Visual Arts e-Pandemic'

The exhibition was diffused in Greek and in English through the ICOM (Figure 10) and the ICOM Hellenic National Committee, the University of Western Macedonia as well as through other organizations, local media and press in Western Macedonia.

The news of the exhibition were also diffused and updated in the social media and more than 6,500 users from more than 10 countries across 4 continents viewed the exhibition <https://visualartspandemy.wordpress.com> in May 2020.

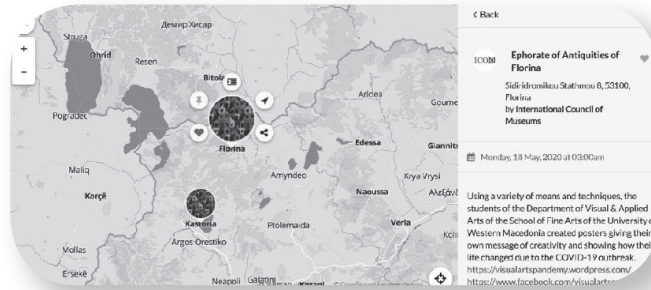


Figure 10. Screenshot from the online ICOM's International Museum Day interactive map with information about the virtual exhibition Visual Arts e-Pandemic: Towards a creative diffusion of the arts.

Retrieved from <http://imd.icom.museum/>

Furthermore, as shown in Figure 11, the exhibition was notably showcased in the global interactive map *Museum digital initiatives during the Coronavirus Pandemic* initiated by Dr Chiara Zuanni as part of a research project at the Institute Centre for Information Modeling - Austrian Centre for Digital Humanities, University of Graz.

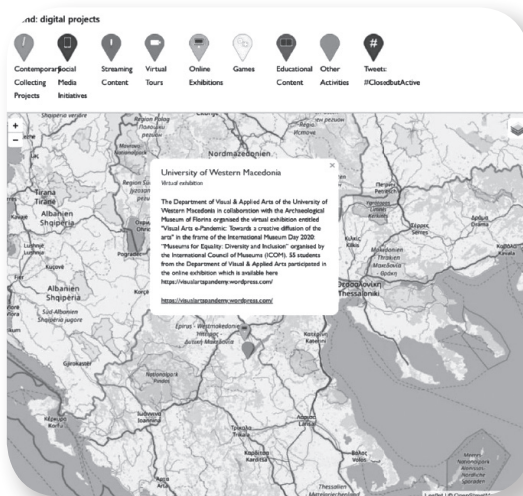


Figure 11. Screenshot from the online interactive world map Museum digital initiatives during the Coronavirus Pandemic with information about the virtual exhibition Visual Arts e-Pandemic: Towards a creative diffusion of the arts. Retrieved from <https://digitalmuseums.at/>



Discussion and Conclusions

The benefits of the realization of this exhibition for the two organizing institutions are noteworthy. As mentioned above, both bodies reside in Florina which is an outermost town and region in Northern Greece. The online realization and worldwide diffusion of *Visual Arts e-Pandemic* exhibition breaks down traditional inequalities – urban, geographical and social– among central, peripheral and outermost regions, increases museum outreach and renders art globally accessible to any person with an internet connection. The museum remains active by addressing diverse audiences in a glocal, i.e. both global and local, level. The collaboration of the museum with the University of Western Macedonia as well as with other local, national and international organizations (for example ICOM) has been reinforced.

The originality of the *Visual Arts e-Pandemic* exhibition lies on the fact that it presents up-to-date artworks. The suggested most common digital practice of the museums during the lockdown is to show online (parts of) their permanent collections (ICOM, 2020c). However, in the case of the *Visual Arts e-Pandemic* exhibition the Archaeological Museum of Florina does not show online the exhibits of its permanent collection, which contains artefacts from the ancient times. Instead, the Museum collaborates with the local Department of Visual and Applied Arts and presents worldwide original up-to-date students' artworks. In this way the Museum broadens the spectrum and the nature (physical and digital) of its events and exhibits.

Furthermore, through this virtual exhibition art and museum practices – educational and otherwise– appear to be subject to social changes as well as to context-specific initiatives (Kanari & Souliotou, 2020) adapted to the COVID-19 special circumstances.

The exhibition also reinforces social cohesion by inviting people to come together on the basis of the shared need to overcome difficulties in the COVID-19 challenging situation. Social cohesion against the COVID-19 pandemic is also implied through the creativity of artistic expression that characterises the community of students of Fine Arts in Florina. The fact that art making and online posters are suggested art therapy practices in times of pandemics (Potash, Kalmanowitz, Fung, Anand & Miller, 2020) indicates that *Visual Arts e-Pandemic* exhibition should also function as a means of psychosocial support.

The exhibition aims to manifest the triumph of human creativity which fosters resilience even in hard times. It faces the COVID-19 era as a creative opportunity for collaboration, artistic expression and therapy, in order to overcome difficult moments and situations and to continue creative practices and partnerships further and after the pandemic. It also confirms the ICOM's words '*Museums have no borders, they have a network*' (ICOM, 2020a).



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