

Stephen Friedman Gallery

Museums Association
Landmark exhibitions resurrected on extended reality platform
Samyama Kolhapuri
27 April 2021



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Past shows from 15 museums and galleries brought together on new virtual arts ecosystem.



Image: Virtual presentation of Yinka Shonibare's Wind Sculpture VII, part of Yorkshire Sculpture Park's digital revival of FABRIC-ATION (2013).

A new virtual arts ecosystem is bringing historic exhibitions, along with live workshops and events, to a digital audience. TheVov is a centralised virtual arts destination founded by Outset Contemporary Art Fund and the art-science collective, Visualogical.

The open-access destination is hosted on the extended reality (XR) platform Vortic Art, a mixed reality environment created specifically for the visual arts.

For its opening season, theVov will run a 10-week programme featuring 15 museums and galleries across the UK, including the Hayward Gallery, Yorkshire Sculpture Park, the Whitworth, Tate, Spike Island, South London Gallery and Turner Contemporary.

The initiative will see landmark exhibitions from the past brought back in digital form, including the late US artist Chris Burden's 14 Magnolia Doubles, which was shown at the South London Gallery 15 years ago; German artist Andreas Gursky's first UK retrospective at the Hayward Gallery in 2018; and British-Nigerian sculptor Yinka Shonibare's open air installation at Yorkshire Sculpture Park in 2013.

The platform operates on a micro-philanthropic model, inviting users to donate to a fund that will be distributed to the participating institutions at the end of the season.

Alongside the exhibitions, a programme of live, public events will run until 30 May, including lunchtime tours and panel discussions with institution directors taking place inside the virtual galleries themselves, as well as evening events with artists hosting interactive workshops, such as collage-making, spoken word, DJ sets, and a life-drawing class featuring a digital avatar.

The platform will launch three shows each Monday until 17 May.

Candida Gertler, co-founder of Outset Contemporary Art Fund, says the shock of Covid has pushed the art world to find creative solutions to keep conversations and opportunities going.

"The income that everybody was relying on all of a sudden was completely cut short," she says. "The art world lives off people seeing the works and that was banned. All the premises were shaken up."

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Image: Virtual presentation of Shannon Bono's Untitled (Mangbetu) and Sian Fan's Seeping Out Skybox, as part of Sarabande's digital exhibition Corpus Mentis, curated by Hikari Yokoyama and Trino Verkade (2021).

"The art world had to ask very serious questions and figure out how one can be efficient and embrace all the means that are at one's disposal."

Oliver Miro, the founder of Vortic, says the pandemic has accelerated the interest and use of XR. He predicts the use of hybrid models across the cultural sector.

"XR opens up a whole area of possibilities that do not exist in the real world," says Miro. "However it is not there to replace the physical but to complement it.

"Working closely with these institutions has given us the opportunity to really play around with creating bespoke virtual spaces and environments and to push the boundaries of what is possible in the digital realm," he adds.

At theVOV, Vortic has experimented with layering content with audio guides, and is one of the first platforms in the industry to use live-streaming synchronisation with 3D technology to enable curator or artist-led tours.

The platform hopes to allow audiences to gain a more intimate connection to the art and the people behind it. Gertler says having access to collector materials, such as exhibition essays, interviews with the artist and behind-the-scenes materials, as well as one-on-one time with the art, enables visitors to deepen their relationship with it and creates intrigue for new art enthusiasts.

"With theVOV we wanted to relay that art can mean something to everyone," she says. "With a little preparation, you can experience it first from a safe environment where you don't have to venture out, commit to a whole day, or even pay a steep entry price for special exhibitions."

Artists can use the digital realm as a way of distributing their art and creating dialogue. Developing exhibitions on the platform also makes things easier for curators, says Gertler.

"For the Andreas Gursky exhibition, the photographs are about four to five metres long and can weigh up to 300 pounds," she says. "Having four technicians lift it off the ground and put it on a gallery wall then seeing it doesn't work and needing to reconfigure it uses a lot of manpower/womenpower. If a curator could install it in the digital realm they could make decisions by the press of a button."

Gertler hopes artists can develop more sustainable sources of income. She says the pandemic has begun a serious conversation about how artists can transition from a "few sources giving lots of support to a huge amount of people saying this is important to me, and contributing to the arts in a democratic way".

"Each pound counts," says Gertler. "It's never been more apparent than now."

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Image: Virtual presentation of Chris Burden's 14 Magnolia Doubles as part of the South London Gallery's digital revival of his solo exhibition (2006).

Looking at the music and movie industry's crowdfunds and subscription models, she says: " We cannot focus on physical travellers, we need to focus on the number of smartphones in the world and how, by giving people access on there, the audience can be exponentially grown."

Vortic is working with a number of well-known artists who are using the technology to create animated sculptures and digital artworks. It will launch a new VR app later this year.