

What's next: The future of museums

As cultural and educational nexuses, they must explore creative ways of engaging with diverse audiences

by Tom Vasich, UCI | August 17, 2020



"I believe in the essential role of arts education, which is to enable people to experience the world through the eyes of artists," says Kim Kanatani, inaugural museum director of the UCI Institute and Museum of California Art. Behind her is Richard Diebenkorn's 1952 oil-on-canvas painting "Albuquerque #9." Photo: Ralph Palumbo

As with much of the economy, museums have been hit hard by the COVID-19 pandemic. The American Alliance of Museums estimates that those in the U.S. are losing \$33 million per day because of coronavirus-related closures, affecting some 725,000 jobs. But the cultural impact may be even more severe.

Museums are the cornerstones of our communities, hosting millions of visitors in person and virtually while providing meaningful and educational experiences for children, students and adults of all ages. They offer vital platforms for artists – society's risk-takers, innovators and pioneers – to be seen and heard. Through their collections, programming and facilities, great museums are vibrant community centers as well as must-see destinations.

But how do American museums bounce back? Many maintain a robust online presence, and Google Arts & Culture can take us inside myriad galleries around the world. But virtual visits cannot replace the visceral feeling of standing before an original work of art in an exciting physical space and sharing a collective experience with others.

Kim Kanatani is the inaugural museum director of the UCI Institute and Museum of California Art. Before coming to the university in the summer of 2019, she was deputy director for education at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York and, previously, at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles and the Los Angeles Municipal

IMCA's interim location on Von Karman Avenue is temporarily closed, bringing a halt to its exhibition schedule and programming. Here, Kanatani discusses what it will take for museums to return and how they will adapt to a post-COVID-19 world.

How can museums, in general, reopen safely?

Centers for Disease Control and public health experts provide guidelines outlining how museums can reopen safely, but it depends on their architecture and programming. We're taking every precaution to ensure the safety of visitors and staff with our reopening preparedness plan. Like many museums, we will temporarily limit our hours of operation and the number of visitors and staff in the galleries. Because IMCA is committed to interdisciplinary exchange, we're tapping UCI colleagues and the artistic community for ideas too.

What is the timeline for IMCA to resume its regular operations?

Since our temporary closure in mid-March, the IMCA team has been working in close collaboration with UCI colleagues and museum peers to develop a reopening plan and implement rigorous safety protocols based on CDC guidelines. The plan includes enabling social distancing, requiring face coverings, heightened sanitation and disinfection procedures, and other measures. We're closely monitoring the state's and UCI's recommendations and look forward to welcoming visitors back as soon as it's safe to do so. Please visit our website (<https://imca.uci.edu/>) for updates.

What are some of the creative ways museums are engaging with the public, despite having their galleries closed?

For decades, museums have been changing the perception that they're static repositories. Creating digital content responsive to their communities – supporting distance learning, research and art appreciation – has been an extraordinary effort by museums. Some are mining their archives, offering virtual cocktails and conversations with curators, and commissioning new digital works. We're exploring virtual studio visits with artists, outdoor events, pop-up exhibitions and installations, and livestreaming programs to ensure that our communities feel connected when we can't physically be together.

What are some of the creative ways IMCA is engaging with its audiences?

We're planning future exhibitions and building a network of peer institutions to enable broader research capabilities and access to California art. We're examining how to tell a diversity of stories in ways that are inclusive, informed and just. IMCA curators are presenting our collection on Instagram, and we launched an e-newsletter, Monthly Muse, showcasing the distinctive qualities of California art, design, architecture and craft. In addition to engaging with UCI faculty and students, we're also developing IMCA collection- and exhibition-based curriculum materials for grades K-12 and continue to deploy our resources to invite people into the experience.

How do you see museums' cultural and educational roles in their communities changing and adapting in a post-COVID-19 world?

I believe in the essential role of arts education, which is to enable people to experience the world through the eyes of artists. This is a singular opportunity to harness the zeitgeist and authentically address diversity, equity, justice and access – to make real change. Museums need to demonstrate their value with renewed vigor. IMCA is exploring new ways to connect with our multifaceted communities, including UCI students and their families; alumni; faculty, administrators and staff; scholars and researchers; art historians; curators; artists; art lovers; collectors; peer institutions; business travelers and tourists; and, of course, residents of Irvine, Orange County and beyond.

What do you think will be the long-term economic impact on museums? Will many scale back or close?

Certainly, some museums will struggle. The field may need to explore different economic models to adapt to the “new normal.” A recent survey released by Culture Track (<https://culturetrack.com/research/covidstudy/>) found that 61 percent of respondents were aware of financial strains on arts organizations in their area, but only 16 percent considered theirs a funding priority. That said, visitors, members, donors, supporters and funders remain generous because they acknowledge the vital impact that investing in museums has on local and regional constituencies. The arts sector is key to economic vibrancy and recovery. IMCA is exploring new paradigms through our strategic planning process. Our vision is, in part, to foster transformative experiences inspired by art and its global contexts. We do that by listening to and engaging with our communities authentically. Museums – and, similarly, schools and libraries – essentially support a resilient, just and equitable society. Because art is a powerful communicator (artists often offer different perspectives on the world) and museums are dynamic conveners, they must flourish – especially in times of crisis – to help provide context for our lives.

A significant role of museums is providing educational outreach. What changes in that area do you envision?

Museums need to move beyond “educational outreach,” which implies a unilateral delivery of teaching and content to audiences who may or may not want those services. Audience development should also be a multilateral dynamic. For museums to remain relevant, they need to engage in a process that, instead, demonstrates generosity and reciprocity through offerings and programs that are collaboratively developed from the inside out and the outside in. IMCA is committed to that process and will serve as a dynamic hub on campus and for the regional community for experiential learning through education initiatives developed with and for our audiences and presented on- and off-site and in the digital realm. In so doing, we will serve as a vital bridge that interconnects UCI with the region and beyond.

You’ll be overseeing the building of a new IMCA museum. How do you think the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic will influence how the facility is designed and utilized?

While my colleagues and I are discussing these issues, it’s premature to comment on the design of IMCA’s new facility. I can say that it will be an architecturally significant building elevating function over form. We’re following how the architecture and design community is responding to the pandemic and related social and civic issues. Generally, I predict more fluid integration of interior and exterior to bring in the landscape and offer a physical embodiment of transparency. Public gathering spaces are already being gridded to let us be together at a distance (like pop-up drive-in movies). We anticipate a continued emphasis on green and sustainable design and ongoing reimagining of the built environment by innovative architects, designers and artists working with others across disciplines.