

Digital Dash

Galleries are moving swiftly to connect with virtual audiences during the coronavirus pandemic. What's working? What's not?

by Portia Priegert

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Artist Sarah Nordean (right) chats with Viviane Mehr at the online opening of her exhibition at VivianeArt in Calgary.

I've been to a few gallery openings over the last week or two. No, wait! Don't start sharpening your pitchforks or shaming me on social media. The only living being within coughing distance was a spider plant. Heck, I didn't even leave my apartment.

Now that going viral is no longer a metaphor for success, artists and galleries are looking for ways to maintain social contact without physical proximity. Creativity will not be stifled. Workarounds will be found. Hence, virtual openings are now a thing.

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You can see the art, sort of, and take a gander at the curator or gallery owner, and perhaps even hear artists talking about their work. But schmoozing? Not so much. And imagine going to an opening without picking up any gossip – or booze. Okay, I'll own that last one – I didn't make it to the liquor store before I went into isolation.

But seriously, although virtual openings seem like a good idea given the options these days, in reality they feel rather flat. Apart from the novelty factor, they lack the sparkle, the excitement, the shared energy of the real thing. And the tangible in-person viewing experience that most visual art needs is sorely missing.

Many early forays into digital events – including talks, interviews, workshops, tours and more – are reminders of how tricky technology can be. It's also apparent that some galleries have a much better handle on it than others.

We're all stressed, of course, and riding DIY learning curves as steep as the coronavirus infection charts. So watching mostly untrained presenters winging it for all and sundry allows one to admire the courage it takes to jump head first into this new reality. We're all struggling to figure out how things will work now, and as American author Brené Brown reminds us, the ability to embrace vulnerability is a sign of emotional strength.



A new online platform is gathering virtual art experiences from public galleries across Canada.

Digital technology, of course, can inspire unbridled optimism of the sort found in Canadian author W.P. Kinsella's ball-park novel, *Shoeless Joe*: "If you build it they will come." Sure, we may think, we shoot videos of our cats so how hard could it be to host an online event?

Unless you're a digital nerd, even getting to your first online events can feel like hailing an Uber only to discover the driver is a deranged octopus intent on dropping you into the "access denied" shoals.

That happened to *Galleries West* when we tried from two separate locations and various devices to join an [Instagram tour](#) led by Sasha Suda, the director of the National Gallery of Canada.

Judging from comments on her feed, we were not alone. The tour, now accessible even without an Instagram account, has uneven audio. What I could hear was interesting but I quickly became frustrated and lost interest.

Audio problems – echoes, tinny sound and fading in and out – were common as *Galleries West* publisher Tom Tait and I checked out various events over the last few weeks. We also noticed plenty of production issues, like poor lighting and shaky camera work.

I found myself thinking about the many moving parts that must come together for even basic productions: research, scripts and effective presentation skills, including diction and body language that does not distract from what's being said.



Sasha Suda, director of the National Gallery of Canada, leads an Instagram tour.

ART THERAPY | The natural world

Stephen Legari, art therapist at the MMFA, leads a meditation activity: immerse yourself into a work of art to nourish your inner peace.

Step 1: Read the short text below.

Step 2: [Click here](#) and turn up the sound. Then, let your imagination take over.

The spring sun returns to nourish the living world around us, the buds appear on the trees, the birds return and each day the sun stays a little longer. While we all work hard indoors, we can let our imaginations travel to the places in nature that matter most to us.



Stephen Legari, the art therapist at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, leads a meditation activity online to nourish people during stressful times.

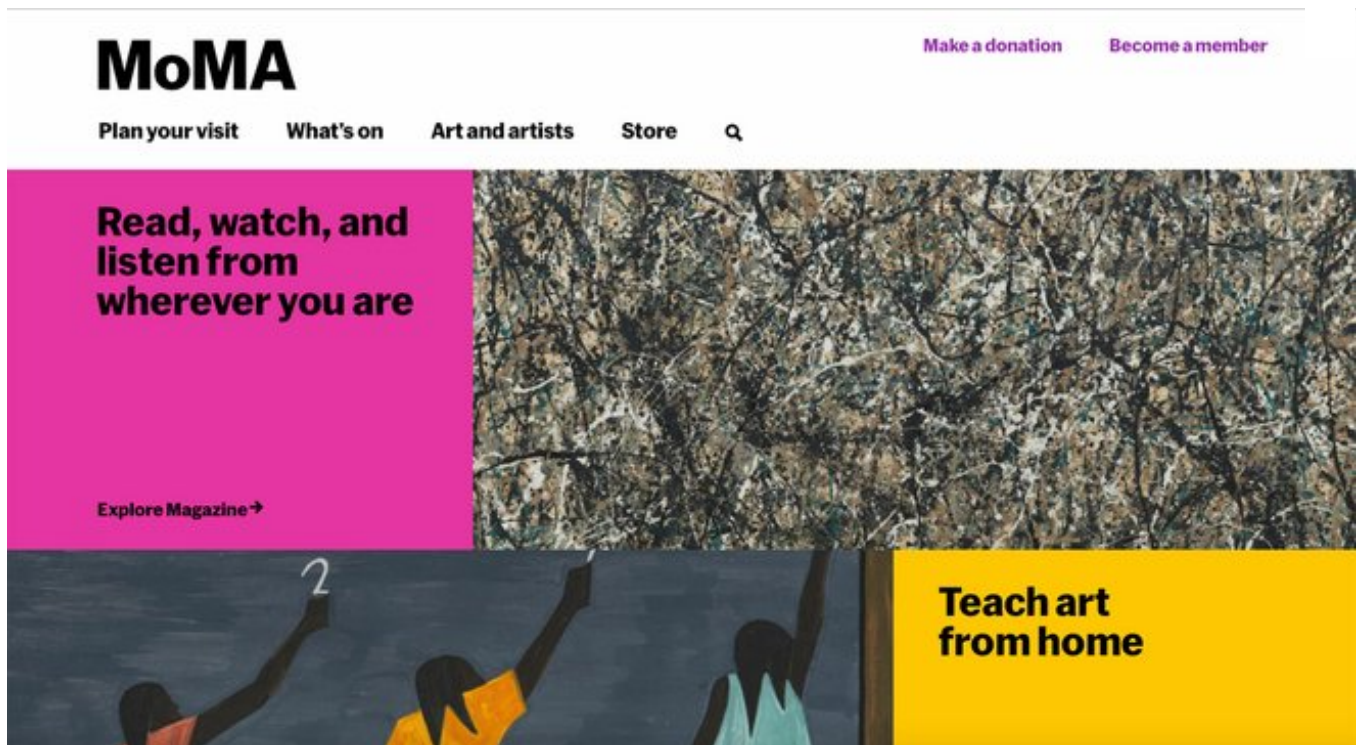
But I don't want to be unduly harsh. I get it. Nothing prepared us for this. The art world has been hit hard. Finances are up in the air. People are working from home. And galleries had

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The good news? As the days pass, quality seems to be on an upswing. And, even better, some galleries are finding audiences. Last week, the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts announced a **stunning rise** in virtual visitors over the last month.

Still, no one really knows what this new connectivity will mean in the long term. Will the virtual community built during the crisis prove steadfast when the country finds its new normal? Are there ways digital events can contribute to revenue streams for struggling galleries? These are not inconsequential questions.

And there are potential pitfalls. For instance, online viewers may migrate to big-name international galleries. When it's just as easy to go to an event at MoMA or the Getty, the gallery down the street may be the loser, a tough reality that plays out every day on Canadian television. Some venues like Open Space, an artist run-centre in Victoria, are taking a smart approach to building local community. Its first virtual offering is *online / on land*, a series of **Indigenous land tours** that will interest regional viewers.



MoMA's home page directs visitors to a broad range of great digital content.

Speaking of MoMA, it has the most comprehensive digital offerings I've found. Just days into the crisis that's now devastating New York, **its website** was hitting many right notes. Quick bright messaging on the home page seamlessly directs visitors to different digital resources: A list of movies that feature interesting architecture; a podcast with journalist Masha Gessen about the challenges facing Russian artists; new pandemic drawings by Romanian-born artist Dan Perjovschi, and lots more. You may not wiggle out of this wormhole any time soon.

So what stands out in Western Canada? The digital offerings I've listed below are focused and generally well-executed. They take advantage of available resources and the technology is relatively straightforward.

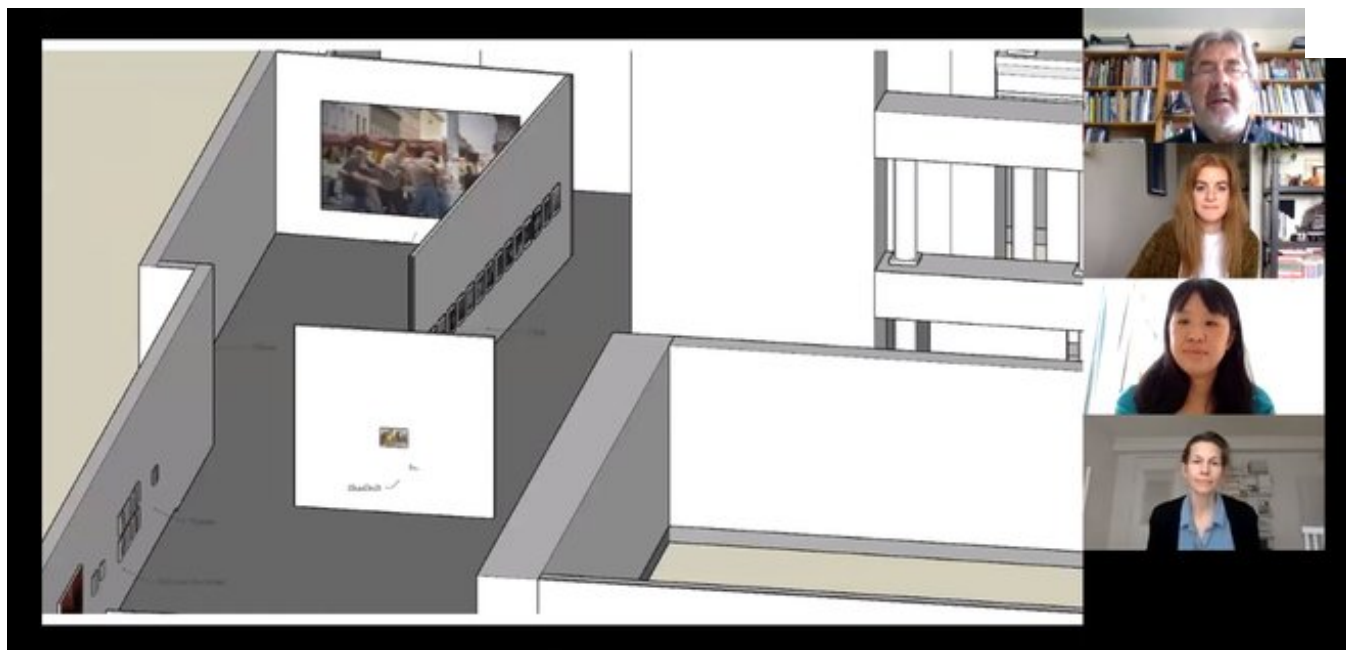


Bridget Moser, "My Crops Are Dying But My Body Persists," 2020 (courtesy the artist and Remail Modern, Saskatoon)

For instance, I enjoyed *My Crops Are Dying But My Body Persists*, a 20-minute video by Ontario artist Bridget Moser. The pandemic put Moser's exhibition at the Remail Modern in Saskatoon on ice just before it was to open, but this [video](#) is now posted on the gallery's website.

After weeks of self-isolation, I find resonance in Moser's dulled eyes and odd objects – like hotdogs with false fingernails. As she says at one point: "We're living on this meaningless island and I think it's getting sick. Maybe it's already very unwell. How do you know if your body is toxic?"

A short text by curator Troy Gronsdahl provides context. The only thing I wanted was more insight into Moser herself.



Ever wonder how curators organize an exhibition? Grant Arnold and Mandy Ginson offer some clues in the first episode of a new online series, *Art Connects*, at the Vancouver Art Gallery.

The launch of the Vancouver Art Gallery's online series *Art Connects* was a talk by curators Grant Arnold and Mandy Ginson about a show with an unwieldy title, *The Tin Man Was A Dreamer: Allegories, Poetics and Performances of Power*, which was to have opened March 27.

Their presentation, on Zoom, was fairly smooth. The overall effect was not unlike an art history class, with images of works flipping up for discussion. The strength here was the intelligence of the curators and the quality of their research.

Apparently, some 250 people attended and comments in the chat space made it feel like a group experience. One quibble: It took five minutes of blah-blah to get to the meat of the talk. That's an eternity online. It's easy at home to get distracted and drift away.

Two talks a week on various themes are scheduled, with back episodes available [here](#). I'd be happy to see this continue after the gallery reopens.



It seems odd now to see people standing in close proximity. This video about Katie Ohe's exhibition at the Esker Foundation in Calgary, was made before galleries closed.

A [video](#) of Calgary artist Katie Ohe's opening at the Esker Foundation in Calgary – back when visitors could still congregate in galleries – offers a chance to see her sculptures in motion. Video is absolutely the right choice to tell the story visually.

It's professionally produced and reveals the magic of her work. In fairness, it was made before the pandemic took hold. But if you didn't get to the gallery before it closed, this video is worth a look.

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Contemporary Calgary is part of a new national online platform, *Field Trip: Art Across Canada*, that pulls together digital content produced by various public galleries during the current crisis.

The gallery's first offering is a 22-minute [video](#) by Calgary artist duo DaveandJenn, who demonstrate how to make a paper puppet of a praying mantis. I'm all thumbs, but the detailed instructions seem ideal for those with a working set of hands.

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Kae Sasaki, "I hear it well but scarcely grasp it, IX," 2020, acrylic on gold-leafed panel, 36" x 48" (courtesy of the artist)

A five-minute Instagram [tour](#) of Winnipeg-based artist Kae Sasaki's exhibition at [aceartinc](#), a Winnipeg artist-run centre, is a testament to less is more.

Instagram viewers are guided silently through a series of sumptuous paintings that reflect the glittering luxury of the Teatro alla Scala in Milan.

Steady camera work and a measured pace that includes generous close ups of each painting, as well as overviews of the gallery, allow us to appreciate Sasaki's craft.

The gallery's hush is interrupted only by squeaking floorboards. I tried muting the sound, but liked it better with the creaks. They make you feel like you're in the gallery.



Stephen Borys, the director of the Winnipeg Art Gallery, posted Winnipeg artist Karel Funk's painting "Untitled #78" on Instagram on March 27. Borys writes: "In this time of self-isolation and quarantine, people's faces are protected, covered, and even hid. It made me think about the hooded portraits by Winnipeg artist Karel Funk."

Since the Winnipeg Art Gallery closed last month, director Stephen Borys has been posting images of works in the permanent collection on his [Instagram feed](#).

Dubbed *My Daily Art*, it's an eclectic blend that includes work by local artists like [Karel Funk](#), [Wanda Koop](#) and [Sarah Anne Johnson](#), as well as a historical painting by France's Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot and embroidery by Inuit artist Marion Tuu'luq.

Not only do the posts highlight hidden treasures in the gallery's vaults, but brief personal reflections by Borys work perfectly for social media.



Arthur Lismer, "Algonquin Park," 1914, oil on board, 9" x 12" (photo by Masters Gallery, Calgary)

I'm a sucker for a good story. Most of us are. Galleries that tell stories about art and artists put a strong foot forward.

At [Masters Gallery](#) in Calgary, owner Ryan Green gives a quick introduction and casually holds up Arthur Lismer's *Algonquin Park*. Then Toronto art historian David Silcox, a former president of Sotheby's Canada, offers his take.

Silcox is personable and his comments are intercut with historic photos. At less than four minutes, it's a solid formula. Perhaps it will pique the interest of a collector.

Another commercial gallery worth noting is Vancouver's Petley Jones, which recently posted a professionally made video about artist [Ann Vandervelde](#). It shows her painting and walking on Lopez Island, one of the San Juan Islands off the West Coast.

My bleary eyes have had enough binge-watching, so please add your favourites to the comment section below. I can't escape the feeling that we've seen only the tip of the iceberg. If we must continue to self-isolate for any length of time, we'll likely see much more digital content

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Unfortunately, I don't think anyone has figured out a way to circulate drinks and canapés to virtual viewers. If someone does, I humbly predict gallery openings will start to go viral – in a good way. ■

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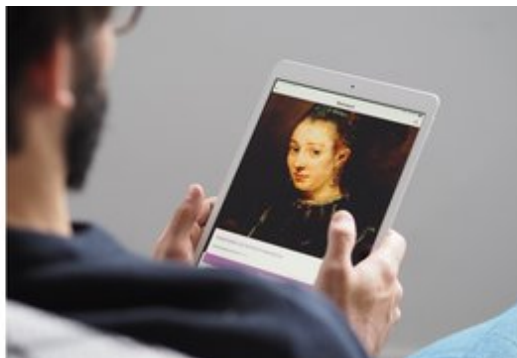


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